Democratic inclusiveness, knowledge focus or something else? Critical analysis of the curriculum for Swedish pupils with intellectual disabilities

Björn Boman* and Jonas Hultin Rosenberg

School of Business Society and Engineering, Division of Economy and Political Science, Mälardalen University, Västerås, Sweden

The extent to which compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities (ID) differs from regular compulsory school is partly reflected in its curriculum. Regarding elements such as democracy and democratic inclusiveness, research is typically lacking. An analysis of the latest curriculum for Swedish pupils with ID shows that discursive themes such as knowledge, learning, values, and democracy are salient features. That in turn indicates a substantial overlap with the regular compulsory school in terms of aims, values, and syllabi contents. However, the curriculum fails to convey how pupils with ID should learn or elaborate on elements such as democratic participation and be prepared for a future life as democratic citizens, leaving teachers and other stakeholders without guidance in terms of implementation practices. Hence, while the set goals are high it is unclear if they are to be deemed as aspiration goals rather than realistic goals for most pupils with ID.

KEYWORDS

democratic inclusiveness, pupils with intellectual disability, special needs education, democratic inclusion, curricular studies

Introduction

Political participation is a basic citizen's right in many countries around the world, including Sweden and other European countries (Hultin Rosenberg, 2021; United Nations General Assembly, 2007). In the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD) it is formulated as a right to "effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others" (UNCRPD, article 29). Within the first pages of both the regular national curriculum for compulsory education in Sweden (Lgr22) and its counterpart for pupils with intellectual disabilities (Lgra22), democracy's privileged position within contemporary educational discourse is highlighted. Indeed, the very first sentence of the curriculum for compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities conveys, "The school system is rooted in democracy." The next sentences stress that students, via the school system, should be able to develop knowledge and values. These values specifically point to "democratic values" in this particular context (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2002, p. 5).

But what exactly are democratic values in this curricular context? And what emphasis do they have within the frames of education for pupils with intellectual disabilities (ID)

compared to, for example, knowledge, learning and skills? A literature review on education of pupils with ID by Olsson (2022) underscores that more research is required in that regard. None of the 20 articles which were included in Olsson's review examines democratic inclusion in the sense that the ID pupils should learn or being taught democratic processes and principles, particularly not regarding what this may relate to outside the school context. Research on the most recent national curriculum Lgra22, the official compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities document in Sweden, is also lacking.

Hence, this article aims to fill this gap by analyzing the contents of compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities critically and contextually, with a particular emphasis on democracy, democratic inclusiveness, and democratic values. We conduct a critical discourse/content analysis of Lgra22 through a political-philosophical lens. The research is design is exploratory and thus we may provide only preliminary answers to our research questions. Nevertheless, our analysis aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What does democratic inclusiveness mean within Lgra22?
2. Does democratic inclusiveness of pupils with ID have a privileged position within Lgra22?
3. What similarities and differences are situated within Lgra22 compared to the upper-secondary counterpart and regular curriculum (Lgr22)?

Theoretical background

Special schools and ID pupils in Sweden

As Giota et al. (2023) assert, IQ levels have been used as a diagnostic tool with regard to placement in schools for pupils with ID. About 1–2.5% within a population have an IQ level between 50 and 70, which signifies mild ID, whereas only 0.3–0.5% have severe ID (an IQ below 50) (Gillberg and Söderström, 2003; Maulik et al., 2011). This may roughly correspond to the share of Swedish schoolchildren which may statistically belong to the compulsory school for pupils with ID (e.g., anpassad grundskola), whether as integrated in regular classes, which often is the case in smaller municipalities which have fewer schools and limited resources at their disposal, or in segregated settings (Giota et al., 2023; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2002; Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2010). However, there are other diagnostic criteria than IQ, such as medical and social factors, and therefore the share might be slightly lower. In the school year 2023/2024, 1.4% of all schoolchildren are obtaining their education in schools for pupils with ID (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024c).

