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'It is important to be involved': social participation of autistic children and adolescents in mainstream schools

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ABSTRACT

Through the application of a Bourdieusian lens, this study aimed to contribute insight into social participation of autistic children and adolescents in mainstream schools in Iceland. The objectives were to (a) explore how autistic children and adolescents perceive their social participation in schools and (b) identify structures and processes that facilitate or hinder the children's and adolescents' participation and social inclusion. Thirteen autistic children and adolescents were interviewed about their participation within different subfields of social relations such as the classroom, cafeteria and playground. The initial inductive analyses drew on Charmaz's constructive grounded theory approach. Then Bourdieu's theory of practice was applied to critically explore identified categories. We describe four categories that reflected processes and structures influencing the participants' social participation in school: (1) defining and practicing friendships, (2) dealing with a non-accessible environment, (3) being bullied and (4) experiencing lack of social support. Our findings suggest that more focus needs to be directed to the structure and characteristics of different subfields and how they organise the social participation of autistic young people.

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Introduction

Positive peer relations and feelings of belonging are positioned as central to children's understanding of themselves and their place in the world (Parker et al. 2006). The school offers opportunities for children and adolescents to interact and spend time with friends and other schoolmates. The school experiences of autistic students have been in focus in various studies (Calder, Hill, and Pellicano 2013; Conn 2014; Goodall 2020; 2018; Sproston, Sedgewick, and Crane 2017) and there is evidence that social

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participation is often problematic for this particular group of students (Mamas et al. 2021; Rotheram-Fuller et al. 2010; Simpson et al. 2019). They are often less centrally connected in their classroom's social networks, are less accepted, and have fewer reciprocal friends than their peers (Kasari et al. 2011; Petry 2018; Rotheram-Fuller et al. 2010). Furthermore, autistic children are more likely to be teased or bullied within school (Humphrey and Hebron 2015; Symes and Humphrey 2010), often leading to feelings of anxiety and social exclusion (Cappadocia, Weiss, and Pepler 2012). Most of the research to date, however, has used positivist framings with little work that critically examines how the organisation of the social world contributes to social inclusion or exclusion of autistic young people. Also, autistic children and adolescents are much less commonly involved in research than their non-disabled peers. Instead, the focus has mainly been on the perspectives of adult stakeholders such as parents or teachers (Goodall 2020; Williams, Gleeson, and Jones 2019). These knowledge gaps inspired this critical study which explored autistic young people's social participation experiences in mainstream schools in Iceland.

Social participation in school has been defined as a multidimensional concept that includes at least four key aspects: (a) friendships and relationships, (b) contacts and interactions, (c) students' social self-perception and (d) acceptance by classmates (Mamas et al. 2021). Thus social participation can be understood in terms of social engagement and/or the degree to which children and adolescents experience being involved in activities at school, such as feelings of belonging, being part of a group and having fun. By 'belonging', we include opportunities to participate in the construction or development of social spaces. Accordingly, often being accepted and valued by others becomes a critical issue for young people (Saraví, Bayón, and Azaola 2020). For autistic children and adolescents, difficulties with social participation arise from the complex interactions between their individual capacities and the socio-material arrangements of their school environment. This includes inaccessibility of spaces due to physical layout or sensory qualities (e.g. sound, light), as well as social and cognitive demands of activities typically performed within school. Negative attitudes, lack of knowledge and flexibility, and lack of appropriate support are also commonly reported as barriers to successful participation (Egilson et al. 2017; Jakobsdóttir, Egilson, and Ólafsson 2015; Krieger et al. 2018; Mamas et al. 2021).

This study was part of a wider Icelandic research project called Life quality and participation of disabled children and youth (LIFE-DCY) (Egilson et al. 2021). Our objectives were to (a) explore how autistic children and adolescents perceive their social participation in schools and (b) identify structures and processes that facilitate or hinder the children's and adolescents' participation and social inclusion. To better understand the social participation of the autistic students and their fluid social positions, we utilised aspects of Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu 1986; 1977).

