

**Doctorate in Professional Educational,
Child and Adolescent Psychology (DEdPsy)**

**Exploring how a sense of belonging is
constructed in the accounts of autistic girls who
attend mainstream school in England.**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Doctorate in Professional Educational Child & Adolescent Psychology.**

Student declaration

I, Nastassja Brennan De Vine declare that, except where explicit attribution to other sources is made, the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

Autistic girls' social motivation and associated desire to fit in, suggests that feeling a sense of belonging is important for the girls. This may be particularly relevant during adolescence, as this period is marked by uncertainty and loneliness due to increasing independence and development of identity. There is evidence that feeling a sense of belonging provides pupils social acceptance and is a protective factor against harmful psychological outcomes. Despite this, limited research has considered autistic girls belonging experiences in mainstream schools and what needs to change to facilitate belonging. Further, the historical underdiagnoses of autistic girls has entailed that their personal stories are mostly absent from autism research. This research prioritises autistic girls' voices by exploring the girls' constructs of belonging, including the facilitators of and barriers to feeling a sense of belonging, and the impact on wellbeing.

This study included the autistic community in the research process in various ways. An autism advisory group provided consultation on pre-study considerations, data collection and data analysis. Personal constructs and lived experiences of school belonging were explored using semi-structured interviews and personalised activities (e.g. drawings and poetry) with eighteen adolescent autistic girls. Participants were involved in the data analysis process as they commented on emerging codes and themes.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis and five themes were identified: (I) autistic girl's want to be seen and heard, (II) the joys and pains of mutuality, (III) losing myself under the mask, (IV) marginalisation links with invalidation, (V) sensory fatigue.

The autistic girls defined belonging from a relational perspective, as they want to be externally valued, heard, and involved in the school community. However, aspects of masking, stigma and sensory experiences limit the girls belonging in school. Implications for schools and Educational Psychologists are discussed using an experience sensitive framework of wellbeing.

Impact statement

Every human has an intrinsic motivation to belong within a particular group or place. When this basic psychological need of feeling a sense of belonging is achieved, positive psychological outcomes can be reached. Feeling a sense of belonging in school is reported to impact pupils' academic achievement, wellbeing, identity and has notable effects on school attendance. Only two studies have explored the school belonging experiences of autistic adolescent girls, which reported negative school experiences relating to teachers, peers and the school environment. These studies are limited by failing to report positive school experiences and autistic girls' constructs of school belonging. The current study extends on this small body of research by exploring how autistic girls define school belonging, as well as what the girls perceive to be the facilitators of and barriers to belonging. This research aimed to provide a platform for autistic girls' voices, which have been traditionally silenced, to understand the meaning the girls give to their experiences. This was done by allowing the autistic girls to participate at various points in the research process and including an autistic advisory group to consult on the pre-study considerations, methodology and data analysis.

The research contributes five unique findings to the existing academic literature on autistic girls' school belonging. Firstly, the girls constructed belonging as receiving external validation and acceptance from school staff and peers which made the girls feel comfortable to share their individuality. Secondly, the girls experienced their efforts to form connections with peers unreciprocated and described the repeated cycle of rejection to be internalised as something wrong with them. Thirdly, the girls found it hard to stop masking and that masking created a disconnection from the self. Fourthly, the girls described the lack of control they had over their school experiences due to stigma which marginalises the girls. The fifth and final unique contribution of this study is that sensory experiences in school lead to the girls missing from lessons and school. The findings will be disseminated to academia through a peer reviewed publication.

There are various implications of the current research. Firstly, it is salient that there is enhanced awareness and training on autistic girls' school belonging experiences, including the factors that facilitate belonging and the impact on wellbeing, for all professionals working with autistic girls, such as EPs, school staff and multi-agency professionals. To achieve this, the findings will be shared to these professionals through the publication of the study and research presentations. Secondly, targeted support for autistic girls through consultation and assessment using aspects of the experience sensitive approach underpinning this study to consider the meaning the girls give to their experiences, will support schools to provide person centred interventions that consider the girls wellbeing. Finally, a one-page summary highlighting key findings will be shared with the autistic girls learning group I am involved in at the local authority, with the aim to disseminate to local secondary schools, and via social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAG	Autism Advisory Group
ABA	Applied Behavioural Analysis
APPGA	The All Party Parliamentary Group for Autism
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EP	Educational Psychologist
LA	Local Authority
M&MS	Me and My School
NHS	National Health Service
PATH	Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope
PSHE	Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education
PSSM	Psychological Sense of School Membership
SEMH	Social Emotional Mental Health
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SEND COP	Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice
TA	Teaching Assistant
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child
YP	Young People

Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore autistic adolescent girls' school belonging experiences within mainstream secondary schools. This study also sought to explore the factors that contribute to and take away from feeling a sense of belonging and the impact on wellbeing¹. Feeling a sense of belonging is a basic psychological need and when the need for belonging is achieved, positive psychological outcomes can be reached (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Adolescence² is a socially complex period, during which the need to belong becomes vital. However, there is scarce research that explores the school belonging experiences of autistic adolescent girls in mainstream school. Furthermore, autistic girls' voices are largely missing from the research with researchers seeking the perspectives of key people around the girls including, teachers, professionals and parents or caregivers. This has resulted in lack of knowledge and understanding of how autistic girls construct school belonging, their views on how they have experienced mainstream school, and how schools could support feeling a sense of belonging.

Within this chapter, I explain my individual experience and background as a means to provide context of my interest in the topic of autism. Next, I consider the legislations and rights that underpin the research aims and methodological

¹ According to the Department of Health, wellbeing is a multi-faceted construct that encompasses personal aspects such as life satisfaction and emotions and aspects that can be measured objectively such as physical health, food and safety (Oman, 2020). Similar to personal wellbeing, researchers have coined the term psychological wellbeing which includes a person's ability to experience agency, personal growth, self-acceptance and positive relationships (Ryff, 1989). Within this study, psychological wellbeing will be used when considering the impact of autistic girls' school experiences on their wellbeing.

² Adolescence is defined as the beginning of the onset of puberty, however different research papers may use different age ranges (Blakemore, 2018). This study refers to adolescence as the period in which the child is in secondary schooling (12 to 18 years).

stance of this study. I then discuss the constructs around autism as well as gender presentation and prevalence. Following this, I summarise research that explores autistic girls and masking and the importance of feeling a sense of belonging. Finally, I review the lifeworld-led framework used in this study to understand the meaning that autistic girls give to their school belonging experiences, before outlining the significance of the study and research aims.

1.1 Researcher background

It has been suggested by researchers that it is important to consider how an individual's experience and background may influence the research process. Willig (2013) argued that researcher's views may impact on the direction the researcher takes with the study. Consequently, Fox and colleagues (2007) postulated that researchers should reflect on their individual views and values to ensure reflexivity can be adopted.

Prior to starting the Doctorate course, I worked closely with autistic children and young people (CYP). I supported autistic children within a mainstream primary school setting as a teaching assistant (TA). I also worked in a Special Educational Needs (SEN) school setting as an Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) tutor with autistic CYP. During this time, I mostly worked with autistic boys, however on a few occasions I worked with autistic girls. I noticed differences between autistic girls and autistic boys and this was my initial exposure to autistic girls. For example, I noticed that autistic girls seemed more interested in social relationships compared to autistic boys. In my tutor role I found myself unsure on how to support the autistic girls and I pondered whether lack of awareness and knowledge on autistic girls contributed to my uncertainty on how to support these pupils. I also reflected on the training offered by the SEN school I worked in and that it did not include information on the gender differences between autistic boys and girls and the possible impact this had on the support offered for these pupils.

When I started the Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at the Institute of Education to train to become an Educational Psychologist (EP), I was curious to learn more about autism and explore why there is dearth of research on autistic girls. As a Trainee EP (TEP) I have gained experience working with autistic CYP, including autistic girls, at an individual level (e.g. individual casework), systemic level (e.g. training on autism inclusion for schools) and at an organisational level (e.g. participating a learning group with EP's to explore current research on girls and autism with the aim of raising awareness of autistic girls in mainstream schools). During individual casework it became apparent that school staff had a lack of understanding of autistic girls and did not seem to have confidence applying practices and strategies to support their needs. I reflected how this was similar to my experiences in my previous tutor role. As part of my role in the autistic girls learning group, I conducted research on inclusion and belonging and it became clear that research on autism was largely male centric with limited research exploring autistic girls' school experiences, including the factors that support school belonging. The limited research on autistic girls revealed that autistic girls were socially motivated and wanted to belong in social groups, which was in line with my experience working as a tutor. I also noticed that most of the research did not include autistic CYP voices, which was surprising given the recent impetus to provide a platform from the autism community to share their perspectives (Pellicano et al., 2014).

As a TEP, I reflected how not only is there a gap in the research exploring autistic girls' sense of school belonging but also I did not fully understand how to support autistic girls' inclusion in mainstream schools or what to recommend to school staff on ways to facilitate school belonging. This was concerning since the Department for Education (DfE) (2019) recently provided guidance on school belonging, stating that "a reduced sense of belonging led to pupils feeling disconnected from school and engaging and investing less in it" and this "overlaps with wellbeing, additional needs and SEMH issues" (p. 27). This may be particularly relevant to adolescents as they are known to be at high risk for feelings of uncertainty and isolation, so the need to belong is likely to play an important role in school life (Goodenow, 1993a).

When reflecting on my experiences working with autistic CYP as a tutor, it was evident that there are differences between autistic girls and autistic boys which suggests they require different levels of support. I shared how I had no training or understanding about autistic girls which left me with the feeling of uncertainty about how to support autistic girls. As I changed my professional role into the TEP role, I noticed that school staff often try to support inclusion for autistic CYP, however I often felt that the support for autistic boys was more developed than the support for autistic girls. As a TEP, I reflected on how it became apparent that school staff experience challenges with autistic girls, such as lack of knowledge, understanding and confidence on how to support these pupils. This underpinned my motivation to explore autistic girls' perspectives in relation to their school belonging experiences and how school staff could improve belonging practices. As a TEP I was interested to develop my knowledge on autistic girls through the research process to further develop my educational psychology practice.

It is through my personal encounter with autistic young people and my reflections on the gaps in the research that I am interested in this topic. My experiences and the research I have conducted have shaped my understanding of autism, and throughout this research project I acknowledge my own views and I was open to the beliefs and voice of the autistic girls in my research.

1.2 Research position and focus

This research aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of adolescent autistic girls who are attending mainstream secondary schools and highlight various changes that could happen in schools to support belonging. To address these important issues, it is essential to provide an overview of issues which underpin the position of this research.

1.2.1 Inclusion as a right

The Human Rights Act 1998 (Article 2) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 1989), documents the right to an education. In 1991, the UK agreed and signed up to the rights of CYP to an education (UNICEF, 1989). Further Articles from the UNCRC that are salient to this research include Article 12, which includes the right to hold a view and the “right to express those views freely”; Article 13, “freedom to receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds”; Article 23, the right to an environment that facilitates active participation for disabled CYP; and Article 29, “education of the child shall be directed to: the development of personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (UNICEF, 1989, pp. 5-10). These right show the international acknowledgement of the need to make school provision for autistic girls. The extent to which these rights are situated within the English legislative context is considered below.

The rights of children documented by the UNCRC are reiterated in The Children and Families Act 2014 (Part 3, section 33-35) which reports that the Local Authority (LA) must support each CYP to achieve educational outcomes and other outcomes. The Equality Act 2010 states that schools and LA’s must provide “inclusive practice” and “remove barriers to learning” for all CYP with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (CoP) (DfE, 2015b, pp.100). Moreover, schools should make “reasonable adjustments” to meet the needs of children with SEND (DfE, 2015b, pp.27). It seems, however, that while autistic girls have the right to attend a mainstream school and for that school to make reasonable adjustments, the provision provided is usually based on financial issues rather than needs (DfE, 2019).

However, The Children and Families Act (2014) highlights the importance of including the CYP and their parents in the process of deciding the support and relevant services provided for them (Part 3). Following this Act, the SEND CoP (DfE, 2014, p.21) provided guidance to the LA’s to ensure that CYP are provided with information and support to help them be involved and contribute to considerations and outcomes about their support.

The Equality Act 2010, legally protects autistic girls against discrimination based on two protected characteristics of sex and disability (DfE, 2014). According to the Equality Act 2010, disability is defined as “a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial long-term adverse effect on that person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities” (Government Equalities Office, 2011, p.7). It is acknowledged that while some autistic individuals consider autism to be a disabling condition (Kansen, 2016), others do not consider themselves as disabled, as this implies their autism is an impairment (Evans, 2017). However, this Act is included in this paper as it offers protection against discrimination or disadvantage for autistic girls and their right to receive appropriate education.

The English government has recognised the important role that schools can play in promoting wellbeing in CYP, through the publication of the Green Paper (DfE, 2017b). This document highlights the importance of supporting CYP, including autistic pupils, with a learning disability and/or mental health difficulties (DfE, 2017b, p.16).

A recent SEND Green Paper Review Consultation was launched by the UK government which recognised that the “system was failing to deliver improved outcomes” for CYP (SEND Review, 2022, p.9). The review revealed that CYP with SEN demonstrated poorer school outcomes than their peers and were more likely to suffer with mental health difficulties than peers. This consultation seeks views from CYP and parents or carers on what can be done to ensure CYP have access to the support they need, which will end in July 2022.

The aforementioned legislations in England provides a legal framework which protects autistic girl’s rights to an appropriate education, protects autistic girl’s against discrimination based on their sex and disability, recognises the role schools have in supporting wellbeing, allows them to have access to services, and emphasises the importance of their voice in the decisions made about their educational provision and future.

These legislations and rights underpin the research aims and methodology adopted in this study which includes the autistic community in various ways in the research process, prioritising the autistic girls voice as the central data collection.

1.2.2 Inclusion for autistic pupils

Various publications have outlined educational practices to facilitate inclusion of autistic CYP, such as Autism (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009) and the Autism Education Trust (Charman et al., 2011). However, despite these efforts to publish inclusive educational practices for autistic CYP, The All Party Parliamentary Group for Autism (APPGA) argues that more is needed to make sure schools are consistently and successfully supporting autistic pupils (National Autistic Society, 2017).

In 2019, the DfE reported that 50% of autistic CYP are receiving an education within a mainstream school and that 29% of all CYP with Education Health Care Needs Plans (EHCP) have autism as a primary need in England (DfE, 2019). Of these, 30% of autistic pupils are in mainstream primary schools, 20% are in mainstream secondary schools and 50% are in specialist provision (these do not include independent schools or nursery schools).

Autistic pupils and their parents and caregivers postulated that there are benefits attending mainstream school settings, such as social inclusion (Bond & Hebron, 2016) and feeling accepted by peers (Makin et al., 2017). Further, school staff have highlighted the importance of pupil role models encouraging social interaction skills and development of friendships (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). However, mainstream school provision presents some barriers for autistic CYP, as there are many unpredictable events and changes that can occur. Difficulty navigating the social environment and having different communication styles are some of the challenges autistic pupil's experience, especially in secondary settings (Makin et al., 2017). This may be exacerbated for autistic CYP that have comorbid learning, sensory and behavioural needs which puts them at risk for mental health difficulties and

makes them vulnerable to social exclusion and bullying (Frederickson et al., 2010).

1.3 Conceptualisations of autism as an evolving concept

The earliest definition of autism came from Kanner's (1943) work with autistic children (males=8, females=3). Through observations, Kanner concluded that these children were "emotionally and intellectually impaired", (p.226), however did not consider how the children experienced daily life.

Following Kanner's work, Asperger (1944) conducted research with autistic children and reported that although the children showed restricted interests, they had borderline to superior intelligence. This led Wing and Gould (1996) to coin the term Asperger Syndrome for the people who presented in a similar way to the participants in Asperger's study. This played an important role in broadening the understanding of autism as a spectrum where some autistic people are more cognitively able than others (Wing, 1981). Since then, there has been a growing awareness of autism amongst professionals and schools. This is reflected in the gradually increasing prevalence rates of autism over the last few decades. A systematic review of 43 research papers documented the prevalence of autism as 0.67% of the population (Fombonne, 2009). Later publications reported that 1% of the population meet the criteria for autism (Brugha et al., 2011; Russell et al., 2014). Thus, it is evident that the prevalence of autism is increasing.

Although Wing and Gould (1996) helped broaden our understanding of autism, autism is currently identified based on quantitative deficits and is currently diagnosed using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition (DSM- 5) or the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10). The DSM- 5 includes two domains of impairments; firstly, social communication and social interaction and secondly, restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (APA, 2013, p.299). Sensory behaviours have been added under restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour domain. This was an important addition as autistic adults feel that disorder of

the sensory systems is a primary deficit of autism and not just a related feature (Grandin, 1995; Williams, 1998). Although autism is present across the lifespan, the DSM-5 reports that these impairments must be evident in early childhood and impair everyday functioning (APA, 2013).

