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How Special Education Authorizes Teaching Practices in Inclusive Schools

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Abstract

Inclusion in schools has gained significant traction and was initially seen as a means to overcome the exclusionary aspects of special education. Paradoxically, special education has also been steadily expanding, even within schools that claim to be inclusive. This suggests that special education serves functions that inclusive education does not. Accordingly, this paper examines the de facto roles that special education fulfills in inclusive schools. To explore this question, the study draws on ethnographic research conducted in inclusive schools in Germany, focusing on teachers' equal treatment, individualization, and differentiation. Differentiation, in particular, often leads to accusations of favoritism and, consequently, challenges to teachers' authority. Based on empirical analysis, I argue that special education plays a legitimizing role in the classroom by providing necessary authorizations for pedagogical differentiation through legitimizing knowledge about differences. In contrast, inclusive education, with its emphasis on universalism and singularity, appears to lack this specialized knowledge—and, consequently, the necessary authorizations.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Education, Authority, Justice, Equality, Difference, Singularity, Dilemmas of Difference

Introduction: The Rise of Inclusion and Special Education

Inclusion in schools has experienced a significant rise, particularly since the Salamanca Statement in 1994 and the enactment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The UNCRPD's adoption in 2006 has played a pivotal role in shaping global perspectives on education by emphasizing the rights of individuals with disabilities to inclusive and quality education. One result of the UNCRPD's influence is a discernible shift in educational policies that now claim to support inclusion. This means they claim to create accessible, supportive, and adaptable learning environments *for all* pupils.

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Historically, the segregation of pupils with disabilities from general education was legitimized by two dominant arguments. First, that only segregation ensures the best support for these pupils' special needs. Second, that segregation reduces an unreasonable burden (!sic) on mainstream schools. These arguments are, in general, no longer considered legitimate. Consequently, separating pupils with special educational needs from general schools is now regarded as an exception in many countries—one that requires further justification. This shift is reflected, for instance, in the school laws of (almost all) German states, where every pupil must be offered a place in a general school. However, attending a special school remains an option if parents choose it. The norm has changed: there is now a general expectation that general schools will accommodate all pupils' needs.

At the same time, since the enactment of the UNCRPD, there has been a steady increase in the number of pupils formally assigned the status of having "special educational needs." For example, in Germany, the proportion of pupils with special educational needs within the compulsory school system rose from 6.6% in 2013 to 7.5% in 2022 (KMK, 2024 XVII). Richardson & Powell (2011, p. 20) thus describe a "paradox of simultaneously rising rates of segregated schooling and inclusive education."

Thus, we can cautiously conclude that, following the rise of inclusion, special education is also on the rise (again). However, this does not mean that special education is replacing inclusion. Rather, both systems coexist. Inclusion has, in general, neither replaced special education nor are we witnessing a backlash leading to its displacement—even though individual cases of both trends can be found.

Based on this observation, it is important to better understand this coexistence in practice. What does special education contribute to inclusive education? In other words, what role does special education de facto play within schools that claim to be inclusive? Why and how does special education fill a gap that inclusion does not?[2]

The answer that I will elaborate on in this paper can be summarized in advance as the following thesis: When it comes to teaching in inclusive school classes, special education provides necessary authorizations (in the sense of legitimizations) for educational differentiations. Inclusive education appears to lack these necessary authorizations.

This perspective already indicates that my paper understands inclusive and special education as observable practices. Thus, I analyze practices that reflect characteristics of special education within inclusive schools, i.e. schools that claim to be inclusive and in which pupils with and without special educational needs are taught together.

To elaborate on this thesis, a distinction between 'inclusive education' and 'special education' is essential (section 2). Such a distinction allows for the observation of special education practices within inclusive education settings. To narrow the focus to practices in which special education becomes crucial, I will introduce the concept of authorization—its relevance for education in general and specifically for teachers' differentiations (section 3). Since the focus of this paper is on teaching in inclusive schools, I will analyze ethnographic observations of lessons in such schools. First, I will examine how differentiations can lead to criticism and, in turn, challenge teachers' authority (section 4). Then, I will analyze how teachers refer to special education knowledge to address these challenges (section 5). Finally, I will conclude by discussing and further developing the thesis that special education fulfills a necessary authorizing function that inclusive education lacks (section 6).

Before proceeding, I would like to make one preliminary remark. This paper does not seek to judge teachers' practices, nor does it aim to determine whether the way special education knowledge becomes relevant in the classroom of inclusive schools is appropriate. Instead, my interest lies in the de facto function of special education in the teaching practices of inclusive schools.

