The purpose of this article is to describe how the learner autonomy of a student diagnosed with high-functioning autism is regarded in regular education in a longitudinal perspective and how her educational strategies are managed by school representatives. The main data include unstructured interviews with the student and educational personnel and passive observations in the class room. The student’s intellectual orientation and scientific interests are discouraged by most teachers throughout her school years. School narratives of her perceived cognitive and educational shortcomings overshadow and counteract her autonomy. The student’s scientific interests can be seen as a means to deal with perceptions of a world that is incomprehensible and frightening. It is possible that persons with weak central coherence, more often than others, have interests concerning how things are structured and strive to organise and explain their environment. This specific kind of learner autonomy can be described as intellectual induction and could be understood as compensatory strategy of the mind. In school, however, it is discouraged with reference to the student’s problems in areas traditionally associated with learner autonomy.

Keywords: autism; hermeneutics; learner autonomy; narrative

The continuing international debate on autonomy in education comprises several perspectives. It is a complex and multifaceted theme that can be discussed in a philosophical, legal or psychological context and on several organisational levels. Autonomy is often associated with, and sometimes explained with reference to, independence, integrity and responsibility, to such qualities as self-reflection, reasoning and individuality (Dworkin, 2015). In a time focused on individuality and individualism, the only joint understanding of autonomy is that it is a quality much desired. Regardless which of the above-mentioned aspects we focus on, the question of autonomy in education is closely related to our definition of the term autonomy itself. Autonomy can be perceived as a basic human right: the right to be respected as an individual in so far as being able to make decisions concerning aspects of one’s own life and to be able to act on those decisions, assuming the somewhat descriptive position that an individual is autonomous in so far as his or her opinions, values and actions are not explainable without reference to his or her activity of mind (Dearden, 1972). On the other hand, our definition of the term can be regarded as related to the individual’s perceived capability to make just and objective decisions based on moral reasoning (Wolff, 1970). Autonomy, in this definition, is an acquired quality based on sense and reasoning and the ability to take responsibility for one’s actions. It is, in essence, conditioned by the authority of others and in an educational context assessable. Regardless of which perspective one adopts, an individual may be more or less autonomous, not only concerning to what extent they are able to act on their wishes and desires but also regarding how they see themselves and others and their respective positions and relations concerning the forming of one’s person; opinions and wishes. Some people are more perceptive to social and normative pressure, peer or authoritative, whereas others are more indifferent. This may be related to our perception (Frith, 1991). In reality, of course, the positions are rarely as clear or fixed as they may appear in theory but the dichotomous definition of autonomy is a recurring issue in political, biomedical and educational debate (Dworkin, 1988).

In an educational context, the concept of autonomy is equally as complex and when discussing autonomy in education, we are not necessarily talking about the same thing (Berka, De Groot, & Penneman, 2000). We may discuss the autonomy of the educational system in relation to the legislative state, to religious authority or to any other social, financial or political power (Berka et al., 2000). We might also refer to the autonomy of specific schools in
relation to the educational system and its policies, curriculums and assessment criteria (Berka et al., 2000) or the autonomy of principals, educational teams or individual teachers concerning their ability to determine their teaching methods in relation to all of the above as well as to the local community and its wishes and expectations. Finally, autonomy in education could have reference to the individual student and his or her learning. These aspects are not necessarily consistent or correlating. On the contrary, it may sometimes be the case that a strong autonomy on one level presupposes weak autonomy on another (Glenn in Berka et al., 2000; Little 1995 in Benson, 2011). Depending on which of these aspects we focus on, the discussion and its applications in school-life take on different forms. In this article, I focus solely on the autonomy of the student as a learner. In comparison with the aforementioned aspects of the term autonomy itself where autonomy could be regarded as either a general human right or an acquired quality, one might assume the position that learner autonomy can be described as an innate quality, a desire to structure and understand the world that leads us to question how things are constructed and connected (Benson, 2011). In this understanding, learning is not exclusively related to a school setting but something that permeates our lives (Habermas in Berka et al., 2000). An individual's development and learning is then closely related to his/her personal capabilities, conditions and interests (Göransson, 2006) as well as shaped and structured by the individual's relations to others in a somewhat interdependent manner (Benson, 2011) but may take a form or direction not desired or encouraged by the school and its representatives. Learner autonomy in this understanding of the term holds reference to the definition of autonomy itself (Dearden, 1972) and implies individual educational strategies to structure, explain and understand things to be autonomous to the degree that they cannot be explained without reference to the learner's activity of mind (Dearden, 1972). Then again one might perceive student autonomy in an educational setting as the ability to plan, structure and evaluate one's own learning in relation to goals and conditions defined in school. In this understanding of the term, learner autonomy becomes an acquired and assessable quality based on reasoning and responsibility and the willingness to assume the school goals as one's own and pursue them independently and with diligence.