The DSM- 5 has been criticised for medicalising autism (NHS, 2013), as alongside behavioural deficits autism has been defined as deficits in social interaction and social communication. This places the difficulty within the autistic person, however it has been argued that when two people who have different experiences of the world interact with each other, they will find it challenging to understand each other and empathise with each other, known as the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012). Thus, many people in the autistic community are challenging the medicalisation of autism and the use of the word 'disorder' as they feel that they have many strengths compared with the neuro-typical population (Kapp, 2020).

Autism is an evolving construct that is changing over time. The language that is used when referring to autism is developing with some preferring person first language (person with autism) (Vivanti, 2020) and others wanting to be referred to with identity first language (autistic person) (Botha et al., 2020). This is important to consider as terminology and language used to refer to autism influences people's understanding and perception of autism and plays a role in stigma (Botha et al., 2021; Gernsbacher, 2017). It has been argued that person first language, which arose in the 1970s, was used to show "the person's unique combination of strengths, needs and experiences" (Vivanti, 2020, p.1). However, there is a consensus in the literature that person first language is the least preferred amongst the autism community (Bury et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Kenny et al., 2016), as it "serves to drive a wedge between the person (good), and the autism (bad)" (Botha et al., 2021, p. 3). Botha and colleagues (2020) argue that identity first language (autistic person) reflects the growing drive from autistic individuals for autonomy. This thesis acknowledges the various interpretations of autism and recognises that some autistic individuals view autism as a condition that is disabling (Kansen, 2016), while other autistic individuals believe autism should be de-

medicalised as they positively identify with autism (Evans, 2017). However, this thesis will use identity first language of autistic to describe the girls, as it is the preferred term of the autistic community (Kenny et al., 2016).

1.4 Gender and autism

Gender³ as a social construct and sex as a protected characteristic (Equality Act, 2010) underpins the position of this thesis. It has been reported that there is a 4-5:1 ratio of autistic males to autistic females (Kim et al., 2011). More recent research has reported a 2-3:1, male to female ratio (Baxter et al., 2015; Loomes et al., 2017). This suggests that the ratio between males and females is decreasing which might be due to the rise in knowledge about autistic girls. However, there is still a gender discrepancy in autism and it has been reported that females are not being referred for autism assessment and thus are underdiagnosed (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Lai et al., 2017).

Researchers have attempted to explore factors that may explain differences in age at diagnosis between males and females. Fountain and colleagues (2011) reported that CYP from a high socio-economic status (SES) received a diagnosis 16 months earlier than CYP from low SES. Giarelli and colleagues (2010) postulated that higher IQ has been a variable that makes females less likely to be diagnosed or receive a later diagnosis compared to males. This could be due to males exhibiting more externalising behaviours and different social expectations of males and females (Giarelli et al., 2010). A large-scale study conducted in Scotland (n= 150), reported significant differences between girls and boys (0-9 years, n=46 of which 7 were girls) and female and male adolescents (10-18 years, n= 40, of which 12 were female) in age ranges at referrals and diagnosis (Rutherford et al., 2016). The authors

³ Gender is defined as the “personal conception of oneself as male or female (or rarely, both, or neither)” (Fisher, 2019, p.67). Previous research exploring autism and gender differences, regarded gender as a binary construct. Research exploring gender identity for autistic people shows that there is an increased number of autistic people who identify as gender fluid (Bevan, 2017). When exploring the research on gender in autism, gender is considered in line with the researcher’s descriptions.

reported that the ratio of sex differences decreased with age and that there were no differences in waiting times for assessment between males and females (Rutherford et al., 2016). These results propose that autistic girls are not usually identified in early years and primary school, which may be due to lack of referrals or they may be assessed by professionals as not meeting the diagnostic criteria at a young age. It may also be the case that autistic girls tend to apply masking strategies which conceals their autism. These studies, however, lack qualitative accounts which makes it hard to understand the reasons females are not recognised by professionals.

Fewer diagnosed autistic girls has impacted on our understanding of autistic girls as researchers find it hard to recruit autistic girls in research (Watkins et al., 2014). This has led to researchers mostly including male samples which has contributed to our understanding of autistic males and male diagnostic bias. This may explain why school staff and other professionals are not recognising autistic girls and why autistic girls are less likely to be diagnosed (Dworzynski et al., 2012). If autistic girls are recognised, they are usually in secondary school (Giarelli et al., 2010; Rutherford et al., 2016) and may have already experienced mental health issues (Westwood et al., 2017).

There seems to be little agreement in the literature about whether females present with a different autism phenotype to males. Dean and colleagues (2017) reported that although both males and females experience similar core difficulties, the way that each gender responds to the environment is different. For example, autistic females are reported to be more socially motivated and responsive to social cues compared to autistic males (Backer van Ommeren et al., 2017; Dean et al., 2014). Research conducted by Sedgewick and colleagues (2019) investigated gender patterns in autism with autistic adolescents (n=53, 27 of which were autistic girls) and non-autistic peers (n=53). The authors used a mixed methodology, including semi-structured interviews, Friendship Qualities Scale (Bukowski et al., 1994) and Revised Peer Experiences Questionnaire (Prinstein et al., 2001). It was reported that, similar to non-autistic girls, autistic girl's communication skills and desire to form friendships contributed to the development of friendships,

notwithstanding relational conflicts and how to manage these. Contrasted to this, autistic males' friendships are marked by reduced closeness. The need to 'fit in' was identified as being important for both autistic and non-autistic girls, which motivated the girls to blend in. This desire to socially fit in was less evident for autistic boys and non-autistic boys (Sedgewick et al., 2019). These gender differences underpin autistic people's masking or camouflaging behaviours, which is discussed in the next section in relation to autistic girls'.

Research has shown that autistic females compared to autistic males and non-autistic people are more likely to experience mental health problems including self-harm, anxiety, eating disorders and suicide attempts (Camm-Crosbie et al., 2019). Professionals working in education and health sectors are suggesting that many autistic females do not fit the current profile of autism (Happé et al., 2006). This raises questions about the social construct of gender and autism which may explain why autistic females are largely misunderstood or not recognised for support, specifically if they have cognitive functioning in the average range. This highlights issues around educational expectations and provision provided, as autistic girls may appear to have limited struggles and fit in with others.

1.5 Autistic girls and masking

The limited research investigating autistic females has documented that they are more socially motivated than autistic males, resulting in being missed or misdiagnosed (Moyse & Porter, 2015a). The research shows that because autistic girls are motivated to form friendships with peers, they hide social difficulties in an attempt to appear socially competent (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Hull et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). They do this by developing masking or camouflaging strategies which are largely based on observations of others behaviours and communication styles (Hull et al., 2017). Although autistic girls are reported to hide parts of themselves in an attempt to fit in at school, these "masquerading strategies" have severe negative consequences on their wellbeing (Tierney et al., 2016, p. 81).

This may be especially relevant during adolescence when social pressures tremendously increase (Blakemore, 2018). Research has reported that autistic females have a larger motivation for connections and friendships compared to autistic males (Nichols et al., 2009; Sedgewick et al., 2016). This combined with puberty, increasingly complex relationships with peers and the desire to socially mimic others can become overwhelming and tiring (Cook et al., 2018; Cridland et al., 2014; Bargiela et al., 2016). This is because adolescents are expected to become increasingly independent and since girls have greater social motivation, autistic girls may have this more difficult than autistic boys (Nichols et al., 2009; Solomon et al., 2012; White et al., 2017). Masking has been linked with anxiety (Cook et al., 2018), depression (Honeybourne, 2015) and exhaustion (Nichols et al., 2009), which autistic girls tend to internalise (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Solomon et al., 2012). Thus, while autistic girls might appear to be coping when masking they could be silently suffering. Moyse and Porter (2015b) reported that masking impacts how others perceive autistic girls and as a result school staff might not visibly recognise signs of emotional distress. This puts them at social risk as they are not on the “social radar” (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019, p.5). Moreover, autistic girls’ concern over the success of their masking strategies may further negatively impact their wellbeing (Bargiela et al., 2016; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

A further negative consequence of masking is the impact on the autistic girls’ sense of self. Pearson and Rose (2021) have suggested that masking creates cognitive dissonance as there is a discrepancy between what the girls think and believe and how they act, which causes psychological distress. The authors suggested a model which depicts the link between masking and distress, which holds that a stressor in the social environment, such as concern over peer rejection, triggers masking behaviours which are effortful to sustain. The masking response feeds into disconnection from the self which then leads to stress and difficulty regulating emotions, which finally leads to what the authors called the “breaking point” (Pearson & Rose, 2021, p. 56).

Research on autistic adults' reports that burnout is initially experienced during adolescence and that masking was the main reason they experienced burnout (Mantzas et al., 2022; Raymaker et al., 2020). Lack of understanding of autism, poor acceptance of autism, stigma and marginalisation were reported to underpin the cycle of masking and burnout (Mantzas et al., 2022). It seems then that masking behaviours put autistic girls at social and emotional risk. The result of "pretending to be normal" (Bargiela et al., 2016, p.3281) are self-harm, suicidal thoughts and attempted suicide (Hunsche et al., 2020) and eating disorders (Camm-Crosbie et al., 2019). In fact, research has documented that autistic females, without a learning difficulty, were most at risk of dying by committing suicide (Cassidy et al., 2020). Furthermore, when masking strategies are not successful this leads to autistic girls without connections and isolated which was "attributed to the girls not belonging" in mainstream schools (Halsall et al., 2021, p. 2082). Halsall and colleagues (2021) highlight the importance of school staff in "facilitating autistic girls' sense of belonging" (p. 2083).

It is evident that autistic adolescent girls are at social and emotional risk, given their desire to fit in with peers. If the girls felt a sense of belonging at school they could be at less risk for experiencing adverse psychological difficulties, since research has reported that a sense of belonging is a protective factor for wellbeing and mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DfE, 2016).

1.6 The importance of belonging

The significance of feeling a sense of belonging is well documented within the research. According to Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs, humans need to feel a sense of belongingness and love to begin to work toward self-actualisation. Maslow (1987) argues that all humans have an intrinsic motivation for connection and relationships with other individuals, particularly, within a group. Baumeister and Leary (1995) postulated that Maslow's theory is based on clinical work and is not linked to either original data or an analysis of previous research. Nonetheless, Baumeister and Leary (1995) support the

importance of belonging as a basic psychological need. These authors conducted a large review of the research and they reported that lack of belonging is linked with higher occurrence of stress, health problems and psychological pathology. Overall, theories that support the idea that the need to belong is a necessary human requirement, suggest that when the need for belonging is achieved, positive psychological outcomes can be reached (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Sancho and Cline (2012) explained that the literature lacks a clear definition of belonging. Hagerty and colleagues (1992) attempted to define a sense of belonging as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment, so that a person feels themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (p.173). The authors broke down the term ‘belongingness’ into two attributes. The first is “valued involvement”, which is referred to as feeling accepted, valued and needed by others. The second is “fit”, which is the person’s view that their values and interests are in line with the system or environment they exist in.

Researchers investigating belonging have argued that belonging is a social construct as all individuals have unique ways of defining what belonging means to them (Shaw, 2019). Congruent with this study’s aim, this research explores autistic girl’s constructs of belonging as a means to understand what belonging means to the girls’ in mainstream secondary settings.

Consequently, this research does not need a clear definition of belonging to explore the construct. Limited research has examined autistic girls’ school belonging experiences during adolescence, despite this being the point at which belonging is arguably important as social demands increase, academic pressures rise and the development of self is forming (Cook et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016).

1.6.1 Psychological wellbeing and belonging

Autistic adolescent girls are reported to be at risk of mental health difficulties (Solomon et al., 2012) which may jeopardise their psychological wellbeing.

Research suggests that feeling accepted and having relationships with others is a fundamental psychological need and underpins wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Moreover, it is suggested that belonging within a group offers social and psychological support, as positive relationships with others provides acceptance, people to spend time with and lean on for emotional support (Majors, 2012). This is particularly relevant to autistic adolescent girls attending mainstream schools, as feeling a sense of belonging is related to school attendance and enjoyment (Goodenow, 1993a). The current study aims to explore the extent to which school belonging experiences impact the girls' wellbeing.

1.7 Conceptual framework: Lifeworld-led approach

Autism has traditionally been portrayed as having a negative impact on wellbeing. As a result, researchers tend to base their research aims and questions on the difficulties autistic people may experience, usually missing a conceptual framework that guides researchers to explore the spectrum of autistic experiences and autistic people's personal constructs beyond the limited view in which the autistic person is seen as the 'problem'. Recently however, autism research has started to shift from investigating autism from a deficit-based approach to recognising the importance of unique personal narratives. Accordingly, this study adopted a lifeworld-led framework which is an experienced-based approach embedded in humanistic psychology. The roots of this approach can be found in ethics of care, compassion, and it declares admiration towards neurodiversity (Milton, 2014 as cited in Pavlopoulou, 2020). It is hoped that this framework would serve as a holistic and valuable method for reflective practice, in coming to extend knowledge and understanding of adolescent autistic girls' school belonging experiences through making their perspectives and experiences of mainstream school, central in this research.

The lifeworld-led framework used in this study builds upon the human science perspective introduced by Pavlopoulou and Dimitriou (2019). Although, the roots of this framework are not new to research in health psychology,

Pavlopoulou and Dimitriou (2019) introduced this humanistic framework to family studies on autism. The authors explained that the lifeworld-led approach allows researchers to explore what it means to be human by examining the meaning individuals give to their “lived and living experiences” (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2019, p. 4). This means viewing participants in research at a “human level which hold endless possibilities for wellbeing and suffering”, not as “frequencies and causalities” (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2019, p. 4).

1.7.1 Features of the lifeworld-led framework

The lifeworld-led approach is made up of eight features: insiderness, agency, uniqueness, sense making, personal journey, sense of place, embodiment, enabling. These features acknowledge that each person has unique personal experiences which constitute relationships, strengths, vulnerabilities and opportunities (Todres et al., 2009). To consider and acknowledge autistic girls’ lifeworld is to explore their lived experiences which should be respected, valued and heard. As such, the lifeworld-led features are used as a base from which this research explores the meaning that autistic girls give to their lived school belonging experiences.

The eight features (see below) of the lifeworld-led approach have been adapted to fit the purpose and research questions of this study. Each feature captures aspects of the human experience and is followed by a definition that reflects the purposes of the research.

Insiderness: Understanding autistic girls’ hopes, strengths and difficulties during daily mainstream school routines and their subjective perspectives on school belonging.

Agency: Enhancing autistic girl’s abilities to make decisions with professionals (e.g. teachers, EPs) around the factors that promote and inhibit feelings of school belonging.

Uniqueness: Autistic girl's experiences are unique and must be viewed as people with various identities including but not limited to female, pupil, daughter and friend.

Sense making: Autistic girl's understanding of their school experiences matter.

Personal journey: Researchers and practitioners should take initiative on understanding and promoting autistic adolescents' school belonging experiences.

Sense of place: Autistic girls should feel welcomed in mainstream school settings and safe in their schools, homes and wider community.

Embodiment: Autistic girl's experiences of living should extend beyond a limited definition based on deficits and disabilities. The girls should be encouraged to develop positive individual identities by emphasising their strengths.

Togetherness: Autistic girls should be given opportunities to share their concerns and ask for support with people they feel comfortable with. They should also have access to enjoyable times with people they value.

1.8 Significance of study

Research into inclusion of autistic girls has been recognised as a gap and a priority (Moyses & Porter, 2015a; Pellicano et al., 2014). Research investigating autism has developed over the last few years, however a majority of the research has used samples that are disproportionately male (Halladay et al., 2015). This is most likely due to the higher number of males than females receiving a diagnosis of autism, which has led to a greater understanding of autism as it typically presents in males (Cridland et al., 2014). While there is a growing body of research investigating autistic girl's experiences, teachers that work in schools are reporting limited knowledge on

how to support autistic girls (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). This is particularly important as the number of girls being diagnosed with autism is increasing (Lai et al., 2015). This research aims to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of adolescent autistic girls to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of this overlooked group.

Secondly, this research is needed, as the number of autistic people being excluded⁴ from mainstream school is on the rise (Hatton, 2018). Although children with disabilities are protected under the Equality Act (2010), with schools having to take positive action to reduce exclusions of children with disabilities, pupils with SEN account for up to seven of every ten permanent exclusions in England (DfE, 2015b). The charity Ambitious about Autism, conducted research with 500 families and reported that 23% of parents claimed their autistic child had been excluded, with 40% of these as informal exclusions⁵ (2013). Furthermore, the Department for Education (2018) found that students with autism as a primary need are over three times more likely to receive a fixed term exclusion than students without SEN. The APPGA (2017) raised concern about the high numbers of young people on the autism spectrum being excluded from school and have seen this as an indication that autistic pupils' needs are not being met. It has been reported that autistic girls experience a high level of anxiety and this poses a risk to their wellbeing (Sproston et al., 2017). A recent study documented autistic girl's experiences of being out of school, and it was reported that this negatively impacts their mental health (Moyse, 2021). Therefore, it is critical to explore autistic girls' experiences and perspectives on the facilitating factors of and the barriers to school belonging, as a means to promote school belonging and reduce the exclusion figures.