[2] This research interest originated from a symposium at the ECER conference, which argued that a re-legitimization of special education is taking place.

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The Relationship between Inclusive Education and Special Education

The paper's interest in the functions inevitably assumes that a divide between 'special' and 'inclusive' education exists and that this divide is observable. Otherwise, one could not investigate their distinct functions in practice. Thus, the first challenge this paper faces is the lack of consensus on what exactly special needs education and inclusive education are (see, for instance, the findings of Rix et al. (2013)), nor is there a consensus on how these concepts relate to each other (Willmann, 2024, p. 108). One established distinction views special education as a historical developmental stage that has now been replaced by inclusive education (Ainscow, 2000; see, for instance, Sturm, 2016, p. 180ff; for a skeptical perspective, see Richardson & Powell, 2011, p. 26). However, this understanding must be recognized merely as a normative statement. From this point of view, it is impossible even to observe the coexistence of special education (i.e., practices that imply a logic of special education) within schools that claim to be inclusive.

Another perspective holds that special education supports inclusive education to prevent exclusion by, among other things, providing specialized knowledge. Here, special education is understood as *subsidiary* (KMK, 2019) or as a *service* for inclusive education (Reiser, 1998). Understood in this way, the relationship between special and inclusive education is one of "necessary co-existence" (Florian, 2019), in which the former supports the latter. Reflections by Hornby (2014) on "Inclusive Special Education" similarly argue for "a synthesis of the philosophy, values, and practices of inclusive education with the interventions, strategies, and procedures of special education" (Hornby, 2015, p. 234).

Another argument (potentially leading to almost the same relationship as necessary co-existence) is that the theoretical divide is grounded in a different understanding of disability. Disability is either something a person has and that needs to be addressed by education or something that educational settings produce. Rix (2015, p. 78) summarizes the:

> "… theoretical divide frequently associated with inclusive and special education is that problems are either *within the setting* or *within the child*. These ways of viewing problems are frequently referred to as the social model and the medical model."

To observe special education practices in inclusive education settings, I summarize the previous differentiations into the following heuristic divide.

Special education inevitably refers to 'special' and therefore implies a relationship to the non-special or normal. Furthermore, by addressing 'special,' it focuses on the deviating side of the relationship. Thus, the gaze is directed towards someone who *is* regarded as special ("problems … within the child") or *has* special needs (Norwich, 2010; Warnock, 2010). This holds regardless of whether the designation arises due to their living conditions or psychological and medical conditions. Thus, practices expressing this perspective in inclusive education settings can be understood as representing a logic of special education.

The focus on peculiarity is historically based on the concept of disability (Willmann, 2024, p. 118f.; Moser, 2003, p. 13). "Special education concerns provision for pupils with disabilities and disorders" (Farrell, 2010, p. 1). Special education understands disability as a *group-related attribution*, constructing a specific clientele with specific needs (similar to early childhood education or adult education) and claiming to offer better provisions for this group. One major reason for this is that special education interventions have been heavily influenced by medical and psychological treatment models (see Farrell, 2010).

The ongoing differentiation of educationally relevant disabilities (reflected in various special needs categories) operationalizes the phenomenon of disability. Special education thus remains committed to the categorical distinction between disability and ability. Even if special education has shifted to conceptualize disability as a relationship between individuals and their environment, it still categorically

defines its clientele. This remains true even for what Hornby (2015) calls "Inclusive Special Education" (see Galkienė & Monkevičienė, 2021, p. 4).

In contrast, 'inclusive' implies a notion of universalism, as seen in the concept of Universal Design for Learning (Galkienė & Monkevičienė, 2021). Inclusive means that something should be suitable for *all*. This does not imply that 'all' are considered equal; rather, the opposite is true. Everyone is seen as different (Richardson & Powell, 2011, p. 2). The focus is on the uniqueness or singularity of every pupil, rather than categorical or relational differences. An inclusive school should accommodate this individuality, aiming to resolve the dilemma that "we either *ignore* differences or *stigmatize* those who are considered different" (Ho, 2004, p. 90).

Thus, in inclusion, the gaze is typically directed towards the excluding norms of an organization or teaching methods ("problems … within the setting"). In other words, 'special' focuses on subjects with categorical specialities, whereas 'inclusive' focuses on the organization and its barriers for subjects who are understood as individuals. Following Moore & Slee (2020, p. 271), one could speak of two "irreconcilable epistemologies."

Difference, Equality and Individuality as a Challenge to Authorization

The following section narrows the paper's focus to pedagogical differentiation and the challenges it poses for teachers' authorization. This is essential because it provides the background against which special education becomes crucial.