In reference to learner autonomy, as was the case with the term autonomy itself, an individual may of course be more or less autonomous, regardless of which of these perspectives one adopts. Understanding learner autonomy as a general human desire to understand and learn, some individuals have a strong urge to question, structure and explain things around them, whereas others are less inclined to do so. On the other hand, some have a developed ability to plan, organise and evaluate their learning in relation to time, environment and the expectations of other people while others focus primarily on one thing at the time and may be more or less indifferent to the educational efforts of others. These individual degrees and aspects of learner autonomy may, or may not, coincide. It is safe to say that the latter understanding of the term is more or less predominant in schools today, among its professionals and educational standards and requirements. Contemporary emphasis within the educational system on individualisation, learner-focused teaching and requiring students to take an active part in planning, conducting and evaluating their own learning conform to the traditional understanding of the concept of learner autonomy. However, a strictly one-sided view of the term may lead to a simplified understanding of learner autonomy and cause us to overlook potential pathways to children's learning.

How then, do we understand and deal with, the autonomy of those who fail to meet the criteria of an autonomous person and in the eyes of others lack the desired abilities to reason and make logical, independent and just decisions for themselves (Wolff, 1970)? Assuming the position that the right to autonomy coincides with the capability of a developed form of reasoning and the ability to take responsibility for one's actions allows for the possible exclusion of a number of groups and individuals from making choices concerning aspects of their own lives and gives others the power to act, by proxy consent (supposedly), in their best interest (Dworkin, 1988). The conception of autonomy in others tend to coincide with the authority to make decisions on behalf of those others, in such a way that it is frequently the very same people or groups who presume the right to decide if others meet the requested criteria to be counted as autonomous as the ones who assume the position of acting by proxy consent.

Assuming the position that learner autonomy can be seen as a general human quality, not necessarily conditioned by one's level of development or reasoning, related to our basic cognitive functions, the question of its application in a school context rather than a question of assessment becomes a matter of human rights.

**Autism and autonomy**

Autism and autonomy both derive from the Greek *Autos*, meaning *self*, and consequently describe aspects of the conception of the self, but while autism is a term that describes self-governance and independence in anyone autism depicts the reclusiveness and self-absorption of a select few (Kanner 1943 in Ullman & Krasner, 1969). Autism is currently regarded as a neuropsychiatric disability and there is widespread consensus concerning the biomedical description of the phenomenon. There is some debate, however, as to the singular adequacy of the medical paradigm (Dahlgren, 2003; Spensley, 1997).
Current medical research concerning cognitive specificities associated with autism focuses on three main, mutually overlapping, areas. The first derive from research in the area of perception and focuses on how individuals experience the world: the central coherence of the mind. The second, and perhaps most predominant although in this context of marginal interest, is commonly referred to as the Theory of Mind and describes the ability to read and decode other people’s emotions and intentions. The third area of research, the field concerning executive functions, focuses on abilities to register, recall and apply information in new contexts. As the theory of mind primarily focuses on social and relational aspects in explaining autism (Baron-Cohen, 2008), it is perhaps of minor importance concerning the question of learner autonomy, and I will not discuss it further. The fields of central coherence and executive functions, however, can be seen to coincide with the earlier-mentioned dichotomous views on learner autonomy.