⁴ In England, exclusion from a mainstream school may be permanent or for a fixed term (excluded for up to 45 days over an academic year) and must be based on disciplinary grounds (Education Act, 2002).

⁵ In England, informal exclusion from a mainstream school may include sending a pupil home to 'cool off' (DfE, 2017a, P.10). This is unlawful even in the event that such exclusions are agreed with parents.

Thirdly, sense of belonging is proposed to be linked to wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Research shows that autistic girls are motivated to form social relationships with peers, however high rates of isolation and mental health concerns have been reported amongst autistic girls (Nichols et al., 2009). Furthermore, relationships between pupils and school staff promotes a sense of school belonging (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Neel & Fuligni, 2013). However, teachers have reported that they find it difficult to build relationships with autistic girls as they are unsure how to support their needs (Moyses & Porter, 2015b). Thus, schools need to be investing additional efforts to develop relationships with autistic girls and track autistic girls' wellbeing and provide the support required. This research is salient in providing school staff recommendations on how they can develop relationships with autistic girls and what support can be put into place to support and improve wellbeing.

Finally, research on the efficacy of mainstream school belonging and the educational experiences of autistic girls, and what can be done to improve their school outcomes, has largely included the views and opinions of teachers, TA's and parents. How adolescent autistic girls, the centre of this thesis, define school belonging and whether they feel accepted, valued and wanted in their schools, seems largely missing from the literature. In terms of autistic girls, limited studies within the small pool of research have included their views on how they have experienced mainstream school, and how these experiences could support school belonging. It is now being acknowledged that autism research both largely gains from autistic participation, and at the same time, deeply missing in it (Chown et al. 2017; Gillespie- Lynch et al. 2017; Happé & Frith 2020; Milton 2014; Milton & Bracher 2013; Nicolaidis 2012; Pellicano 2014; Pellicano et al. 2014; Pellicano & Stears 2011; Woods & Waltz 2019). In response to this, the current study includes the autism community in the research process, to varying degrees, to ensure that the autistic girls feel like this research is being done with them rather than on them.

1.9 Research aims and purpose

The purpose of the research is to address the need to better understand the lived school belonging experiences of adolescent autistic girls at mainstream schools. This study aims to provide a platform for autistic girls to share their views and personal stories. Further, this study aims to explore how autistic girls construct and define feeling a sense of belonging. This study also aims to explore what autistic girls perceive as facilitating factors of and barriers to their sense of belonging at mainstream school, and the impact on wellbeing.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter contains information about what is presently known about adolescent autistic girl's school belonging experiences (see Appendix A for literature search strategy). The chapter starts with research on belonging in schools for all CYP and the link between belonging and academic success, social relationships, wellbeing and mental health. It then focuses on school belonging for autistic girls, including friendships and social motivation for autistic girls and facilitators of feeling a sense of belonging. It also takes into account the implications of lack of belonging, such as school exclusion. Finally, it considers the impact of lack of belonging on autistic girls' wellbeing. Research that includes autistic girls are critically analysed in most detail, since there is limited research on this topic and the focus of this thesis. This literature review is an evidence review including both qualitative and quantitative studies relevant to the topic.

2.2 School belonging for children and young people

The literature suggests that school belonging is a feeling of being "personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow, 1993b, p.30). This feeling of belonging is essentially a psychological connection to a school and is necessary for learning (Blum, 2005). Pupils who report greater feelings of school belonging are more likely to be academically successful (Anderman, 2003), are more likely to have good mental health (Goodenow, 1993a) and have a greater sense of self (Jose et al., 2012). Moreover, it has been reported that promoting school belonging is positively related with the retention of pupils who are at risk for withdrawing from school (Vaz et al., 2015) and thus has notable effects on school attendance and school completion (Havik et al., 2015).

It could be argued that the need to feel a sense of belonging is particularly prominent during adolescent years, as Young People (YP) begin to explore who they are independent from their family. Goodenow (1993a) explained that adolescence is marked as a high risk time of feeling lonely and uncertain, consequently the need to belong and feel accepted in a school setting may be particularly important. Goodenow's (1993a) research explored adolescent pupils' (N=353) sense of school belonging using various questionnaires including the Student Opinion Questionnaire (Pace, 1984), the Class Belonging and Support Scale (Goodenow, 1993a) and teacher ratings of pupil's academic success. It was reported that adolescent female participants reported a higher sense of school belonging than the male participants. It was explained that this may be linked to the social expectations of females and differences in peer friendships, compared to males (Goodenow, 1993a). For example, females may be more concerned about connecting with others compared to males. Kiesner and colleagues (2002) conducted research with 295 adolescents (females= 111, males=138) and reported that adolescent girls experience greater feelings of peer group identification. Similarly, it has been reported that adolescent females are more concerned about having nurturing and caring friendships (Newman et al., 2007). It could be argued that girls have a greater desire to feel a sense of belonging, compared to males. This may be because males could have less social motivation than females and are less prone to experience the advantages of feeling a sense of belonging. Conversely, girls may be more exposed to the harmful effects of poor peer relationships, loneliness and lack of school belonging.

It is clear that feeling a sense of belonging plays a salient role in CYP's school experiences and future outcomes. However, schools need to have a good understanding of the factors that facilitate school belonging as well as the factors that inhibit school belonging, to promote belonging and wellbeing for their pupils.

2.2.1 Belonging boosts academic engagement, motivation and success

Numerous studies have reported that feeling a sense of school belonging is positively and significantly related to academic achievement (Arslan, 2019; Benner et al., 2008; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004).

Research has reported that a sense of school belonging impacts on a pupil's academic achievement through motivation and engagement in classroom lessons. Furrer and Skinner (2003) adopted a longitudinal methodology to explore what aspects of school belonging can be promoted in a primary school setting to improve academic performance and motivation. The findings revealed that school participation increased with each positive relationship to teachers and peers (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Although these results suggest that quality of relationships with teachers and peers promotes a sense of school belonging, this may be more relevant to primary school settings where pupils spend more time with teachers and are able to develop attuned relationships. This may be more difficult in secondary mainstream schools as teachers and pupils have less time together. Attuned communication is described as receiving a person's initiative at an emotional level, by reflecting awareness of the persons' emotional states (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017). Research suggests that teachers may develop an attuned relationship with pupils by listening to their experiences, adopting curious attitudes by exploring pupils' perceptions and being caring and nurturing towards pupils' experiences (John, 1996; Noddings, 2013).

Neel and Fuligni (2013) conducted a similar longitudinal study with adolescents (13-19 years old) across three schools (N=572). The authors measured school belonging and the link with academic achievement and motivation using a School Belonging measure (Tyler & DeGoey, 1995), Utility Value of School measure (Eccles et al., 1993) and pupils' academic achievement was gathered using pupil's average academic grades. These measures were repeated one year after initial data collection to determine the fluctuation in belonging. It was reported that girls' sense of school belonging decreased throughout secondary schooling and this may be due to lack of

teacher-pupil relationship. This study, however, reported average levels of belonging for females and males, and it may be that some female participants reported stable belonging experiences, which could not be captured in the averages reported. This study also reported that school belonging was associated with feelings of usefulness and school enjoyment, above and beyond academic achievement.

Similar to the aforementioned study, Zimmer-Gembeck and colleagues (2006) reported that a good student and teacher relationship improves feeling of belonging in school which in turn results in higher engagement in lessons. When students are engaged in learning, driven by school belonging, they have greater academic success (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006). It is evident that the relationship between students and teachers plays a pertinent role in engagement and academic performance. The importance of relationships in belonging is explored in the next section.

2.2.2 The importance of relationships for school belonging

A plethora of research shows the salient role school staff play in helping pupils feel a sense of connection to the school community as well as the facilitator of peer relationships in feeling belonging (e.g. Pavri & Monda-Amays, 2001; Wehman et al., 2009). Juvonen (2006) introduced a model of belonging which holds that feeling a sense of school belonging is linked with a person's relationships with teachers and peers. In line with this, Sancho and Cline (2012) conducted a small-scale qualitative study which suggested that the relationship with teachers plays a key role in feeling a sense of belonging for pupils who recently transitioned to secondary school. Similarly, Rose and Shevlin (2017) analysed longitudinal interview data collected over a period of four years in Irish schools and reported how a sense of school belonging relates to providing an inclusive school environment for pupils with SEN. The authors explained that a critical finding is the relationship between acceptance and belonging (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). The pupils who felt accepted, were provided with support from their teachers to fully participate in all aspects of school life. The sense of school belonging depended on this support and

positive relationships with adults and peers (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). While this study provides rich data, findings may not be generalizable to mainstream schools in England.

A recent study explored secondary aged pupils (N=184) perceptions of belonging in UK mainstream settings, using a mixed methodology and highlighted the salient role relationships play in school belonging (Shaw, 2019). Through semi-structured interviews with groups of pupils, it was reported that being a part of reciprocal friendship groups, having positive relationships with teachers, and school staff listening to pupil views are facilitators of belonging (Shaw, 2019). While this study offered important insights into school belonging, the group interviews means that not all pupil voices could have been heard, which entails the information shared might have been coming from those who feel more confident and comfortable to share perspectives. Furthermore, the group dynamics might have inhibited some participants sharing their views.

Building on the aforementioned research, Riley (2019) drew on two studies about school belonging to explore what school settings can do to promote feeling a sense of belonging for CYP. A key finding reported that school's which create a sense of trust between school staff and pupils facilitates the development of pupil agency and belonging. Schools play a vital role in building connections with pupils which fosters a sense of trust. When teachers trust pupils they provide them the opportunities to “construct aspects of their own lives, a key part of identity” (Riley, 2019, p.98). This helps pupils feel like they are a part of the school community and involved in the decisions that impact their lives (Riley, 2019).

Peer groups are also suggested to play an important role in the development of identity, self-concept and sense of belonging (Uslu & Gizir, 2017). This is particularly relevant during adolescence which is marked as a time of physical changes and psychological adjustment (Newman et al., 2007). Research has reported that group belonging is positively correlated with self-esteem and positive psychological adjustment (Uslu & Gizir, 2017). Furthermore, peer

rejection is linked with poor academic performance (Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990) and internalising behaviours (Coie et al., 1995). It has also been reported that YP who have poor social relationships with teachers or peers are more likely to participate in socially disruptive behaviours and risk taking behaviours such as youth offending (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). These studies report correlational findings, thus direct causal links between these variables cannot be made.

Overall it seems that schools need to promote school belonging to reduce problem behaviours and this can be done by fostering attuned relationships between pupils and staff members and peers (Battistich et al., 2000).

2.2.3 Belonging is a buffer against internalising and externalising behaviours

Prince and Hadwin (2013) reported that UK legislation has acknowledged the responsibility of schools in fostering wellbeing and mental health through the developments of programmes such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) (DfES, 2005) and Targeted Mental Health in Schools (TAMHS; DCSF, 2008). Such programmes clearly show the salient role schools have in promoting CYP's wellbeing. These initiatives are underpinned by research showing that school belonging acts as a protective factor against harmful emotional experiences and it can impact on psychological wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DfE, 2016).

A growing body of research suggests that feeling a lack of belonging in school is a predictor of externalising behaviours such as, bullying (Bond et al., 2007), suicide (Marraccini & Brier, 2017) and substance use (Bond et al., 2007; Napoli et al., 2003). A study conducted by McGraw and colleagues (2008) explored 941 adolescents' (16-19 years) perceptions of belonging to school, peer belonging and negative affect such as anxiety, depression, stress and self-harm ideations. Results revealed that perceived belongingness was negatively associated with negative affect, which remained stable over a one-year period when the measures were taken again. The authors suggested that a sense of belonging functions as a protective factor against negative

affect (Mcgraw et al., 2008). The findings also revealed that poor sense of peer belonging was the strongest predictor of depression. Similarly, Lester and colleagues (2013) reported the predictive power of school belonging to a pupil's depression and anxiety symptoms. Consequently, feeling a sense of peer belonging may act as a buffer against depression for adolescents.

Researchers have also investigated the relationship between school belonging and positive psychological adjustment. Feeling a sense of school belonging is linked with enhanced wellbeing (Sebokova et al., 2018). Van Ryzin and colleagues (2009) included a measure of hope as this construct is positively correlated with self-actualisation, wellbeing, optimism and academic success, and it is negatively correlated with anxiety and depression. The authors reported that hope (positive psychological adjustment) was significantly correlated with school belonging, including teacher related belonging and peer related belonging. These findings emphasise the important role schools have in establishing a school environment that fosters positive psychological wellbeing, specially through improving relationships with peers and teachers. However, the correlational findings are limiting as they don't provide information on the causal relationship between hope and school belonging.

2.3 School belonging for autistic girls

“The lack of conversation of girl's acts as a silent unsaid that serves to further marginalise them” (Russell & Thomson, 2011, p.294).

Autistic girls have been described as 'research orphans' (Klin, 2007, in Bazelon, 2007) as they are either being missed and not referred for a possible diagnosis or have been misdiagnosed. Since autistic girls are in the minority, this raises concern over their sense of school belonging and the implications this may have for their wellbeing.

Pesonen and colleagues (2015) reported two autistic women's lived experiences which highlighted the fundamental role social acceptance and

peer relationships played in feeling belonging during school years. The participants shared their school experiences of trying to be like others and concealing of their true self to feel a sense of belonging. As autistic adults, one of the participants described how feeling a sense of belonging in her job has increased her confidence to assert her individuality and have the agency to make choices about her own life, which made her for the first time “feel equal to other members of society” (Pesonen et al., 2015, p.82). Although this study was conducted with autistic adults living in Finland and may not be relevant to people living in England, it raises important questions about the extent to which autistic adolescent girls feel the need to hide parts of their identity as a means to feel a sense of school belonging and the impact this may have on their self-efficacy and sense of agency. The research reported below considers autistic adolescents school experiences.

2.3.1 Friendship and social motivation for autistic girls

There is a common misconception that autistic girls are not interested in making friends (Chevallier et al., 2012). However, accumulating research is suggesting that this is not necessarily the case for some autistic girls and that peer relationships are an important part of feeling a sense of school belonging. Calder and colleagues (2013) conducted interviews with twelve primary aged autistic pupils in mainstream schools and reported that some participants expressed motivation for peer relationships, while others preferred to be alone. This study only included three autistic girls, however each of these participants shared that they were motivated to socially engage with peers which could imply that peer acceptance is important. This has implications for interventions in school and the importance of considering whether autistic CYP want to socially interact with peers. However, the small number of autistic girls included means that no reliable conclusions can be made.

Tierney and colleagues (2016) using semi-structured interviews explored ten autistic adolescent girls’ social experiences and ways of coping within social contexts. The autistic girls attended mainstream schools, however one girl

was home educated and one attended a pupil referral unit. It was reported that the autistic girls expressed desire to have friends and made use of masking so as to not appear different to peers. This meant the girls' learning needs and social difficulties were not visible to mainstream staff. This may have implications on school staff recognising the girls' difficulties and need for support. Moreover, autistic girls experiencing difficulties at school usually behave in ways that don't impact on school staff, which may further reduce chances of staff helping the girls (Moyse & Porter, 2015b). The participants, in Tierney and colleagues (2016) study, reported heightened anxiety in social aspects of school, which was expressed in less obvious ways such as biting nails. It was also reported that the social school environment caused distress, with some of the girls describing "sensory overload as traumatic" (Tierney et al., 2016, p.77). This study did not explore the factors that may improve the school experiences for autistic girls, which this study aims to do and thus improve knowledge in this area.

Research conducted by Cook and colleagues (2018) interviewed 11 autistic adolescent girls from mainstream settings and special needs schools. Similar to Tierney and colleagues (2016) study it was found that many of the girls in the mainstream schools adapted their behaviours to be more like others and this caused internalisation of problems which lead to heightened anxiety and stress (Cook et al., 2018). The girls from the mainstream sample explained that this often affected their ability to cope at school and lead to absenteeism. Consequently, the need to be accepted by peers may have triggered masking behaviours which in turn caused negative feelings and may act as a barrier to feeling a sense of belonging. Interestingly, the girls from the special schools reported that they did not mask as they felt comfortable to share their autistic identity with other neurodivergent peers. The researchers suggested that future research adopt a participatory research method as a means to include all autistic girls and therefore, the current study aims to contribute to the findings of Cook and colleagues (2018).

Research has shown that autistic pupils that attend mainstream schools with specialist resource provision⁶ are more likely to feel a sense of belonging as they have “access to normal places and things” while receiving support from trusted teachers with specialist knowledge (Croydon et al., 2019, p.1).

