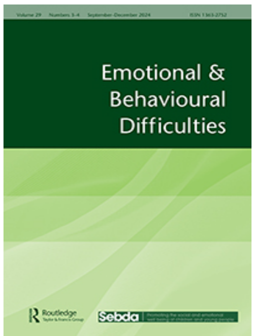

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ARTICLE

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Autism as diversity or difference? A text analysis study involving students, caregivers and education professionals in two special educational settings

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ABSTRACT
The number of students diagnosed with autism is increasing. In Sweden, it is today possible to find both special classes and special schools dedicated to students with autism. This study explores the meaning that the diagnosis assumes in two special educational contexts. Data were collected from interviews with 23 students and questionnaires filled out by 18 education professionals and 22 caregivers. Data were analysed using the Methodology for the Analysis of Computerised Text Data (MADIT). The results are discussed in relation to a) implications for the educational agenda and b) processes that create diversity versus processes that create difference. Some of the main results suggest that participants are using the diagnosis to move towards diversity. Other results indicate that the diagnosis could create unnecessary limitations regarding what the students could become.

KEYWORDS
Autism diagnosis; interaction; special needs education; text analysis; diversity

Introduction

Globally, we are witnessing an increase in the prevalence of autism in children and adolescents (Maenner et al. 2020; Morales Hidalgo, Voltas Moreso and Canals Sans 2021; Salari et al. 2022). In Sweden, the autism spectrum diagnosis increased approximately 3.5-fold in children aged 2–17 between 2001 and 2011 (Idring et al. 2015). Prevalence estimates vary across the world, likely due to methodological differences in case detection (Chiarotti and Venerosi 2020). According to the World Health Organization approximately 1 in 100 children is diagnosed with autism (WHO, 2023). Similar numbers can be found regarding the prevalence in Sweden (Karolinska Institutet 2024). Local rates are sometimes higher, for example in Stockholm 1,8% of children between 0 and 17 years of age are diagnosed with autism; among boys the prevalence is 2,4% and among girls 1,2% (CES 2022).

While the Swedish school system does not require a diagnosis for a student to receive special support (SFS 2010:800 Education Act), various special or segregated schooling options are available, such as special support classes and schools for students with autism and other neuropsychiatric diagnoses (SOU 2020:42). In this sense, the autism spectrum diagnosis plays an important role in organising education and it is essential to understand the many ways that such a diagnosis impacts a student's life (Bradley 2016; Frost, Bailey, and Ingersoll 2019; Mesa and Hamilton 2021; O'Connor et al. 2018).

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Previous research

Autism has been broadly studied from a neurological and neurodevelopmental perspective, focusing on aetiology (Hardiansyah 2024; Hirota and King 2023; Salehinejad et al. 2022; Tajik-Parvinchi et al. 2021). In fact, autism was originally 'born' as a diagnostic category in a medical-psychiatric context (Evans 2013; Harris 2016; Kanner 1943). However, autism is a diagnosis for which the understanding has shifted throughout history, not only in terms of its diagnostic criteria and conceived causes but also in terms of what people consider autism to be (Hacking 2006, 2009; Wolff 2004). The neurodiversity perspective on autism provides a major shift in how the condition is understood, arising as a reaction to the biomedical perspective, mainly through people who themselves were autistic (Bagatell 2007, Kapp 2020; Ortega 2009; see also Botha et al. 2024). From the neurodiversity perspective, autism is seen as a part of whom a person is rather than a disease they have (Bagatell 2010). Consequently, and drawing on the social model of disability, autism becomes a 'problem' only in the context of the demands and norms of society (den Houting 2019; Kapp 2020; Oliver 2009). Compared to the biomedical perspective, the neurodiversity perspective offers an alternative way of understanding what autism is: a difference rather than a deviance or deficit (Brownlow 2010; Monk, Whitehouse, and Waddington 2022; see also Singer 2017). From this point of view, autism is a natural variation among humans (Jaarsma and Welin 2012), and could be seen as a value neutral feature akin to other features such as hair colour (Botha, Dibb, and Frost 2022) or analogous to gender and sexuality (Shields and Beversdorf 2021). In a similar vein, it has been proposed that autism can be seen as one type of cognitive style rather than a disability (Baron–Cohen 2000).

While the neurodiversity perspective provides an alternative to the biomedical understanding of autism as a pathology, some authors have pointed out a risk of a dichotomic neurotypical-neurodiverse logic being created, a climate of 'us' against 'them' which could enable discord and separation (Runswick-Cole 2014; Russell 2020). On one hand, neurodiversity promotes inclusion of everyone under a broad umbrella of neurological varieties, on the other hand, the perspective could create an idea that autistics have inherently different brains and experiences (Russell 2020). It has also been argued that a neurodiverse identity might have the effect of making a person feel isolated from the broader community (Guest 2020). Although a common aspect within the neurodiversity perspective is the shift away from the medical-psychiatric perspective, it seems to us that autism is located somewhere in-between two ideas: a natural and neutral diversity within the broader human community and an essential difference separating autistic individuals from others.