The theory of central coherence originates in perception research and is used to measure how people sort, experience and generalise understandings from impressions. In short, the theory is based on the premise that the brain perceives the world and all its impressions through a filter designed by our past experiences. This filter summarises and generalises our experiences in order to make them coherent and understandable and helps us focus on what we regard to be essential. Coherence varies in everyone and weak central coherence is not in itself necessarily an indicator of autism but some argue that people with autism, to a greater degree than others, have a weak central coherence in general (Frith, 1991). The term reduced central coherence is relatively widespread but is probably an unfortunate choice of words. Instead, central coherence can be seen as a sliding scale where there are advantages and disadvantages to both ends, and it can be associated with difficulties to be far out on the scale either way. According to this theory, individuals with autism perceive the world in details rather than as a whole, something that can be experienced as chaotic and exhausting. At the same time, the ability to put together various details into a whole requires a mental image, a vision, of what the final result will look like. Without a vision of the end-result the pieces would be just pieces and trying to put them together would be futile. Nevertheless, it is often assumed that the weak central coherence is without direction and that the child with autism has difficulties constructing context and making connections in general.

In this article, I propose that the mind, in cases of high-functioning autism, strive to compensate the weak central coherence through what can be described as an intellectually, albeit not necessarily conscious, inductive process which may coincide with learner autonomy.

The executive functions are a system of neurological utilities that is thought to regulate the lower cognitive processes, what is popularly known as the working memory (Baddeley, 1996). It also relates to abilities such as self-evaluation and motivation, space- and time-perception, planning, organisation, structure and automation. Recently, Miyake and colleagues (Miyake, Friedman, Emerson, Witzki, Howarter, & Wager, 2000) proposed a sectioning of the term into three sub-areas: the ability to hold and shift focus or keep multiple focuses at once; the ability to register and manage conflicting information; and the ability to reconnect and recall information from memory and relate it to new impressions and situations.

Researching Alice

The purpose of the study behind this article is to describe the inclusion of a student with high-functioning autism in regular education in a longitudinal perspective. There are two sides to the study. One describes the narratives formulated in school about the student by her teachers and the other focuses on the student’s own experiences of herself and her situation in school.

The study mainly resides in the critical hermeneutics but accommodates methodological and ontological aspects. This article, which derives from the study but discusses altogether different aspects of the student’s life in school, focuses in particular on the question of her learner autonomy in the context of inclusive education.

The research design consequently consists of two mutually complementary methods. The project is designed as an ongoing longitudinal case study and this article describes empiric materials collected over a period of 5 years. The main data are unstructured interviews with the student and educational personnel and passive observations of her in school. Interviews and observations were conducted on three separate occasions in the student’s life: at the ages of eight, eleven and thirteen. All observations were conducted during the course of the school day and the interviewed teachers all have main responsibility for Alice’s educational development in their capacities as her class teacher, special educator, tutor or educational assistant.

The research design of the study: the interviews, the observations and the conversations with Alice, as well as the longitudinal character, can be seen as a kind of triangulation in order to describe and validate the results. I have also conducted additional interviews with, for example, Alice’s parents and other school personnel than those who appear in the study, for validation purposes.

Interviews were decisively unstructured as I asked the teachers to describe the student and her challenges and capabilities. This method was chosen to give the informants an opportunity to talk more freely about Alice in the hope that this would reveal the stories they formulate about her rather than simply answering specific questions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and finally rewritten into coherent narratives which were in turn analysed from a hermeneutic–narrative perspective.
My conversations with Alice were not recorded, due to the unpredictability and sensitivity of our relationship. Instead her thoughts and reflections were subsequently documented by hand. In my retelling of the observations, it is my ambition to show samples as close as possible to the experiences of Alice herself in order to interpret and depict what I perceive to be Alice’s own story. The observations were documented, colour-coded and transcribed into short observation narratives which were subsequently sorted and analysed.