Halsall and colleagues (2019) explored autistic adolescent girls (N=8) masking strategies who attended an autism resource base within mainstream schools, using semi-structured interviews. The authors reported that the autistic girls’ masking strategies were not sophisticated enough to support the development of friendships with mainstream pupils which resulted in isolation. However, the girls were motivated to detach themselves from the resource base as they perceived the base as a barrier to them blending in with their mainstream peers. This contributes to the evidence that some autistic girls may be motivated to form friendships and connections with peers (Calder et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2018; Tierney et al., 2016) which may be crucial in enhancing school belonging since belonging is linked with a person’s relationships with peers (Juvonen, 2006; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). Furthermore, it was reported that the autistic girls found it challenging to develop friendships in the resource base due to the combined social and communication difficulties of peers in the base (Halsall et al., 2019).

This is one of the first studies to suggest that this tension between making friends with mainstream peers and pupils in the base, reduced the autistic girls’ sense of belonging in mainstream schools (Halsall et al., 2019). While this study provides interesting insights into autistic girls’ masking behaviours, it did not explore the possible link between masking and school belonging and what could be done to facilitate belonging for autistic girls attending mainstream schools with attached resource bases. The current study contributes to these findings as it includes autistic girls attending mainstream

⁶ Specialist resource provision, or resource bases, are defined as specialist provisions attached to a mainstream school for pupils who have an EHCP. These provisions are usually specialised in a specific area of need, for example autism (DfE, 2015a)

secondary schools, including the schools that might have autism resource bases.

2.3.2. Autistic girl's perceptions of school belonging

Research into autistic girls, and into school belonging and inclusive education, has been recognised as a priority by the autism population (Pellicano et al., 2014). The ability to be present in school and participate in daily school life is a rights issue, and government legislation holds that all CYP have the right to express their views and perspectives on all issues affecting them (SEND CoP, 2014) Understanding the school belonging experiences requires listening to those that have been traditionally silenced (Milton, 2014), in this thesis the voices of autistic girls. To the researcher's knowledge, only two studies have prioritised the autistic voice and have explored the school belonging experiences of adolescent autistic girls in UK mainstream schools.

Goodall and MacKenzie (2019) conducted a qualitative study that focused entirely on the lived school experiences of two autistic girls in a mainstream school. Two girls aged 16 and 17 years were interviewed. The study used an autism advisory group (AAG) when planning the study, prioritised the girls' voices, and used participatory methods to encourage and support communication. Key findings were that the two girls felt "anxious", "isolation", "unwanted", "distressed" and "excluded" (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019, p.11).

Both girls shared their negative experiences of school relating to the teachers, peers and the school environment. In terms of the secondary school environment, daily routines like class changes were described as a difficult experience as the corridors are noisy and chaotic and this made one of the participants feel "physically, mentally and emotionally drained" (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019 p.11). Neither of the girls felt accepted or included by peers or teachers. Both girls referred to experiences of bullying which made them feel isolated and lonely. They explained that "having friends at school" was very important in feeling a sense of belonging (p.7). Similarly, Cridland and colleagues (2014) research which explored autistic adolescent girls (n=3) and

parent's (n=5) experiences using semi-structured interviews, reported that friendship was an important part of positive school experiences. The authors highlighted the complexity of social relationships for autistic girls, explaining that this impacted on the girls fitting in at school. While these findings contribute to the literature suggesting that social relationships are salient for autistic girls, the experiences documented heavily focus on parent views, thus may not be relevant to the autistic girls.

Goodall & MacKenzie (2019) also reported that relationships with teachers were an important factor that contributed to feelings of belonging. According to the girls, a good teacher is someone who listens and understands autism and the associated difficulties. This is in line with previous research investigating mainstream support for autistic pupils, which reported that autistic CYP characterised a good teacher-pupil relationship as one of understanding and acceptance of individual needs and appropriate support (Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021). A positive teacher-pupil relationship is reported to be linked with healthy wellbeing for autistic CYP (Milton & Sims, 2016) and school attendance for autistic girls (Moyse, 2021), thus is arguably a protective factor for feeling school belonging. It has been proposed that teacher's limited knowledge on autistic girls' acts as a barrier to forming relationships with autistic girls, and that mainstream teachers would benefit from an increased understanding of autistic girls' social and emotional needs (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). Limited research has explored teachers' understanding of autistic girls, however it has been suggested that their understanding of autistic boys is greater (Crindland et al., 2014).

Finally, the girls shared how they have to conceal their anxiety and isolation by leaving social spaces and school activities and they might even avoid going to school (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). This may have implications on the girls' school attendance and put them at risk of feeling a reduced sense of belonging. It is possible that when the girls are isolating themselves within the school environment or not attending school their anxiety may be further exacerbated which may impact their mental health. Moreover, if the girls are masking their feelings of loneliness or are not attending school, the likelihood

of them being recognised as struggling may be reduced and may not receive the necessary mental health support or intervention (Moyse & Porter, 2015b). In fact, Russell (2002) reported that a 15-year-old girl had been out of school for two years and was regarded by social services as not qualifying for support or assistance as she was not a drug user, involved in crime or drugs or homeless. This further highlights the saliency of enhancing school belonging as it may keep autistic girls in school, where they could access support.

According to the autistic girls, inclusion is being “treated as a person” and “feeling happy, welcome and belonging in the environment” (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019 p.15). If the girls do not feel like they belong in school, they explained this may make them be absent from school. This finding is congruent with Cook and colleagues (2018) research. Positive school experiences were not collected and the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings.

The second study explored the social experiences and sense of school belonging felt by eight adolescent autistic girls (11-18 years) in mainstream schooling (Myles et al., 2019). Qualitative methods, including semi structured interviews and focus groups, were used to consider what autistic girls, school staff and parents felt would support the girls’ social belonging in mainstream secondary schools. The authors identified facilitators of and barriers to feeling a sense of belonging. Results revealed that a sense of belonging was linked with happiness, and this was associated with friendships. The participants reported that “true friendship” is determined by “feeling comfortable and understood” by peers (Myles et al., 2019, p.15). A second factor that promoted a sense of school belonging was feeling safe and supported. The participants reported that this could be done through peer support, by “sticking together” during the busiest parts of the school day like breaktime (Myles et al., 2019, p.16). This finding, that relationships with peers facilitates belonging for autistic girls, is congruent with the literature on belonging for all CYP which suggests that peer relationships are crucial in enhancing school belonging (Juvonen, 2006).

Two main themes were identified as barriers to feeling a sense of school belonging. Firstly, the girls spoke about the difficulty of managing group situations and being “on the outside” (p.16) of social peer groups. They spoke about feeling isolated and not accepted. This peer rejection may impact on the girls’ academic performance and wellbeing, as it is evidenced in the literature on belonging for all CYP that lack of peer relationships and social isolation affects pupil’s grades and mood (Coie et al., 1995; Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990). However, it could be argued that this may severely impact autistic girls wellbeing given that they tend to internalise their feelings and experiences and mask these difficulties (Tierney et al., 2016) which puts them at social and emotional risk as the girls may appear to be coping (Moyses & Porter, 2015b). Secondly, the girls spoke about not feeling their involvement was valued by others and two participants commented that they thought others believed they were “stupid” and one participant explained that she believed her humour would “offend” and “irritate” people (p.16). This is concerning since part of Hagerty and colleagues (1992) definition of belonging is feeling valued and accepted by others. Thus, since the girls in Myles and colleagues (2019) study perceived their involvement in school was not valued or appreciated this may reduce their school belonging. The authors also reported that the sensory stimulation in mainstream settings was difficult for the girls, however did not explain the impact this had on their belonging experiences.

Overall, peer acceptance and feelings safe in school were identified as facilitators of school belonging and being on the outside and feelings devalued were recognised as barriers to feeling a sense of school belonging (Myles et al., 2019). While this study offers insightful findings into the school belonging experiences of autistic girls, the findings may not accurately represent the lived experiences of autistic girls as the participants did not have the opportunity to represent how they construct or define feeling a sense of belonging. Researchers suggest this can be done through participatory methods (Raymaker & Nicolaidis, 2013) and therefore, the current study aims to contribute to the findings of Myles and colleagues (2019).

The participants from Goodall and MacKenzie (2019) study reported that lack of feeling a sense of school belonging may make them stop attending school. There are two main ways in which CYP can be documented as missing from school, either they can be excluded or they can be absent. This will be considered in terms of autistic girls' documented experiences, which may shed light on the importance of fostering a sense of belonging in a school setting.

2.4 Excluded autistic girls

Previous studies have postulated the major issue of exclusions for autistic CYP, however the few that have focused particularly on autistic girls are considered in this section.

Goodall (2018) conducted qualitative research with twelve autistic adolescents (aged 11-17), only two of which were females. The participants were either excluded from school or were being home-schooled. Goodall (2018) reported that the participants felt misunderstood, alone and fearful in mainstream schools. Since both males and females were included in this study, it is hard to know which accounts are specifically relevant to autistic girls.

A study that focused entirely on the lived experiences of autistic girls who were missing from mainstream education, interviewed eight autistic girls (aged 11-18) and their parents about mainstream school experiences (Sproston et al., 2017). Five out of the eight girls had been excluded, two had withdrawn from school and one had experienced a failed managed move. It was reported that interviews with the participants lasted between 14-57 minutes, which suggests that shorter interviews could have been supported by different ways of communication or tools to increase the length of responses (Sproston et al., 2017).

Sproston and colleagues (2017) shared key themes of relationships, school staff understanding and the impact of the school environment, which is

congruent with previous research investigating autistic pupils' school experiences (Cridland et al., 2014; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2020). The girls spoke about how they wanted to feel a sense of belonging and explained positive experiences with teachers who invested the time in getting to know them (Spronston et al., 2017). The participants also spoke of their enjoyment of the social parts of schools, notwithstanding their experiences of isolation and bullying. The girls shared that school staff who they perceived to have negative attitudes towards them made them feel judged which inhibited their ability to participate in lessons. The authors explained that school staff attitudes played a pivotal role in the process of exclusion and it was important for staff to adopt "accepting and approachable attitudes" (p.9).

Avramidis and colleagues (2000) investigated primary and secondary mainstream teacher's attitudes (n=81) towards SEN CYP using the Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming (ORM) scale (Antonak & Larrivee, 1995). It was reported that experience working with SEN CYP and success adapting teaching strategies or intervention to include these pupils enhances teacher's confidence and competence, which positively impacts teacher's attitudes (Avramidis et al., 2000). Consequently, it might be that teachers who have experience successfully integrating autistic CYP into mainstream schools are more likely to adopt positive and accepting attitudes. However, Moyses and Porter (2015b) reported that mainstream teachers shared that they find it difficult to build relationships specifically with autistic girls as they are unsure how to support their needs. This may be linked with the dearth of knowledge and understanding of autistic girls (Humphrey & Symes, 2013) and it is possible that teacher's confidence may increase with improved understanding of how to support autistic girls, which may impact teacher's attitudes. Therefore, the current study is important as it may help raise awareness of autistic girls' school belonging experiences and support school staff to understand the facilitators and barriers to school belonging.

Spronston and colleagues (2017) also suggested that school staff can make autistic girls feel valued by listening to their views and perspectives. Research

suggests that SEN CYP have powerful insights to make about their educational experiences (Parsons et al., 2009) and that by giving them the chance to share their perspectives helps them embrace and make sense of their experiences (Valente & Danforth, 2016). This may enhance autistic girls' belonging experiences as it could make them feel listened to which is an important part of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992) and positively impact their wellbeing if necessary changes are made based on their perspectives and experiences (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2019).

Another theme discussed by Spronston and colleagues (2017) was the inappropriate sensory school environment. It was reported that mainstream schools need to consider the sensory needs of autistic pupils to enable inclusion. This study captured pupil voice which provided insightful descriptions of the girls' school experiences and highlights the importance of feeling belonging in schools.

Similar to Spronston and colleagues (2017) study, Howe and Stagg (2016) reported on autistic adolescent pupils (n= 16, 12 males and 4 females) sensory experiences in mainstream school using the Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile (Brown & Dunn, 2002) and a qualitative questionnaire. The authors reported that the overall sensory experiences impacted the pupils' listening and focus in lessons which negatively influenced their learning and motivation to attend school. The few autistic female participants mean the findings cannot be generalised and might be more relevant to autistic males' sensory experiences.

A recent study, which focused entirely on autistic girl's views, investigated autistic girl's (n=10) experiences and why they were missing from mainstream school (Moyse, 2021). This study adopted a participatory approach and used semi-structured interviews to explore the girls' school experiences. The autistic girls documented that their differences are not always accepted and their voices are not always heard in mainstream schools. As a result, adjustments are not made to facilitate a sense of school belonging, which negatively impacts on their self-efficacy and this is linked with anxiety,

depression and exhaustion. Moyse (2021) reported that this depletion contributed to absenteeism, and eventually, a withdrawal from school, “which was a rejection of the environment, not a rejection of learning” (P.174). This further highlights Sproston and colleagues (2017) findings of the importance of listening to their girls’ perspectives and acting on making the necessary adaptations to promote belonging and inclusive practices. Some participants reported that being out of school impacts on their mental health and they spoke about how they wish schools would “prioritise their wellbeing over the grades they achieved” (p.173). This is in accord with Maslow’s (1987) hierarchy of needs, which suggests that people first need to feel a sense of belongingness, safety and self-esteem before they can learn.

The limitation of this study was that it only included eight participants and used case studies to examine the girls’ experiences, which limits the generalisation of the findings. The contribution of this research is that the autistic girls described that they wanted to be in a school setting, however the secondary school environments and ethos had a severely negative impact on their mental health. This clearly shows the importance of promoting a sense of wellbeing in school and the damaging implications on wellbeing and mental health when schools fail to foster a sense of belonging.

2.5 Impact of lack of belonging on autistic girls wellbeing

Research documents that autistic girls’ high motivation for friendships coupled with the increased complexity of social relationships during adolescence (Cook et al., 2017; Sedgewick et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2012) and wanting to belong are exhausting and have negative repercussions for the girls’ wellbeing (Bargiela et al., 2016). The transition to secondary school for autistic girls has been reported to be especially challenging and underpinning the start of a decline in mental health and the need for external professionals to become involved (Tierney, 2014). Mainstream school environments present a tremendous amount of pressure for autistic girls. The literature review depicts the sensory challenges the girls experience (Howe & Stagg, 2016; Myles et al., 2019; Sproston et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016), which arguably

could be more difficult to manage in secondary school environments which may be larger and include more transitions throughout the school day compared to primary school. Moreover, it is evident that the girls experience immense isolation and peer rejection at school, which evokes anxiety and distress (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019). Tierney and colleagues (2016) reported that some of the girls used self-harm as a way to manage feelings of rejection and loneliness.

It is clear then that autistic girls are at social and emotional risk. Autistic girls have postulated that if they felt accepted, valued and supported by mainstream school settings they would feel a sense of belonging (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019) and may be at less risk for experiencing adverse psychological difficulties, since it is clear that a sense of belonging is a protective factor for wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DfE, 2016). This should be considered with urgency as research is showing that autistic girls without intellectual disability are reported to experience depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts and eating disorders (Beck et al., 2020; Camm-Crosbie et al., 2018; Cassidy et al., 2018; Cassidy et al., 2020), and this has been linked with wanting to 'fit in' at school (Bargiela et al., 2016).

2.6 The EP role

A recent study surveyed EPs inquiring about their role and documented that 30% of their total work included working with autistic pupils (Robinson et al., 2018). EPs have knowledge on child development and how this relates to various systems around the child (Ashton & Roberts, 2006). The literature review emphasises the barriers to the mainstream school environment for autistic girls which is worsened by the lack of knowledge or understanding on how to support. The small amount of research on autistic girls' school belonging experiences in a mainstream secondary school environment suggests that although the girls want to fit in by having friends and feeling included in school activities, they are often left completely and isolated. Research has also documented the negative impact of trying to belong on wellbeing, including exhaustion, anxiety, depression and challenges to

identity. These wellbeing consequences are further impacted by school staff not recognising these behaviours thus not offering appropriate support. There is limited research exploring autistic adolescent girls' constructs of school belonging in mainstream school settings. By exploring what belonging means to autistic girls, professionals such as EPs can support schools in understanding how to enhance belonging and remove barriers to feeling a sense of belonging. This informed understanding of belonging for autistic girls will enable EPs to raise awareness and will inform suggested provision and intervention.

The recent SEND Green Paper Review (2022) recognises that although CYP with SEND were at risk for suffering with mental health difficulties, these pupils are not receiving the necessary access to support. EPs have a salient role in providing this support at an individual level, systemic level and strategic level. Developing a richer understanding of autistic girls' school belonging experiences within mainstream schools, including the facilitators and barriers to belonging, is vital to support EPs to recognise impact on autistic girls' learning and wellbeing.

2.7 Research Questions

- Research Question 1: How do adolescent autistic girls define a sense of belonging at school?
- Research Question 2: What do adolescent autistic girls feel are the facilitators and barriers to school belonging in mainstream secondary school, and the impact on wellbeing?

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with information about the rationale for the epistemological position of this research and clarifies the reasons underpinning the research methods chosen. Next, the research design is discussed followed by details about the participants. Then, the materials used in the study are described before outlining the procedure of the study which includes the data collection procedure, pilot study and general procedure. Following this, data analysis used in the research is explained. Trustworthiness of the study is discussed before considering the ethical concerns around the inclusion of autistic adolescents in the research.

