Autism, Body and Space –
How teachers' ability expectations performatively shape and contain the autistic body in school spaces

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Abstract: This paper deals with the question of how autism is dealt with in and by schools – especially with regard to the claim of (spatial) participation. Based on empirical research, the article examines how teacher expectations of abilities and (learning) behaviour are incorporated and relationally form bodily images of 'autism' contrasting the 'normal' child in and through school spaces. This eventually results in spatial arrangements. Interview data with teachers from elementary schools in South Germany was gathered and analysed regarding the research question: how are "autistic bodies" narrated by teachers in school and what spatial arrangements are evoked by this? We discuss our findings with reference to Norbert Elias' works on the process of civilization and Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of space and the body. We show how, in highly regulated educational organisations such as schools, the "unruly autistic body" is shaped in relation to spatially prefigured behavioural expectations and how a perceived lack of the 'right (neurotypical) bodily hexis' of autistic students lead to spatial exclusion and a withdrawal of academic expectations. Turning back to the educational discourse on autism, we propose a paradigm shift regarding teachers' diagnostic practices.

Key words: autism; body; space; academic expectations; civilization process; teachers' diagnostic practices

Content:

Introduction – the relational production of school spaces and bodies regarding autism

School is an organisation in which different actors come together with the aim of providing and communicating education. School thus represents the institutionalisation of relational interaction in which, whether implicitly or explicitly, norms and values are negotiated, and achievement against arbitrary and pre-determined standards is measured. Like no other organisation in the educational biography of children and adolescents, school represents an accumulation of social and professional expectations that are simultaneously highly asymmetrical (i. e., hierarchical), achievement and norm based. For several years, professional discourses around inclusive education have questioned the extent to which student differences are dealt with in an educationally appropriate way (Allen, 2012). That is, it is criticised that achievement expectations are set along assumed differences (Sturm, 2023), which are then (spatially) materialised in different static educational pathways. Special Educational Needs (SEN), for example, are thus constructed as an individualised category, and deficits and learning failures are personalised along disability categories (Pfahl, 2011).

From a relational spatial perspective (Schütz & Luckmann, 2003; see also Goffman, 1959), school can be seen as a social territory in which ongoing positioning takes place through interaction. In this context, social and material space are not just closely connected – they are mutually dependent. In their recent synthesis, Buchner and Köpfer (2022) point out that there are still few research studies in the context of inclusive education that take relational understandings of space as a basis (e. g., Hall, 2020; Waitoller & Annamma, 2017), yet such an understanding of space offers the possibility to understand space both as a materialised product of social action and as a material prefiguration that shapes social action (Soja, 1985; see also Löw, 2000; Schatzki, 2019).

In school, differences are interactively (co-)produced. It has been observed in recent years in Germany and internationally how the category *autism* has increasingly found its way into discourses on inclusive education (cf. Davidson & Orsini, 2013; Theunissen, 2016) as well as – numerically – into the classroom. This article focuses on the construction of autism in educational organisations and asks how autism is dealt with in schools and classroom practice, or how it is spatially invoked, narrated and materialised, and how autistic students are positioned within it. Autism functions here as a double category: as a diagnostically classified neurodivergent way of being, and as a school-administrative category along which support systems are arranged and professionalisation is aligned (Köpfer & Papke, 2023). One starting point for identifying the ways that autism is narrated in schools is through analysing teachers' understandings of autism that lead to perceptions and processing of autistic pupils in educational settings. Thus, it is possible to ask what teachers know about autism and how this is reflected in their autism rhetoric (Orsini, 2022), ergo in "structures, modes, and commonplaces of what nonautistics have come to narrate and thereby know about autism" (Yergeau, 2018, p. 6).

In the multitude of often deficit-oriented perspectives with which the phenomenon of autism is confronted (cf. overview in Leveto, 2017, p. 3), we adopt a perspective, which is characterised by a sensitivity "to the ways in which power relations shape the field of autism" and "enabling narratives of autism that challenge the predominant (deficit-focused and degrading) constructions that influence public opinion, policy, and popular culture" (Orsini & Davidson, 2013, p. 12). The inseparable unity of mind and body for scholars of critical autism studies, plays a significant role here (e. g., Titchkosky, 2012; see also Douglas et al., 2019; Milton, 2014). Thus, attention is turned to what norm-oriented notions of achievement and ability are contained within society and educational organisations that are expressed in

"compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer, 2006). Therefore, it is significant to empirically explore "what it means to live in an autistic bodymind, and what it's like to confront the power and violence of ableist institutions such as schools, prisons, and hospitals" (Orsini, 2022, p. 6).

The relationship between academic achievement and disability has been explored in both educational discourses and in discourses on autism (Keen et al., 2021; Wagener & Wagner-Willi, 2017). Restayn et al. (2022a), for example, have proposed a new reading of non-normative bodily constitutions beyond essentializing-naturalistic *and* radical-constructivist positionings, which has shown how autistic students' bodily images are produced by teacher expectations of abilities and (learning) behavior. However, the interrelation between the body and the production of space has not yet been explored.

Against this background, in this article we explore the school's production of space and body in the context of autism. Based on interviews with elementary school teachers in South Germany, who have experience of working with autistic children, we elaborate (1) how 'autistic' bodies are narrated and (re)presented within the framework of educational achievement and behavioral expectations and (2) how spatial production is processed. Finally, these body and space formations are (3) discussed in relation to the socio-philosophical approaches of Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. From this, we (4) derive implications for discourses on autism, as well as (inclusive) schooling – with a special focus on diagnostic practices.