Theoretical perspective

Our analysis is informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his central organising concepts of field, habitus and capital to illuminate the relationship between existing social structures and children's and adolescents' understandings of their social participation and 'place in the world'. Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977) emphasised

that individuals and social groups are continuously engaged in struggles to acquire and expand different types of capital to improve or maintain their social position. This struggle takes place within social spaces like the family or school which are referred to by Bourdieu as interlocking 'fields'. Each field has its logic(s) or set of understandings, rules, values and beliefs (doxa) which determine the structure of the field and guide the actions or practices of individuals – providing opportunities and boundaries for participation and making specific ways of being and acting acceptable and legitimate (Grenfell 2013). In the study, we were interested in examining how particular micro subfields mediated participation. By 'subfield', we refer to localised sets of relations, such as a particular school or classroom, that exist within larger fields such as education.

According to Bourdieu, practices are the results of an unconscious relationship between habitus and a field. Habitus has been described as conceptualising individuals' 'social personality' because it refers to a disposition for practices that are based on societal rules and expectations, while at the same time being – very much like personality in a psychological sense – part of the individual's internalised and mostly unconscious sense of self (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This includes the influence of habitus on a person's way of thinking, feeling, doing and being. In this way, the concept captures how persons are inclined to act in certain ways and not others. Possible social practices then depend on the position a child holds in a given field but are also rooted in habitus, which accounts for how past experiences shape what seems appropriate and possible (Maton 2013). Thus, from their social position in a field, children develop a 'practical sense' of where they belong and who they are meant to be – and at the same time, internalise the meaning and values that order their social worlds (Teachman et al. 2020; Wacquant 1992).

Children's position in a field is determined by the amount and type of field-specific capital or resources they have. Generally, more capital equates to a stronger social position. Therefore, capital reflects the production and reproduction of social inequalities that create conditions where 'everything is not equally possible or impossible' (Bourdieu 1986, 241). Bourdieu conceptualised three forms of capital: economic, cultural and social. In our analysis, the focus is mainly on cultural and social capital, and how these different forms intersect and produce a range of effects in the children's and adolescents' lives. Social capital comprises the potential value that lies in social relationships and networks like one's belonging to high-status peer groups. Social capital can be activated to create opportunities such as getting access to activities or receiving assistance or support. Conversely, cultural capital refers to socially accepted truths, knowledge and representations, which are found in interactions between individuals as well as material properties of the human environment. This includes valued abilities like skills in sports or academic acumen (Bourdieu 1986). In school, these forms of capital can be expected to affect the children's and adolescents' opportunities to be a member of a group and participate. From a Bourdieusian perspective, there is also an opportunity to consider children's agency in engaging with situations in the field to increase their capital and strengthen their social position. Insight into children's agency can contribute to our understanding of how schools can be organised in ways that encourage and support children's efforts to achieve good social positions. In sum, the Bourdieusian perspective allows for identifying social processes that may contribute to children's participation in different subfields at school, generating insight into often implicit dynamics of social life.

In this paper, Bourdieu's key concepts are used as a theoretical lens to analyse the social participation of autistic children and adolescents in relation to their position-takings, practices, and often disadvantaged positions within school. The positions in which different social networks place children and youth in relation to reproduction of their different forms and amount of capital within school is also highlighted.

Methods

Participants

Eligible for participation were autistic children and adolescents, between 8 and 18 years of age. In collaboration with the Icelandic Counselling and Diagnostic Centre, an advertisement was sent to families who had previously taken part in our earlier survey about life quality and participation of autistic children in Iceland (Egilson, Ólafsdóttir, et al. 2017; Jakobsdóttir, Egilson, and Ólafsson 2015). In the advertisement, families were informed about our ongoing research and interested parties were asked to contact us through e-mail for further information. Altogether eight participants were recruited through the advertisement. To obtain a more varied sample in terms of gender and age, our collaborator at the Counselling and Diagnostic Centre also directly informed a few families about the study and asked for their permission to be contacted. Five more participants were recruited this way.