3.2 Research Paradigm and Research design

Research paradigm refers to the assumptions and notions that guide thinking and research (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). The paradigm that researchers adopt provides insight into the way they perceive the world (Cohen et al., 2000). Moreover, the research paradigm is important to establish as it provides an understanding of the focus, expectation and the motivation behind the research design and methods of data collection selected (McKenzie & Knipe, 2006).

3.2.1 Research paradigm

The epistemological position of this research is constructivism. This research paradigm argues that “people construct their understanding of the world rather than encountering those meanings passively” (Swain, 2016, p. 62). Consequently, various realities exist that are based on people’s narratives (Dean & Rhodes, 1998). The researchers adopting this paradigm do not use theories to understand ideas, but rather establish an understanding of the situation throughout the research process (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). According to the constructivism paradigm, individual stories and meanings of

those stories are developed through social participation with others and personal experiences, which shape or construct reality (Swain, 2016). Researchers adopting this paradigm value unique perspectives as this ensures a multifaceted understanding of a phenomena, thus the intention is to collect diverse and rich qualitative data (Burr, 1995). Consequently, individual's subjective experiences and their interpretations underpin the researchers understanding of phenomena (Creswell, 2002). The constructivism paradigm acknowledges that the researcher may bring personal experiences and values to the research, and that methods allow questioning of research conclusions.

Constructivism has been criticised for poor reliability and generalisability and as a result findings may be considered as complementary to quantitative data (Trainor & Graue, 2014). Cohen and colleagues (2000) have also expressed worry over the accuracy of information captured using qualitative methods. For example, there is concern over participant's accuracy of knowledge as they may not recall information correctly or may not tell the whole truth. Furthermore, researchers adopting a constructivism approach have been criticised for inevitably being biased and may misunderstand qualitative accounts which could lead to inaccurate findings (Cohen et al., 2000). However, this study aimed to include autistic people in the research process partly to ensure the researcher accurately understood the participant's narratives (see section 3.2.2.2)

Taking a constructivist approach allows an explicit focus on the lived experiences and voices of autistic girls, and thus is appropriate for research with overlooked groups. A constructivist paradigm is also in line with the lifeworld-led framework of this study (see section 1.7) as it allows this research to consider the similarities and differences in feeling a sense of belonging in school.

3.2.2 Research Design

3.2.2.1. A qualitative design

A central aim of this thesis is to provide a means to hear the voices of autistic girls. A qualitative methodology allows this to occur and ensures rich information regarding the autistic girl's views could be gathered. This is because qualitative research does not "assume there is only one correct version of reality or knowledge" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, P. 6). Qualitative research design relates to the constructivist approach as it allows researchers to explore participant's personal experiences. A qualitative design also fits well within the lifeworld-led framework as researchers are able to explore the meaning that participants give to their experiences by adopting this approach.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain the views and perspectives of autistic girls. Research shows that semi-structured interviews can be utilised to gain first person views of individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This is important given the dearth of research including autistic people's voices and exploring the lived school belonging experiences of autistic girls.

A qualitative methodology has been successfully used with autistic YP, ensuring they had opportunities to engage in a meaningful way in the research process by helping them articulate their voices in a way that feels comfortable for them (e.g. Cridland et al., 2014; Tierney et al., 2016).

3.2.2.2 Inclusion of the autistic community

There is an urgent need to provide the autism community a voice (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Milton & Bracher, 2013; Pellicano et al., 2014). Majority of the research investigating autism has failed to include autistic people in the research process of organising and developing constructs and knowledge. This has resulted in the disempowerment of autistic people in salient decisions that influence their lives (Milton, 2014).

According to Hart (1992), participation is a right of each individual, and this links to the SEND CoP (DfE, 2014) which reported that each person with SEN has the fundamental right to be included in any decisions made about the provision provided in their educational setting. Research has reported that including autistic people in the research process has contributed to understanding about the importance of making provision more suitable to a pupil's strengths and needs (Bolic Baric et al., 2016). Involving autistic people in research also allows them to provide their understanding by sharing their lived experiences, which increases the chances of the findings being translated into practice (Tandon, 1981). Consequently, it distinguishes itself by carrying out research with autistic people rather than on them (Oliver, 1997). As Cook (2012) correctly postulated, participants hold the valid knowledge of their unique experiences and it is only by including them in the research process that effective change can take place.

A participatory approach is therefore needed to challenge conventional research and establish conclusions on what is already thought to be reliable knowledge (Raymaker & Nicolaidis, 2013). An important principle of participatory research is recognising how power imbalances between the researcher and participant are undermining the group participating in the research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). Arnstein (1969) suggested using the "ladder of participation" to consider the different types of participation (cited in Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019, p. 943). This ranges from no power, to having some involvement through consultation, to having full involvement such as through co-production of the research.

In line with the aim to include autistic people in the research process, this study involved the autistic community in various ways. This research used an AAG which consisted of one autistic adult and one autistic adolescent. The AAG provided consultation for pre-study considerations, by making suggestions with regards to the information sheets, consent forms and the interview schedule (Harrington et al., 2014). They provided input into the methods used to collect data and recommended ways to reduce anxiety (Chown et al. 2017). The AAG also gave consultation for data analysis as

they checked final themes and sub-themes, providing advice on ambiguities (see Appendix B for AAG consultation notes).

This study also ensured that participants had the opportunity to participate in the research process. Each participant was invited to create a personalised activity that depicts their unique belonging experiences (see section 3.4.1 For details). This was done to ensure they had the opportunity and agency to share their constructs of belonging. Participants were also involved in the data analysis process as they were asked to comment on codes and emerging themes. This methodology of returning analysed data to participants is known as member checking and is used to “validate, verify or assess the trustworthiness of qualitative results” (Birt et al., 2016, p.3). This is important in qualitative research as the researcher collects the data and conducts data analysis, thus giving the potential for researcher bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Moreover, qualitative researchers could inflict their own beliefs on the research stages which may lead to the researcher’s views dominating that of the participants (Mason, 2017). Thus by including the participants in checking the results, the research bias may be reduced.

Including participants in data analysis is a somewhat new method (Dockett et al., 2009). The rationale underpinning the involvement of participants in the data analysis process is to ensure data are accurate (Dockett et al., 2009) and in line with the ethical duty of the researcher to ask for continuous consent from participants (Van den Hoonaard, 2002). The advantages of including participants in data analysis include providing them the chance to reflect on their interview answers and collaboratively produce emerging themes (Dockett et al., 2009). Moreover, some participants may see the value of research and find their involvement cathartic (Dockett et al., 2009).

3.3 Participants

The sampling methods used were purposive for data collection. The participant selection criteria included; aged between 12 and 18 years, born

female⁷, clinically diagnosed as autistic by a certified professional and enrolled at a mainstream secondary school in England.

A study conducted by Mogensen (2010) reported that larger sample sizes are often linked with the researcher's connections. While some studies have recruited up to eight participants (e.g. Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019), other studies have included up to 60 participants (e.g. Calder et al., 2013; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). This study managed to recruit 18 participants. The average age of the participants was 15 years old (SD= 1.98).

This study considered data saturation, which can be reached when no new data will provide new insights (Bryman, 2016) and the sample size varies according to the scope of the study. While Guest and colleagues (2006) reported that data saturation may be reached by as few as six interviews, a more recent study suggested that 12 should be an adequate sample size to produce codes for thematic analysis (Ando et al., 2014).

This study used thematic analysis to analyse the data (see section 3.6 for details) and initially planned to recruit a minimum of 12 and maximum of 20 participants. This decision is justified by the aforementioned research suggesting that 12 interviews is sufficient for thematic analysis (Ando et al., 2014). Furthermore, this study aimed to capture autistic girls' meaningfulness of school belonging experiences by identifying patterns of meaning across participants, which also underpins the decision to recruit between 12 and 20 participants. Given the time restraints to complete the thesis on the doctorate, it was decided that up to 20 interviews were realistic. Although this study did not recruit 20 participants, it could be argued that a depth of experiences could be captured across 18 participants, by identifying patterns of meaning in

⁷ All eighteen participants were female at birth. Participants, however, did not have to identify as female to participate in this study. This is in recognition of recent research reporting that autistic people are more likely than people with the predominant neurotype to identify as non-binary gender (Strang et al., 2020). The descriptions 'girl' or 'female' are used throughout the research, except for specific references to the participants identifying as male or gender-fluid.

the data.

Details of the participants are documented in Table 1. It is important to note that the girls selected a pseudonym to protect their identity. All of the girls were self-identified as cognitively able. As reported in the table, the majority of the participants were White British, with only one Black British participant. Furthermore, all of the participants, except for two girls', were from middle class backgrounds. Although the diversity of participants was not directly sought, it was hoped that the recruitment process through various social media platforms would provide opportunities for a wide range of people living in England to consider participating in the research. While the diversity of the sample was not achieved, it was believed that the sample was big enough to provide a wide range of experiences. Finally, although all of the autistic girls attended a mainstream secondary school, two of the girls attended a mainstream school with an attached autism resource base⁸. Both of the girls integrated into the mainstream for lessons and unstructured social routines, however the levels of integration differed between the two girls.

⁸ The Department for Education (2019) reported that 1045 primary mainstream schools have autism resource bases and 640 secondary mainstream schools have autism resource bases throughout England. Since fewer girls are being diagnosed with autism compared to boys, researchers have reported difficulty recruiting autistic girls (Watkins et al., 2014). Further, given the high number of mainstream schools that have autism resource bases, autistic girls may attend these schools. Thus, to give all autistic girls that may attend mainstream secondary schools the opportunity to share their views, the schools that have resources bases were included in this study.

Table 1. Participant details

Pseudonym	Pronoun	School type and year group	Age in years	Ethnicity	Family socioeconomic status
Ella	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 11	16	White British	Middle
Issac	He/him	Mainstream school, Year 12	16	White British	Middle
Zoe	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 8	12	White British	Middle
Atlas	They/them	Mainstream school, Year 9	13	White British	Middle
Zena	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 10	14	White British	Middle
Rose	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 11	15	White British	Middle
Mia	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 12	17	White British	Middle
Jade	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 12	17	White British	Middle
Addie	She/her	Mainstream school with autism resource base, Year 12	16	White British	Middle
Vera	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 11	15	White British	Middle
Candice	They/them	Mainstream school, Year 9	13	White British	Middle
Mimi	She/her	Mainstream school with autism resource base, Year 12	16	White British	Middle
Angel	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 13	18	Black British	Middle
Kitsune	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 8	12	White British	Middle
Sadie	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 8	12	White British	Middle
Luna	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 9	13	White British	Lower
Alice	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 8	12	White British	Lower
Ava	She/her	Mainstream school, Year 11	15	White British	Middle

3.4 Materials

3.4.1 Semi-structured interview and personalised activities

Semi-structured interviews were used to engage in two-way communication to explore autistic girl's constructs, beliefs and experiences. An interview schedule was created with the aim to illuminate autistic girl's voices in a non-judgemental and curious manner (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2019). This was done by ensuring that the conversation was directed by participants, with prompting questions used when more information was needed. While some questions explored participants' constructs of belonging and implications on wellbeing, other questions were based on themes of belonging highlighted in the literature. To facilitate the discussion on belonging this study used the 'circle of belonging' activity adopted in Myles and colleagues research (2019). This consisted of concentric circles, where the inner circle reflected the highest level of belonging and the outer circle reflected the lowest level of belonging. Participants were asked to select where they fitted within the circle of belonging, in relation to others (see Appendix C for interview schedule)

Losh and Capps (2006) postulated that it may be difficult for CYP to express views on emotionally complex matters especially under limited time, with an unacquainted person, in an unknown environment and unknown interview questions. To address these issues, this research provided the participants choices for ways of participating, making the methodology accessible to autistic girls. Participants were given the option to construct a personalised activity that represented their belonging experiences. The following activity ideas were provided; photos, drawings, collages, models using clay or Lego, and stories or poems. The personalised activities were designed to scaffold interview responses so that the participants have the chance to respond within their level of comfort. Each participant was given the choice to respond to the interview questions using preferred means. This way I could initiate topics that are relevant to their experiences of school belonging. This type of approach provides autistic people with agency to select what methods are right for them (Parsons et al., 2020), have the opportunity to share their

constructs (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2019) and empowers them to share their identities and stories (Benford & Standen, 2009).

The SHoWED Protocol (See table 2) was used for the personalised activities. The SHoWED Protocol is a well-established Photovoice technique (Catalani & Minkler, 2010), which is used to contextualise participants' personal photo narratives. The adapted version of the SHoWED Protocol from Pavlopoulou's (2020) research was used in this study. This was used to guide the discussion and ensure consistent questions were asked across all participants. This is in line with the constructivism paradigm of this research as the researcher and participants worked together to construct meaning during the interview. The purpose of using these questioning techniques is to co-construct knowledge of the participants' activities and unpick the meaning of the activities in relation to the girls' experiences (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Table 2. SHoWED Protocol

S	What do you See happening here?
H	What is actually Happening here?
O	How does this relate to Our lives?
W	Why does this barrier/facilitator exist?
E	How could this activity Educate others about autistic girl's school belonging experiences?
D	What can we Do about it?

Following the semi-structured interview, participants were invited to share their personalised activity either by holding it up to the screen or emailing a copy (please see section 3.5.3. for details). Once I received the activity I used the SHoWED Protocol to guide the discussion and co-construct the meaning of the activity. This was important as photos and drawings do not mean anything without the interpretation of the CYP (Pavlopoulou, 2020). For example, if a participant drew a picture for the personalised activity I asked them the following questions:

- What do I see happening in this drawing? This allowed me to understand what was drawn from the participant's perspective.
- What is actually (or really) happening in this drawing? This question allows the participant to share the underpinning events or experiences drawn, that may not be immediately evident in the drawing.
- How does this drawing relate to your life? This helped me understand how the drawing uniquely relates to the participant's personal journey and school experiences.
- Why do these barriers and/or facilitators exist? This question is linked to research question two (see section 2.7) and provides the opportunity to co-construct understanding of meaning the participant may attach to barriers and/or facilitators identified in the drawing.
- How could this drawing educate others about autistic girl's school belonging experiences? This question provides the participant the agency to share views on how they think the drawing can raise awareness about their school belonging experiences.
- What can we do about it? This question allows the participant to share their thoughts about what they think can be done to enhance belonging in light of what they drew.

3.4.2. Background measures

Quantitative background measures were used to provide a clearer picture of the individual presentation of the sample. Since the presentation of autism varies significantly between each person (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), it was salient to explore all participants' background belonging and emotional and behavioural data so that readers know that the experiences described in the results are more probable to occur in autistic YP with similar characteristics. This data was analysed concurrently with the qualitative data (see section 5.5.2. for limitations on this).

Two measures were used to gain a clearer picture of participants belonging experiences and wellbeing. The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Questionnaire (Goodenow, 1993b) was chosen to characterise the

girls' belonging experiences. The Me and My School (M&MS) measure (Deighton et al., 2013) was used to characterise the girls current emotional and behavioural difficulties (see Appendix D for information on each measure). Table 3 presents the girls' scores across these scales.

Table 3. Pupil scores on background measures

Name	PSSM				M&MS		
	Sense of belonging	Participation in school	Perception of fitting in among peers	Generalised connection to teacher	Emotional difficulties	Behavioural difficulties	Total
Ella	3.2*	2.5	3.8	3.3	8	3	11
Issac	2.4*	2.7	2.4	2.1	14***	2	16
Zoe	2.6*	2.2	2.2	3.6	13***	5	18
Atlas	3.4*	3.0	3.4	3.7	12***	1	13
Zena	2.2*	2.0	1.6	3.0	17***	8*****	25
Rose	2.0*	1.7	1.6	2.9	15***	3	18
Mia	2.8*	2.3	3.0	3.0	15***	2	17
Jade	3.0*	2.8	2.8	3.4	10**	2	12
Addie	4.1	4.2	3.8	4.3	6	1	7
Vera	1.8*	1.5	1.4	2.6	15***	8*****	23
Candice	2.7*	2.3	2.0	3.9	16***	3	19
Mimi	3.0*	2.5	3.2	3.3	13***	0	13
Angel	2.1*	1.7	1.8	2.7	18***	8*****	26
Kitsune	2.3*	2.2	1.8	2.9	7	2	9
Sadie	2.3*	1.8	1.8	3.3	15***	4	19
Luna	2.3*	1.7	1.8	3.6	14***	2	16
Alice	2.4*	2.0	2.2	2.9	15***	8*****	23
Ava	2.2*	2.3	1.8	2.6	13***	4	17
Mean	2.60	2.30	2.36	3.16	13.11	3.67	16.78
SD	0.56	0.63	0.78	0.53	3.36	2.66	5.34
Range	1.8-4.1	1.5-4.2	1.4-3.8	2.1-4.3	6-18	0-8	7-26

Notes:
 Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) (Goodenow, 1993b)
 *below 3.84 negative sense of belonging
 The Me and My School (M&MS) (Deighton et al., 2013)
 **10-11 borderline emotional difficulties
 ***12 and above clinical emotional difficulties
 ****6 borderline behavioural difficulties
 *****7 and above high risk for behavioural difficulties

The mean for the PSSM scale across all participants was 2.60 (SD=0.56), compared to 3.84 (SD=0.72) in Goodenow's (1993b) original research. This suggests that the girls are at risk for experiencing poor sense of school belonging, which is unsurprising given the negative school experiences documented by adolescent autistic girls (Goodall & MacKenzie; Moyse, 2021; Sproston et al., 2017). It is interesting to note that the highest overall score in the PSSM scale was the *Generalised Connection to Teacher* sub-test (M=3.16) which may suggest girls in this study feel a greater connection to

their teachers than they do to peers (M=2.36) or their school community (M=2.30).

