

Summary

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Dissertation title: Experiencing school and extracurricular learning spaces by individuals on the autism spectrum

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This study aims to reconstruct people's experiences on the autism spectrum in school and extracurricular learning spaces.

The choice of a scientific topic can be explained on three levels: first, it reflects a perceived gap in first-hand research on the autism spectrum; second, it is a response to self-advocates' pleas to restore their proper place and status in the debate on and around autism; and third, it is a growing cognitive curiosity fuelled and inspired by the daily therapeutic and diagnostic practice applied to children and adolescents on the autism spectrum and their families. The scientific goal was set to attempt to reconstruct the meanings that individuals on the autism spectrum give to their experiences of school and extracurricular educational spaces, and to describe not only the spatial conditions of these spaces, but also the associated characteristics - patterns, types and behaviours. At the praxeological level - and therefore in educational *praxis* - it was important to delineate, from a first-person perspective, possible support strategies for the organisation of educational spaces, thus gaining new or expanding current knowledge on the subject.

The research problems were formulated in the form of questions. Academic analysis was primarily concerned with understanding rather than measuring the phenomenon under study, so the main question was about how and related characteristics: how do people with autism experience learning spaces in and out of school? This was developed through specific questions, namely:

- What is the specific functioning of people on the autism spectrum as seen through the lens of their sensory experiences related to school education? How do people on the autism spectrum construct knowledge about themselves? How do they experience autism? How do they perceive themselves?
- What are the places of significance for people with autism spectrum disorder in school and out-of-school learning spaces??

- What is the sensory experience of people on the autism spectrum? What barriers does it reveal? What meanings do people on the autism spectrum give to their 'sensory experience'?
- What are the barriers and limitations inherent in school and extracurricular learning spaces for people on the autism spectrum from their perspective?
- What are the expectations and needs of the people with autism spectrum disorder interviewed in terms of (co-)creating learning spaces that support learning and being effective?? Where do they see opportunities, and where do they see threats?

The study was based on a qualitative approach using an interpretive-constructivist paradigm. The dissertation takes the form of a multi-source ethnography as conceptualised by George Marcus. The triangulation of sources was made possible through the use of a variety of data collection methods, such as semi-guided free-form interviews, sensory ethnography - sensory *walks* (*walk-alongs* and *extended journeys*) and 'participatory feeling', and content analysis of blogs. Grounded theory served as an analytical and research meta-strategy in this thesis.

The project received a positive opinion from the Research Ethics Committee at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz. The research material was collected between 2019 and 2022. The keyword method was used for the blog search, and the data corpus was built using the cyclic method. It was successively expanded with data collected through direct contact - 13 free interviews and nine sensory walks were conducted (in Warsaw, Szczecin, Świecie, Grudziądz and Bydgoszcz). Recruitment to the study was purposeful, non-random, and also based on a system of instructions, the so-called snowball method. Thirteen people with autism spectrum disorders - five women and eight men (including one minor) - participated in the face-to-face study. Data analysis was supported by MAXQDA software. The collected corpus of text included in the final analysis totalled 962 pages.

The result of this study is a reconstructed picture of people's experiences on the autism spectrum - the topography of experiences, the multi-sensory landscape of school and extracurricular school spaces. The final chapter presents practical implications for universal design and inclusive education. It discusses neurodiversity in 'education for all', but also presents the perspective of people on the autism spectrum on the co-creation of a 'least restrictive environment'. On a practical level, a proposed scheme for implementing accessibility strategies for pupils on the autism spectrum and with individual educational needs is presented. The dissertation concludes with a gloss that gives the researcher's subjective voice on her experiences of living together.