Altogether 13 autistic children and adolescents agreed to participate, 9 boys and 4 girls. Participants' gender and age characteristics are described in Table 1. All participants except one lived in the greater capital area where over 60% of the Icelandic population lives.

Data generation and analysis

In-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted to explore the students' experiences, perspectives and feelings regarding their participation in school. The interview guide was informed by the findings from our previous surveys (Egilson, Ólafsdóttir, et al. 2017; Jakobsdóttir, Egilson, and Ólafsson 2015) and covered various features of children's participation within different subfields (e.g. classroom, cafeteria, playground) at school, such as their involvement and sense of belonging, friendships, relations with teachers and other people, and what they identified as key aspects of participation at school. In addition, the participants were encouraged to choose conversation themes that they found important.

Table 1. Participant age and gender.

Children			Adolescents		
Name*	Age	Gender	Name*	Age	Gender
Rut	8	F	Geir	12	M
Bjarni	9	M	Helgi	12	M
Gunnar	9	M	Guðrún	14	F
Anton	9	M	Freyja	15	F
Halldór	10	M	Brynja	17	F
Þorgeir	10	M	Jón	18	M
Sigurður	11	M			

*All names are pseudonyms.

Altogether 15 interviews were carried out, 2 children were interviewed twice. The first author conducted 11 interviews and other members of the research team conducted the remaining 4. All interviewers had experience in working and conducting interviews with autistic young people. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 min. All participants were interviewed in their homes and before each interview, the interviewers had gained background information from the parents to build and establish trust and rapport with their child and ensure that the interview focused on relevant topics and issues. All participants and their parents provided informed consent and easy-to-read versions were provided. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and imported into the Atlas.ti qualitative software program for analysis.

The initial analysis was inductive and utilised the analytic techniques of the first five steps in the constructivist grounded theory approach described by Charmaz (2014). Accordingly, data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously from early on to identify emerging codes and possible gaps in the data. Then, we made appropriate adjustments for subsequent interviews, such as by adding probing questions. Initial (line-by-line) coding was applied to define what was happening in fragments of data and to identify processes connected to the children's social participation. Consequently, focused coding was carried out to find the most frequent and significant codes which were then used to sift through the data, and look for patterns (i.e. categories) until saturation of categories was reached. Comparative methods were implemented throughout this process such as by comparing codes and data and defining links between them. A methodological journal was used to write memos about the data while they were gathered, and to critically interrogate the context in which they were situated. According to Charmaz (2017), this approach encourages researchers to examine their preconceptions and raise critical questions from the beginning of data collection through analysis and writing. Because our goal was not to produce a constructivist grounded theory, we did not advance to Charmaz's next steps of theoretical sampling and coding. Instead, to advance our aim of investigating structural mediators of social participation, we then applied Bourdieu's central concepts to critically explore our generated categories to define and elucidate the structures and processes that influenced the children´s and adolescents' experiences as well as their fluid situations over time and space.

To further engage participants in data generation and interpretation we sent a summary of their interview to four participants for review. Two of them had minor additional comments that were included in the final analysis. The study was approved by the Icelandic National Bioethics Committee (VSN-13-081/16-187-V2).

Findings

Four main categories were developed regarding social participation in school: (1) defining and practicing friendships, (2) dealing with a non-accessible environment, (3) being bullied and (4) experiencing lack of social support. The categories reflected processes and structures influencing the participant's social participation, as well as aspects they considered most important in relation to their possibilities to participate. In what follows, we detail these categories, the social relations that organised participants' practices and their strategies for obtaining opportunities of inclusion in school spaces. Furthermore, we describe the forces that according to the children's perspectives

constrained or enhanced inclusion, how these were reproduced or resisted in the children's accounts, and their suggestions for change in order to increase their opportunities for social participation.

Defining and practicing friendships

The children's and adolescents' accounts reflect that school was an important field for gaining and maintaining friendships. All participants except Geir named one or more friends that they spent time with on regular basis. They described friendships as being characterised by good fellowship, mutual trust, and joint interests, like Bjarni who said: 'They [my friends] show consideration and know how to be friends. They are fun to be with'. Nevertheless, all described difficulties regarding social interactions and challenges in building and sustaining relationships with other children and adolescents.