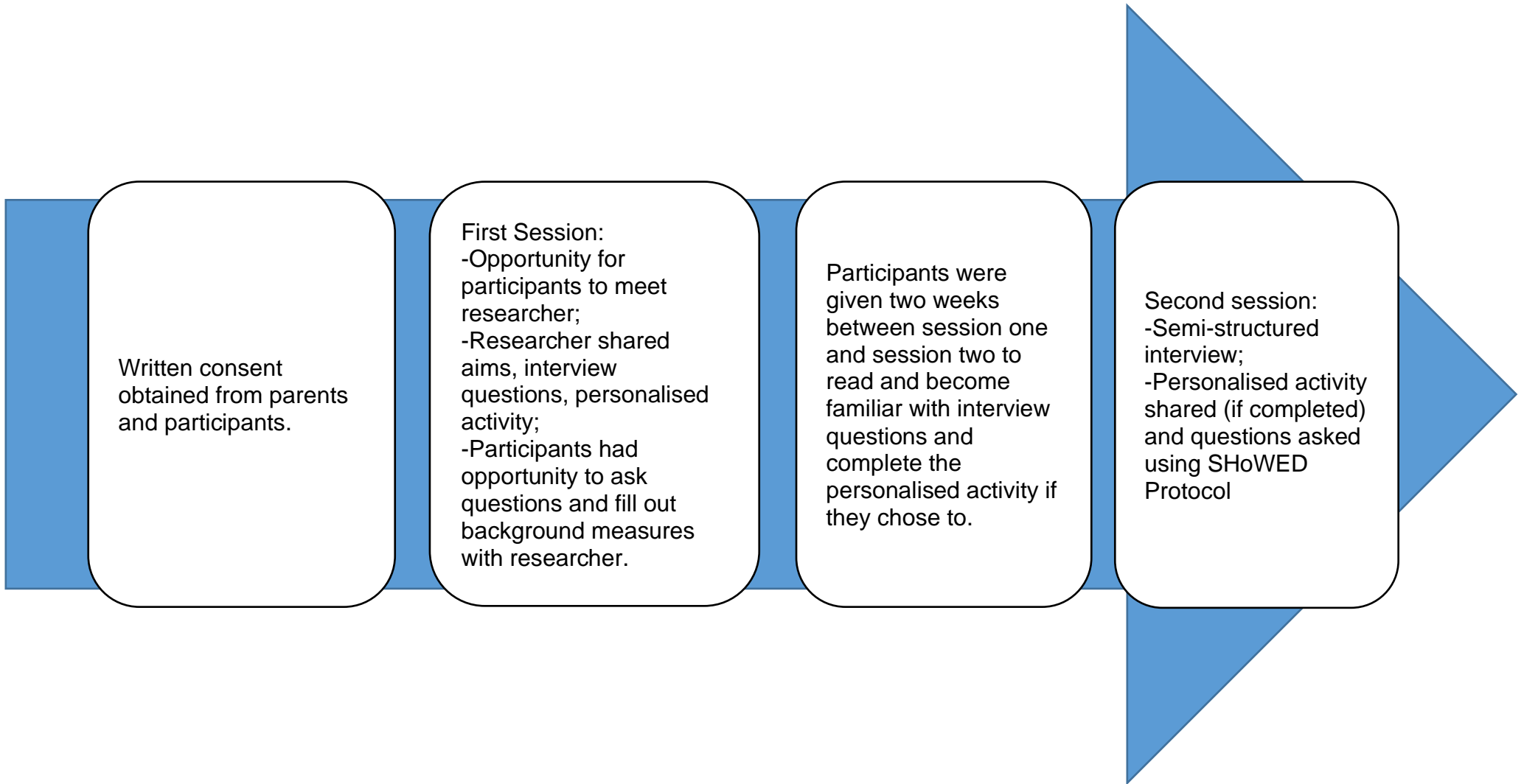
The girls rated their emotional and behavioural difficulties on the M&MS measure (Deighton et al., 2013) across two sub-scales. According to the data fifteen girls obtained scores above the suggested cut-off score of 10 and above, which suggests emotional difficulties. In terms of behavioural difficulties, only four participants obtained scores above the suggested cut-off score of 7 and above, indicative of behavioural difficulties. Overall, this data suggests that the girls in this study exhibit more emotional difficulties, which Deighton and colleagues (2013) describe may indicate tendency to direct negative feelings inwards which may result in worry or low mood, rather than behavioural difficulties such as directing negative feelings outwards through aggression. This is consistent with the research suggesting that autistic girls tend to internalise their feelings (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Solomon et al., 2012).

3.5 Procedure

3.5.1 Data collection

Data collection was planned around two individual sessions per participant (see Figure 1). The purpose of the first session was to give the participants an opportunity to meet the researcher, explain the data collection process including what to expect from the interview and they were given an option of completing a personalised activity. During the first session participants were also given the choice to complete the background measures with the researcher or they could complete these in their own time. In the second session, the semi-structured interviews were conducted and if participants completed the personalised activity these were shared (refer to general procedure for details of the sessions).

Figure 1: Data collection



3.5.2 Piloting

Before data collection began, the study was piloted to ensure the feasibility of the methodology and to make necessary amendments before the start of data collection (Robson, 2002). A pilot study was conducted with one 14-year-old autistic girl, who attended a mainstream secondary school in London. I met with the participant on two occasions via Zoom; during the first session the research aims, interview questions, background measures and personalised activity were discussed. The participant was given two weeks to familiarise herself with the interview questions and complete the personalised activity. During the second session the semi-structured interview was conducted and questions using the SHoWED Protocol were used to explore the meaning of the participants' personalised activity. After the pilot interview, the participant was asked whether any questions were ambiguous and should be amended (see Appendix E for amendments to the interview schedule).

3.5.3 General procedure

This study was approved by the ethics committee at the UCL Institute of Education (see Appendix F). Following ethical approval, a poster to advertise the research was posted on social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook and sent to autism charities (see Appendix G). 22 people showed interest in the study and requested further information, which was sent out with information sheets (see Appendix H) and consent forms (see Appendix I) for both parents and young people to sign and return via email. Of the participants who did, 18 parents and 19 young people returned consent forms. The one participant for whom parents did not return a consent form were withdrawn from the study. A final sample of 18 participants participated in the research.

Previous research has rarely included autistic CYP voices in the research process due to communication and interaction differences (Preece & Jordan, 2010). While this has been used as a possible reason for why it is difficult to include autistic people's views in research, it is possible to modify the

interview techniques to allow autistic CYP to participate in research (Lewis & Porter, 2007). This research achieved this by providing participants options of the interview location, although due to covid-19 restrictions it was suggested the interviews be held virtually. Müller and colleagues (2008) explained that virtual communication helps control the environment which may prevent sensory overload and it allows for social distancing which may limit the social exhaustion of face-to-face interaction. Online methods also limit non-verbal communications, such as facial expressions and body language, which may decrease any concern participants may have over the signals their body language may be sending (Benford & Standen, 2009; Harrington, 2014).

This thesis made accommodations to ensure autistic girls were involved in the research process and had the opportunity to share their views and experiences in a way that felt safe and comfortable. The researcher met virtually with participants on two separate occasions. Each participant received a visual diagram providing details on each session (see Appendix J). Participants were provided with the option of having video on or off during both sessions and having a parent or family member to join them during the sessions. Participants were also given the choice of answering interview questions by typing their answers in the chat function on Zoom or emailing their answers to the researcher. However, none of the participants used this means of communicating.

The first session, which lasted between 20 minutes and 42 minutes (mean= 31 minutes), provided an opportunity for the researcher and participants to begin building rapport. This was important in ensuring the participants felt comfortable with the researcher and the research process. A script was developed to ensure consistent information was provided to all participants which mostly included an introduction of the researcher, information on the general aim of the study and procedure of the study (see Appendix K). During this session, participants were given the option to construct a personalised activity that represented their belonging experiences. At the end of the first session I emailed each participant the interview schedule. The benefits include, being able to read and think about answers before the interview and it

was hoped this would address autistic girl's perfectionistic tendencies (Benford & Standen, 2009; Chown et al., 2015) and allow time to process information and respond in a less spontaneous way (Nichols et al., 2009). Congruent with previous research using similar methods (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2019), participants had two weeks to go through the interview schedule and create the personalised activity if chosen. Participants were also asked to fill out the questionnaire and were offered the choice to do this together in session one or in their own time.

The second session included the semi-structured interview and participants were invited to share the activity, if they completed it. The interviews were held virtually on Zoom with the option of videos on or off and lasted between 44 minutes to one hour and ten minutes (mean=62 minutes). If the participants chose to complete a personalised activity, they were asked to either share it on the screen or send it via email. The SHoWED Protocol was used to guide the discussion and ensure consistent questions were asked across all participants (see Appendix L for example of SHoWED protocol used in an interview). All the interviews were recorded to ensure accurate transcription. At the end of the second session, the participants received a post interview poster (see Appendix M) which included signposting information for mental health and wellbeing support.

3.6 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data due to its reflexive yet systematic approach for analysing data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase process: familiarise yourself with the data: generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define and name themes, produce the report.

Through individual experiences, this study aimed to capture patterns of meaning among autistic girls' mainstream school experiences through common themes and understanding. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was considered to capture these experiences, however in

supervision with the supervisors its idiographic nature of exploring an individual's unique experiences (Smith et al., 2009) was not consistent with the research aims or questions. Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which can be used to explore common patterns, meaning and themes, and to maintain consistency with previous studies with similar methodologies (e.g. Mosquera et al., 2021; Pavlopoulou et al., 2022), was felt to be the most appropriate method to analyse the data.

Thematic analysis was selected as it allows researchers to focus on participant's perspectives and how they experience and interpret the world around them. This is in line with the constructivist position of this thesis which holds that individuals bring their own experiences and perspectives. Consequently, thematic analysis is appropriate for exploratory research with under-researched populations whose voices are often underrepresented in the literature, such as autistic girls.

Braun and Clarke (2013) discuss the importance of researchers being aware of their involvement in the research, including the importance of recognising how the researcher's unique experiences and ways of making sense of the world may influence data analysis. Therefore, I acknowledge that the identified themes may be influenced by my own experiences. However, in order to ensure that the codes and sub-themes identified correctly captured the autistic girl's perspectives and stories, I sent a coded transcript to each participant and asked them to comment on the analysis. Moreover, once I had incorporated participant's responses into the data set I consulted with the AAG on the final themes and sub-themes. It is also possible that the identified themes, sub-themes and codes could have been interpreted in a different way if analysed by a different researcher (see Table 4. For details of the phases of thematic analysis)

Table 4. Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Phase	Description of researcher process	Description of participant/ advisory group process
1.Familiarise yourself with the data	The interviews were transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document, with a focus to retain the original words. All transcripts were reviewed numerous times to ensure accurate understanding and to become familiar with the data (see Appendix N for an example of a transcript)	
2.Generate initial codes	Each transcript was printed. I read and coded five transcripts. I coded all data, line by line with the aim of anything related to the research aims (Creswell, 2014) (see Appendix O for an example of a coded transcript). My supervisor coded the same five transcripts to check initial codes and ensure accuracy. On the basis of this I independently coded a further thirteen transcripts. 41 codes were generated across the whole dataset (see Appendix P for initial bank of codes).	
3.Search for themes	Codes were reassessed and reduced by combining similar codes and deleting codes not relevant to the research questions. Then the transcripts were re-read, looking for further relationships between codes (see Appendix Q for final codes and quotes across	The participants checked codes and sub-themes, suggesting alternative or additional codes as required (see

	participants). Finally, I began looking for broader patterns which formed themes. Coloured post-it notes on a poster facilitated the process.	Appendix R for an example)
4. Review themes	All themes were checked and reworked using mind-maps and post-it notes. All data were re-read to ensure the themes represented all the data collected. This was reviewed by both supervisors. (see Appendix S for final themes, sub-themes and codes)	The AAG reviewed themes.
5. Define and name themes	Final themes determined. The relationship between themes was hierarchical and occurred at two levels; themes and sub-themes (see Appendix T)	
6. Produce the report	Final analysis written using extracts from data collected and linking this to the research questions and the literature review	

Data from the semi-structured interviews and personalised activities was analysed inductively, which means coding was data driven rather than attempting to fit into a pre-determined coding frame. This is congruent with the constructivist paradigm, which holds that people construct knowledge and meaning. Since this research is interested in exploring school belonging autistic girls' perspectives the research questions were broad. This meant the transcripts were analysed line by line and initial codes were developed from the data related to the research questions.

An example of the data analysis process, including coding of data, emerging themes, review of themes and final themes and sub-themes is shown in table five below.

Table 5. Example of data analysis

Quote	Initial code	Emerging theme	Review of theme	Final theme
<p>“I think one of the things I find jarring is the way dyslexia is spoken about versus how autism is spoken about because a girl in my science class has dyslexia and the PowerPoint was changed for her and she is allowed to write on pink paper and I think it’s so jarring that she is allowed that and it wouldn’t be mistaken for she is a strange person. But for me if people knew I was autistic they would automatically think I am strange cause of the stigma around autism”</p>	<p>Stigma</p> <p>Attitudes</p> <p>Lack of Support</p> <p>No</p> <p>Under- standing of autism</p>	<p>Lack of under- standing of autism</p> <p>leads to lack of acceptance and lack of appropriate support</p>	<p>Stigmas and lack of under- standing undermine autism</p>	<p>Stigma and attitudes challenge autistic self</p>

3.7. Trustworthiness

As this research adopted a qualitative approach, it is not possible to analyse its trustworthiness using reliability and validity principles (Robson, 2011). Yardley (2000) proposed four principles to use when evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance.

3.7.1 Sensitivity to context

This research explored (see Chapter 2) the research on school belonging experiences for all CYP, with a focus on the literature documenting autistic girls' school belonging experiences in mainstream settings. The literature review also included the wellbeing and mental health implications of lack of belonging for autistic girls. Yardley (2015) highlights that this is an important aspect of being sensitive to context. The literature review showed a gap of prioritising autistic girls' voices and including participation in the research process as a means to provide a platform for autistic girls to share their perspectives. Subsequently, this underpinned the development of the research rationale and methodology.

Yardley (2015), highlights the importance of acknowledging the socio-cultural context of the research. In chapter 1 the legislations relevant to autistic people were explored as well as the evolving constructs of autism.

Finally, Yardley discusses the need to acknowledge the relationship between the researcher and participants. In Chapter 1 I spoke about my interest in the topic and my previous role working with autistic CYP. During the first session of the data collection, I shared this information with the autistic girls as a means to build rapport and help them feel comfortable.

3.7.2 Commitment and rigour

Yardley (2015) explains that it is important for the researcher to show commitment to the topic and that an in-depth data collection and data analysis is completed. As explained in Chapter 1, I had experience of supporting autistic CYP in schools as a TA, ABA tutor and as a TEP. As a TEP I have also worked closely with autistic girls at an individual level and I have completed research for the LA at an organisational level. In terms of rigour, data was collected via social media and reached participants from different parts of the country from a broad range of school contexts to allow for a diverse representation of autistic girl's experiences. Participants were provided the opportunity to share thoughts and views on the data analysis to ensure the codes and themes accurately represented their stories. It has been

argued that member checking enhances rigour in qualitative research, as it “ensures that the participants’ own meanings and perspectives are represented and not curtailed by the researchers’ own agenda and knowledge” (Tong et al., 2007, p.356). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis facilitated the use of a systematic procedure for the analysis of data.

3.7.3 Coherence and transparency

Coherence entails the research aims, research questions, methodology and data analysis should fit well together (Yardley, 2015). The exploratory nature of the thesis fits well with the use of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis as it allows for a systematic yet reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Furthermore, this research aimed to include autistic voices and understand the meaning the girls’ give to their experiences which was done through the personalised activities and involving them in parts of the data analysis process. The AAG also depicts how this research included the autistic community as I sought consultation from the group about the research aims, methods and data analysis.

Transparency refers to research disclosing all parts of the research process (Yardley, 2015). This research achieved this by describing each stage of the research process including participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis.