1. Elias meets Bourdieu: Performing civilized space – shaping and abandoning of (un)ruly bodies in the educational field

Although writing during different time periods, Bourdieu (1930-2002) and Elias (1897-1990) share a number of similarities. Both of their sociological projects can be seen as an attempt to move beyond and transcend "the usual unresolvable debates centred on dualities such as individual / society or state / society" (van Krieken, 2003, p. 116) and both adopted a relational view of social life, positing that human relations are relations of interdependency, which in turn sit within wider social networks of interdependencies. The relationships that exist in educational settings are not simply between individual teachers and students. They are shaped by the structural and hierarchical relations that exist within the educational system, which sit within structural and hierarchical relations of wider society. Bourdieu, for example, developed the concept of fields to theorise this relationalism, which refers to the "differentiation of society into distinct sectors or 'worlds'" (Crossley, 2005, p. 80). Every field inherits its own logic and specifies its "custom duty" (Bourdieu, 1991/2018, p. 112). Schools can be understood as fields with an internal logic that structures everyday practice, which is largely unquestioned. Indeed, Bourdieu argues that social life would be impossible if we did not take it for granted. He has referred to the taken for granted nature of practical logic as *doxa* or *doxic* experience. It masks the fact that, although seen as inherently true and necessary, the core values of a field have been imposed through the struggles between dominant and dominated groups.

Another feature of the taken for granted nature of everyday life can be found in the concept of habitus, which both Bourdieu and Elias developed to explain the ways in which values and dispositions become naturalised and embodied. Bourdieu's embodied habitus can be found in his concept of hexis, with "the body itself serving as a locus of cultural content in abbreviated and practical form" (Accialioli, 1981, p. 37). This cultural content is manifested in an individual's performativity of their body, their deportment, their gait, and their mannerisms. However, not all forms of bodily hexis are equally valued. Each field with its internal logic and

hierarchical power dynamics, has a 'right' hexis that is socially recognised and valued. In schools, children in their role as students are expected to perform a compliant and conforming hexis, which acknowledges and reinforces their subordinate position in relation to adults/teachers. For Bourdieu, the power of the habitus relies on its habitual nature and the unconscious, or, at least, not entirely conscious way in which individuals carry out practices, "without explicit reference to a body of codified knowledge, and without the actors necessarily 'knowing what they are doing' (in the sense of being able adequately to explain what they are doing)" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 76).

Drawing on Bourdieu's understanding of space as "manifestations of social and economic differences" (Bourdieu, 1991/2018, p. 113), the highly regulated institution of school can be acknowledged as a field in which different power positions are occupied and different levels of agency can be exercised. These positions depend on the different amount of social, economic, cultural, bodily, and symbolic capital of its agents and directly refer to distinct (materialist) spaces. The possession of a "certain volume and type of cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1991/2018, p. 112) required, that includes corporeal styles and characteristics of moving, speaking e. g., *body technique* or the "right hexis" (Crossley, 2005, p. 120; Moore, 2022 refers to a "neurotypical bodily hexis", p. 213) reproduces the power dynamics of the field. In schools, teachers and students occupy different (physical) spaces, which are partly negotiable, culturally and temporally shifting, but which are being appropriated uncontested, being perceived as given.

Both theorists also made a distinction between subjective/individual habitus and the shared/collective habitus. The subjective habitus reflects the individual habits and dispositions of a specific person, whereas the collective habitus is grounded in "a shared body of dispositions, classificatory categories and generative schemes" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 80). Whilst this distinction is important, it must be acknowledged that an individual habitus does not emerge in isolation; it is rooted in and grows out of the shared habitus, which can be understood as "the soil from which grow the personal characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of his society" (Elias, 1987/1991, p. 182).

Bourdieu's concept of doxa and the naturalisation and internalisation of relations of domination and submission share similarities with Elias's conception of established and outsider relations whereby "members of groups which are, in terms of *power*, stronger than other interdependent groups, think of themselves in human terms as *better* than the others … [and] … may make the less powerful people themselves feel they lack virtue – that they are inferior in human terms" (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994, p. xv-xvi, italics in original). Although a relatively late development in his career, the concept of established and outsider relations closely links to his earlier work on civilizing processes, which according to Elias emerged in the 16th and 17th century and account for the development of modern states. However, changes in the relations between interdependent nation-states and between states and their citizens (sociogenesis) cannot be understood in isolation from the changes in individual personality, behavior and manners (psychogenesis) which emerged during the same period. From the outset, adults have played a crucial role in the socialisation or civilization of children, and Elias was concerned with the ways in which social control becomes internalised and "embodied within individuals as 'self-control': how the super-ego and ego emerges out of the social processes and constraints children encounter within interdependent – indeed, dependent – relations with their parents and teachers" (Lybeck, 2020, p. 90). The civilizing process positions children de facto as uncivilised and the goal of their socialisation is the gradual maturation towards adult civilization. However, this is not a neutral exercise of inculcating manners and self-control. It is ideologically loaded and the

ideal civilized citizen reflects the norms and values of the dominant groups in society, which is where Elias and Scotson's notion of established and outsider relations is relevant; "the established almost invariably experience and present themselves as more 'civilized', and outsiders are constructed as more 'barbaric'" (van Krieken, 1998, p. 151). In the context of the school, all children occupy an outsider position in relation to the established position of adults, but not all children are seen equally. Those with disabilities or with different educational needs/rights are in a more marginalised outsider position in comparison with their non-disabled peers. In order to become a member of the established group, individuals must accept and conform to its norms and values. Those children who cannot or will not conform to the dominant, in this case neurotypical demands, are reduced to a permanent outsider status.