Hence, statistical rules of thumb may not always manifest themselves in simple and predictable ways. For example, what is considered the norm and what is considered non-normal in terms of intellectual faculties and behaviors may change over time (Giota et al., 2023; Isaksson and Lindqvist, 2015). When placement in compulsory schools for pupils with intellectual disabilities (which earlier were called *särskolor* in the Swedish context, e.g., Berthén, 2007) is considered, the municipality must have an active and

continuous dialogue with legal guardians. Regarding children whose legal guardians have another mother tongue than Swedish, the municipality must offer an interpreter and, in all cases, provide clear information about the responsibilities (for the legal guardians) and consequences (for the child) that are connected to placement in such schools. In addition, the municipality where the child and its legal guardians live are responsible for conducting social, pedagogical, psychological and medical evaluations, involving workers with adequate competencies such as special teachers, psychologists, and doctors. The legal guardians are being constantly informed about the processes and evaluations and have a right to convey their opinions in the matter. In general, the legal guardians are mostly involved in the evaluation of their child from a social aspect. However, regarding the initiation of psychological and medical evaluations of a child, the legal guardians must give their explicit written consent. Hence, legal guardians may potentially prevent full evaluations from taking place. When children are 16 years old, they can decide for themselves whether they want to conduct an evaluation which may lead to placement in Upper Secondary School for Pupils with Intellectual Disabilities. At that level, it may function as a late selective mechanism for entry into special upper-secondary level education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023).

Giota et al. (2023) found a substantial increase of students with mild ID in Sweden in later cohorts such as those born in 2004. The total variation of prevalence rates of schoolchildren at the age of 13 with mild ID is between 2.74% in the 1980s and 3.41% in 2017. Moreover, the authors found a general trend toward teaching ID students in segregated settings. This echoes a recent descriptive report which stresses that the share of pupils with ID who are integrated in regular compulsory school classes has decreased from 10 to 9% (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024d). Hence, regarding Swedish citizens who are (later) eligible for voting and in other ways partaking in a democratic society there is an increase of people with ID, which is also manifested in the share of the population (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024c). Hence, the nexus between the education of ID pupils, curricular documents, and democratic processes is an important set of dimensions to consider.

Earlier research on special education and ID curriculum

Having discussed some of the core features of the Swedish school system in the context of ID pupils and related school types, we now turn to related studies on curricular and policy documents, both in the Swedish and international literature.

The Swedish school system, as well as the Nordic countries in general, have for several decades been characterized by ideals such as equity, inclusion, gender equality, and democratic humanism (Boman and Mosesson, 2023; Buli-Holmberg et al., 2022; Klang et al., 2019), as well as integration. Integration, in the context of schools for pupils/students with ID, refers to physical, social, and functional aspects. However, segregated integration refers to pupils with ID being taught in specialized schools, while integrated integration implies being taught in regular classes. The decisions in that regard are related to finding the most optimal learning contexts

for everyone (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022, pp. 19–20). In part, integration in the broader sense is also reflected in the increasing number of ID pupils in Sweden (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024a).

Isaksson and Lindqvist (2015) examined policy documents in Sweden, covering the 1970s up until 2014. Their findings underline the salience of hegemonic intervention, which means that politicians and other actors of state bodies have implemented elements such as inclusivity within the education system at different time periods. More recently, inclusion of ID pupils has been underscored. Paradoxically, however, the opposite pattern has been the case in practice as more pupils are being taught in segregated settings. In addition, in the most recent decades earlier emphases such as on individual deficiencies among pupils are being reinvigorated within policy discourses. However, as the authors accentuate that hegemonic policy ideals might still be contested at the local level or in practice among teachers. Hence, "outdated" educational ideas are seldom or never completely reproduced in practice.

As for instance Klang et al. (2019) stress, teachers in mainstream teaching settings have higher aspirations for their students, including special needs students, compared to their counterparts in segregated settings. This may be overall beneficial for most students. On the other hand, teachers in segregated settings seem to offer more social support for the ID pupils.

As Göransson et al. (2022) underline, the compulsory School for Pupils with Intellectual Disabilities' national curriculum contains elements that point to that education should stimulate curiosity, creativity and self-confidence, which corresponds to a learner-centered ideology. Advocates of the social reconstruction ideology believe that the main purpose of education is to contribute to a more equal and equitable society. Hence, among the ideological perspectives discussed by Göransson et al. (2022), democratic inclusion of pupils with ID overlaps the social reconstruction emphasis to the largest extent.