Within the micro relations of the classroom, the participants knew their place within its social hierarchies and used relevant strategies oriented to maintain or improve their positions, such as helping, commenting and asking questions. Being outside of their classroom was more complex and there it could be problematic to form or sustain relationships. When engaging in a new class or activity, for example, the school choir or band, the participants described difficulties like not knowing what to say or how to behave. They appeared to lack an interpretive scheme, a habitus attuned to understanding and acting in such circumstances, or as adolescents Guðrún and Brynja both said: 'I feel like I'm socially strange'. Therefore, a long time could pass before the children developed relations within such settings.

Having a supportive friend was an important source of social capital, especially within a new or challenging context, such as in crowds at the school playground or the cafeteria. Freyja reported:

> Look, if my friend is with me and we are in a group or where it is crowded, then I often need to be with her, with her support, you know, with her by my side […] and I often talk to my friend when I'm nervous about something.

In this way, Freyja was able to take part in social settings she otherwise avoided by drawing on the social capital she was able to access through her friend.

It varied how, where and to what extent the participants practiced their friendships within school. Most of the younger children took part in outdoor games with others, especially during recess. When they couldn't physically play a game, they would draw on their available capital to take on socially valued roles such as being a judge, cheerleader or a director. Þorgeir reported: 'My friends are maybe playing dodgeball or some game I can't play. Then I'm the judge or I just go with them to cheer them on'. And Rut said: 'Look, they [my friends] are often performing a play, but I usually watch while they are practicing. I think it's better just to watch and also, I like it when I'm the director'. The children described how friends need to agree about what games to play but nevertheless found it hard to give in and compromise. At times, their interests in particular topics as in dinosaurs or folklores complicated their social participation, although some dyads had made up 'games' or 'rules' to decide who was in charge and when. Reflecting their habitus, the children tacitly interpreted the social rules of the playground and negotiated ways to participate in line with their preferences, abilities, and that was valued in the subfield.

When approaching adolescence, participants found it increasingly harder to take part in what their friends pursued, like going to the youth centre, to dances or other school-related events. In such settings, the adolescents often lacked the cultural capital required, did not fully understand the unwritten rules of the game and overall, had difficulties in following the doxa of the subfields. As their friends' interests and conversations changed with age, it became more challenging to 'read between the lines' (Jón) and understand hidden or unspoken meanings. Freyja described:

> Oh, sometimes I don't know what they [my friends] are thinking, and then I start to overthink things and how they feel about me. Like sarcasm, I suck at that! And then I just feel like an outsider.

All described situations where they felt uncomfortable and 'out of place' (Jón) in group conversations and found it easier to interact on social media where the required communication skills were easier to interpret.

Typically, the participants acknowledged that they were commonly positioned with those who occupied somewhat marginalised social spaces. Anton, Bjarni, Halldór, and Jón talked about three groupings; 'the soccer players, the popular girls, and us' (Anton) where 'us' referred to a small number of children interested in other things than sports. 'Us' could also mean children who were not very popular among their schoolmates. The boys had incorporated this social schema into their habitus and drew on it to describe their social positions. Likewise, Freyja described herself and her friends as 'nerds' because they had special interests, dressed differently and had few things in common with the more popular kids. In doing so, the participants developed an understanding of their social position in the field, which may have contributed to sustaining the structure of the field and possibly their marginalisation.

Dealing with a non-accessible environment

The material and social characteristics of the school subfield influenced participants' possibilities for social participation, and all of them named incidents where adjustments were needed. There were complaints about noise and chaos at the cafeteria, causing anxiousness and frustration, especially during lunch hours. Institutional rules like standing in line and sitting at a fixed table also caused difficulties. Bjarni described: 'I hate being in the food line, the noise is too loud, and everyone is bumping into you'. Anton, Gunnar and Halldór had support during lunch; a person who monitored them and stepped in and helped if needed. With the right support, the boys were able to join their friends in the cafeteria. In contrast, the three teenage girl participants avoided being at the cafeteria during rush hours. Rather, they navigated the field in line with their needs and preferences by spending their lunchtime in a quiet place. Consequently, they may have missed out on opportunities to acquire and maintain social capital. Freyja said:

> Often, I take my lunch to the hall where the school counsellor is. There are sofas, I just sit there and that's fine. But you know, sometimes my friend comes with me but often I sit there alone.