2. Empirical Analysis

To empirically elaborate on the relation between autism, body and space outlined above, we now draw on data from the German research project "Teachers' Subjective Theories about Autism and Learning' (TEAL – Restayn, Köpfer & Wittwer, 2020-2023). The research project is part of a broader multidisciplinary Doctoral College on "Teachers' Diagnostic Judgment Processes" (DIAKOM) and investigates teachers' subjective theories and their impact on diagnostic judgment in schools. In TEAL, following a mixed-methods approach, we conducted problem-centered interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) with 16 elementary school teachers in order to gain narrative impulses about their teaching experiences regarding autistic students (Restayn et al., 2022b). We analysed the interviews using Grounded Theory Methodology (Charmaz, 2014) and showed that elementary school teachers construct an 'autistic' corporeality through ability expectations of a supposedly 'normal', i. e., capable, student, and by extension, expectations of inability of the autistic student.

In the current study, part-presented in this article, we pursued a secondary analysis of the interview data focusing on 'able-bodiedness' as one of the core categories – following the research question on how autistic bodies are narrated by teachers in school and what spatial arrangements are evoked by this. Methodologically, we added the procedure of a hermeneutic sequence analysis (Kruse, 2014), to reconstruct communicative formations regarding a specific subject. For this purpose, interview sequences were selected in which the participants referred to an autistic corporeality. These sequences were then explored regarding dense narratives that contained spatial aspects to eventually reconstruct body-space-formations. As a result of the analysis, three exemplary sequences of different cases will be presented that prototypically point to the different body-space-formations which we found in the empirical data.

2.1 The unruly Child – Disrupting the civilization process

Figure 1

First transcript sequence

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01   A:    can you describe it a little more precisely?
02   B:    yes: {-} i think every teacher -
03         um {---} knows that after a few years of work when one has experience and
04         has already seen a few hundred children  {2.0};
05         um {1.0} then {--} then you have such a gut::feeling {-};
06         so I can't describe it any better {-} so there is really such a
07         gut::feeling that I notice {--} something is wrong {-} something {,} is
08         not right {--} ;
09         that is not NOR::MAL {--};
10         so this behavior i can NOT:: include in my {--} experiences {-} of the
11         last five hundred children {,} that I have had {---} ;
12         i can't fit that anywhere {--} .
13         that means the behaviors and of course i can specify them but in the
14         beginning I really think that there is this gut feeling {--} -
15         i can already say that these behaviors are IN:appropriate {---} .
16         they are ex:aggerated {---} .
17         the child engages in a peculiar form of physical contact with others{--}.
18         what constantly DISTURBS: the others {-} -
19         the child does not sense: the boundaries of the others {--} .
20         so i can then pin it down to individual {-} um events to individual
21         incidents {-} but at the beginning {-} there is a gut feeling -
22   A:    do you perhaps have one or two examples in mind {--} that you somehow
23         particularly remember {-}?
24   B:    yes {-} so stefan CHOKES:: for example -
25         he goes for the throat {---} -
26         so this is something {-} that normally all children understand in the
27         first or second year of school so the neck is !SU!::!PER! taboo {--} .
28         you are not allowed to touch it {--} ;
29         then um {-} he maSSAGES: other children {--} ,
30         i mean that does not hurt so much {-} but he does it over and over again
31         in the circle of chairs ;
32         and it is simply <<higher> !NOT! !AT! !ALL! appropriate at the moment
33         {--} ;
34         and the other children sometimes think it is quite NICE: {-} ,
35         but it's still {-} <<laughing> uh {-} what child in first or second
36         grade> stands behind another {?}and maSSAGES IT:: {--} ;
37         so then he has now YESterday {-} um there we had such a school graduation
38         party on the SCHOOL yard {--} -
39         or just i was now of course again more sensitized because this last
40         parent-teacher meeting was on friday: {-} which was also not easy {--} -
41         and i really kept an eye on him {-} -
42         and then he kept BLOWING:: on other kids {-} .
43         from behind in their necks {-} .
44         or somehow blow in the face° -
45         and they said <<imitating> STOP it stefan {-} STOP it {-}> ;
46         and he does NOT stop {--} ;
47         so that's what i mean so this feeling: {-} for the {1.5} for the social
48         emotional VIBRATIONS now at the moment: {--} .
49         that's just not THERE {--} .
50         i once said to the parents because i just {-} because i had the feeling
51         that i need somehow drastic {1.0} um {---} expressions so that they
52         understand {--} -
53         i once said you know your child is like a social illiterate {--} .
54         who can {-} NOT read the {-} situations: ;
55         <<higher> does not understand> what is going on {--} ;
56         so and just therefore that is also not EVIL {--} -
57         it is not EVIL and it is not STUPID: {--} ;
58         he does not know the LANGuage: .
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Explanation of Figure 1: First exemplary interview sequence from our own data material

In response to the interviewer request for concrete examples from her everyday work in which the teacher describes a "gut feeling" (l. 5; 7) that something is "wrong", "not right" (l. 7-8) not "normal" (l. 9) regarding "inappropriate" (l. 15), "exaggerated" (l. 16) behaviours of (autistic) students, she describes three examples how a boy called Stefan violates behavioural expectations in a formal learning context (choking, massaging, blowing at). While the first behavior marks a fundamental violation, which will be examined below using

Elias' theory of civilizing processes, the other two examples can be read as infractions of context specific norms.