Hanreddy and Östlund (2020) emphasize that there are a host of social and socioeconomic benefits from integrated integration compared to being taught in segregated settings with alternative curricula (i.e., easier content and lower expectations). These findings generally echo those of for instance Göransson et al. (2022) and Giota et al. (2023). There are also many published studies on inclusion of pupils within the current education system in Sweden and elsewhere (e.g., Andersson et al., 2023; Göransson et al., 2011), as well as less curriculum-oriented research on ID pupils and special schools (e.g., Frostlund and Nordgren, 2024; Rendoth et al., 2024).

Yet, it is unclear how and to what extent ID pupils ought to be included as real or potential democratic citizens. Moreover, it is not clear how democratic inclusiveness is regarded within the frames of the national curriculum for pupils with ID such as Lgra22.

Conceptual foundation

Simplican (2015) argues that prominent Western philosophers have failed to include people with ID in relation to their philosophical works on democratic citizenship and political equality. That may be because liberal philosophers, while focusing

on equality, cherish rationality and intellectual prowess. The ideal within liberal political ideology is to become an enlightened societal agent with vast knowledge, reason capacity and appropriate values. In what follows we suggest that mainstream democratic theory, despite this serious deficiency, offers conceptual tools which are conducive for the study of the democratic inclusion of individuals with ID.

Democracy is defined by an equal distribution of political influence among the members of an inclusive demos (Dahl, 1989). Equal and inclusive political participation often serves as the point of reference for empirical studies of political behavior (Lijphart, 1997), mapping patterns of participation and explaining variation in participation between different social strata (individuals with ID are seldom included in these studies, however). Democratic inclusion, political equality, and the relation between democratic inclusion and political equality have also been major objects of study within democratic theory (e.g., Miller, 2020; Christiano, 2008; Hultin Rosenberg, 2019).

Theoretical studies of democratic inclusion have mainly focused on the *spatial dimension* of the scope of democratic inclusion (Beckman and Hultin Rosenberg, 2022). The main disagreement has concerned what type of relationship between the individual and the democratic state that gives the individual a justified claim to inclusion in the demos. Competing principles of democratic inclusion are distinguished by such *relational requirements* (Beckman and Hultin Rosenberg, 2022). The difference between the principles matters, for example regarding issues of voting rights for resident non-citizens and non-resident citizens. The democratic inclusion of individuals with ID does instead actualize the *categorical dimension* of the scope of democratic inclusion and the question of what is required to qualify as a democratic agent (Beckman and Hultin Rosenberg, 2022). These *agency requirements* are not as frequently discussed as relational requirements in the literature on democratic inclusion. Ability of democratic participation as a minimal requirement for democratic inclusion has garnered some attention, however (e.g., López-Guerra, 2014; Christiano, 2001; Munn, 2013; Nussbaum, 2009). Inability-based exclusion has been defended by democratic theorists (e.g., Christiano, 2001) and recognized in international human rights conventions. In General Comments No 25 from 1996, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights states that "established mental incapacity may be a ground for denying a person the right to vote" (HRC General Comment No. 25, 2016, p. 25). This position has been challenged by other democratic theorists arguing that inability is not a sufficient reason for exclusion of adult citizens (Mráz, 2020) as well as in more recent human rights conventions (UNCRPD, article 29). Focus should instead be on how to ensure political equality within an inclusive demos, whose members possess different intellectual and communicative abilities (Beckman, 2007). We adhere to this recent trend. As such, our position aligns with Taylor (2018), who emphasizes that the primary question should be how rather than if people with ID should be included in the knowledge communities in our societies.