The term *authorization* refers to authority, which can be defined as *legitimized leadership* (Schäfer & Thompson, 2009). Authorities generally do not rely on coercion (Paris, 2009); rather, one follows them "voluntarily" because their leadership is recognized as legitimate. If a person or a social practice, such as teaching, is authorized, it is acknowledged as legitimate by others.

Theoretically, my research is based on practice theory (Reckwitz, 2016; Schatzki, 1996) and performativity theory (Butler, 2011). Accordingly, teaching practices are neither inherently legitimate nor pedagogical; rather, they become legitimate through recognition, which is inherently precarious. This means that maintaining legitimacy is an ongoing effort, requiring individuals to present themselves and their practices as legitimate. These theoretical perspectives highlight the fact that authorizations are never guaranteed and often fail. For instance, a situational authorization fails when a teacher instructs pupils to do x, but they refuse. If the teacher then resorts to threats of punishment, the relationship in that situation is no longer based on authority but on coercion. Thus, one crucial way of maintaining authorization is by ensuring that one's actions are recognized as legitimate.

With the concept of authorization, the empirical focus is on *the continuous performative production of a legitimate pedagogical practice* in inclusive teaching (Jergus & Thompson, 2017).

Furthermore, it is important to stress that teaching fundamentally depends on authorization—that is, being recognized as a legitimate pedagogical practice of leading and following. Even though a teacher may be able to force pupils to be quiet by threatening punishment, they cannot force them to learn through coercion. Since learning cannot be compelled, pedagogical practices rely on their authorization (Merl, 2021).

Such authorizations of inclusive teaching occur not only in everyday teaching practices but also, for example, in school concepts, teacher self-help literature, classroom arrangements, educational theories, and research. In each of these areas, specific understandings of teaching practices are legitimized, and their authorization is claimed.

An example of the (de)authorizing impact of educational research discourses is the ongoing debate on abandoning categories of disability in inclusive education. Here, an understanding of pupils as individuals and the desire to avoid stigmatization legitimize certain practices while delegitimizing others (see Merl,

2019, pp. 34–39). Thus, such educational reflections negotiate which teaching practices are or should be authorized.

However, it remains surprisingly unclear which pedagogical practices are authorized in practice and how this occurs, particularly regarding inclusive teaching and the frequent calls for individualization and differentiation. What counts as legitimate and, therefore, authorized teaching in inclusive schools? How is it legitimized? What role does special education play in these processes of authorization? This knowledge is crucial, given that teaching authorization is both necessary and precarious.

As stated, this paper's focus on the role of special education in inclusive teaching narrows the discussion to the authorization of *teachers' differentiations* in the classroom, as special education knowledge plays a crucial role in this authorization. Differentiation and individualization in inclusive education are most often discussed as a didactic challenge: Teachers are expected to *individualize* their teaching to meet each student's needs.

Individualization refers to the concept of singularity, implying the notion of *uniqueness* of each individual. In contrast, differentiation implies a relational difference—i.e., x is different from y with regard to z. Distinguishing between individualization and differentiation is necessary because, in the context of special education, the concepts of relative difference and singularity/individuality offer different paths to authorization, which I will demonstrate empirically.

At the same time, individualization, differentiation, and equality inevitably raise questions of justice and legitimacy. However, these aspects are rarely discussed as a matter of distributive justice (Trautmann, 2022). The challenge is that teachers must allocate limited resources. For example, the time available for lesson preparation and individual student support is finite. This raises fundamental questions about how teachers distribute scarce resources. Should a teacher devote more time to a student who requires more support to reach a learning goal? Or should more time be given to a student who benefits most from additional attention?

These examples raise questions of legitimacy: To what extent is it justifiable to support students based on their level of need versus their potential benefit? What constitutes "greater need"? When should all students be treated equally? Furthermore, which arguments regarding distributive justice do pupils themselves recognize as legitimate?

Reflections on pedagogical professionalism suggest that teaching inherently involves contradictions (Helsper, 2002). Two of these contradictions help illuminate the authorization problem in terms of differentiation and individualization in inclusive education: (1) the *differentiation antinomy* and (2) the *antinomy of justification*.