In the first part of the sequence the teacher refers to a "taboo" (l. 27), something that "normally all children understand in the first or second year of school" (l. 26-27): "going for the throat" (l. 25). The description of Stefan choking other children is something the teacher mentions almost in passing, which is at odds with her strong emphasis on the violation of norms. Drawing on Elias' civilizing processes (Elias, 1939/2000) and the powerful role of adults in civilising children (Lybeck, 2020, p. 68) developmentalist assumptions are evident in this short passage. Stefan is excluded from the category of developmentally 'normal' children, who are being adequately civilised and know that choking is not permissible. Following the narrative of the teacher, Stefan has not been civilised to that degree because he is assumed to be developmentally behind the other children she compares him with.

However, the way the teacher treats the issue of choking almost casually reinforces the difference she marks between the 'normal' child and the "'unruly' subject" (Erevelles, 2000, p. 34) and calls to mind a key feature of the established and outsider relations Elias refers to in his earlier work on civilizing processes. Here, not only are outsiders a category to which Stefan is assigned, constructed as uncivilised, unrestrained and unrespectable, acceptance by the established requires them to adopt forms of behavior, social norms and values the established define as civilised and respectable. (van Krieken, 1998). Her 'matter of fact' description of Stefan's choking indicates that his 'uncivilised' behavior is considered to be a fixed characteristic, given by birth, part of his alien constitution, and beyond reach of pedagogical intervention (Murray, 2013).

Later in this sequence, she exemplifies another crossing of (bodily) boundaries. Although her comment is about a specific boy, Stefan, it is conveyed as a warning for all children about what is considered (in)appropriate for their age. Again, developmentalist assumptions appear and Stefan is positioned as both immature and uncivilised. Here, what is considered (in)appropriate is defined by context *and* space. Massaging another child in a Physical Education (PE) lesson might be seen as less inappropriate, or one might even think of a PE lesson where this was practiced as part of the warm-up, for example. Although she admits that his classmates sometimes think "it's quite nice" (l. 34), it is still considered a physically boundary-crossing inappropriate behavior – "what child in first or second grade stands behind another [child] and massages it?" (l. 35-36), she asks. Although presumably not explicitly stated as a rule, a 'normal' student should intuitively know (in Jackson's (1968/1990) words as part of the 'hidden curriculum' (p. 34; see also Myles & Simpson, 2001) that massaging may be nice, but not suitable in most formal learning situations in classroom. With her laughter, drawing on the (non-normative) behaviour of the student, she expresses a form of both distancing and tension in communication, implicitly assuming some kind of shared agreement and shared habitus between the interviewer and herself, a *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1972/2002), that involves taking for granted certain rules, practices and behaviours in a social field that are by no means naturally given as a matter of fact, but could serve as some sort of unquestioned intuitive script, shared and known by those, having been socialised (and civilised) in school – although, as shown above, highly contextualised by situation and space.

This vagueness allows a degree of "fluidity and indeterminacy" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 71) in practice. Although ideals of civilised society may change due to shifts in social power balances (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2022), children in school ought to accumulate social and cultural capital, physically expressed in what is assumed to be the 'right' way of showing it. What can be referred to as the "right hexis" (Crossley, 2005, p. 120), is learned and internalised as part

of habitus and, on the other hand, secures access to such capital (over and above symbolic capital). What is recognized as being 'right', legitimates and highly obscures the inequality to such a degree that it is perceived as natural and thus repeatedly reproduced. Consequently, social actors strategise and adapt their hexis (and, indeed, are expected to do so) in an attempt to make it more closely resemble that of the 'right', socially recognised hexis (Crossley, 2005).

The third example the teacher offers of Stefan's infractions is blowing air in other students' faces. Not only is this considered to be another instance of crossing boundaries, it is exacerbated by the fact that the incident was preceded by the parent-teacher meeting, which obviously has been perceived as challenging by the teacher. The expression of keeping an "eye on him" (l. 41) reveals her focus on Stefan, whose behaviour is not only framed by institutional norms but is also opposed to the behaviour of other children. Stefan seems to be under constant surveillance because the unpredictable autistic body must be regulated.

Furthermore, the acknowledgement that she is "more sensitized" (l. 39) to Stefan's behaviour in the school yard because of the preceding parent-teacher meeting reveals that the teacher makes her statements against the background of a legitimisation of her own actions. This could also explain why she opposes all of Stefan's 'apparent' boundary crossings of other children in terms of developmentalist assumptions. Stefan's representations, or bodily hexis can be seen as accumulative crossings of boundaries in terms of physical proximity, which in turn are seen to transcend institutional norms. The notion that Stefan "does not stop" (l. 46) despite his classmates saying to do so, implies that Stefan does not *want* to or *cannot* "stop it" (l. 45), being another example of the ill-mannered, unruly behavior of an uncivilised 'other', rather than considering context or even the possibility of another explanation for this behaviour – apart from the possibility that other children are also playing their games in the yard, setting their own rules, without being surveilled. Exerted by the *order of things* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), (self-) discipline could be understood as a form of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 1972/2002) performed by the dominated group (the students) via the embodiment of social control as self-control (Lybeck, 2020), not only ensuring social stability through current ideas and ideals of civilised behaviour (Gilliam & Eva Gulløv, 2022), but also obscuring power relations in educational settings and beyond.