However, conceptual and normative studies on political equality have mainly focused on political equality in the context of inequality in socio-economic resources (Rawls, 1999; Cohen, 2001) and not in the context of inequality of intellectual resources. An example is John Rawls who in *A Theory of Justice* and

elsewhere (e.g., Rawls, 1999) defends a conception of political equality that parallels a more general equal opportunity principle that in tandem with the difference principle and the just savings principle constitute his second principle. Rawls offers a conception of political equality that requires "a fair opportunity to take part in and to influence the political process" (Rawls, 1999, 197). Citizens should not only "have the means to be informed about political issues" (Rawls, 1999, p. 198) and "be in a position to assess how proposals affect their wellbeing, and which policies advance their conception of the public good" (Rawls, 1999, p. 198). They should also "have a fair chance to add alternative proposals to the agenda for political discussion" (Rawls, 1999, p. 198). Equal opportunity in the political context (what Rawls refers to as fair value of political liberties) is, according to Rawls, achieved when "similarly endowed and motivated [...] have roughly the same chance of attaining positions of political authority irrespective of their economic and social class" (Rawls, 1999, p. 197). Rawls' conception of political equality effectively addresses political inequalities that trace back to socio-economic inequalities. Political inequalities between citizens that are "differently endowed" are left unaddressed, however. The distinction between "natural" and "social" inequalities underlying Rawls' conception of political equality prevents it from fully addressing salient inequalities in the political sphere. The general notion that political equality requires something more than equal political rights can still serve as the normative point of departure. Political equality requires that every member of the demos has real opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making procedures (i.e., including people with ID).

The school is the most important institution when it comes to ensuring that all members of the demos possess the abilities, skills, and knowledge required for effective political participation. It is pertinent to examine how for instance learning objectives are framed among citizens with a neurodiverse profile, namely ID pupils in the current research context. As Alshoufani asserts (Roth et al., 2022), neurodiverse students may reflect on their own atypical profiles in society, such as why they are placed in special schools instead of regular schools and have a partly different curriculum to follow. The existence or non-existence of such a critical introspection within the frames of the curricular documents might be an important feature within a critical examination of steering documents such as Lgra22.

Lastly, Schiro's (2013) curricular concepts are of significance as they provide different categorizations of expressions and contents within Lgra22 and its various parts and sections. Schiro's typologies include, for example, social efficiency, learner-centered and social reconstruction ideologies. Social efficiency focuses on the current and future participation in society in terms of being useful citizens and workers, partly through preparatory schoolwork of a variety of kinds. Learner-centered approaches aim at the cultivation of a pupil's personal growth and confidence, while social reconstruction emphasizes the improvement of society such as through fostering tolerance, human rights, inclusion and democracy. According to Göransson et al. (2022), these themes could be merged within curricular documents such as those for special needs classes and ID pupils in Sweden. That may, in turn, signify interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 2003). As the knowledge and skills of citizens of pupils are important in school subjects such as civic education (Jurs et al., 2022) it is pertinent to examine such dimensions in the curricula.

Methods and data

In line with earlier content analysis of curricular documents, a qualitative and thematic content analysis was chosen as the main method (e.g., Boman and Mosesson, 2023; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Krippendorff, 2018) for the analysis of the compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities, Lgra22. Our examination only included this document. In practice, this type of analysis is very similar to discourse analysis such as critical discourse analysis (CDA) as both account for the interplays between textual, contextual and social levels of analysis (Fairclough, 2003). Moreover, discerned themes and sub-themes within thematic textual analysis correspond to discourse analytical concepts such as nodal points. Because themes and sub-themes are discerned through interpretative processes, they may be regarded as floating signifiers, whose meanings may change between individuals, groups, and societies (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, pp. 105–113). Moreover, there is a reflexive involvement of researchers within such analyses which may affect the degree to which interpretations are valid (Krippendorff, 2018). However, as Ratner (2002) has emphasized, all textual analyses must have an objective basis to be meaningful. The goal should be to reflect rather than distort reality as it is perceived within oral or written textual resources. Thus, research typologies derived from textual analysis of any kind should have such an "enlightening" and objective purpose and be congenial with other authors' meanings (Ratner, 2002).