Regarding the *differentiation antinomy*, Helsper (2004) argues that a tension exists between the principle of equal treatment and the need to differentiate among pupils. Similarly, in special education, Norwich (1994; see also Dyson, 2001) describes a dilemma in considering differences:

> "a dilemma in education over how difference is taken into account - whether to recognise differences as relevant to individual needs by offering different provision, but that doing so could reinforce unjustified inequalities […] or, whether to offer a common and valued provision for all but with the risk of not providing what is relevant to individual needs. […] in order to understand the question of differentiation in education, there is a need to recognise some incompatibility or, at least the limited compatibility of equality and individuality." (Norwich, 1994, p. 293)

An inclusive school system intensifies this tension, as organizational differentiations that were previously institutionalized now take place in everyday interactions. This means differentiation occurs daily in the classroom, making it more susceptible to criticism.

Even though Norwich acknowledges the dilemma between equality and individuality, he does not distinguish between individuality and categorical/relational differences. This distinction, as I will elaborate, is central to the authorization of differentiation in inclusive classrooms.
The second contradiction, the *antinomy of justification*, arises because teachers must constantly make decisions under time constraints while also being expected to justify these decisions with sound reasoning (Helsper, 2004, p. 70f).
These two dilemmas are useful for theoretical sensitization. They not only highlight the existence of dilemmas, but also suggest that no singular solution can resolve them within teaching practices.
This leads to the central empirical question of this paper: *What role does special education play in inclusive schools in the authorization of differentiation in teaching?*

Methodology

In this paper, I reuse observational data from an educational ethnography conducted in inclusive schools in Germany (see Merl, 2019). I carried out participant observations in four school classes, each observed for a period of four to six months, with one to two days of observation per week. I selected weekdays that included the most lessons with the form teachers, focusing primarily on teacher-student interactions. Additionally, I collected artifacts and attended teachers' meetings to gain insight into how teachers discuss their students outside the classroom setting. My classroom observations were documented using handwritten field notes, while teachers' meetings were also audio-recorded.
In total, I observed four classes across three secondary schools in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. These included two grade six classes, one grade five class, and one mixed-grade class (grades five to seven). For this article, I draw on field protocols from three of the four classes. The selected schools were required to either describe themselves as inclusive or to have observed classes that included both students with and without special educational needs or disabilities.
The four classes were chosen through theoretical sampling, following the Grounded Theory Methodology (Clarke, 2005). Initially, I observed two different classes at the same secondary school in a rural area to allow for comparison with minimal contrast. Subsequently, I selected a Gymnasium in a larger city and a comprehensive school located on the outskirts of another large city to maximize data contrast (see Merl, 2019 for further details).
I analyzed the data based on Grounded Theory Methodology, particularly situational analysis (Clarke, 2005).
This paper reuses these data. Thus, I have undertaken a more focused and theory-driven analysis: The main categories and concepts used to analyze the data in this paper stem from research literature on (relational) differences, individuality, and equality in philosophy (e.g., the difference between the concepts of "singularity" and "relational differences"; the concept of the "presumption of equality") as well as literature on special and inclusive education (e.g., special education's focus on "categories of disability"; inclusive education's focus on "universalism").
However, to define the de facto function of special education in inclusive school classes, I have inductively analyzed how categorical differences, singularity, and equality become relevant in teaching practices. This analysis revealed that pupils' criticism of differentiations put a strain on pedagogical authority and that teachers' attempts to legitimize their differentiations often rely on special education knowledge. I will elaborate on this in the following empirical sections.

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From Differentiation to Criticism: The Presumption of Equality

The following field note comes from a 6th-grade classroom in a secondary school that describes itself as 'inclusive':

> During a class discussion on how to use a gas burner, Mr. Roland says: "Stop, stop for a moment. Tom, can you manage it or do you need a break?" Tom: "Uhm, need a break." Mr. Roland: "Good, then take it".

The field note illustrates differentiation in teaching in the form of an additional break from the ongoing class discussion. This break is offered only if Tom "needs" it because he "can't manage it." Tom confirms this condition.

For the purpose of this paper, the word "need" is central. It already provides a justification for the differentiation, which can function as legitimization. By suggesting that Tom needs a break, the teacher refers to a necessity. It is necessary for Tom to have an additional break because the teacher implies that Tom cannot manage (i.e., is not able to behave as expected). Therefore, one could argue that the offered break neither favors nor disadvantages anyone in the classroom. In other words, the differentiation is already implicitly authorized by the argument that it is needs-based.

As the informed reader may have already noticed, this reference to a needs-based authorization of educational differentiation is also crucial for the entire discipline of special needs education. In fact, the renaming of 'special education' to 'special *needs* education' reflects precisely how the latter is legitimized:

> "In 1997, the International Standard Classification of Education replaced the term special education with special needs education in order to differentiate it from earlier international definitions of special education as that which took place in special schools or institutions (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005). This was an important change in terminology that differentiated the provision of special education services, which can occur in a variety of settings, from the placement of children in special education schools or classrooms. Special needs education is defined as 'educational intervention and support designed to address special educational needs', wherever that intervention takes place." (Florian, 2014, p. 44)

Regardless of where the intervention (i.e., differentiation) takes place, it is legitimized by the argument that it addresses special educational needs. The discipline is no longer defined by special educational *treatment* but rather by special *needs* that authorize it.