In order to show how school narratives influence and affect Alice’s self-image and respond to her specific learner autonomy and communicative strategies, I construct a narrative of my own. This can perhaps be perceived as a methodological problem but is, in this design, a necessity. To abstain from using Alice’s perspective in this study would be to leave the school narrative un-contradicted and in essence to acknowledge the categorical depiction of Alice and her conditions and capabilities that is already predominant. In order to outline any potential bias, I will briefly describe the origin of the study and how I came to take an interest in Alice and her life in school. A few years ago I worked as a substitute teacher in a variety of capacities ranging from preschool to secondary school; some temporary posts were brief, other a little longer. On one such occasion, I met Alice. At the time she was 8 years old and attended a regular class with the support of an educational assistant. Alice fascinated me. I perceived her reasoning and behaviour to differ from that of her peers and I subsequently asked her parents if they would consider allowing me to study her and her situation in school. They were positive and I conducted a series of observations and interviews. At this point, I had no intention of continuing the study beyond this occasion. A couple of years later I incidentally met Alice and her parents and we came to talk about what had happened since and agreed that it might be interesting to follow up on this study. This led to the second and third parts of this longitudinal project. I have no private relationship with either Alice or her parents and I have never, after the brief initial posting, worked with her in any capacity other than that of a researcher.

This study was conducted in a manner consistent with the requirements of the Swedish Research Council. All participants, that is, educators, children and their parents, have been duly informed of the academic conditions and consequences of the project and have given their written consent to participate in the study and subsequent publications. All persons have been subject to a process of anonymisation, where their names and other personal information has been removed or altered. Due to the sensitivity of the material all data are confidential and may be released only after assessment and consultation with concerned parties, most importantly Alice and her parents. These parties hold the right to refuse any request of release.

**Educating Alice**

This study describes Alice and her life in school at the age of 8, 11 and 13. At the age of 5, Alice was given the diagnosis Autism Spectrum Disorder. Her autism is described as high functioning, which means that she does not have additional developmental or intellectual disabilities. She attends a regular class, at the age of eight with the support of an educational assistant, and later without additional educational support.

Alice displays a clear interest for, and an intellectual orientation favouring, the understanding of structures and constructions. Given the choice, she prefers an intellectually inductive approach to learning that differs from that of her peers and leads her to specific interests and actions that are not uncommon among persons diagnosed with high-functioning autism or Aspergers syndrome (Grandin, 1996). This can be described as a specific kind of learner autonomy (Habermas in Berka et al., 2000). These results, though most evident in the observations, are confirmed in the interviews:

- She has these specific interests. The interests vary, but it is variations on a theme, you know. For the moment, it is skeletons. For the most part animals but sometimes humans too. She does not really draw the animals; more build them from the inside. Starting with the bones and adding muscles, skin and fell.
- Assistant, year two

Alice’s interests are not static but evolve over the years. Alice has had strong interests from the start. It was stones, shells and fossils, then bones and skeletal remains, animal skulls and carrions. Animals have been an ongoing focus but it is interesting to note how her interests evolve and change over the years. Today it is mechanical things and structures.

- Special educator, year five

Through her scientific interests, Alice obtains a body of knowledge, in specific areas, uncommon for her age. She sometimes has a hard time understanding that her peers do not know the things she does and may pose a demanding student, as she requests substantial accuracy and precision from her teachers.

- It is important that you’re correct in what you say. Other children do not notice if you’re careless or stretch a point but Alice gets upset if I call a moth a butterfly or a sparrow a passerine. […] Alice wants to understand. It is important to her, I think, to understand the world.
- Teacher, maths and natural sciences, year seven

Not all teachers see this questioning as something positive.

- Sometimes she questions or corrects her classmates, or even me as a teacher, if she thinks we’re wrong.
We've been trying to explain to her that it is not acceptable. She has to understand that she cannot do things like that.

Tutor, year seven

Even though Alice, and her autism, changes over the years, the school narrative describing her remains essentially the same. This narrative is based on her autism spectra diagnosis and allows the teachers to disregard her educational strategies with reference to educational method and her weak learner autonomy. The predominant narrative is decisively categorical and the few teachers who express a more relational view are discouraged. These teachers do not have the licence to act independently (Berka et al., 2000) in the matter of Alice’s educational strategies. Hence, the autonomy of the teachers is correspondingly restricted by the college and by the school’s educational guidelines. Alice’s intellectual orientation and interests are equally discouraged and she is subject to an ongoing educational method that relies heavily on the implicit idea that her inclusion in class is, in essence, a question of her learning, sometimes by force, to adapt to regular conditions, rules and methods.