Regarding Lgra22 the authors examined the entire content of the curriculum by close reading processes. This selection of syllabi and value-related sources in our analytical work partly align with Boman and Mosesson (2023) who performed a similar type of analysis of Lgr11, the curriculum for the compulsory school in Sweden. However, in line with quantitative content analysis we also focused on contextualized word frequencies which is akin to the earlier forms of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). In this respect, basic enumeration techniques were used inside the PDF document (i.e., the English version of Lgra22) by means of search strings and highlighting selected words and frequencies. As such the analysis shares some features of keywords analysis and corpus analysis (Baker, 2004; Baker et al., 2013). However, unlike corpus-driven analysis our analysis was limited to a single document and internal search processes, while a corpus builds on a variety of extensive and merged external sources.

The selection of words was related to our theoretical framework and empirical focus (e.g., democratic inclusiveness among young people with intellectual disabilities), as well as earlier research on Swedish curricular documents within the compulsory school. Although the ID curriculum is different from the regular compulsory school curriculum, a substantial overlap in terms of overarching values and guidelines as well as syllabi is expected (Göransson et al., 2022). Hence, akin to Boman and Mosesson (2023) we expected important themes or discursive nodes such as knowledge, skills and values to be emphasized and, as such, plenty of iterations to be found within the compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities curriculum document. In addition, we focused on other pertinent concepts such as democracy, democratic, democratic inclusiveness, inclusive education, dignity, equality, and equity (e.g., Göransson et al., 2022; Göransson et al., 2011; Roth et al., 2022) which are of both theoretical and empirical

TABLE 1 Themes, word frequencies and discursive salience.

Theme	Word frequency	Discursive salience
Democracy	13	Medium
Democratic	25	Medium
Disabilities	91	Low
Equity and equality	17	Medium
Humanism	1	Low
Inclusive and inclusiveness	3	Low
Knowledge	208	High
Learning	60	High
Skills	47	High
Values	42	Medium

significance in the present study. A basic criterion for the inclusion of a theme among the results was that it is mentioned at least once in Lgra22, which signifies a low level of discursive salience, while larger frequencies are coded as medium or high in the same respect (e.g., Baker et al., 2013).

In addition, we also provided a general outline of Lgra22 as this aligns with our qualitative close reading process of the entire document. Some of these features are discussed below. We also contextualized the findings and interpreted them in relation to the external contexts, earlier research, and theoretical groundings.

Data triangulation and comparisons with other curricular documents

Finally, we conducted data triangulation (Bryman, 2016) by comparing the compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities document with Lgra22, both the general directions of the Upper Secondary School for Pupils with Intellectual Disabilities (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024b) and the regular curriculum of compulsory school in Sweden, Lgr22 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024c). We worked with official English translations whenever possible, although the actual curriculum in the Upper Secondary School for Pupils with Intellectual Disabilities, GySär13, is found in Swedish. Generally, it is fruitful to work with both Swedish and English documents in the Swedish school system (Boman and Mosesson, 2023). While GySär13 and Gy11 will be replaced with a newer set of curricula, Gy25, these have not yet been released and implemented.

Nevertheless, the purpose was to gain further perspective and comparative viewpoints in relation to the main document, as it partly hinges on explicit or implicit comparisons with other layers and levels of education, including regular compulsory school and further education among individuals with ID. The focus was on democratic features and values rather than grades and syllabi.

Results

The quantitative enumeration process resulted in 12 main themes, which are summarized in Table 1. Discursive features such as knowledge, learning and skills were the most salient whereas democratic were coded as medium in the same respect.

Contextualization

Below, most of the main themes are contextualized with respect to various historical, political, social, and sociocultural aspects (e.g., Cohen, 2001: Fairclough, 2003; Munn, 2013; Schiro, 2013).

Democracy and democratic

Democracy and *democratic* themes are underscored under the headlines *Fundamental values and mission of the school*. Moreover, emphasis is placed on democratic values and decision-making processes, for example regarding how people can influence democratic decisions. Moreover, human rights, including the rights of the child under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lgra22, 177) are highlighted.