Previous studies, mainly focusing on ADHD, have suggested that the medical-psychiatric perspective is commonly used by education professionals to make sense of students' difficulties (Hjörne 2016; Malmqvist 2018; Rafalovich 2013). The use of the medical-psychiatric perspective in school has been criticised for placing the root of difficulties inside the individual (Mehan 2014; Neophytou and Rodríguez-González 2021). Another risk discussed in the previous research is that, if it is known that a student has a specific psychiatric diagnosis, the student's behaviours become interpreted as indications of their diagnostic category, thereby confirming their status as deviant (Dudley-Marling 2004; Hjörne and Evaldsson 2015; Hjörne and Säljö 2019). On the other hand, diagnostic categories are thought to be useful in organising support and finding ways to help students with their difficulties (O'Connor and Hayes 2019; Young-Pelton and Bushman 2015). Graham and Tancredi (2019) highlight the dilemma between denying and ignoring differences versus recognising but potentially stigmatising differences (Graham and Tancredi 2019).

In previous research, the views of students with autism are noticeably lacking (Goodall and MacKenzie 2019; Olsson and Nilholm 2022; Rasmussen and Pagsberg 2019). While some studies have concentrated on the parents' perspective (Anderson 2020; Bush et al. 2017; de Wolfe 2012) or the views of education professionals (Luddeckens, Anderson, and Ostlund 2022, Nah and Tan 2021), few studies have combined the perspectives of a relatively large number of students, caregivers and education professionals in order to observe how they make sense and what they talk about (Eccleston et al. 2019; LaBarbera 2017). Some studies have only explored the students' perspective, several of which are about experiences of mainstream schooling (Bradley 2016; Goodall and MacKenzie 2019; Horgan, Kenny, and Flynn 2022; Williams, Gleeson, and Jones 2019).

In this paper, we present the results of a specific type of text analysis (Bassi, Moro, et al. 2024; Turchi and Orrù 2014; Turchi et al. 2021) applied to the narratives of students with an autism spectrum diagnosis, education professionals, as well as caregivers from two special educational contexts, exploring what happens in the interaction between the perspective of each group. Specifically, the study involves 23 students, 18 education professionals and 22 caregivers from two special educational settings. The research objective is to describe how the participants make sense of 'a student with an autism spectrum syndrome diagnosis', discuss the implications for the students and, more broadly, the person with autism as either diverse or different. Data were obtained through interviews and questionnaires and treated as textual data. The research adds to the existing literature using MADIT (Methodology for the Analysis of Computerised Text Data) (Bassi, Moro, et al., 2024; Pinto et al. 2022; Turchi, Bassi, et al. 2023; Turchi and Orrù 2014). MADIT focuses on *how* ordinary language is used to configure a reality of sense (the process) combined with *what* the participants say (the content). MADIT has previously been used in a variety of settings (Bassi, Moro, et al., 2024; Bassi, Orrù, et al. 2024; Turchi, Bassi, et al., 2023; Turchi, Fabbian, et al. 2022), although never in the context of the education of students with autism. The results obtained make two main contributions: a) provide a deeper knowledge of the processes leading to autism as diversity versus autism as a difference; b) provide an understanding of the participants' ability to create opportunities for the students in question.

We specify that throughout the paper we use expressions such as 'student/person with autism '/' with an autism diagnosis'/'with an autism spectrum syndrome diagnosis'. These are not used to indicate the a priori stand that autism is a disease that someone has. With reference to Bolton (2018) and Kenny et al. (2016) we acknowledge the difficulty of finding one expression that suits all, and as researchers we do not wish to take any stand on whether person-first or identity-first language is better. Moreover, we have preferred the term 'syndrome' as opposed to 'disorder' or 'disease', based on what we understand is the correct medical status of the diagnosis (Calvo et al. 2003; Nordin and Bejerot 2014).

Materials and methods

The Methodology for the Analysis of Computerised Text Data (MADIT) was used to analyse the data (Iudici et al. 2022; Turchi et al. 2021, 2022). The methodology has its roots in the philosophy of language of Wittgenstein (1953) and understands ordinary language as a fundamental tool that people use, in interaction, to construct (reality of) sense. In particular, in ordinary language sense is constructed by how words are used (Turchi et al. 2021; Wittgenstein 1953). In MADIT, ordinary language is defined as the everyday, non-formalised language that people use to construct (reality of) sense (Turchi and Orrù 2014, 6–7). In MADIT, considerations about the use value of words is theorised through the concept of discursive repertories (DRs). DRs are defined as *a precise and distinct way of using ordinary language, which configures a reality (discursively intended) which assumes a 'factual' value for the interactants* (Bassi, Moro, et al., 2024; Turchi and Orrù 2014). In other words, DRs are the rules to which ordinary language adheres as it is used to configure sense.