The sequence concludes with a vague explanation given by the interviewee for not regulating Stefan's behavior, talking about lacking a "feeling for […] the social, emotional vibrations" (l. 47-48) – as if those 'vibrations' were something obvious and fundamental to all social actors. In Bourdieusian terms, Stefan is characterized as lacking a 'feel for the game', the practical logic, whereby individuals have "grown up, learning and acquiring a set of practices, cultural competencies, including a social identity […] which renders them largely incapable of perceiving social reality, in all its arbitrariness, as anything other than 'the way things are', necessary to their own existence of *who* they are" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 70, italics in original). Lacking the (unspoken) expectation to intuitively know, to literally *feel* the 'vibrations' sent by others to understand what they want or do not want, is something that endangers civilised behaviour. The fact that children who transgress these rules are punished/corrected indicates that the 'intuitive' rules require constant maintenance for their continuity.

2.2 The wrong kind of act – Disrupting the Play and Process of Distancing and Segregation

Figure 2

Second transcript sequence

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01    so i would say the most DIFFI:cult thing is really {-}uh:: {-}
02    when the children are agGRE:ssive {--} we have another CHILD now -{-}°hh{-}
03    who::: {--} is so not aggressive against classmates but against ADUL:ts {-};
04    and that is of course somehow really a tough situatIO:N {--}.
05    so so THIS WEE:k {--} -
06    my current STU:dent {--} °hh um:: hh° {-} had reFU:sed to come with his
07    chair to the <<higher> CHAIR circle> {-};
08    and then sat down completely in the MIDDLE with his CHA::IR {-} -
09    and then °h my colleague {-} has tried to pull the chair !OUT!: a little bit
10    after he had refused THREE times {-} °h {-};
11    and then: he <<slightly with a smile> thREA:ted HER> {--} with his fist {-};
12    °h these are then already: {-} um: {-} <<hesistant> siTUATIO:ns {--} yes: {-}
13    where: {-} the whole group {-} simply also:: {--} so there:: {1.0} °hh>
14    that's how it drives INTO EVERYone. {-} not? that is one of the
15    hardest parts {-}. if: uh: when children do not um - {1.0} °h {-}
16    yes: if {--} to accompany the children THERE and to find an appropriate
17    behavior or i say sometimes always: {--} °h - then again to consider what
18    has st:TRESSed the child {--} ? can i av:OID the situations {--} °h ?
19    what would be a {--} SMALL step: {-} um into the right direction: {--} -
20    so for example with THIS child we have now th:OUGHT about {-} - we would like
21    THAT:: {---} - that the child thinks perhaps BE:FORE can I do it can i NOT do
22    it {--}? and if he has the feeling that I can not DO IT {-}; that he can
23    also remain in place or in the READING:corner {--} °h. that we say WELL:
24    {--} um: {-} then we lower {--} the: {-} the requirements a bit {-} yes.
25    so that but that takes: {--} a lot of energy for the group and of course for
26    us {-}. whereas when a child withdraws or {--} °h -
27    or sometimes just refuses it is not quite as tough for {-} <<slightly
28    smiling> for all of us>;
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Explanation of Figure 2: Second exemplary interview sequence from our own data material

In this sequence of a different case, a teacher describes what she considers to be an especially difficult situation in classroom, namely the initiation of a circle of chairs, where the behaviour of an autistic student, considered inappropriate, is sanctioned by two professionals as an example to explain her expectations of students in general: to "avoid" (l. 18) conflict situations.

The autistic student is described as "aggressive" (l. 3), "not […] against classmates but against adults" (l. 3). The situation recounted by the teacher could signify spatially pre-defined expectancies: a circle of chairs, which entails a specific script of how to arrange oneself close to one another, without leaving too much space, forming a circle. What is not expected in this spatially defined situation with its predetermined expectations of behaviour is an actor choosing to sit in the middle of the circle. In doing this, the student's behaviour is seen as a disruptive assault, jeopardising the rules of the game. After the student refuses to conform to spatial expectations and abandon the centre (of attention), a colleague, tries to "pull the chair out a little bit" (l. 9), to which the student responds with a likewise bodily expressed threat against the teacher. Here, the interviewee's narrative diverges from the specific situation of the circle of chairs and expresses more generalised concerns. In uttering that such behavior could "drive into everyone" (l. 14-15), she unconsciously produces some sort of "ableist divide" (Campbell, 2019), a distinction between the teacher *and* the other conforming children in the class, and the 'unruly child', the 'other' or the "outsider" (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994) who is lacking the 'right bodily hexis', not showing civilised behavior and thus to be sanctioned. Although the exclusion of the child from the situation appears to be in his favour (at least, if he is not able to take part, he can make himself comfortable in the