As expected (e.g., Wahlström et al., 2016), the civics elements of social studies emphasize democracy, democratic procedures, and even the democratization of Sweden. As early as after Grade 6, when most pupils are 12 or 13 years old, pupils who acquire the highest grade, A, must demonstrate good knowledge of societal conditions, democracy and human rights, as well as other elements of knowledge within geography, history and religious education. At the end of Grade 9, they must, for instance, also manifest an ability to make comparisons between societies with relatively well-founded arguments (137–139).

Disabilities

As being part of Lgra22, the word *disabilities* is the second most frequent in the entire document with a frequency of 91. However, most of these instantiations constitute basic iterations within the headlines on each page. That is also the case with some of the other themes, such as knowledge and values but to a much lesser degree. Hence, while *disabilities* as a concept is an important discursive feature within Lgra22 it is not particularly salient in relation to the specific contents within fundamental values or syllabi.

Equity and equality

Equity might be an ambiguous word whose meanings and connotations might shift over time and space. In Lgra22 it is mostly conveyed as the right to equal quality of education, even when there are different circumstances regarding, for instance, school resources and other contextual factors. Equity in this sense is related to the Swedish Education Act (2010).

Equality is also an ambiguous term as it can refer to for example (in)equality in opportunity and/or (in)equality in outcomes (Rawls, 1999). However, in this context it is mostly associated with gender equality, which constitutes a fundamental value of Sweden since at least the 1970s and as such highlighted in national curricular documents (Boman and Mosesson, 2023).

Inclusive and inclusiveness

Words such as *inclusive* and *inclusiveness* are neither frequent nor salient in any relation to the specific features of special school and democratic values. This echoes the findings of, for instance, Isaksson and Lindqvist (2015) who stress that inclusion, while

being associated with special education, is often not explicitly stated, elaborated or explained. It might also be because such normative approaches are more salient in policy reports (e.g., Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2010; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024a) whereas curricular documents are more descriptive, while simultaneously containing normative aspects such as an emphasis on humanism, human rights, and gender equality (Boman and Mosesson, 2023).

Be that as it may, the words inclusive and inclusiveness are mentioned as features of objective teaching and learning approaches. According to Lgra22, it is the teachers' duty to uphold a school climate which allows for different opinions and expressions among ID pupils.

Knowledge

Knowledge is the most frequent theme is Lgra22 with 208 instantiations. Knowledge is expressed within the *Overall guidelines and objectives* and under many sub-headings such as *Norms and values* and a sub-section which is called *Knowledge*, as well as most of the syllabi. Knowledge in this regard concerns incremental knowledge which enables pupils to continue with future studies, knowledge about human rights and democracy, as well content-specific knowledge. Moreover, the stipulated knowledge base for ID students includes cultural heritage, ethical considerations, environmental conditions, sexuality and much more (e.g., Lgra22, 10–19). In addition, some of the knowledge objectives are imposed on teachers rather than pupils (e.g., Rendoth et al., 2024). That includes, for example, knowledge about grading and other forms of meaningful knowledge assessments (Lgra 22, 19).

Because knowledge is a basic word it can be discursively or thematically connected to many other sub-themes or floating signifiers. At the subject and syllabus level, there are many examples where specific knowledge categories are emphasized. For instance, regarding home and consumer studies pupils are supposed to be taught and learn basic knowledge about food, meals and practical tasks at home. However, in addition they are expected to gain an understanding of intersectional issues such as labor division in the home and gender (in)equality, which taps into the nexus between gender and socioeconomic inequities. Furthermore, more complex phenomena such as finances and consumption choices are included among the content knowledge (Lgra 22, 38).

On the other hand, the learning and knowledge objectives and requirements within, for example, mathematics seem to be much narrower compared to those of the regular school system. That includes both the quantity and complexity of the subject content and grading criteria (Lgra 22, 43–49, cf. Boman and Mosesson, 2023).

Learning

Learning is another basic curricular theme and as expected given a salient position in Lgra22, especially in relation to pupils' learning processes and teachers and other school staff's responsibility to develop and document such processes. Specifically, the school climate should be safe and conducive to learning (Lgra 22, 20).