She has certain interests, of course. In a way I suppose it is good she has them, because it means that she reads, but sometimes I feel these interests take up too much of her time. Time she should spend on other things.

Tutor, year seven

From this perspective, Alice’s interests are simply a distraction and disruption to school routine. The interests of the school in these cases do not coincide with Alice’s (Glenn in Berka et al., 2000; Little 1995 in Benson, 2011). However, in her scientific orientation and detailed accuracy, Alice shows examples of a distinct strategy to structure and understand the world around her. An educational strategy that is, compared to that of her peers, decidedly autonomous.

The class is working with animals and Alice’s assistant is drawing a giraffe on the board. When she’s drawn half of it Alice says, without raising her hand:

- It will not fit.
- Be quiet, Alice, her teacher says. Raise your hand if you want to say something.

When the assistant is almost done drawing it is evident that Alice was right. There is not enough room on the board to fit the giraffe. The teacher says to leave it but Alice says:

- It is not done.

The assistant goes to sit down but Alice does not leave it. She stands up and says out loud:

- Finish it!
- Sit down, Alice, the teacher says.
- Finish it!
- What is missing, the assistant asks.
- Finish the tail, Alice says in a hard tone of voice.

- Come on then, and help me finish it. The assistant tapes a sheet of paper to the wall end and lets Alice finish the tail. At recess the teacher corrects the assistant, saying:

- It becomes unclear to her what we expect, if you let her have her way like that.

Observation, year two

Alice expresses a need to see things finished and closed. When something is finished or an event completed she can move on but to leave something unfinished appears worrying and unsettling to Alice. It interferes with her need of structure and control. It is also interesting to note how Alice early on predicts that the drawing will not fit the board. It is often claimed that persons with autism have a predisposition to view the world in details rather than in ensembles, that they have a weak central coherence, and that this inability to make coherent structures from perceived details is a basic neurological disability in autism (Frith, 1991). In this episode, Alice displays an ability to predict an entity based on detail. She shows the same capability in her constructing of animals:

Alice is building a collie. Her assistant has given her books on anatomy and she reads them conscientiously. For the moment, she’s working with the fur, tearing up papers to make strips. A teacher passes by and says to the assistant:

- Do you really think she should be allowed to tear up all that paper? We only have so much material to go around.

The assistant and Alice go searching for something else and find shredded paper in a bin. Alice discusses the various qualities of collie-fur with her assistant.

They try to curl and colour the strips and glue them onto her figure.

Observation, year two

Starting with the teeth, the eyes or any other physical detail, she constructs the skeleton, muscles and hide of a proportionately plausible dog before moving on to the characteristics of the fur. In other words, she may start in detail, whereas most other children would start with a preconception of a “dog” (Vygotskij, 1978), but end up with a full dog, that is, fur and all; a dog that is in proportion with detail much more similar to an actual dog than any of her peer’s dogs. An important point in this is to stress the role of the other. Alice has specific educational interests that pose an interesting opportunity for learning but for her interests to lead her further she needs to be challenged by others (Vygotskij, 1978). The initiative to learn, structure or explain something comes from Alice herself but, especially in recognition of her problems with her executive functions, she needs the guidance of others to introduce new things and to contextualise and structure her learning. Here lies the substantial difference between Alice’s learner autonomy and the school’s conception of it (Dam, 1995; Dearden, 1972).
In a way, she is more attentive than most children. She sees things as they are. In other children, it is perhaps more that they draw a mental picture they have of a horse but Alice wants to know how many teeth the horse has; what the skull looks like; how many vertebrae there are in the throat. There are such possibilities in it but as it is now it is more important that she completes the same five pages of math as everyone else.