3.7.4 Impact and importance

Research findings have the ability to make a difference for CYP, families, professionals and organisations, such as EP services (Yardley, 2000; 2015). Having identified research into the school belonging experiences of autistic girls as a gap and the increasing number of autistic people being excluded from mainstream schools, it is hoped that the findings from this research will develop school staff’s understanding of what belonging means to autistic girls and what can be done to facilitate school belonging. Moreover, the findings are discussed using an experience sensitive approach to wellbeing for professionals that work with autistic girls, such as EPs. Finally, I will share the

findings of the research with TEP's and EP colleagues in the LA I work with the hope of informing their knowledge and ways of working with autistic pupils and schools.

3.8 Ethics

In line with the BERA (2011) ethical guideline, the research design ensured that all participants were treated with respect, sensitively and with dignity. This research considered different ways to enable the participation of the autistic girls whilst avoiding potential risks for an already ostracised population (Powell & Smith, 2009). This was vital given the nature of the research topic, the potential stress produced by interaction, the age of the autistic girls and the possibility of feeling exposed when sharing their stories and experiences.

3.8.1 Consent

The AAG were colleagues of the researcher which meant they may have felt less worried and more comfortable to offer recommendations towards improving the methodology and research design.

Recruitment of participants was primarily through social media platforms, which meant parents or caregivers were predominately respondents to the study. Thus, parents or caregivers had the chance to influence whether the autistic girls were aware of the research or not. Participants and their parents that showed interest in participating in the research were provided with information on the aim of the study, procedure, confidentiality and anonymity concerns and how the main findings would be shared.

Both parents and participants had to provide written consent to participate in the study. However, parental dissent could override consent from a young person. All participants were told that they could withdraw their consent at any point in the research, without having to give a reason, and any data collected would not be used and would be destroyed. I sought ongoing consent from each participant at the start of each session and throughout each session

(Roberts-Holmes, 2018). This is because when carrying out research with vulnerable groups of people it is important to continuously ask for consent and provide explicit information on various advantages and disadvantages of participating in a research study (BPS, 2010; Powell & Smith, 2009).

3.8.2 Managing risk and power

When conducting research with vulnerable groups there is a risk that they have difficulty sharing their views or share more information than is needed. This was taken into account as different ways of communicating were offered to participants. The girls were given the agency to choose the method in which they felt most comfortable to communicate (Morrow, 2008). They could either answer the interview questions verbally or type in the chat or they could use their personal activities to discuss their experiences. At the start of each interview, the participants were reminded of the aims of the session and were invited to use verbal or non-verbal signs to signal whether they wanted to take a break or stop, ask for clarity on anything and signal they were okay to continue.

All questions and activity information was provided in advance to reduce stress, develop trust and allow for time to read and think about what information to disclose. The personalised activities were constructed by the participants in their own time, with questions being asked during the interview. This gave the autistic girls control over what information relating to their belonging experiences they felt comfortable sharing as well as the power to reflect on the meaning this has on their lives. If the participants did not want to answer a question they were given the option of staying silent or verbally saying or typing in the chat function on the online platform 'I don't know' or 'move on'.

The girls were also able to bring someone that made them feel comfortable and safe to the sessions to help decrease anxiety, and they were given the opportunity to add further information or clarification after the interviews via email, in acknowledgment of unique processing speeds.

The autistic girls were reminded that they could choose the information they wished to disclose, draw or write and that it would be confidential.

Participants' personal data were kept in a different folder from the data collected during the data collection phase. A poster signposting external services was sent via email to the participants at the end of each interview, in consideration of the potentially upsetting content discussed (Spiers, 2015).

The power dynamic between the researcher and participants was considered. A study that embodies a participatory nature places the researcher as "working for individuals on the spectrum instead of against them" (Raymaker & Nicolaidis, 2013, p.184). However, researchers have argued that research with autistic people needs to consider further ethical concerns as autistic people have historically been disenfranchised (Cascio et al., 2020).

The AAG helped keep the study purposeful and relevant. They provided advice on how to make the research information accessible, facilitate participation and reduce stress.

3.8.3. Data management

All personal data collected during the research process, was stored on UCL data safe haven on a password protected laptop, in a locked cupboard. Hand copies of transcripts were stored in a locked cupboard. All data collected and stored was in line with the Data Protection Act (1998).

Each participant selected a pseudonym. A system to connect the participants' actual names with their pseudonyms was formed and was only available to me, the researcher. This was stored separately from data collected during the research stage on a secure laptop, password protected, in a locked cupboard.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present findings from the analysis of 18 interviews. A key aim of this study was to prioritise autistic girl's voices and to provide them with the opportunity to express their perspectives and tell their lived experiences (Lundy, 2007). The participants had an opportunity to check the sub-themes and themes to ensure the researcher accurately understood their personal stories.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis which produced five master themes (with fifteen sub-themes) (see table 6). The themes and corresponding sub-themes are presented, followed by relevant quotes taken from the interview transcripts. All participants were asked to choose a pseudonym or I gave them one to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Table 6. Final themes and sub-themes

Master themes	Sub-themes
Autistic girl's want to be seen and heard	Validating autistic identity (N=18) Participating in the school community (N=8) Normalising neurodiversity (N=12) Dropping the mask (N=6)
The joys and pains of mutuality	Good peer relationships enhance belonging (N=11) Relationships with school staff (N=7) Long to belong (N=7)
Losing myself under the mask	Finding a way to fit in while disappearing (N=7) Masking for peer approval (N=6) Masking is energy depleting (N=3)
Marginalisation links with invalidation	Autistic girl's heterogeneous constructs of autism (N=12) Stigma and attitudes challenge autistic self (N=8) Inappropriate school practices (N=6)
Sensory fatigue	Entrapped in sensory environment (N=7) Sensory build up leads to emotional and academic shutdown (N=8)

4.2 Autistic girl's want to be seen and heard

All of the autistic girls (N=18) constructed belonging as being externally validated by people in school so that they could feel comfortable to show parts of themselves to others in a mainstream school setting. The participants explained that validation comes in the form of school staff showing that they value and appreciate the girls. The autistic girls further stated that key to validation is sharing their views and perspectives which enhances belonging

in mainstream schools. Eight participants defined belonging as actively participating in school routines and contributing to school in a meaningful way. A further twelve autistic girls described belonging as being able to interact with school staff and peers who understand neurodiversity. Finally, six participants discussed how belonging is feeling comfortable to share their individuality without having to hide parts of themselves. The autistic girls postulated that they felt this sense of comfort when they were around people who were similar to them or who were autistic as they do not feel like a minority.

4.2.1. Validating autistic identity

The autistic girls constructed belonging as feeling appreciated and valued by people in their schools. The participants postulated that schools play an important role in validating them by understanding who they are and what they need, showing an appreciation for them as unique individuals and taking the time to notice what is happening in their lives.

Participants explained that schools are not *“just a place where we do lessons”* (Vera) and some described the vital role school staff play in showing those who feel like a neurominority *“that they are a valued member of the class community”* (Jade). For example, school staff have the ability to make the autistic girls feel *“appreciated for who I am and feeling wanted”* by noticing *“when you are not there”* or *“saying hello to you in the corridor”* (Ava).

The autistic girls shared that feeling a sense of belonging is enhanced when school staff show an understanding of the function of autistic behaviours from the perspective of an autistic person. Participants explained that belonging is *“people knowing why I am the way I am”* (Mia). For some girls this is related to *“stimming behaviours”* (Rose) and for others this is related to understanding the importance of managing sensory input using various devices such as *“ear plugs”* (Jade). When school staff accommodate autistic people’s needs, they experience acceptance which facilitates a sense of belonging. The autistic

girls defined acceptance as school staff and peers being *“respectful and kind”* (Kitsune) and feeling that *“people like me for who I am”* (Zoe).

Another salient aspect of feeling validated is being involved in decisions that affect the autistic girls' school lives. The autistic girls stressed the importance of *“being able to say something and people actually listen to you”* (Sadie) and school staff *“hearing something and doing something about what is heard”* (Angel).

“But like just listen to us. When I say something is unbearable listen to me. Cause like when I got my diagnosis they didn't care much about the jumper but like why did it have to get to that point. Like I told them what I needed” (Issac).

The participants mentioned that when they are involved in the discussions about provision they feel a sense of trust and safety that strengthens school belonging.

“Majority of my teachers trust me to know what helps and they will let me listen to music during lessons to help me calm down. And you know some teachers don't like it cause they think it's not a proper working environment but it's like they trust that I know what helps” (Jade).

4.2.2. Participating in the school community

Some participants defined belonging as *“contributing towards something”* (Mia). This makes them feel like there is an important place for them in the school community to exercise their hobbies and interact with each other.

“If I were able to find a few people in the school with similar interests to me this would be good cause then we could have fun and do things we enjoy like anime stuff...and I won't get judged cause we like the same stuff” (Kitsune).

Participants identified many ways in which mainstream secondary settings can make reasonable adjustments to facilitate school involvement. Some spoke about the importance of *“bringing people together”* (Sadie) such as through *“joined activities with the other years”* (Ella). Zena pointed out that tutor groups in mainstream secondary schools could include shared structured activities to facilitate the growth of relationships in school.

“I think just make use of opportunities to help me form bonds with other people. So many people in my tutor group have bonds with other people and I think this time could be used to form close friendships. Like more activities where others can come and join and I might get to know people that way” (Zena).

Other participants explained that participation in school includes *“being involved in school activities”* (Alice) such as *“some clubs or kind of extracurricular stuff”* (Vera).

Belonging in a mainstream school setting increases when school staff *“focus less on the fact that I have special needs and more on how I am a part of the school community”* (Jade).

4.2.3. Normalising neurodiversity

The autistic girls identified the dearth of knowledge and understanding of autism that exists in secondary school contexts. This makes the girls feel *“so misunderstood by people in school”* (Rose).

“Many mainstreamers haven’t even heard of the term autism and even when we tell them about autism I don’t think they know what it is.” (Addie) .

The autistic girls explained that the limited knowledge and understanding of autism underpins assumptions non-autistic people make about autism. Some participants described how people in schools have commented *“oh wait you*

are autistic you don't look autistic" (Mimi) or "oh I think I have got autism and then others saying, oh I definitely have got that" (Mia).

"I also think people misunderstand and they think that autism is having anxiety or autism is why you are depressed or autism is why you have an eating disorder. But it is not cause autism is autism and isn't anxiety or depressions. Autism just means things emerge from that" (Candice).

The participants shared that they appreciate the school's efforts to educate staff and pupils on neurodiversity related topics. When neurodiversity training includes *"autistic people's stories"* this makes them feel like neurodiversity is not a *"foreign thing that we shy away from"* (Zena).

When schools educate and raise awareness about neurodivergent people, the autistic girls feel like they belong in a school community that appreciates them for their strengths and vulnerabilities. The former was emphasised by the girls so school staff and pupils do not believe that autistic people *"only have negative thoughts and that we have happy thoughts too"* (Zoe). The range of thoughts and experiences are depicted below in Zoe's drawing (see figure 2).

they can raise awareness on *“how I think at school and not just what they think I think at school”* (Zoe).

The girls provided ideas of how to raise awareness in secondary schools such as *“having assemblies that explain what is autism is and show that it’s not something to make fun of it needs to be understood... Or even like having posters to give to people around the school”* (Mia). Some of the participants pointed out a gap in the school timetable as *“there never been an...PSHE lesson where they have had a conversation about autism and I think it’s so important and not talked about at all”* (Zena).

The participants of this study postulated that they have more chances to belong in a school which allows them to share autistic experiences and what it is like to be neurodivergent. Participants explained that this will help people in schools understand autism and could make autistic girls feel a greater sense of belonging in their schools.

The girls mentioned that in order to feel like they belong in the school community, peers need to avoid distasteful language which ostracises autistic girls.

“A key thing I have noticed a lot at school is people saying offensive words and terms...Like a boy in my form the other day said if he was autistic he would kill himself... and he didn’t mean it but if people could be more accepting in that sort of way” (Atlas).

4.2.4. Dropping the mask

Another aspect of belonging identified by participants was feeling comfortable to show their autistic self around people at school, without the need to mask. Participants explained that being surrounded by school staff and peers who understand autistic people's experiences and recognise what it is like for them plays an important role in feeling comfortable around others.

Participants postulated that spending time with people who are either similar to them or understand them or both impacts feeling a sense of belonging at school and wellbeing.

“If I was surrounded by people in school that I felt comfortable with or being around other people that are like autistic would be good cause they get me and will like me and I don’t get as stressed or tired after talking to them cause we are similar. So definitely being around them all day definitely affects my mood” (Vera).

Those who attended a mainstream school that had an autism base attached explained that the autism base played a significant role in feeling a sense of belonging as they were surrounded by neurodivergent people who would not judge them for being autistic.

“I would say in the inner part of the circle, well especially in the base because we can be ourselves a bit more and then it’s a bit more awkward out in mainstream. Well we are all autistic and we all know about it at the base. We even joke about it.” (Addie).

They also explained that the autism base in the mainstream school decreased the pressure to explain who they were, including their strengths, difficulties and what they needed. This is in direct contrast to the pressures they experience in a mainstream class environment.

“I think there is less expected that I will be a normal in quotation marks child like I am going to act neurotypical and also like ahh I feel less pressure to mask there.. so I mask quite a lot when I am in mainstream and generally in life but I feel less pressure to mask and try to.. I don’t know it feels like I have to do less to fit in. Perhaps it is because we are all autistic in the base and we all function in completely differently ways and no one bats an eyelid and it is like my brain works completely differently to yours but it is fine cause you

know we all function in different ways and no one cares it doesn't matter. So belonging means not feeling the pressure to mask" (Mimi).

4.3. The joys and pains of mutuality

A central facilitator of belonging was identified by participants as relationships. This includes close connections with peers which was reported to make school better (N=11) and good student-adult relationship which facilitates emotional wellbeing and academic motivation (N=7). However, seven participants explained that while these relationships are a key part of belonging they are difficult to form and maintain which may have a negative psychological impact. The participants described the tremendous amount of effort they put into forming bonds and how these were unreciprocated by people in school which leaves them feeling completely alone and unwanted.

4.3.1. Good peer relationships enhance belonging

Participants explained the salient role friendships play in feeling a sense of belonging. The importance of having company at school, feeling comfortable to share parts of life with friends and having friends who provide support was described as being a facilitator of belonging.

Specific qualities that make people close friends were shared. Some participants spoke about having a *"person to talk to"* (Candice) and *"being able to say something and people actually listen to you..without being made fun of"* (Sadie). Other participants discussed the importance of *"feeling comfortable"* (Zoe) to show their true self to peers and having *"a good time together"* (Zena). Mia explains how her friends support her at school which she described to "make school better":

"I think it's also the way they look out for me so like my mate (name removed) would save me a seat next to her at lunch cause she knows I don't like the smell of noodles" (Mia).

The sense of belonging that friendships and strong bonds provided was seen as particularly important to school participation. Participants explained how having friends plays a role in *“being able to go to school” (Mimi)*.

4.3.2. Relationship with school staff

While close friendships are important in schools, participants also identified the key role relationships between pupils and school staff play in feeling a sense of belonging.

“I tend to get very attached to teachers and if I click with a teacher my year will be way better” (Jade).

Participants described the qualities of a good student-adult relationship that enable them to experience a less lonely and isolated school environment. Some spoke about how the teachers that *“understands that I learn differently and accepts me.. really helps make school better” (Atlas)*. Others emphasise how *“my teachers affect how I feel” (Ella)* and how important it is to have a *“good relationship with them” (Mimi)*.

The autistic girls explained that having a good relationship with teachers *“boosts my enjoyment of the lesson”* and helps them *“relax and therefore helps me concentrate” (Jade)*.

4.3.3. Long to belong

The autistic girls describe how difficult it is to form and maintain friendships in secondary mainstream settings.

The autistic girls spoke about how they try to develop relationships with peers however this is not always successful which makes them feel isolated.

“I try to sort of fit in or I try to communicate with other people but it never seems to work or it doesn’t last very long and you feel shoved out the picture cause everything you try and do you are just put on the outside and you don’t know why and you don’t know what you can do”. (Ava).

Participants emphasised how *“mostly I don’t feel included...like people don’t really pay much attention to me” (Kitsune)*. The girls shared that it is difficult to understand people’s emotions and what people imply through their behaviour, which makes it hard to sustain lasting friendships.

“I have struggled with maintaining friendships. It’s like a gender difference, so like girls want a lot of emotional literacy and to understand that they feeling a different way to what they are saying. And then I don’t get that and I feel disconnected cause in their head they think that they have implied that they feel bad but then I don’t pick up on that and it makes it hard to maintain” (Jade).

The autistic girls explained that, despite having a different way of understanding the expectations of the social world, they make an effort to form connections with others.

“I think that since my friendship group fell apart I felt really lonely.. and it feels well I joined my school when I was ten and I have spent four years trying to get rid of the social anxiety, trying to make friends and trying to fit in only to be where I am today and to feel like I am in the exact same place as I was five years ago is very difficult” (Zena).