Because she was isolated, Freyja missed important discussions like deciding what to do together after school – a significant part of maintaining friendships and an opportunity for acquiring cultural capital.

The prevailing material arrangements of the school limited participants' interactions with their peers and contributed to their marginal positionings. In fourth grade, Gunnar's class moved from the main school building and into a portable classroom in the schoolyard. Earlier on, he had had access to a quiet place during school hours, such as when stimuli in the classroom were overwhelming for him, he could retreat into the hall and recover. In the new arrangement, Gunnar had to go outside in all weathers and walk over to the main building. Even though it was not a long walk, he said, 'that just isn't helping'. Consequently, Gunnar experienced more difficulties inside the classroom than before, and he got more often into disputes with his classmates.

The effects of exclusionary material arrangements were compounded by participants' acceptance of barriers as unavoidable or 'just the way things are'. Anton had a physical impairment in addition to autism spectrum disorder and used a walker or a wheelchair for mobility, depending on distances and terrain. Not having access to certain spaces within the school appeared to have become natural for him and part of his habitus. During the interview, he talked eagerly about his friends with whom he had close fellowship during classes and at lunch. Yet, during recess, he mostly spent his time alone and said: 'I always spend my time at the same place at the schoolyard. That's a good spot for me and often I just forget myself in my thoughts'. At first, this seemed not to bother Anton much. But later, when asked to describe the schoolyard, another aspect was revealed. A popular place in the schoolyard was a fenced-in court where his friends often played dodgeball, football, or other games. As the court was situated on a small hill and the entrance was quite narrow, it was in fact impossible for Anton to join the game even though the longing was there. His social strengths were of little use in this inaccessible environment.

Being bullied

The accounts revealed how bullying practices and exposure to negative attitudes shaped participants habitus and understanding of their place in the social world of the school. This meant that they adjusted to which attributes of individuals grant power and which are less valued or marginalised. All participants had been teased or bullied and described how some of their fellow students seemed to avoid them, like 'their autism was contagious' (Sigurður). The children were aware of others making fun of them and often heard negative comments. Sigurður said:

> Some kids are really mean to me […] they just hate me. They for example don't want me to sit beside them and sometimes they say nasty things about me. Just if I'm there, they say something bad.

In the most serious cases, the participants had experienced both mental and physical violence for a long time, as Brynja described: 'From 1st to 7th grade, it was mostly physical but then the kids realised "yes, she can complain if there are any bruises or marks", so after that, it was just ignorance'. Reactions to the teasing or bullying varied but most participants tried to disregard it and instead be near someone they trusted. However, due to such negative experiences, they felt frustrated, depressed and on one occasion suicidal thoughts were mentioned.

Gunnar's account reflected his struggles to improve his position in the school's social hierarchies. He said it was difficult to 'always just to walk away' when other children

teased him and sometimes, he lost his temper: 'I can get really angry and sometimes I try to beat them up. But who gets sent to the principal? Me! It seems like it doesn't matter how it started'. Thus Gunnar felt like he was always blamed for getting into fights but those who bullied him were allowed to continue without any consequences. In this way, Gunnar drew on his capacity (violent response) to assert a position of power the bullies tried to deny him. Even though it was not an approved behaviour by the school, it was an important strategy in which he claimed agency.

To deal with bullying, most participants drew on their social resources by seeking help from their friends, parents, teachers and other school staff. Although their parents frequently met with school professionals to discuss possible solutions, participants seldom experienced changes. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this in itself is not surprising since the schoolyard tacit rules of the game and consequently the power relations within the field had not changed. The children described helplessness and lack of way out, like Freyja said:

> They tried [to do something]. My mom was really angry, and she hated all the kids because of this. And I remember going to a meeting with the boy who teased me the most and his mom. However, it was just constant bullying.