Learning is also closely linked to the syllabus in most of the school subjects, as well as the broader guidelines in that respect. For example, natural science teaching should aim toward increased interest and curiosity in learning about the pupils themselves as well as the surrounding environment (Lgra 22, 105), which signifies a learner-centered approach according to Schiro's (2013) classification. However, the practical elements of the grading criteria and content in various subjects contain less focus on learning and instead place salience on for instance motor skills, communication, safety, and various experiences of the activities which are associated with these.

Skills

In Lgra22 *skills* are related to knowledge acquisition, subject-specific skills (e.g., English, mathematics), and more generic practical and social skills. In general, these are connected to both social efficiency and learner-centered discourses (Jurs et al., 2022; Schiro, 2013) compared to, for instance, values which are highlighted in the next section.

Values

As Boman and Mosesson (2023) stress, Lgr11 is a knowledge and values-based curriculum. This does also seem to be the case regarding Lgra22. In relation to *values*, democratic values and values stipulated in international documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) are accentuated. In addition, human rights and democratic values are also highlighted (Lgra 22, 13). This view is mostly congruent with a social reconstruction discourse or ideology (Göransson et al., 2022; Schiro, 2013), as well as (future) citizenship and democratic participation.

Moreover, values associated with an inclusive multicultural society and traditional humanist values, in accordance with Christianity and Western humanism, are emphasized within the frames of Lgra22. Also, the national or particular values of one's (home) culture are underlined. This view is in concordance with a traditional view of education and learning (Göransson et al., 2022) or a hybrid discourse (Fairclough, 2003), in the current context implying a blend of traditional and social reconstruction discourses.

Furthermore, values are underlined as being part of fundamental values such as equality and tolerance which are important elements within today's European societies as well as in the broader international community. Moreover, teachers ought to discuss different kinds of values that people may endorse.

Comparisons with other curricular documents

Lgr22 is the compulsory school counterpart of Lgra22. In many regards, these two documents are reflections of each other in terms of syllabi and content, although Lgr22 is more extensive and covers 283 pages compared 196 in Lgra22. This is mostly because the pre-school is also a part of Lgr22, the curriculum of the regular compulsory school.

A palpable similarity is that the school system is rooted in democracy, which is stressed in the very first sentence of both curricula. Moreover, all school forms accentuate the international perspective of education, as well as an ethical, environmental and historical perspective.

Further, GySär13, the curriculum of Upper Secondary School for Pupils with Intellectual Disabilities, underscores that it is not sufficient that the school teaches and transmits knowledge about basic democratic values. The instruction itself ought to hinge on democratic work processes and develop the student's ability to take personal responsibility and participate actively in social life. Hence, the upper-secondary level of School for Pupils with Intellectual Disabilities continues the foundation which has been set in compulsory school. Because these are core elements of the curricula, this should be implemented in all types of national or individual programs, which in this context puts emphasis on vocational education (e.g., c.f. Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022, 2024b,c).

Overall, there is an alignment of democratic emphasis in all three school forms. The main difference is that social science studies is being taught in all national program within the regular upper-secondary school, according to Gy11, the national curriculum of the upper-secondary school. Therefore, individuals without ID are also taught more about democracy as a system within Sweden and internationally compared to individuals with ID, who obtain their education in the ID school counterpart.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to conduct a thematic discourse/content analysis of Lgra22, the current compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities in Sweden, where social, cultural, political and other contextual factors outside the text are considered (Fairclough, 2003). These do also include typical curricular elements which align with Schiro (2013), such as learner-centered, social efficiency, or reconstruction ideologies. Specifically, our focus was on thematic elements such as democratic inclusiveness, both its meaning and salience within Lgra22 compared to other themes and discursive features.

A general finding is that Lgra22 is similar to Lgr11, the regular national curricular for the compulsory school, in many ways (Boman and Mosesson, 2023). These similarities include both overarching guidelines, values, and syllabi. Pupils with ID, akin to their counterparts in regular schools, are expected to gain knowledge about democratic values, processes and principles, as well as the same school subjects as in Lgr11 and Lgr22 (i.e., the slightly updated national curriculum). Akin to Göransson et al. (2022) we discerned an interdiscursive blend of various forms of discourses, such as traditional, learner-centered, social reconstruction, and social efficiency elements (Schiro, 2013).