MADIT comprises 24 DRs that are divided into three classes: stabilisation, generative and hybrid. Each specific DR belongs to either one of the three classes depending on whether the DR tend to keep the construction of sense stable or unstable (Turchi et al. 2021): In the class of stabilisation DRs the repertories promote stability in the discursive process, keeping the process equal to itself. The stabilisation DRs limit the opportunities to generate alternative scenarios (realities of sense). The generative DRs promote instability in the discursive process. These DRs pave the way for other ways of configuring sense. The hybrid DRs can contribute to stabilise or generate instability in the process of sense-making, depending on the DRs (generative or stabilisation) with which they connect in a text (a full list of the definitions of DRs is available in the supplementary material to Turchi et al. 2021).

The analysis primarily focuses on identifying the DRs that characterise each group (students, caregivers and education professionals) in relation to the question "How would you describe a student with an autism spectrum syndrome diagnosis?' Using this wide-ranging open question allowed us to pursue our research objective outlined above, by enabling the collection of various ways of narrating 'a student with an autism spectrum syndrome diagnosis' (in terms of various DRs). The particular combination of DRs constitutes the *discursive configuration* (Bassi, Orrù, et al. 2024) related to our object of investigation. The contents of the answers, i.e. *what* the participants talked about, are taken into account, although always considering the DR in which they were used. The discursive configuration is generated, maintained and changed in and by the interactions between people in a specific context (Turchi and Orrù 2014; Turchi et al. 2021), in our case, the special educational contexts of the students, caregivers and education professionals. The perspectives of the different groups of participants reciprocally impact each other and can both challenge and confirm the point of view of the others. Thus, in the analysis, we take into account if and how the DRs overlap between the groups (thereby reinforcing each other) or differ between them (thereby challenging and possibly de-stabilising the configuration). In the section 'analytical process' we offer a few examples of the analysis.

In this study, identifying a large amount of stabilisation DRs could indicate that the diagnosis risks becoming an element that 'blocks' development (such as the acquisition of new skills, the opportunity to take on new challenges). Finding generative DRs could indicate that many possible scenarios and futures are available for the students.

Context and participants

Following the Education Act of 2010, a legislative amendment led to the closure of special units for students with an autism diagnosis who did not have intellectual disabilities (Anderson 2020; SFS 2010:800 Education Act). Because of this amendment, students with autism who had previously been placed in special educational units were included in regular schools (Anderson 2020). Compulsory schools (including lower secondary school) and upper secondary schools can organise special educational groups (*särskild undervisningsgrupp*) (National Agency for Education 2024). It is also possible for both public and private compulsory and upper secondary schools to only receive students in need of special support – resource schools (*resursskola*) (SFS 2010:800 Education Act). The present research involved a) a private upper secondary resource school with limited access, specifically profiled towards students with an autism diagnosis, and b) two special teaching classes in lower secondary school focused on students with an autism diagnosis located in the premises of a public compulsory school. The study involved 63 participants: 23 students with an autism spectrum syndrome diagnosis, 22 caregivers and 18 education professionals. The private upper secondary school offered three programmes: social sciences, science and the arts. The school also offered a preparatory programme for students with insufficient grades from compulsory school. The students in the upper secondary school were between 15 and 19 years of age. The second school setting comprised the special teaching classes in lower secondary school. The students who participated in the research were in 7th and 8th year and were between 14 and 15 years of age. Table 1 shows the number of participants from each school and the different roles of the education professionals.

In some cases both students and caregivers participated, while in other cases only one or the other participated. The resource educators support the students with subject-related issues, accompany the students from one class to another, and spend time with them during breaks. The resource educators are connected to a specific class and follow the same students throughout the day. These educators had degrees varying from leisure time educator and preschool teacher (university degrees) to specific vocational training. The Student Health Team (EHT) is a multi-professional team comprising professionals with knowledge of medicine, psychosocial aspects and special education. Swedish schools are required to have an EHT.

Table 1. Participants.