reading corner), in actuality, his removal, is in favour of the dominant and dominating group: the teacher and the class, the "established" (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994), possessing the right kind of bodily capital. This includes adequately defending oneself, expressing one's feelings and intentions verbally and not physically, and demonstrating a presupposed level of self-control (Elias, 1939/2000) with respect to metacognitive competencies ("can I do it can I NOT do it?" (l. 21-22)). Interestingly, she disrupts her speech, stating what "is one of the hardest parts […] when children do not -" (l. 14-15). What exactly is the hardest part remains hidden as she seemingly corrects herself, proceeding that it would be the hardest part to *accompany* the children to find an appropriate expression of behaviour. Here again, this 'appropriate' behaviour, culturally defined by constantly shifting norms due to struggles over power (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2022) and being part of what is instilled in the children as part of the civilizing process (Elias, 1939/2000), can be read as an example of a form of symbolic violence. It obscures how behavioural expectations, like self-regulatory skills being invoked in children, conceal power balances by disguising them as something in favour of the children themselves. Her explicit statement is that she is attending to the needs of the child, thinking about (di)stressing factors, avoiding them, by "lowering the requirements" (l. 24). However, what is happening implicitly is that the teacher appropriates space via symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1972/2002), keeping at distance the seemingly provocative 'unruly child', combined with a lowering of (performance) expectations of them. The sanctuary (reading corner) that is assigned, with the possibility for the student to decide whether to return to the circle, is a space where he is being occupied and contained (instead of being taught). In his physical removal to the reading corner, he becomes detached from the role of the student. The institutionally framed and highly predefined situation does not allow for making choices but allocates a space for each agent, in order of their capital possessed. Students are able to exercise choice, but not in circumstances of their making and only if they conform to the predetermined rules. Moreover, the student might internalise the rhetoric of failure and misbehaviour, believing that he was individually responsible for the exclusion because of his behaviour. However, at the same time, the teacher concedes that the student's mere refusal is the lesser evil, because the most important thing – the performance of the dominant group – remains unaffected and with it the civilising gestures that are repeatedly reproduced and naturalised: *"That we say well, we lower the requirements a bit. But that takes a lot of energy for the group and, of course, a lot of energy for us. Whereas when a child withdraws or […] just refuses, it is not quite as tough for all of us"* (l. 24-28). This search for control seems to lead to restrictive arrangements of physical and social space, where the disabled, the 'unruly' autistic body, that is uncontrollable, perceived as performing volcanically – ready to erupt at any moment – can be safely contained and restrained. Hence, the autistic body is to be regulated and relegated to low arousal spaces – such as the reading corner – that allows for greater control of them and their unruly body. Keeping the student at a physical distance by assigning such a space to him – ideally, through his own 'insight' and realisation that he is not capable enough and that the exclusion is for his own good – serves to physically and symbolically reinforce his outsider status.

2.3 Spare us – threatened spatial order and personalization of structural problems

Figure 3

Third transcript sequence

```
01  B:   in terms of stature ⟨--⟩ a !BIG! ⟨--⟩ !STRONG! ⟨-⟩ MAN ;
02       and we also NEEded that ⟨--⟩ -
03       because we even: had ⟨--⟩ rage outbursts ⟨-⟩ that have become really
04       violent where sometimes it only helped if he ACTUALLY  ⟨--⟩ ,
05       grabbed him in the !VERY!: worst case and then carried him outside the
06       door ⟨---⟩ -
07       or he had to STOP him ⟨-⟩ when he was attacking other children ⟨--⟩ or
08       even ME -
09       we had that too h° ,⟨--⟩ and - ⟨⟨...⟩⟩
10       ⟨⟨...⟩⟩ to manage ⟨---⟩ ALONE ⟨-⟩ -
11       but for example if_it was about ⟨-⟩ -
12       get your SCHOOL:things out .
13       and the child has °h ⟨--⟩ could't find his MATH book and immediately
14       fell into STRESS ;
15       then he ⟨--⟩ with his !VERY!: VERY VERY CAlm:: manner ⟨--⟩ -
16       the school assistant then <<enumerating> tried to arrANGE the
17       SCHOOL:things ⟨-⟩ .
18       or °h look now we have to GET:: the HOME:work book ⟨-⟩ .
19       look have to turn to THIS page and THAT page °h .
20       ⟨-⟩ has CALM::ED him has ⟨--⟩ um:::> .
21       was nat? also had a SUPERvisio:n ⟨--⟩ a SUPERvisio:n task when:: ⟨-⟩ the
22       CHILD left the ROOM ⟨--⟩ -
23       we had that quite often when:: the situatio:n ⟨--⟩ was: TOO DIcey ⟨--⟩
24       for him or TOO STRESSful that he simply left the room then it was clear
25       that ⟨-⟩ the school assistant had to come along because of course i could
26       not have left my other ⟨--⟩ twenty children in the room ⟨---⟩ -
27  A:   <<agreeing> mhm>
28  B:   WITHOUT a school assistant ⟨--⟩ !THESE!:: situations would not have been
29       manageable ⟨-⟩ .
30       then I would have had to INform the colleague next door ⟨--⟩ every time
31       uh:: ⟨-⟩ -
32       please also supervise my class ⟨-⟩ ,
33       my class would have been ⟨--⟩ completely out of control -
34       or the whole lesson schedule would have been been disTURBED ;
35       but this way it was just CLEAR ⟨---⟩ -
36       he: is then always RESponsible for the boy ⟨--⟩ ,
37       and CAN:: ⟨--⟩ also take CAre of him ⟨-⟩ ,
38       and sometimes they were: ⟨-⟩ REALLY three quarters of an hour outside in
39       the yard if °h ⟨-⟩ -
40       if the boy it was also for him CLEAR:: ⟨--⟩ i MAY always leave the room
41       ⟨-⟩ ,
42       if I have the feeling I need it now -
43       and then it could be that they were outside in the YARD for three
44       quarters of an hour and ⟨---⟩ -
45       he: just NEEded the air or was romping about or whatever ⟨--⟩ -
46       but i could CONTINue my lessons during that time i knew ⟨-⟩ ;
47       the boy was in GOOD hands -
48       and uh:: ⟨--⟩ yes .
```