Assistant, year two

Hence, her central coherence may be weak, but through her intellectual interests she finds ways to compensate, or complement, this weakness. In order to structure and deal with her impressions, Alice shows an autonomous strive to organise and explain things around her that can be seen as a specific educational strategy.

Several of the interviewees testify that Alice has difficulties accepting noisy and loud environments, such as sports and music lessons, perhaps due to specific perceptual sensitivity and difficulty sorting impressions. An interesting detail is a music lesson in year two, where the assistant states that Alice tolerates trying conditions better when she is allowed to work with something she is interested in (Sjödin, 2013). The results imply that Alice finds it most difficult to sort impressions and cope with chaotic surroundings if she has to be idle. Idleness can be difficult to handle for any child and perhaps Alice, through her specific conditions, is particularly sensitive to it. It is possible that Alice may be using her interests as a sieve to help her structure and manage surrounding impressions.

Alice and her class head out at six in the morning to look for migratory birds.

The teacher gathers the students and talks about migratory birds in general and cranes in particular. Some listen, others talk to each other about other things. Alice is sitting on the ground some distance away looking into the reeds, at the small birds that chatter there. She chirps for herself and draws meticulous pictures of the birds in her notebook.

The teacher sends the other students to the observation tower and addresses Alice:

- Why are you sitting here all by yourself? If you do not go up with the others, you might not see any cranes this particular morning but then again neither do any of the other students. However, what she does and does not know or learn is not really the question; the real issue seems to be that she does not conform to the ways of the other students. Alice follows her own agenda, an agenda that allows and encourages her to study things in particular detail and to learn through her interests and impressions. This strategy is decidedly discouraged by school representatives:

You have to make sure she always has something useful and relevant to work with and knows what to do. It does not really matter what it is. This monotonous kind of work, that other children may find boring, that is no problem. It is good for these children to be a little bored. They benefit from it. Perhaps she sometimes finds all the repetition and rehearsal boring and meaningless, if she thinks she already understands, but one has to be firm. It is all about being clear and definite, is it not? She has to conform to the ways of the school.

Tutor, year seven

Several of the teachers address Alice’s resistance to rehearsal and repetition and it is evident in the observations that she resists any occupation or task she perceives as meaningless. If she chooses her employment or is made to take an interest in it, she can go on indefinitely but if she does not understand the purpose of the task it can be difficult to get her to accept it at all.

When she chooses what to do she is tireless; she can go on forever. It is not easy to introduce new things; new questions, to her. She often shows great resistance to new tasks and subjects but it is not impossible. I feel that the most successful strategy is to present the new via something she is already interested in and feels confident with. She is not a stranger to learning new things; it is just a matter of how you present it. If she does not understand why she should do something, she does not even try.

Teacher, maths and natural sciences, year seven

However, views on how this resistance should be handled in school vary. Some teachers claim that repetitive work is beneficiary for children with autism and that Alice should be made to accept her tasks. Some believe that it is a question of discipline: Alice must simply learn to abide to the same rules and conditions as everyone else.
That is what she has to learn. She must learn to be one of us. To function in a social context. She is like any other student. I ask the same things of her as I do of any of the others.

Teacher, year two

These teachers also address the importance of Alice learning to follow the timetable and adapt to the authority of the current teacher. They focus on her weakness as an autonomous learner (Dam, 1995) and her educational independence and integrity, qualities traditionally associated with the concept of learner autonomy, are seen as a disciplinary challenge. Though autonomy is traditionally seen as a desired quality, when it does not conform to school authority and expectation it is regarded as a problem and subsequently relabelled as defiance, resistance or disability.

On the contrary, others question the relevance of such tasks and advocate flexibility and responsiveness (Dewey, 1938). They propose that Alice’s autonomous educational interests lead her to intellectually structure and sort her impressions and search for answers and insights and that this characteristic should be nourished and reclaimed by her educators instead of discouraged.

On the one hand it is the class and what Alice is required to do there. She’s supposed to do everything the others do, that is the idea. They have been very clear about that. On the other hand, it is Alice herself. She has these specific interests and I understand that she has had them for quite some time but I’m not supposed to encourage them at all.