			Education professionals			
	Student	Caregivers	Teachers	Resource educators	Student health team (EHT)	
Upper secondary school	19	16	7		2	
Lower secondary school	4	6	3	3	3	
Total	**23**	**22**	**10**	**3**	**5**	**63**

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority prior to commencing the participant recruitment process (approval no. 2021–03775). The head teachers of the selected schools were contacted by the first author of the paper who, having confirmed their interest in participating, informed the education professionals, caregivers and students about the research. Ongoing discussions with the head teachers were held regarding the best way of collecting data and a few teachers were also involved in a pilot study about the questionnaires with the aim of ensuring the questions were understood. The research aims, procedures and participant rights were explained on an information sheet and during in-person meetings with each participant group in each school.

Regarding the students, the first author visited both schools to explain the research and to describe how the interviews would be carried out if the students decided to participate. The students asked questions about the research, and some students already expressed their wish to participate. Because the researcher who visited the schools also conducted the interviews, the students had the opportunity to meet the researcher before deciding to participate. In line with the ethical standards for research with children, written consent was obtained from all students and from the caregivers for children younger than 15 years of age. The students participated via a semi-structured interview and the caregivers and education professionals participated via an online questionnaire with a majority of open-ended questions. The interviews and the questionnaires contained equivalent questions to all participants in order to observe what happens in the interaction between the perspective of the different groups of participants (Bassi, Orrù, et al. 2024; Turchi and Orrù 2014). The interviews and the questionnaires covered four main themes: the autism diagnosis, being a pupil with an autism diagnosis, relations to peers and the purpose of going to school. In this paper, we present results related to the second theme: being a pupil with an autism diagnosis. Table 2 presents the question that generated the textual data considered in this paper.

The interviews were carried out in dedicated rooms in each school during, before or after school hours. The interviews lasted approximately 30 min depending on how long a student spoke when giving their answers. All the interviews were fully transcribed by the first author.

Table 2. Aim, role, question.

Aim	Role	Question
Describe the discursive configuration of ‘a student with the diagnosis of autism spectrum syndrome’	Students who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum syndrome	*How would you describe a student with the diagnosis autism spectrum syndrome?*
	Teachers	*As a teacher, how would you describe a student with the diagnosis autism spectrum syndrome?*
	Resource educator	*As an educational resource, how would you describe a student with the diagnosis autism spectrum syndrome?*
	Caregivers	*How would you describe a student with the diagnosis autism spectrum syndrome?*
	Student Health Team	*Based on your role as a member of the student health team and the students you work with, how would you describe a student with the diagnosis autism spectrum syndrome?*

Analytical process

This section features examples of the analytical process (see also Bassi, Orrù, et al. 2024). An example is offered for each of the DRs further described in the results section: contraposition, description, justification and specification. Using MADIT, the analysis is guided by the question 'what function does the answer serve in regards to the question asked?'. According to MADIT, looking at the answer departing from this methodological question allows the researcher to observe how ordinary language takes form to construct the answer, and thus the process of sense generation related to our object of investigation. In our case, we looked at the answers to the question: 'How would you describe a student with an autism spectrum syndrome diagnosis?'.

Example 1: contraposition

Answer: 'I would say a student who needs more support generally than the average student' (student, upper secondary school).

The statement 'student who needs more support' takes form through a comparison between a student with a diagnosis to a student without a diagnosis ('than the average student'). Thus, the content 'needs more support' acquires sense through the comparison between two groups of students. Because of the comparative feature, the answer is considered to be a DR called contraposition (Turchi et al. 2021 supplementary material).

Example 2: description

Answer: 'for those who have more difficulties with social life in school I would describe it as someone who needs extra help to get in contact with others' (student, upper secondary school)

The two parts a) 'for those who have more difficulties with social life in school' and b) 'someone who needs extra help to get in contact with others') serve the function of merely answering the question. They do not serve the function of judging, commenting, comparing, etc. Instead of relying on personal interpretations (as in the case of the justification – see below) or mutually exclusive comparisons (as in the contraposition – see above), this text offers a sharable description by using different terms that do not configure students in an unchanging way, but rather focus on elements other than diagnosis alone. Because of this, answer 2 is considered a description DR (Turchi et al. 2021 supplementary material).

Example 3: justification

Answer: 'My general experience is that students with the diagnosis are kind and interesting' (teacher, lower secondary school).

The first part 'My general experience' serves to place a premise, a framework within which what will come next is legitimised. Thus, the second part ('is that students with the diagnosis are kind and interesting') is true in the premises placed by the first part of the answer ('My general experience'). Because of this connection between the two parts, the answer is considered a justification DR (Turchi et al. 2021 supplementary material).

Example 4: specification

Answer: 'Student are first and foremost individuals, not their diagnoses. Based on the criteria used to give an NPF diagnosis, most of our students meet the requirements, although to a different extent and within different contexts' (teacher, upper secondary school).

