



Autism Studies in Education (AutiSE)
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University of Education Freiburg / Germany
Department of Education
Research in Inclusive Education

Research Lecture Series 2025

Autism Studies in Education

Methodologies / Critique / Representation

The rise of autism in the social imaginary coincides with a significant increase in diagnoses (throughout the lifespan), which is evident in all Western-dominated educational systems (Decoteau 2021). Although perceptions of autism are shifting in the field of education, an essentialist and often medical-neurological view of autism remains persistent (Waltz 2023).

In education, the social and cultural construction of autistic difference is given little attention, even though it fundamentally shapes both the processes of diagnosis and the educational experiences of autistic students (Dwyer 2023). Instead, autism is codified as a stable category on both the personal and institutional level: It is reified as a diagnostically assessed neurodivergent way of being and institutionalized as a school-administrative category along which support systems are arranged and professionalization is aligned (Richards 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the connection of diagnosis and intervention, to which systems of educational support are linked. We therefore see the need for a critical approach to autism that investigates the seemingly self-evident connections that are drawn from medical diagnosis to educational intervention, as well as the ways of organising educational support that emerge from these connections (Maynard & Turowetz 2019; Broderick & Roscigno 2022).

In developing this approach, we follow Davidson and Orsini (2013, 13) in their understanding of critical autism studies as a way to advance “new, enabling narratives of autism that challenge the predominant (deficit-focused and degrading) constructions that influence public opinion, policy, and popular culture [and to] commit to developing new analytical frameworks using inclusive and nonreductive methodological and theoretical approaches to study the nature and culture of autism”.

This emancipatory project, however, must contend with complex questions of methodology, critique and representation. Autistic and non-autistic researchers such as ourselves are complicit in an underlying political economy that rewards research that ticks the correct boxes: community driven, participatory, engaged – and preferably, all of the above. While these boxes might be different from those of a more clinically orientated research paradigm they nonetheless create their own logics of knowledge production. Even the most critical research done in the name of autism, is a need to know, and to communicate to knowers and non-knowers alike the inherent value of the knowledge claims being made. At best, this can serve as a corrective to the archive of demeaning and dehumanizing knowledges of autism that still stands in for evidence and truth (Orsini 2022). But it also necessitates a stronger focus on the conditions of knowledge production in critical and emancipatory autism research. What do these “new analytical frameworks using inclusive and nonreductive methodological and theoretical approaches” (Orsini and Davidson 2013, 13) entail?

Organized by the research group AutiSE of the University of Education Freiburg (Germany), the international lecture series “*Autism Studies in Education – Methodologies / Critique / Representation*” wants to tackle this question and aims to bring together perspectives on how to critically approach autism as a contested phenomenon in the context of education. We invite contributions that reflect on different ways to address the entanglements of diagnosis-based categorization and (political) representation in the context of education and education studies. The lecture series is intended as a forum and network for discussing competing views on what it means to do engaged, emancipatory and critical autism research in education and takes the following questions as its starting point:

- Methodologies: What are the methodological and epistemological challenges of inclusive, community driven and emancipatory research? How can transformative perspectives on autism be developed and communicated? How can community interests be assessed given the heterogeneity of the autistic community? What is the relationship between scientific interests and community interests? Who determines the value of community driven and emancipatory research?
- Critique: What makes Critical Autism Studies critical? What theoretical foundations of critique does it rely on? How does critical autism research negotiate norms and normativity? What norms are being critiqued and what norms is this critique based on? How does the situatedness of researches impact competing understandings of critique?
- Representation: Are the goals of representation scientific or political – and what is the difference between the two? Is representation a necessary prerequisite of emancipatory research? Do different types of research require different levels of representation? How is representation in research (de-)legitimized? What ideas of autism, neurodiversity, knowledge (production) and scientific research are produced as a result?

Time Schedule and Registration:

The Autism Lecture Series takes place digitally via Zoom – 4 times a year, at 4pm CET, 3pm GMT – dates tba.

Each session contains two lecturers and two perspectives accordingly.

Participation is free of charge – but requires registration at **autism_studies@ph-freiburg.de**

If you are registered for the respective lecture, you will receive the access link to the Zoom meeting room.

Thank you very much for your interest and contribution!