Even though the subject content and learning objectives are narrower and with less saturation and complexity in Lgra22 compared Lgr22/Lgr11, the requirements for higher grades such as A in Grade 6 and Grade 9 seem rather high when taken at face value. These requirements may present a double-edged sword in terms of the school system and democratic inclusiveness: on the one hand it makes the ID pupils with higher educational aspirations and cognitive abilities (pupils with mild ID who are closer to the threshold for "normal" cognitive ability) prepared for future education and social inclusion (Munn, 2013; Nussbaum, 2009), which aligns with social efficiency and social reconstruction discourses (Schiro, 2013). On the other hand, it makes it difficult

for pupils whose cognitive ability levels are close to severe ID to reach the required levels and as such being prepared for more complex knowledge acquisition about, for example democracy, democratic procedures, and social inequities. Indeed, competent teachers might be able to adapt their instruction to conform to different pupils with ID. Curricular documents are always interpreted and contextualized in practice (e.g., Wahlström et al., 2016). Nevertheless, this poses a challenge for the education system in general and pupils with ID in particular, especially in relation to democratic inclusion. It would be conducive if more concrete guidelines on how and to what extent pupils with ID should learn democratic features and other social and cultural elements of our society complemented the rather vague and unspecified curricular declarations.

Regarding the three research questions, which apart from similarities and differences concern the salience of democratic elements within Lgra22 in relation to other themes, it might be regarded as significant. While knowledge and values are more frequent compared to words such as democracy and democratic this does not appear to be a limitation. First, democratic values are emphasized. This means that these have a privileged position within the curriculum. Secondly, the social studies syllabi puts emphasis on democratic elements both in terms of learning objectives, subject content, and grade criteria. However, words such as democracy and democratic are disconnected from related words such as, for instance, inclusion and inclusivity. This may not necessarily be a limitation as it is explicitly and implicitly stated that pupils with ID who study the regular school subjects should acquire democratic knowledge. However, pupils with severe ID, who are much fewer in numbers (Giota et al., 2023), are not included in that respect.

Regarding John Rawls' theory of justice (1999), particularly the notion that equal political rights are not sufficient unless citizens also have the real opportunity to exercise those rights, our research has implications for democratic inclusion by framing it not only as a matter of curricular content, but also as a question of access to democratic practice. For pupils with ID this implies that educational environments which enable participation, not merely prescribing it, are tailored for their needs. Hence, it is pertinent for teachers to elaborate learning situations that facilitate democratic procedures.

The current analysis has several limitations. For example, qualitative research such as textual analysis is difficult to replicate because the analytical processes are interpretive with a substantial degree of reflexive involvement (Krippendorff, 2018). Moreover, our readings of a single document are cross-sectional, and longer trends are therefore not captured. However, our content analysis partly builds on quantitative features that can be reproduced. Moreover, we have also examined the entire document and not just particular sections. Furthermore, our findings can be contextualized and compared with earlier research. In addition, we have made comparisons with counterparts at the upper-secondary level for individuals with ID, as well as the regular compulsory school's national curriculum. For example, we have noticed overlaps with Boman and Mosesson (2023) and Göransson et al. (2022), as well as with the other documents which were triangulated. This enables both synchronic and diachronic comparisons, at least within the Swedish context.

Future research may connect these and other findings with statistics on young people with mild and/or severe ID regarding

democratic processes such as voting patterns in relation to, for instance, various social, psychological, physical and pedagogical obstacles. It makes sense for such endeavors to transcend educational research and tap into political science and political sociology (e.g., Christiano, 2001, 2008; Beckman and Hultin Rosenberg, 2022; Mráz, 2020). However, thematic, content and discourse analyses may further assist such endeavors. For example, it is not clear if pupils with ID, who later are eligible for voting when they are at least 18 years old, are provided sufficient pedagogical content adaptation in terms of political debates and other multimodal resources (Boman and Hultin Rosenberg, 2024). Thus, multidisciplinary research seems pertinent in this regard.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in this article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

BB: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. JR: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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