From this, we can conclude that while teaching in an inclusive class, Mr. Roland refers to the same authorizing logic that special needs education relies on to justify special education *within* inclusive contexts.[3] Thus, the observed situation can be understood as one where special needs education is at least implicitly relevant in inclusive education, particularly concerning the legitimization of differentiations.

However, this logic is not automatically acknowledged by others. This is demonstrated in the following field note, which follows the previous scene:

[3] Tom's additional break is not just a need. It is a *special need* in relation to his classmates, because he is the only one who is considered by the teacher to need it. It is this relative deviation from a (ableist) norm that makes it a special need.

> I then hear a pupil saying a long-drawn-out "ey" and another pupil saying more quietly: "I need a break too" Someone else calls out "Me too"

After Tom is allowed to take a break, his classmates express criticism of this differentiation. One pupil criticizes it explicitly with the phrase "ey," while others do so implicitly by stating that they have the same needs as Tom ("I need a break too"). This latter criticism quotes the condition required for granting an additional break. Consequently, if Mr. Roland agrees that this condition is fulfilled, he should, in theory, grant a break to these pupils as well.

This second expression of criticism ("I need a break too") is particularly interesting because it utilizes the same legitimizing logic that Mr. Roland used for differentiation—needs-based reasoning. By employing this logic, the classmates implicitly acknowledge it as at least *legitimate in general*.

Thus, the statement "I need a break too" is not a criticism of the *authorizing logic* itself but rather of *the specific decision* that only Tom needs a break or that only Tom is allowed to decide whether he needs it. The classmates' criticism can therefore be rephrased as follows: "It is legitimate that those who cannot manage should get an additional break, but why is only Tom allowed to decide that he cannot manage? I can't either. Consequently, I should also be allowed to leave the class for a break."

This perspective allows us to conclude that needs-based differentiations are generally considered legitimate in inclusive schools. However, such differentiations and the underlying needs must also be plausible or at least comprehensible to others in order to be accepted. This does *not* seem to be the case in the observed situation. Thus, *differentiations require a more concrete justification in order to be authorized*—i.e., to legitimize why Tom is offered/granted an additional break.

Conversely, this leads to another conclusion: in inclusive classes, equality is presumed as the norm. Unless otherwise indicated, treating every pupil equally is considered legitimate in general. This logic aligns with the philosophical concept of the "presumption of equality":

> "[T]he presumption of equality requires that everyone should get an equal share in the distribution unless certain types of differences are relevant and justify, through universally acceptable reasons, unequal shares. […] This presumption results in a principle of prima facie equal distribution for all distributable goods. A strict principle of equal distribution is not required, but it is morally necessary to justify impartially any unequal distribution. The burden of proof lies on the side of those who favor any form of unequal distribution." (Gosepath, 2021, Section 2.4)

I argue that the classmates' criticism implicitly expresses this principle. Therefore, the burden of proof lies with pedagogical differentiations. Teachers' practices that are perceived as expressions of equal treatment do not bear this burden. The key point here is not whether teachers actually treat every student equally in everyday lessons (a difficult standard to define). Rather, it is a question of how the treatment is *perceived* by the pupils.

For teachers in inclusive classrooms, the presumption of equality implies the necessity to not only state unequal needs abstractly but also to justify them concretely—for instance, by arguing that "x needs y due to z in order to achieve a." It is precisely this necessity that makes the authorization of teaching differentiations in inclusive classes so precarious because it raises the question: *How can different needs be justified concretely?* More formally: *Which combinations of 'ys,' 'zs,' and 'as' are recognized as legitimate in the classroom?*

I will explore this question in more detail shortly. Before doing so, however, I would like to highlight additional conclusions that can be drawn.

The explicitly and implicitly expressed criticism also demonstrates that teachers' *authority is threatened precisely through such differentiations.* Had Mr. Roland not differentiated as he did, his authority would not have been questioned in the same way. In other words, regarding the teacher's authority, it would have been easier *not* to offer Tom the break. Nevertheless, in the observed situation, Mr. Roland responds to the criticism as follows:

> Mr. Roland says loudly, "Shh. Andrea wanted to say something" and thus continues the class discussion. Meanwhile, Tom leaves the classroom.