In this answer, the first sentence highlights the difference between a student and their diagnosis, implying the irrelevance of commenting on 'a student with an autism spectrum syndrome diagnosis' as a supposedly homogenous group. The participant proceeds to providing more elements that support their statement. By explaining that 'Based on the criteria used to give a NPF diagnosis, most of our students meet the requirements', the participant specifies in more detail the motivation and the intention behind their first statement. Given the addition of shareable elements, this text is considered a specification DR (Turchi et al. 2021 supplementary material).

Results

The results are presented as follows: 1. Discursive configuration stemming from the students' answers, 2. How the DRs used by education professionals and caregivers sustain and challenge the students' configuration. The percentage illustrates the proportion of a specific DR in relation to the whole. The whole (100%) is made up by all the identified DRs in a specific group of participants.

Discursive configuration stemming from the students' answers

As shown in Figure 1, the answers given are largely formed by stabilisation and hybrid DRs (50% and 36.49%, respectively), compared to generative DRs (13.51%).

Figure 2 shows the specific DRs. Among the stabilisation DRs found in the text collected from the students, the most recurring one is the justification. Through this DR, the discursive modalities maintain the 'current state of things' as unchangeable though a legitimising discursive element. Our analysis shows that the justification DR constitutes 28.38% of the text produced by the students. The second most common stabilisation DR is contraposition (9.46%). As shown in the analytical procedure, this is a discursive modality that compares and separates two or more elements as mutually exclusive.

The most common hybrid DR is the specification (24.32%). The role of this DR is to broaden the argumentation of the DR with which it is associated. In the case of this study, the specification DR is found to equally reinforce stabilisation and generative DRs. We will therefore deepen the discussion about the stabilisation and generative DRs, rather than the specifications.

Lastly, we observe a frequency of 12.16% for the generative DR called description. This repertory is characterised by configuring a reality of sense that represents a shareable relationship between the elements of the discourse. Apart from a single case of the DR 'Targeting', the description is the only generative DR to be found in the answers given by the students. In summary, the configuration that stems from the students' answers is quite stable and will likely stay this way. However, there are elements that render the configuration less stable.

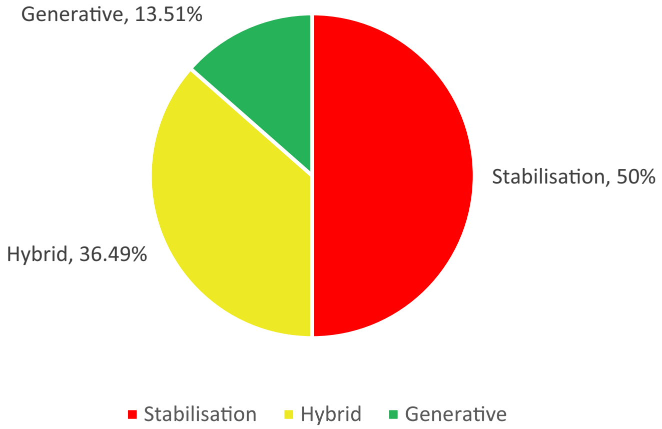

Figure 1. The proportion of stabilisation, generative and hybrid DRs in the configuration stemming from the answers given by the students.

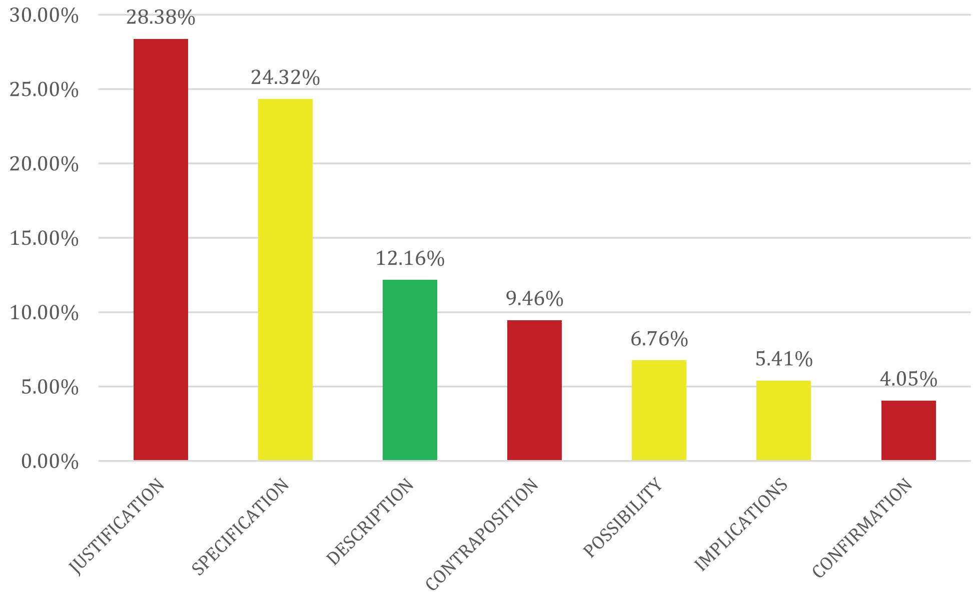

Figure 2. The specific DRs found in the students' answers that cover a proportion larger than 4% of the total configuration.