In some schools, 'autism presentations' were practiced, wherein students were informed about autism spectrum disorder and got the chance to ask their autistic peers questions. Those who had experienced such meetings claimed they made a bad situation even worse, reinforcing the social hierarchies rather than addressing them. Halldór said: 'They [the teachers] just described the "movie-concept" of Asperger, it was just so much generalisation'. And Brynja reported: 'I was never asked! […] It was just horrible, the whole presentation and everything got much worse after that'. Nonetheless, most participants agreed that education about various marginalised groups was important and wished for better understanding and change in attitudes among their peers. Guðrún said: 'A better understanding about, that it's not okay to make jokes about disabled people and neither about your skin colour or your family form. It would be great, but sadly it's not like that'. Hence, prevention efforts made by the schools were at best experienced by participants as ineffective and problematic at worst.

Experiencing lack of social support

In the previous sections, we have outlined how the socio-material relationships that organised the school subfields sustained participants' marginalisation. Participants may not have always fully understood how these forces operated, but nevertheless were highly critical of school services and drew on their experiences and insights to suggest possibilities for much needed change. Participants described how the teacher assistants focused mostly on their educational needs, like help with completing classroom assignments. The adolescents complained about the lack of support in social settings and wanted more control over where, when and by whom assistance was provided. Brynja reported:

> If someone had helped me in these relations with the other kids or if I had been taught better, you know how to communicate. No one helps you with that because it's not directly related to your schoolwork.

Even though the younger children were not as critical about the support they received, they all named incidents where social support was lacking, especially during recess where the rules of the field were not as apparent as within the classroom.

Most participants wanted to be involved in decision-making regarding their school participation and support needs but stated that they were seldom or never consulted. Guðrún claimed:

> The meetings are always held without me […] it's always just the parents and the teachers. But you don't tell your parents everything and it's not certain that they always know what is best and what needs to be done.

Similar comments were made by other participants who also wanted to be included and heard at meetings so that their needs and wishes could be acted on.

The adolescents claimed that more emphasis should be placed on social participation in school and school-related events. They recognised the need to focus more on social skills and believed that all students would benefit from such learning, not only autistic children. Three of the younger children, Gunnar, Helgi and Rut, called for 'peace' and more justice in the world where they and everyone else could pursue what they wanted to do and be. With better access to timely and relevant support, the children believed they would be able to participate in the ways and to the extent they wanted. Participants' critiques are a reminder of how their lived experiences of marginalisation uniquely position them to identify opportunities for reform.

Discussion

In this study autistic children and adolescents shared their experiences about their social participation in school and the factors that contributed to their possibilities to participate along with other students. Bourdieu's key concepts provided tools to analyse the effects different forms of capital had on their positionings and practices within different subfields such as the classroom and playground.

Bourdieu likened social relations to games, where the school subfield (as any other field) can be seen as a competitive game in which children need to improvise in the quest to maximise their positions or to 'fit in' with others (Maton 2013). The rules of the game, i.e. doxa, of different subfields, field-specific capitals, and resources within school to promote inclusive education for autistic students were evident in our findings. The participants' social participation varied between different subfields, thus it mattered where and with whom they spent their time. Being with a friend could facilitate entry to a subfield and created a certain safety for the children who then felt more involved and part of the group. However, their social capital was not necessarily related to the number of friends or the hours they spent together, but to their friends' understanding, support and trust. In other words, there was a clear interaction between the children's social capital and their access to cultural capital that enabled them to better understand the tacit rules of different games and participate in a way that made sense to other children. But difficulties also occurred, and it was often problematic to make and sustain friendships.