Mr. Roland dismisses the expressed criticism. This reflects the antinomy of justification, which he resolves unilaterally. This makes sense in terms of efficient classroom management, as it prioritizes time-on-task to maximize learning outcomes (Teddlie et al., 2002). However, this response also implies that the challenge to his authority remains unresolved, potentially exacerbating the threat to his legitimacy.
This is especially relevant given that similar challenges to the legitimacy of differentiations appear repeatedly in my data. Typical examples of this are that students call out "this is unfair" or ask "why isn't Simon being told off?"
Since simply rejecting pupils' criticism may have long-term implications for a teacher's authority, addressing it at some point seems necessary. This brings us back to the initial question: *How can the acknowledged different needs (as a basis for differentiation) be justified concretely?*

How Differentiations are Legitimized

There are, of course, many arguments teachers give in order to deal with the demand to legitimize their differentiations in inclusive classes. Furthermore, the mentioned structuralist considerations make us aware that regardless of the given arguments, the tensions (1. between equal treatment and differentiation, as well as 2. between decisions under time pressure and the necessity to provide sound reasons) inevitably remain.
There is, however, one *authorizing strategy* observable in inclusive schools that seems to have the effect of suspending these tensions. This strategy offers a more durable 'solution' regarding the authorization of teachers' differentiations. I am going to analyze this authorizing strategy on the basis of observations in another 6th-grade class at the same inclusive secondary school. In this class, similar pedagogical differentiations to the ones analyzed earlier could be observed. However, over time, these differentiations were deemed as *favoring* one pupil (Anton). This criticism once again expresses that the differentiations were no longer authorized by Anton's classmates. Furthermore, Anton was increasingly bullied. Since the criticism of the teachers and the bullying did not end even after repeated discussions, one of the class teachers told me she was considering the following intervention:

> Ms. Behr tells me that she has to talk to Mr. Müller today about "opening up the subject of autism, since they don't all know what's going on with Anton". She also wondered whether Anton should be present there at all.

Ms. Behr tells the ethnographer about the need to discuss "opening up the subject of autism" with Mr. Müller, the second class teacher. Ms. Behr suggests that it is necessary to learn about autism (i.e., autism spectrum disorder) and thus about "what's going on with Anton." Since this explanation followed immediately after Ms. Behr told me about a new, serious incident of bullying, one can conclude that the possible 'opening' is considered to be a solution for the ongoing bullying; i.e., the opening is expected to bring about a change in the way Anton is treated by his classmates. The phrase "open up" makes it clear

that autism has not yet been discussed publicly in class, but that the teachers are aware of it. The phrase also indicates that 'opening up' autism as a topic provides knowledge about "what's going on with Anton." Implicitly, autism is used ontologically as a label to describe something that is wrong with him. The argument here is that knowing the concept of autism allows understanding what is going on with Anton. It's furthermore of interest that Ms. Behr has not yet decided whether Anton should be present during this possible opening. Since his presence is not necessary for the planned 'outing,' we can conclude that such an intervention is expected to fulfill a function primarily for his classmates. Anton himself—according to the implicit logic—knows what "is going on with Anton." What is relevant is that the others now know too.

After consulting with Anton and his parents, the teachers eventually decide to explain to the class what Asperger's autism is and that Anton is Asperger's autistic. Anton is present in this situation. Since this paper is concerned with the authorizing function of this 'outing', I focus my further analyses on a statement of Ms. Behr that followed the outing itself:

> Ms. Behr: Since Anton has Asperger's, "because of that, just that you also understand that, that's why we teachers react, we're all special here at the school, that's why we teachers sometimes react differently to Anton, because he has this specialty." Elif says quietly, "aaaahhh, that's why." Ms. Behr goes on to explain that lately, it has often been an issue why Anton is treated differently. She adds that the teachers do not favor anyone, but "we treat you all the way you need it."