Assistant, year two

The predominant school narrative, however, stresses the importance of Alice conforming to school requirements.

At the end of her seventh year some of the teachers feel that Alice spends too much time and attention on her interests and the college decides to forbid Alice from working with anything related to her interests during the school day:

- How do I know if she hears me when she is not listening when I speak to her? Seeing as how she sits with that stuff all the time, how will she be able to concentrate on what she is supposed to do?
  The special educator says:
  - It is not good for these children with too much stimuli, we should try to help her focus on what is important. She needs clear rules to relate to. We must help her to focus so she can listen properly and do the things she’s expected to do.
  Observation, year seven

In relation to this, Alice says:

- I have to do something. If I do not do something I cannot hear what they say to me. Their voices blend together with the other sounds. If I do something while I listen I can focus but they do not believe me when I tell them. Sometimes it is like the volume is up too loud inside my head and sometimes there’s no sound on at all. When it is that loud I cannot stand it and I break. Inside.

Eventually, Alice assumes the school narrative and its biomedical explanations as her own and comes to understand her problems in school as a result of her own shortcomings:

- I do not know what is wrong with my mind, why I am so stupid. I cannot hear what they say; I cannot explain to them so they understand and they do not want to listen. They do not think I hear them when they talk about me; they do not think I understand; but I hear everything.

Conclusion: in defence of Alice L.

The study behind this article aims to describe how life in school can appear to a student diagnosed with high-functioning autism; however, it is not essentially a project about autism but about normality and what happens to a child who is measured against the expected student normality and its presumed learner autonomy and deemed insufficient. Alice fails, because of her different conditions, to adapt to the school’s supposed normality and the school, through its professionals, responds by discouraging her and further consolidates her otherness. From an early age, Alice has shown sincere interest in structure, construction and coherence, interests she expresses through her varying, and sometimes immersive, hobbies. Her interests and strategies can be seen as a specific kind of learner autonomy based on a process of intellectual induction related to the perceptive strategies of the mind. These interests, however, are strictly discouraged by most of her educators.

From the school narrative’s point of view Alice’s capacity to autonomy as a learner is quite weak. Many of the things traditionally associated with learner autonomy (Dam, 1995; Wolff, 1970) are things that are challenging to Alice and many other persons with similar diagnoses. From an Executive Functions’ perspective Alice has problems with planning, structuring and executing her work within the school provided timeframe (Dam, 1995; Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). Within the school narrative, this disqualifies her as an autonomous learner. To have her follow the rules become the measurement of her adaptation to school normality. This supersedes her inner desire to examine how things work and her constant strive to understand how the world works (Benson, 2011). However, there is more to the concept of learner autonomy than this.

Most people have an inductive understanding of the world. Most of us strive to systematise, explain and understand the world we live in and there’s no reason to think that Alice would be an exception. Since she has a different perception than most, and experiences the world around her in a different way than others, her structuring...
strategy is perhaps somewhat different. The inductive process that, in persons with strong central coherence is automated, in Alice can be seen an intellectual, though not necessarily conscious process. It manifests itself as a scientific interest, an inquiring attitude to her environment and a constant need for things to be structured and coherent. In this article, I propose that this intellectually inductive process could be compared to a specific kind of learner autonomy; a scientific urge to sort, structure and explain the world that, if perceived as an possibility instead of as an inconvenience, present interesting opportunities in a school context. According to the theory of central coherence (Frith, 1991) people with autism generally perceive the world in details and find it difficult to merge these parts to wholes. It is clear that Alice’s view of the outside world is based on details and that she prefers to focus on the parts rather than the context but at the same time she shows a willingness and desire to organise and structure these separate impressions. Perhaps the mind, in high-functioning autism, strives to compensate for the weak central coherence and look for alternative ways to structure impressions and make the world manageable and understandable (Grandin, 1996). This scientific orientation, however, is not a trait usually associated with autism nor is it exclusive to what is commonly described as neuropsychiatric diagnoses.