Explanation of Figure 3: Third exemplary interview sequence from our own data material

In this sequence, the teacher describes the role of the school assistant, his areas of responsibilities and what she expects from him. The school assistant is introduced according to his physical characteristics (big, strong) and with reference to a threatening scene that is described with dramatic language. The teacher cites a stressful situation in class, where the student became upset because he was unable to find his math book and is supported by the school assistant to calm down. The seemingly miraculous ability of the school assistant and his "very very calm manner" (l. 15) is described in an exaggerated way. It quickly becomes clear that the function of the school assistant is to protect the teacher from attacks by the student. Rather than supporting learning, his role is to maintain a spatial order that is

threatened by the student's behavioural needs and failure to meet the collective behavioural expectations (to retrieve a book from a bag at a certain time). Once again, an image of a physically uncontrollable, monstrous student is evoked.

The teacher's needs to conduct orderly lessons are legitimised because of her privileged status in the educational field and, as a result, the meanings attached to the disruption of the teaching situation are individualised and transferred to the disruptive child. In positioning the autistic child as the locus of the disruption, his bodily difference is naturalised. As Weisser (2017) notes, as is so often the case in institutionalised pedagogical contexts, a personalisation of structural problems takes place (p. 145). Children are made responsible for 'causing problems' and facilitating interventions, such as spatial separation, differentiation, and school assistant supervision that are enacted on them, while the invisible conditions for inclusion/exclusion remain implicit (e. g. behavioural and bodily requirement to undertake a certain task at a certain time at a certain pace). The assumption that the autistic body is physically uncontrolled and uncontrollable is taken as an opportunity for a new spatial order, in which the role of the educational assistant is to provide special care and protection for the child ("in good hands", l. 47), but actually serves to legitimise spatial separation.

The narrative of this interview sequence is one in which the student is in need of shelter and of someone who understands him and can calm him down. However, what is not explicitly narrated is that the teacher needs a *spare-me (us) - room*, a room in which the student does not disturb or threaten the teacher and the class. Refusing to conform to the spatially predefined situation with the specific behavioural expectations it contains is not foreseen and threatens the educational situation ("My class would have been completely out of control or the whole lesson schedule would have been disturbed", l. 33-34). The creation of a new spatial order, mediated via the school assistant, keeps the 'uncivilised child' out of reach but, rather than being framed as an act of exclusion, it is legitimated on behalf of the child. Thus, the threat of disturbance of the pre-defined situation is projected on the child, who is perceived to be a physical threat. Discharging the child from his role as a student as such, taking him out of the learning situation in a 'legitimate' way, allows for a powerful demonstration of maintaining the spatial order, unquestioning the doxa therein. The school assistant not only has the function of a prompter (to help the student), but also of a guard who secures and maintains the space between the teacher and the threatening child. In gradually enlarging the physical and metaphorical distance between the teacher and other students and the unruly child, by removal to the reading corner and decreasing performance demands of him, the assistant's role is no longer about facilitating learning, it is about containing and preserving a safe space: "And then it could be that they were outside in the yard for three quarters of an hour and he just needed the air or was romping about or whatever. But I could continue my lessons during that time, I knew the boy was in good hands" (l. 43-48).

3. Discussion

The preceding sequences demonstrate how teacher expectations of abilities and (learning) behavior are incorporated and form bodily images of 'autism' which contrast with the 'normal' child and lead to the reconstruction of body-space formations in distinct spatial arrangements.

The analysis pointed to different formations that could be read as a continuous trifold process of (re)producing and reinforcing the otherness of autistic students who refuse to conform to bodily-bounded performance expectations: 1. The production of ''the unruly child', that is shaped against the background of institutionally determined behavioural

expectations based on ideas and ideals of civilised bodies, 2. the powerful processing of spatial distance and the withdrawal of performance expectancies from the child (now released from the role as student), and 3. the justification of the disabling process, attributing institutional incapacity to the student.

Drawing on the sociology of Bourdieu and Elias, we have highlighted how processes of spatial exclusion take place in the field of school and the unequal power dynamics that exist within it. These processes of exclusion create new spaces or converted spaces to remove embarrassing 'uncivilised' (Elias, 1939/2000) behaviour. Furthermore, certain characteristics of the actors, which they repeatedly physically express and thus confirm via their (neurotypically defined) cultural, incorporated capital, in the form of a 'right hexis' (Crossley, 2005), serve as markers of distinction between the in-group and the out-group (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994). The teacher, whose status and accumulated capital gives the authority to dominate space in the field of school, is in the position of keeping at a distance the student, who is "deemed a nuisance" (Bourdieu, 1991/2018, p. 111), lacking the (neurotypically) defined cultural capital. Indeed, such is the power of the teacher that their authority can be discharged and mediated via a third party in the form of the school assistant. This process not only legitimies (spatial) inclusion and exclusion, but makes it appear natural and given (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and thus veils power relations between teachers and students and between those persons who are labeled as being 'non-autistics' and 'autistics'. The creation of a 'sanctuary' for the student, who, contrary to all tactful attempts to draw attention to the 'right kind of acting', violates and supposedly disregards the advice of the ensemble and the audience, seems only logical: Here the student can live out his still uncivilised needs, 'be as he is' without being subjected to excessive performance expectations that he is incapable of fulfilling and, abovs all, without disturbing the performance of others. Thus, the sanctuary becomes a spare-us-room, supervised by the school support staff – or the student himself, who internalises institutional(ised) conceptions of incapacity. Whereas teachers seem to be in search of a regulated and protected space to support students classified and labeled such as being 'autistic', as a result of the internal and institutional logic of the field of school, an 'unruly' body is spatially processed and excluded so they are safely contained, no longer educated, and thus withdrawn from the role as student.