Education professionals and caregivers

The DRs found in the answers given by the caregivers and the education professionals both sustain and challenge the DRs that characterise the students' answers. In particular, the justification DR was identified in the text collected from education professionals,[1] while the contraposition modality was found in the answers given by the caregivers. Figure 3 shows the proportion of justifications and contraposition in the answers given by the education professionals and caregivers. It should be noted that in the case of the caregivers, the contraposition DRs are concentrated among five caregivers who use this DR several times. This means that the modality is not as 'widespread' among the participants compared to other DRs.

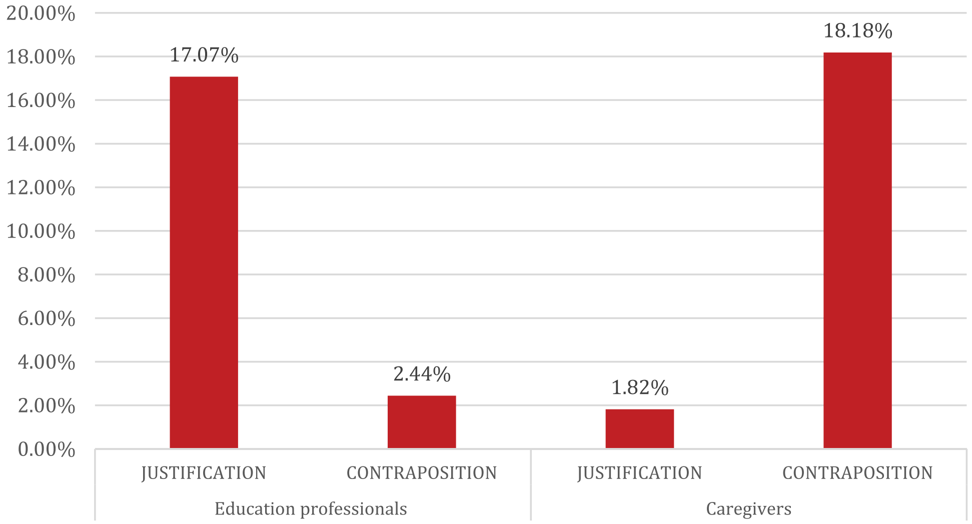

Figure 3. The proportions of the justification DR and the contraposition DR in the answers given by the education professionals and by the caregivers.

In the case of the education professionals, the justification DRs often appear connected to generative DRs (in 6 out of 7 occurrences). This means that compared to the students' configuration, the stabilising process of the justification is less strong, challenged by its connection to generative DRs.

The generative DR description is found in the answers of both caregivers and education professionals. It is interesting to note that this tendency is stronger in the text collected from the education professionals compared to the other two groups. These results will be further explored in the discussion section. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the description of each participant group.

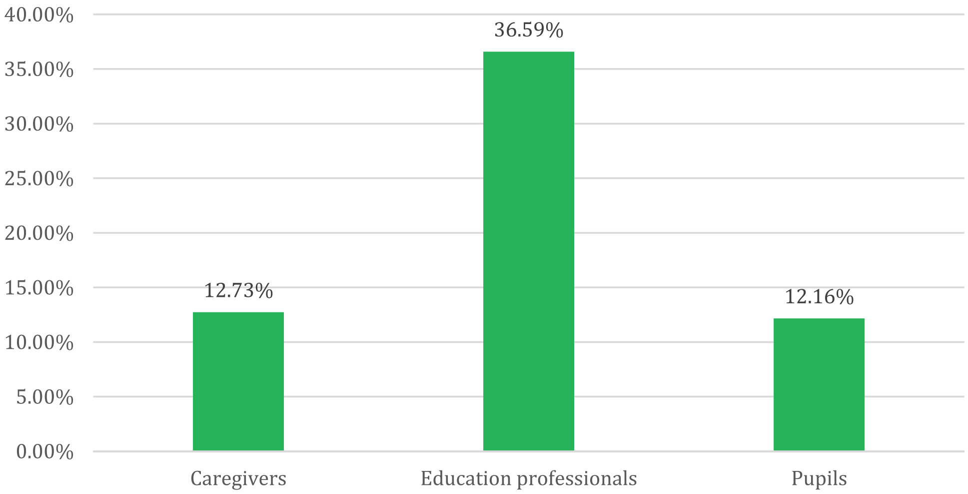

Figure 4. The proportion of the description DR in the answers of each group of participants.