Briefly after the actual outing, Ms. Behr justifies the differentiations the teachers make when dealing with Anton ("sometimes react differently") with reference to "this specialty" of being an Asperger's. Thus, differentiations are legitimized with the relative difference Asperger's vs. non-Asperger's and thus Anton vs. his classmates. Ms. Behr also adds, "we are all special." Thus, she refers to three different concepts of how the pupils are understood: as relatively different (Asperger's vs. non-Asperger's), as equal, and as individuals ("we're all special"). In a theoretical logic, this seems contradictory. If everyone is already understood as being special, it seems unnecessary to argue that one pupil "has this specialty" in order to justify differentiations. If everyone is special, pedagogical individualization should be justified for everyone in order to meet everyone's specifics. However, if everyone is 'just' special, this implies that all pupils are also equal in being special and therefore could just as well deserve equal treatment. Irrespective of these theoretical contradictions, Elif seems to accept the given justification ("aaaahhh, that's why"; later in the conversation, other pupils also express their understanding). Ms. Behr then explicitly links the outing to the ongoing criticism of the teachers' differentiations ("has often been an issue") and distinguishes their differentiation practices from favoritism. She does this by once again arguing that the teachers "treat you all the way you need it." In other words, by arguing that differentiations are needs-based. Against the background of the former analysis of Tom's additional break, it is clear that this abstract justification (needs-based differentiations) in itself is not sufficient to make the concrete differentiation plausible and comprehensible for the pupils. The authoritative figure of a needs-based differentiation requires a more substantial justification of the stated unequal needs. In fact, it is the outing itself that proves that abstract singularity does not legitimize pedagogical differentiations. If everyone is special, it cannot be explained why the teachers react differently to Anton. Thus, the outing serves exactly this more substantial justification in practice (and Elif's and later others' reactions indicate that it is recognized). It does so, even though it remains unclear how exactly Anton's "needs" differ, i.e., how "this specialty" and the pedagogically necessary differentiations are connected. Furthermore, it does so even though one can question the coherence and plausibility of simply deducing *educational* needs from psychological and medical categories.

Despite this, it seems logical for teachers in an inclusive classroom to establish such a category and to situate one pupil within it. This is because, in doing so, teachers provide a more concrete justification for their differentiations than simply stating that someone needs them (as analyzed in the first field note). At the same time, this justification remains abstract enough to support more than just individual differentiations. This is possible because disability, disorder, and, in our case, Asperger's autism, are discursively constructed as *permanent* and *complex* differences (Cloerkes, 2007). If someone is framed as permanently and in a complex manner different from others, it follows that differentiations are permanently and comprehensively necessary. Thus, past and future differentiations are continuously and comprehensively authorized.

Furthermore, I argue that, in terms of performative authorization, the only loose connection between the established category and the claimed resulting special needs serves a functional purpose. After all, previous weeks' interventions showed that, although repeated conflict discussions and concrete justifications of past differentiations were able to resolve past conflicts, they did not prevent new conflicts or the associated criticism of favoritism. Since it remains unclear which specific differentiations result from the established difference, it also remains undetermined how differentiations will take place in the future. This allows teachers to legitimize future pedagogical decisions as needs-based differentiations and thus to more generally authorize pedagogical practices in the inclusive classroom. Because the teachers' differentiations are authorized by reference to an abstract psychological category, one can conclude that they are ultimately drawing on the authority of psychology in society (Foucault, 2006) to restore authorization.

However, this powerful authorizing strategy has consequences, one of which is stigmatization. Anton has now been performatively made into someone else—someone special. Even though everyone is deemed special ("We're all special here"), the outing introduced a difference that makes Anton even more special than everyone else—and in a way that is not desirable. As a result, he now carries a stigma, i.e., "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). This contradicts one of the central tenets of inclusion: preventing discrimination and stigmatization in the first place.

The fact that the teachers kept the diagnosis hidden until that day suggests that they actually considered it private information that should not be made public in the classroom. This also applies to the special education needs status of all pupils in the class, which remains unknown to their classmates. In this respect, it may indicate that the teachers were well aware of the stigmatizing effects. However, they ultimately concluded that the outing was the best way to address both the bullying and the criticism of their perceived preferential treatment.

The Role of Special (Needs) Education in Authorizing Teaching Practices in Inclusive Schools

This paper has examined the role that special education de facto plays in inclusive school. I narrowed this focus to the requirement to differentiate in inclusive classes. I argued that such differentiations raise questions of legitimacy and, consequently, of the teachers' authorization by the pupils. Furthermore, I contended that teachers depend on being authorized and that their authorization can be undermined precisely by such differentiations. In other words, differentiations put a strain on pedagogical authorization. The analysis also demonstrated that the social order implies a *presumption of equality*. Thus, treating everyone equally (i.e., being perceived as doing so by the pupils) is generally accepted, does not put a strain on the teachers' authorization, and therefore requires no further justification.

Empirical observations also showed that differentiations in inclusive teaching are fundamentally authorized through the concept of *needs-based differentiation*. That is, it is generally regarded as justified to treat pupils differently if this is due to differing needs. However, this does not mean that

differentiations are automatically authorized in every situation. I concluded that, due to the presumption of equality, teachers' differentiations require more substantive justification of the unequal needs than merely stating them in abstract terms. However, this requirement relates to the aforementioned antinomy of justification: teachers can hardly justify every decision made under time pressure.