The attitudes towards Alice and the way the teachers describe her are rather dichotomous (Sjödin, 2013; 2014). Whereas a majority of the teachers use medical words to describe her and lean heavily on disciplinary measures and recommendations, there are a few who refrain from the use of such words and instead speak of Alice’s alternate way of thinking. They are, however, discouraged by the school community and do not have licence to act autonomously towards Alice (Berka et al., 2000). The school’s attitude to Alice’s researching, investigative interest is distanced, if not negative. Her teachers argue that she uses too much material and that she is littering and subsequently justify their disapproval through the use of educational arguments. It becomes unclear to her what is expected of her in school if she is allowed to do things that she wants or likes, but the disciplinary measures aimed at Alice are not just directed to her but to all the students. It is said that the most important thing is that she learns to follow the rules; accept to sit in class with the other students and learn to get to class on time, with the proper equipment. The conducting of repetitive assignments becomes something of a symbolic issue. Many of the things we do in school lack evident meaning. Some children accept this without question, some negotiate with their teachers and obtain, through these negotiations, additional agency or independence (Markström & Halldén, 2009) but Alice does not parley, she wants to know why. This could be viewed as an educational opportunity but is instead generally seen as a problem. A general truth in contemporary educational theory is that repetition leads to reflection, which may be true for most children but not necessarily for children with autism. To Alice repetition is just repetition. For repetition to lead to reflection, she needs something more, for example responsive communication with another (Benson, 2011).

Alice’s learner autonomy is, as we have seen, ignored and discouraged throughout her school years with reference to her supposed weaknesses as an autonomous learner (Dam, 1995). Alice’s independence and integrity as a learner, qualities traditionally associated with the concept of learner autonomy are seen as a disciplinary challenge. While autonomy is traditionally seen as a desired quality, when it does not conform to school authority and expectation it is regarded as a problem and subsequently relabelled as resistance. The conflict between the learner autonomy of individual students and the school’s expectations of them as learners is a question of relevance not only to Alice but to all children regardless of their abilities and conditions. In essence, it revolves around the question of student agency versus institutional authority and how children manoeuvre between their own interests and sense of self and the school’s expectations of them.

The conflict of interest between the expectations of the institution and the vested interest of each individual to obtain and execute certain degrees of personal autonomy, as learners and otherwise, are managed by most students through the use of various strategies (Markström & Halldén, 2009), some more successful than others. This is a process acceptable to and even to some degree encouraged by school representatives and the children who see through this expectation can negotiate some liberties and adaptations in reference to school regulations. Due to her different cognitive conditions, Alice does not comprehend this expectation to parley and when she voices opposition or displays a desire to act on her interests she does so in a way that is not regarded as acceptable. This is not unique to Alice or to children with diagnoses but a process applicable to the relationship between the school as an institution and the individual student in general.

It is explicitly stated in interviews, as well as visible in the observations, that the school and most of its representatives, views itself as an unchallengeable constant. The institution, its goals, habits and educational methods are as they are and the purpose of the inclusion of Alice is that she, through disciplinary means, should learn to adapt to school rules, regulations and requirements and, subsequently, conform to be as similar to the normative perception of a standard student as possible. This requirement leaves no room for Alice’s autonomy. From this perspective, the conditions in school, which are said to be the same for everyone, aims to measure each student’s ability to respond and adapt to the expected student role (Säljö & Hjörne, 2008). But the conditions in school are not the same for all students, simply because all students are not the same. Considering this, it is reasonable to assume
that the requirements aimed at Alice, that is, the implicit, and on occasion explicit, expectation that she become as similar to the normal student, makes her situation in school quite different to that of her peers. In doing so, Alice must abandon her intellectually inductive strategies and scientific interests and conform to school routines, habits and timetables.

The general educational policy in many countries today, some 15 years after the Salamanca agreement, favour inclusive education. However, policy documents and standards still assume the position that the curriculum and educational goals are the same for all students but standards, methods and developmental/educational requirements are not neutral. They favour certain characteristics, abilities and conditions over others and assume that some children’s capabilities and diversities are deviations from student normality.

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