Discussion

In this section, we will discuss the implications of the stabilisation vs. the generative DRs for the students' educational and social development and, more broadly, the question of diversity vs. difference. We will also take into consideration the contents of the DRs.

One of the main results of the research is the high distribution of the justification DRs. In the answers given by the students and the education professionals, the main category of content was 'varying, specific to each and every one'. This category contains text that focuses on autism as something specific to each person, a diagnosis that varies, its meaning depending on who has it.

Examples	Content category
'Eum I think it is very difficult because everyone functions very differently' (student, upper secondary school)	varying, specific to each and every one
'This is almost impossible to say since every student is unique and there is such a great variation within the spectra that it is hard to create a general picture' (EHT member, lower secondary school).	varying, specific to each and every one

The texts in the examples convey the sense that, because the diagnosis varies a lot between people, it is hard to talk about 'a student with autism'. At the same time, the justification DR maintains the sense that the diagnosis says something about the student. The justification DR and the above 'varying' content can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid making generalisations about students with autism. However, the question is who and in what way it will be decided what the diagnosis says, for each student, in each educational context. A possible risk is that if it is not clear what autism means (but it is clear that it means *something)* it is hard to know when the diagnosis will influence decisions and interpretations of the students' behaviours. It may therefore be the case that the diagnosis is taken into consideration when it should not have been or in a way that does not align with what the diagnosis actually says about the student.

In terms of the students educational and social development, should it not be essential to ensure that the diagnosis is only taken into consideration when it is adequate? Perhaps acknowledging certain difficulties, but not let the diagnosis hinder development, for example by justifying difficulties that could be overcome? If a teacher note that a student has a difficulty, for example, speaking in public, is this difficulty treated in the same way if it is understood as part of 'autism' as it would be if it had been understood as being just part of the student? How might this affect the student's opportunities to develop? Because the justification suggests that the diagnosis is a central element through which various difficulties, actions and utterances are filtered, it could also favour an idea of autism as a fundamental 'difference' from people who do not have autism (Bolton 2018; Guest 2020; Russell 2020).

The contraposition DR is another recurring stabilisation repertory among the students and was also found mainly in the caregivers' answers. The most common contents revolve around the students with autism being special, different and diverse, as illustrated in the examples in the table below.

Examples	Content category
'because the problems that we experience cannot pretty often allistics[2] not understand just because they don't have those problems and can't imagine them, sort of'. (student, upper secondary school)	Being diverse/different
'A person who, in some cases, thinks in a different way than the people who create society's (the school's) framework'. (caregiver, lower secondary school)	Being diverse/different

The contrapositions, in both form and content, build on the idea that autism is something that differentiates people/students with autism from other people/students. We think this is an expected result, especially considering that a diagnosis often helps people who have been feeling different to make sense of that experience and to find a sense of belonging within the autistic community (Cooper and Cooper 2021). However, the separation between autistic people/students and other people/students (or neurodiversity-neurotypical) could foster fragmentation in school as well as in the broader society (Guest 2020; Russell 2020). Thinking about the opportunities that are created for these students to become active members of the broader society, a sense-making that build on differences might make it harder for the two groups (autistic and not) to go on together in society. A previous study found that students with autism experienced themselves to be different, but also felt they were treated as 'different-er' than they really where (Mesa and Hamilton 2021). Perhaps the contrapositions could be read as an indication of a process in which the students are configured as 'different-er'. To balance this process, more generative DRs could be useful.

The description is a generative DR which is already present in the answers given by all groups of participants. The description provides information about the student without putting any boarders as to what can be further added. In this way, the diagnosis is recognised but does not become the core element through which the student is understood. Various contents were found in the descriptions. One that was slightly more common was the category called 'structure and routines' which contains text revolving around students with autism preferring, needing or wanting clear schedules, information, routines and rules:

Examples	Content category
'eh, but I know that eum for example I need, we might need much more clarification routines much stricter eum and more clear schedules'. (student, upper secondary school)	Structure and routines
'But in general in school I feel that a student with the diagnosis ASD needs clarity' (teacher, lower secondary school)	Structure and routines

Unlike the justification that places the diagnosis at the centre (the students are diverse but 'within' an implicit frame), and the contraposition (that builds on a separation), the description simply informs. Thus, autism is being used to add information but without creating boundaries as to what can be further said. As autism is made sense of through descriptions, it is recognised but does not become a divisive element between those who have autism and those who do not. In this sense, the descriptions can be understood as configuring autism as diversity rather than a difference: the students with autism are still thought of as part of the broader group of 'students', rather than becoming a separated group of students. Observing descriptions in our material can thus be a way of observing a process that configure autism as a neutral diversity (Botha, Dibb, and Frost 2022), i.e. autism as something that contributes to rendering a person unique, but does not mean that the person belongs to a different type of people.