> After all, the disabled student embodies the 'unruly' subject whose physiological excesses are seen as disrupting the disciplined control of schooling. In fact, the actual existence of special education programs that serve children with a variety of labels (learning disabled, emotional and behavioral disorders, mild, moderate and multiply handicapped) is predicated on the inability of regular schooling to control effectively the disruptive interruptions of these bodies that appear impervious to the rigid demands for conformity and rationality in schools. (Erevelles, 2000, p. 34)

In naturalising attributed deficits of the student as being an inherent part of their autistic identity, power relations are concealed. The (re)allocation of space for the autistic body is processed in *complicity* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) with the 'uncivilised' student, who is lacking the 'right' "neurotypical bodily hexis" (Moore, 2022, p. 213). There is, so to speak, a paradoxical simultaneity of special support and separation (Köpfer & Tan, 2023). Following Pfahl (2011), the allocation of both special attention and segregation may have severe consequences for subjectivation processes and may provide an explanation for the underachievement of autistic students in the educational system (Ashburner et al., 2010). The performative production of 'autism' comes with the dramatization of the uncontrollable, alien autistic body that becomes a problem (Murray, 2013), a disruption, that is out of space

of pedagogical responsibility and needs special treatment, while the diagnosis seems so ubiquitous that even learning goals seem to fade into the background.

Turning back to discourses on autism and inclusion in schools, what we outlined above could also be read in terms of a misleading diagnostic process, that starts with the alienation of a child labelled as autistic, and proceeds from spatial exclusion inside the classroom, to extended spatial exclusion outside the classroom ending in attributing institutional incapacity into the student to maintain the spatial order 'given'. This process is accompanied by decreasing performance demands and may result in unschooling in the last instance. Though there are attempts at taking situation specifics into account (Leuders et al., 2020), German discourses on teachers' diagnostic competencies tend to focus on individual teachers' skills or students' 'needs', neglecting performance expectancies inherent in educational structures and cultures. Even though, in German discourses of inclusive education, diagnostic practice is discussed in a more reflective manner, focusing for example on the interconnection of didactics and diagnosis (Prengel, 2016), the specifics that constitute an (institutionalised) 'diagnostic' situation, in which different agents bring their physical-spatial behavioural expectations, norms and values into account, are not always considered.

While there are numerous publications concerning a lack of knowledge on the part of the teachers (Gómez-Marí et al., 2021), the question of knowledge production itself remains obscure. Orsini (2022) points out on how "unknowing autism" (p. 14) can resist hegemonic ways of knowing and opens new possibilities in which "autistic people are no longer forced to toggle between worlds in which their humanity is at once hyper visible as an object of scientific study and erased in all but the most liberal models of disability inclusion or accommodation" (p. 14). Taking into account social situations – and corporeality therein – could involve a broadening of teachers' diagnostic competencies in the context of inclusive education aside from the focus on 'special needs' of the individual student, thus objectivated and 'known' by way of a *shared habitus*. It can be assumed that what special discourses, such as medicine, psychiatry and special education have created in the first place (Waldschmidt, 2008) can be described as the "shared body of dispositions, classificatory categories and generative schemes" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 80) of autism. Regarding the deficits attributed to autistic students, Weisser states that "associated intervention programs remove themselves from the context of their production and make us forget what or whom they owe their existence to: the tacitly effective conditions of inclusion in the educational ratios of the present" (Weisser 2017, p. 146, transl. by authors).

The analysis and discussion we present should not be read as an attempt to diminish teachers' valuable work and efforts, trying to cope in a situation that is strongly formalised and in turn loaded with expectations embedded in organisational cultures regarding *their* predefined behaviour as a teacher. Still, we aim to reveal those hidden mechanisms we found that seem to undermine the claim of inclusive education, and constraints that are not solely the result of its meritocratic logic. Adapting what Bourdieu calls a "reflexive sociology" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) for an 'reflective' approach to diagnostic practice, "uncovering sources of power and illuminating reasons that explain social asymmetries and hierarchies" (Navarro, 2006) would entail recognizing and questioning assumptions, biases and beliefs as well as acknowledging spatially corporeal expectations inherent in educational situations. Such a reflective approach would require asking questions about the autism interventions that rarely get asked and, especially, what are the interventions "trying to achieve and why? [and] Are there ethical issues regarding these purposes, or the means by which one tries to achieve them?" (Milton, 2014, p. 7). This could be one next step to a broadened

understanding of diagnostic practice in (inclusive) educational settings as a "collaborative search for approaches for successful learning" (Jansen & Meier, 2016, p. 282, transl. by authors) that aims for planning of pedagogical services in terms of formative, "didactical diagnoses" (Prengel, 2016) and would entail offering a shared space in which mutual learning processes can unfold, aside from classificatory categories. Again, 'unknowing' could pave for a paradigm shift towards more inclusive diagnostic practices, that considers the material body without reifying it, thus being aware of unspoken and uncontested performance expectations that specify educational situations. Making space to reveal them would be another step to what we call educational equity.

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