A common authorizing strategy in inclusive classrooms is to assert that everyone is different and therefore has different needs. Theoretically speaking, this strategy is based on the concept of singularity. The disadvantage of this approach is that it lacks the capacity to justify *specific* pedagogical differentiations. The assertion that everyone is unique inevitably remains empty. Any attempt to further define what makes someone unique must refer to categorical differences, which ultimately undermines the notion of uniqueness (Dederich, 2005). Thus, pointing to singularity cannot actually justify a differentiation made by the teachers.

To justify differentiation, a relative difference is necessary—one that makes the stated different needs comprehensible. That is, x is different from y regarding z, and that is why it is justified to treat x differently from y. This is precisely what the outing accomplishes: it establishes a relative difference between pupils and thereby serves (at least to some extent) as a more substantive justification for the teachers' practices—regardless of whether this justification is in our view coherent or not.

If we now revisit the initial distinction between inclusive and special education, we can relate it to the authorizing problem outlined here. Inclusive education, I argued, is based on a universalist notion and is concerned with concepts of individuality or singularity. A reference to this logic of inclusion was evident, for instance, when the teacher stated, "we're all special here". However, as demonstrated in my analysis, this authorizing strategy lacks the capacity to justify specific differentiations.

In contrast, special education shifts the focus toward an individual who is (or is regarded as) special. It is concerned, among other things, with categorical differences between pupils and their distinct pedagogical needs. Consequently, it allows for an argument like x is different from y regarding z and, therefore, justifies treating x differently from y in relation to z. Put more critically, one could say: special education allows *authorization through pathologization*.

Historically, the profession of special education has been constituted precisely along these lines: through the pathologization of a particular group, it was justified that a specialized pedagogy was necessary (Powell, 2016, p. 151).

This brings me back to the central thesis of this paper, which I summarized at the outset: special education provides the necessary authorizations for educational differentiations in inclusive classes, whereas inclusive education lacks these legitimizations. This is because its *emphasis on uniqueness or individuality fails to substantiate the claim of abstract different needs*. In practice, inclusive education lacks the capacity to justify differentiations. Thus, a crucial function of special education within the context of inclusive schooling is to provide legitimizing knowledge about differences comprehensively. However, this inevitably implies drawing on categorical differences (e.g., autism) rather than adhering to a universalist approach in which everyone is seen as unique.

At the same time, this legitimizing knowledge of categorical differences excludes the recognition of the singularity of individuals, which could be subject to radical critique (see Dederich, 2005; Linton, 2020) from an inclusive education perspective.

In part, the *authorization through pathologization* reflects what Norwich (2008, p. 70) terms the "identification dilemma"—the dilemma in which identifying a student as having special educational needs increases the likelihood of stigmatization, whereas failing to do so reduces the likelihood that necessary educational resources will be secured. Thus, the identification dilemma attributes to special education the function of justifying the allocation of resources.

However, my analysis suggests that, in inclusive classrooms, the knowledge provided by special education serves a different function: legitimizing teachers' differentiations. Because of this function, it resolves an *authorization dilemma* that teachers face in inclusive settings: they must either treat everyone

equally, which is perceived as legitimate but may result in inadequate support for some pupils, or differentiate, which requires justification and therefore invokes special education knowledge.

It is essential to emphasize that the legitimizing special knowledge about categorical differences—and the different needs derived from it—should not be viewed uncritically. Special education knowledge is heavily informed by psychological and medical discourses (Richardson & Powell, 2011, p. 5), often relies on problematic assumptions of ontological difference, and can lead to stigmatization. However, in the actual teaching practices of inclusive schools, it clearly serves a function that inclusive education alone does not seem able to fulfill.

I also wish to clarify that I am not arguing that no alternative means of legitimizing pedagogical practices exist. Rather, I contend that the concepts of uniqueness, singularity, and individuality are central to inclusive education, yet these concepts do not fulfill the aforementioned authorizing function. Furthermore, teachers in inclusive classrooms refer to special education to fulfill this function. This is why and how special education, in practice, fills a gap that inclusion does not.

One could now conclude that this function—providing legitimizing knowledge on categorical differences and thereby authorizing educational differentiations—is indeed necessary but nevertheless problematic for inclusive education. Given this conclusion, it seems appropriate to consider how this function could be replaced with alternatives that have fewer problematic implications. In my view, this requires critically reflecting on the problematic implications of the presumption of equality. However, that discussion must be left for a separate publication.

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