The descriptions were found in all groups, especially in the answers given by the education professionals. The descriptions used by the education professionals are likely a consequence of their pedagogical vision and education. This also probably explains why we found more descriptions among the education professionals compared to the other two groups. The description modality suggests an ability to push the students forward, allowing them to challenge themselves and develop new skills. This could also be thought of as an indication of a pedagogical vision; not treating students as 'students with autism/autistic students' but rather as just students, individuals. In the descriptions, the diagnosis is not denied nor does it become the main focus. In this sense, we could understand the descriptions as a way of finding a middle ground between ignoring the diagnosis and emphasising differences (Graham and Tancredi 2019).

The finding of the descriptions could be read in contrast to some findings in previous research in which diagnostic labels in educational settings become an element that works to confirm the 'inability' or the deviant identity of a student (Dudley-Marling 2004; Hjörne and Evaldsson 2015; Hjörne and Säljö 2019). Unlike the risk highlighted in previous research, the descriptions suggest that the education professionals are not allowing that problems and deficits are placed inside the students, because of the diagnosis (Graham 2008; Mehan 2014). Moreover, in contrast to previous discussions, the results suggest that the medical discourse is not the strongest one (Gesser-Edelsburg and Hamade Boukai 2019; Hjörne 2016; Malmqvist 2018; Rafalovich 2013). In fact, we identified few DRs which, according to MADIT, would be typical of a medical perspective (such as the DRs of 'cause' and 'prescription') (Iudici, Tassinari Rogalin, and Turchi 2019; Turchi and Orrù 2014). Rather, the results suggest the existence of both a (neuro)difference and a (neuro)diversity discourse; the first discourse is primarily based on justifications and contrapositions and the second discourse is based on descriptions.

The differences to previous research might have to do with the contexts of the research projects, but also with the methodological focus on *how* (the DRs) autism is used in language and the fact that this research takes into consideration the intersection between students, caregivers and education professionals. In terms of cherishing diversity and the development of the students, the descriptions are important indications of the ability of all the participants to 'keep the door open' for the students. Moreover, looking at the narratives produced by the education professionals through MADIT can be a way of observing the competences of the education staff to focus their work beyond the difficulties commonly associated with a diagnosis (see also Evaldsson and Svahn 2019).

Conclusions

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2007) and the goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development affirm the right, despite disabilities, sex, ethnicity, etc., to participate fully in society (United Nations 2015 Art. 25). Looking at this right from the point of view of this research, to participate fully in society should be in line with moving towards diversity, where people (and students) with autism are also part of the broader society/community. The stabilisation DRs found in our data create a stronger division than needed between students with autism and students without and do not favour the goal of participation. This is clearly represented by two of the main findings of our research, related to the justification and contraposition DRs:

- the justification modality might lead to use of the diagnosis in inadequate ways, influencing decisions and interpretation of students' conducts where it should not;
- the contraposition modality favours a separation of people and students with autism from others, potentially leading to fragmentation and inequalities.

To move towards the goal of participation, it could be useful to further strengthen and make use of the generative modalities that are already also present, like the description. This would mean creating even more possibilities for the students, allowing them to be different while also keeping many doors open in terms of what they can do in their lives.

In order to promote full participation (both in school and in general in the broader community) and diversity, it would be useful to sustain the education professionals to make their aims clearer and help them strengthen their existing skills in order to provide as many opportunities as possible to their pupils. The multi-voiced focus of MADIT allows us to see that the generativity is higher among education professionals than from the students' point of view. These findings suggest that the students' horizons could be broadened by the education professional roles. This could be achieved by adding more generative DRs and help education professionals strengthen their existing skills: e.g. training them in recognising the discursive modalities they use and the ones used by their student, in order to design *ad hoc* initiatives and activities aimed at adopting more generative ones. This would influence the students due to their interaction with the education professionals. Applying MADIT, the results of such an intervention could be evaluated by comparing the discursive configuration at t0 (pre-intervention) and t1 (post-intervention). The post intervention should contain a higher proportion of generative DRs, such as targeting, proposal and anticipation, as well as the already existing description.

Notes

1. Differences among the groups of education professionals regarding the distribution of the justification DR: teachers 12%, resource educators 22%; EHT members 28.57%.
2. 'Allistic' is a term used to indicate someone who does not have autism/is not autistic (https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/allistic).

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