Challenges in social participation and interaction faced by our participants created barriers to acquiring forms of cultural capital, like knowing what to say or how to act,

which in turn affected their social capital in terms of access to social networks. Our analysis points to the children often identifying with others who had similar interests, like being a nerd and knowing nerd stuff. While this group identification had its advantages, as in positive friendships where nerdiness was a recognised form of capital, it also had negative effects in the larger field of students' social relations, as it detracted from obtaining valued social positions and could be a source of bullying. During adolescence, our participants increasingly experienced social exclusion that was at least in part linked to the lack of accessible activities and social settings. This included perceptions and preconceived notions related to what it means to behave 'normally' and what attributes were valued or marginalised, as part of a larger web of socially embedded beliefs that mediated how they had come to understand themselves and others (Bourdieu 1977). This had repercussions for the adolescents' acquisition of the social and cultural capital needed to navigate the field and engage in meaningful practices and relations.

Bullying experiences, painful feelings and exclusion further put our participants at risk of being marginalised in the field by internalising negative responses of others towards them. Our study indicates how such embodiment became part of their habitus and was carried forward into other social settings and possibly influenced their future participation. Research has shown that autistic students are considerably more likely to be bullied than their peers (Cappadocia, Weiss, and Pepler 2012; Humphrey and Hebron 2015), they are often marked out as being 'odd' and consequently express a desire to 'fit in' or 'pass as normal' (Humphrey and Hebron 2015; Humphrey and Lewis 2008). Furthermore, it can be problematic for autistic children and adolescents to recognise and respond to bullying behaviour (Humphrey and Hebron 2015), due to their difficulties navigating the social field and playing by its tacit rules. It should be noted that our participants did not express a wish to pass as normal but rather made a claim to a particular kind of normality where diversity is endorsed, and everyone is accepted as they are.

The structural and socio-material arrangements of the schools contributed to children's marginalisation, sometimes in profound ways. These arrangements included attitudes and traditions which complicated building and sustaining social capital with peers, the inaccessibility of spaces and the lack of appropriate supports. These findings echo those of our previous survey study about school participation of autistic children and adolescents in Iceland which showed that barriers to participation included elements of the social and physical environment as well as limited resources (Jakobsdóttir, Egilson, and Ólafsson 2015). The analyses presented in this article add more detailed insight into how these factors feature in the mechanisms of exclusion within school and its subfields.

Our findings underline the importance of teachers and other school staff supporting autistic children and adolescents in accessing and developing positive social relationships as well as developing skills and abilities in navigating social situations. Also, there is a need to bring into light, through research and discussion, the tacit rules of the school subfields and use the knowledge to create more inclusive environments. Applying a Bourdieusian lens reveals how inaccessibility of the school environment and activities appears to be related to teachers' and other staff's lack of cultural capital in the form of knowledge and understanding of how disabled children and adolescents can participate in equity with others. The forms of cultural capital surrounding childhood disability play a role in the actions taken by school staff to provide support and make accommodations to the social and physical environment, assignments, and so on. The importance

of cultural capital related to disability was also observed in the children's accounts about their participation during recess, a subfield in which children are the main actors and in which adult supervision is limited. This finding emphasises the importance of teachers supporting all students in their class in acquiring cultural capital about being disabled and recognising the voices of their disabled peers. In doing so, the practices of actors in the field are more likely to be inclusive of disabled students.

Conclusion

Our study reflects how autistic students experience their participation in different subfields within school. Our field analysis revealed that although children may be physically present in a socio-material space like a classroom, 'being there' does not ensure they are included in a way they find meaningful. Likewise, 'not being there' does not necessarily reflect their lack of interest towards social participation. As for all, a balance between doing specific tasks, pursuing individual interests and participating with others, is valued by autistic children and adolescents. It is necessary that schools acknowledge the barriers faced by autistic students, develop knowledge on opportunities for them to participate along with other students, and translate this knowledge into practice by providing appropriate support. In this regard, we strongly suggest that more attention be directed to the structure and characteristics of different subfields, (e.g. classrooms, cafeterias, playgrounds), and how they govern whether or to what extent autistic children and adolescents can participate or not. And, as emphasised by our participants, it is important to consult with autistic students about what should be done, where and when to ensure that individual needs and wishes are respected and acted on.

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