For some of the autistic girls, their efforts to develop social relationships are unreciprocated by other pupils. This is reflected in Angel’s poem as she writes that *“nobody makes an effort”* (see figure 3):

Outsider.

A red sign plastered on my face that everyone else can read but me.

Ignore her, make fun of her, exclude her, leave her be.

Whatever it says is unimportant cause I can make it out From the way I'm treated, it seems they'd rather be without.

Nobody makes an effort, and I often wonder why?

But it's not solely about why, instead it's about what their actions imply.

Figure 3. Sample of poetry titled Outsider under the subtheme: Long to belong by Angel, 18-year-old autistic student.

Participants expressed feeling a sense of despair as they work hard on forming connections with others, however despite these efforts most of them are left without connections and close bonds with others. Zena writes about her longing for friends and belonging and draws our attention to her severe loneliness despite her efforts to form friendships (see figure 4).

- Everyone is laughing
- Someone is crying. Their friends comfort them.
- I sit alone. Just like I always have and always will. It's what I have always told myself is my place. Where I belong.

Five years later and I have learned how to smile when the adults say hello and ask me questions. I know to push down the trembles in my voice and try to forget about the twisting in my stomach. I know how to appear just a little more like what I know I am supposed to be.

I know I am not what I am supposed to be, which is perhaps why I feel sick in the car on the way into school. It doesn't help that I can hear each of my own footsteps and squint at the sky even though it's filled with clouds because it feels like it's burning the back of my eyes. I can feel the collar of my blazer against the back of my neck and I resist the urge to constantly adjust it so as to not draw the attention of everyone around me, and when I reach my classroom I force my eyes to the round as I slump into my seat, waiting for my teacher to arrive for registration. If I close my eyes, it's almost the same as it was five years ago. I can hear laughter and screams and gossiping. It's as if nothing has changed. And here I sit, still alone.

When break time rolls around, I know to leave the classroom and walk as quickly as I can around to a 'quiet room' - there are two of these and they are just classrooms that aren't tutor rooms so people don't really go there much. I hate that I pull out a book. I hate that with the hand that isn't holding the book I hold my head, as if I still need to protect myself from the screaming and the cackling and the games. I hate that I hear people in the corridor doing literally anything, and I feel a pang knowing that I don't know how to do that. I hate all of these things because they tell the voice in my head that as it says nothing has changed and I don't have friends because I don't know how to, so this is my place. Where I belong. I am alone. Just like I always have been, and always will.

Figure 4. Sample of poetry titled Unbelonging under the subtheme: Long to belong by Zena, 14-year-old autistic student.

Participants also shared how *"it is very lonely and feeling like it will never end"* (Zena). This is because the girls explained that *"I don't have many friends and everyone is kind of sitting together and having a good time with their friends and I am on my own"* (Rose). This deep sense of loneliness and isolation described by many participants is depicted in Rose's clay model (see figure 5).



Figure 5. Sample of a clay model under the subtheme: Long to belong by Rose, 15-year-old autistic student.

The lack of mutual connections coupled with feeling unwanted by others is described to be internalised and impacts the autistic girl's identity and sense of self.

"... I guess when a lot of people collectively outwardly don't like you, you start to find a dislike within yourself like why does nobody else like me and it makes you feel bad.. and like you know you feel like you are not good enough for the people and that's why they don't like you or are mean about you and then you start to feel bad about how you look and then you think well then maybe there is something wrong with how I look". (Candice).

4.4. Losing myself under the mask

Autistic girls explained how they have learned how to hide parts of themselves, by mimicking non-autistic people's behaviours, in an attempt to fit in and be included in social groups (N=7). This can be so intense that eventually they lose their sense of self. Six participants explained that

masking their social difficulties is the only way to make friends and be accepted by others, even if these behaviours are uncomfortable and are not in line with who they are or their autistic identity. A further three participants describe the tremendous amount of energy they put into masking and how it is not always easy to get out of the masking behaviours.

4.4.1. Finding a way to fit in while disappearing

The need to keep parts hidden from others was described by seven autistic girls to be essential to fitting in with people at school. This is because they are afraid that they would be rejected or judged for who they are. This has meant that autistic girls do not show who they truly are to others, and that others do not get the opportunity to fully know or understand them.

“I am very good at masking, you know pretending to be a completely different person to who I actually am, so it’s probably my fault that they don’t understand me cause I haven’t been truthful cause if I was myself I would probably be sitting in a corner and chose to do nothing so I would say that people don’t understand me at all” (Vera).

Participants explained that they *“don’t feel like I would be accepted if I wasn’t masking so that’s why I don’t belong” (Angel)*. Some participants explained that they even hide the fact that they are autistic from others as they *“don’t really know how to be myself” (Vera)*. Other autistic girls postulated that they mask, or hide parts of themselves, as a coping strategy to protect themselves from misunderstanding and judgements from people.

“Masking makes me feel like I don’t fit in cause I have to do an extra step that no one else has to do... that defence mechanism of I will mask I will not show you cause I know you will take everything the wrong way” (Mimi).

The autistic girls will hide parts of themselves from people at school in an attempt to fit in. Participants explained that this has an impact on their lives out of school as when they *“go home I can just let it out and have a meltdown”* (Mia).

4.4.2. Masking for peer approval

Participants described the immense pressure they put on themselves to engage in behaviours that are unnatural or uncomfortable just to be similar to others and liked by peers. If they did not engage in such behaviours, they were afraid that they would be left alone and without meaningful connections.

“I think it has meant that there have been long periods of time where I don’t feel like I have friends or I have been very alone or isolated. I felt very misunderstood and I would think maybe I should force myself to do things I wasn’t comfortable with” (Zena).

Participants explained that they *“adjust my personality like sometimes into someone I don’t even like”* (Zoe) as *“nobody is like us so I have to be like them. I am only doing things because I don’t want to be alone, not because I want to”* (Rose).

In an attempt to appear like others, participants described how they are quiet observers of people’s behaviours, which provides them with clues on how others behave or communicate. This acts as a template for what society deems as appropriate gendered and social behaviours.

“Let’s just say I used to walk very differently than I do now. I changed the way I walk to be like others. So I now walk with my arms by my side with my head up. I am basically just copying because I think I am doing it wrong and they are doing it right” (Rose).

Participants explained that if they did not show socially accepted characteristics or behaviours they might be left without friends.

“I figured out from primary school time that being myself isn’t the most successful way to make friends and in my school, if you want to make friends you have to be loud and funny and popular and make jokes and I think that masking has worked cause I do have friends now.”
(Vera).

4.4.3. Masking is energy depleting

Participants described the large amounts of time and energy they spend trying to understand and analyse others behaviours. This is taxing on executive functions and daily living, as it requires concentration and cognitive abilities.

“I will observe their interaction and what they are saying and when I know that oh they have this type of humour then I can get involved in the conversation... but it’s like a flow chart in my head, so like I will think...they said this and then I have to be funny and say that and then if they say this I must say that so that they will like me. It’s all very logical in my head but it doesn’t come naturally to me at all”
(Mia).

Furthermore, the effort and energy needed to observe and copy others behaviours were described to be an extra task that autistic girls have to do at school. Paradoxically, while these observing and analysing behaviours are meant to help autistic girls appear more socially attuned, Vera highlights the limited social energy available after such tasks and the long term implications such as social burn out:

“So I will mirror what other people will say so I sound like everyone else. It just takes a lot of skill and effort from me to just seem like everyone else. So that just makes me feel very tired and makes me run out of my social battery almost and then I kind of just deflate and become quiet because I can’t keep on producing neurotypical kind of conversations for a long time cause then I get burnt out. So it’s like being social is like school work” (Vera).

Interestingly, some participants highlight that masking has become somewhat automatic in social situations at school. While this might be helpful during social situations, participants explain that it is difficult to stop masking. Thus while the autistic girls might appear to be coping in school they might be struggling internally which compromises their wellbeing and school staff's ability to recognise when they need help or intervention.

“it is something I do very instinctively so to actually stop masking actually takes effort if I am stressed.. I am sometimes I will be able to stop masking with my face I think.. I feel like I am not.. apparently it is hard to tell if I am stressed even though I am like look I am showing all the signs of being stressed” (Mimi).

4.5 Marginalisation links with invalidation

Twelve participants discussed their constructs of autism and how they have made sense of themselves. While some of the autistic girls identified autism to be a part of who they are, others described the barriers being autistic has created for them. The autistic girls (N=8) shared that stigma around autism and school staff's attitudes towards autistic people ostracises them. This is internalised by some of the autistic girls which makes them feel like their autism is a “barrier”. The participants explained how school staff offer strategies or support in schools, however these are usually based on what school staff think the girls need rather than on what the autistic girls actually need. The autistic girls share their views on how these are inappropriate school practices (N=6).

4.5.1. Autistic girl's heterogeneous constructs of autism

Five participants constructed autism as being inseparable from who they are. Six autistic girls described how being autistic means they process information differently which impacts their experiences. A further six spoke about how difficult it is to be autistic, focusing on the barriers they experience.

Some participants described autism as “a part of who I am” (Addie) or as “part of my identity... cause it affects how I feel, what I do, what I talk about” (Atlas). Participants postulated that “I don’t want it to go away cause if I didn’t have autism I wouldn’t be who I am” (Zena). Other participants explained that being autistic means that “my brain works in a slightly different way” (Sadie) and that “neurotypical people don’t also make sense to me” (Mimi).

The autistic girls explained that “autism makes us no different to others” (Addie) as every person is different because they have unique experiences.

“Autism is a big wheel with different colours where yellow is anxiety and blue is loud sounds and sensory stuff and everyone is a different place cause there are infinite colours and everyone has different experiences. Also people are not inherently different cause they are autistic, it is not as if autistic people are neon green and come from a planet where there is big ear defenders all the time” (Candice).

The participants postulated that once they were diagnosed “it felt like a big relief” (Zena) as “it kind of connects the dots and makes me feel less weird” (Issac). Furthermore, Angel highlights the mental health implications of receiving a late diagnosis (see figure 6).

But I was 16, and then it was too late,
The hospital became my second home and the consequences of being undiagnosed I had to face,
Which compounded my issues, at least now I know why,
I spent my days crying in the bathroom stalls, running away from it all.
In fact, I still do, from what I recall.

Figure 6. Sample of poetry titled Autistic under the subtheme: Autistic girl’s heterogeneous constructs of autism by Angel, 18-year-old autistic student

While the majority of the participants found relief in knowing they were autistic, few participants expressed that being autistic “means I have some disadvantages” (Vera).

“The world isn’t designed for autistic people it is just designed for you know the neurotypical man so it means there is a lot you just have to make it work” (Candice).

4.5.2 Stigma and attitudes challenge autistic self

Eight autistic girls postulated that stigma around autism impacts the way school staff and pupils perceive them and their attitudes toward the girls. The autistic girls explained that this reduces their sense of belonging in mainstream settings.

The autistic girls explained that *“people have an idea in their heads of what autism should look like and if you don’t fit into that idea then nobody takes you seriously” (Angel)*. When non-autistic people find out the girls are autistic *“the stigma around it...people’s ideas and misconceptions about it” (Ava)* impacts how they perceive and respond to them. The participants highlight how they have very little control over how people perceive them and consequently their school experiences. Zena draws our attention to how she perceives her experiences in relation to another pupil which she believes is largely due to stigma around autism:

“I think one of the things I find jarring is the way dyslexia is spoken about versus how autism is spoken about because a girl in my science class has dyslexia and the PowerPoint was changed for her and she is allowed to write on pink paper and I think it’s so jarring that she is allowed that and it wouldn’t be mistaken for she is a strange person. But for me if people knew I was autistic they would automatically think I am strange cause of the stigma around autism... also she is able to be open about being dyslexic cause it doesn’t affect how people perceive her so she is comfortable to ask for changes to be made to the lessons. And I think that if changes like that were so open and were so clearly like this person needs these changes cause their brain perceives things very differently then

changes would be easier. Cause then people would understand that these changes made it easier” (Zena).

Participants identified that school staff attitudes toward them, including the language they use invalidates their feelings and experiences. This affects how the girls respond and acts as a barrier to teachers understanding how the autistic girls truly feel during the school day.

“I think sometimes the way that teachers phrase things like, ‘well if you are really really not ok’ or ‘if you are really struggling’ then you don’t have to do this or something. I am not good at validating my emotions to say that I am not ok” (Zena).

The girls explained that *“I feel like people’s attitudes towards autism in general... myths or stigmatised views about autism” (Angel)* need to *“change or just to get to know me and usually when they judge you about something it’s because you don’t have time to explain it (Atlas)”*.

Atlas depicts how they perceive people at school observing them and judging them, as shown by the red eyes and speech bubbles (see figure 7 below).



Figure 7. Sample of a drawing titled Eyes on me under the subtheme: Stigma and attitudes challenge autistic self by Atlas, 13-year-old autistic student

The participants shared that their school experiences are the result of stigma around autism. This is because autistic people are not judged or perceived differently by non-autistic people because of who they are but rather they are ostracised because of the way non-autistic people think about autism.

“Also just cause of people’s response to autism. My autism doesn’t make people think any differently about me. They are the ones thinking differently about me in relation to my autism” (Candice).

This creates school experiences of feeling marginalised and for some of the autistic girls it makes them negatively relate to their autism.

“I think that it (autism) is a barrier in some sense cause as soon as you find out that you are different and all of that then the stigma around it I guess it is like anything like people’s ideas and misconceptions about it so if you try to explain to somebody and also people if you try and explain it then they will say so what people get overwhelmed with work like what is so special about you so I see it as being negative like something that gets in the way” (Ava).

4.5.3 Inappropriate school practices

The autistic girls explained that while schools offer provision such as a “quiet room so I can go and sit in the head of years’ room for break or lunch if I don’t want to interact” (Vera) or a “space where you can go and I have a pass to go there” (Zoe), these provisions are not reasonable or appropriate for their needs. This is because “I don’t want to explain why I am there or why I am leaving and all that kind of stuff” (Vera), or “it will draw a lot of attention to myself and like I feel quite embarrassed I guess.. I feel like people will judge me” (Angel).

Participants explained how “teachers just don’t have the time or make the time to ask” (Zoe) the autistic girls if the strategies available in schools are helpful. The participants perceived the common practices adopted in mainstream settings as inappropriate as they are strategies that are provided to the autistic girls rather than adapted with them and their needs in mind. As Issac states, this leaves him feeling “uncomfortable”:

“I have a card I can use in class to tell the teacher I am not ok. But I don’t use this cause it makes me feel uncomfortable..it draws attention to me, so if I am having a rough day or I am stimming or doing weird stuff. I think having a card just draws way too much attention” (Issac).

4.6 Sensory fatigue

Seven autistic girls describe the various sensory experiences they have in a mainstream secondary school environment and how these experiences feel inescapable. A further eight participants shared that these sensory experiences make them feel overwhelmed and this impacts their emotional well-being and academic resilience.

4.6.1 Entrapped in sensory environment

Participants describe the mainstream school environment to be sensory insensitive to their needs. Some participants explain *how “the noise really really bothers me in exam halls” (Mia)* and others describe the difficult transitions in a secondary school as *“the bell goes they expect us to just go to the next lesson. And it gets so crowded and I get pushed around and this stresses me out cause it gets very loud” (Zoe)*. Atlas also described their olfactory and light sensitivities in mainstream school settings:

“Or sometimes smells too so if the boys have sprayed deodorant around or if the lights are flickering and go from bright to dim” (Atlas).

Other participants spoke about the school uniform and how this reduces their sense of belonging. The girls describe how they *“get that it makes us look smarter” (Atlas)*, however *“the school uniform so I hate the skirt and tights so much on my skin” (Vera)* and this impacts their comfortability in lessons as *“I can’t sit in a lesson sometimes cause of the texture of the trousers on my legs” (Atlas)*.

“The uniform has horrible textures and it’s just not good. The jumper is so bad in terms of textures. I get physically ill. They are so strict with what we have to wear to assembly. So like they would make us take off all jewellery and put on a jumper which I obviously never have

with me cause I hate it on my skin. They did not care that I literally cannot handle that on my skin.” (Issac).

The autistic girls explained that these sensory experiences are a barrier to belonging as they are inescapable and lead to the girls having to physically remove themselves. Some participants explained that *“I would rather do work at home. I don’t feel comfortable at school. It’s too loud and I don’t get space” (Ella).*

Jade drew a picture (see figure 8) which *“reflects my school life cause when I am having a bad day I am usually in the corner of the study room on the floor... the school environment is not sensitive to the noise experiences we have... but there is no way to eliminate crowds but I can take myself away”.* Jade explains that when she gets *“overwhelmed I vocally stim and say AAAAA”.*



Figure 8. Sample of a drawing under the subtheme: Entrapped in sensory environment by Jade, 17-year-old autistic student

4.6.2 Sensory build up leads to emotional and academic shutdown

The autistic girls highlight how sensory experiences make it extremely difficult to access the academic and social environments in a secondary school and this has an impact on their wellbeing.

The autistic girls spoke about how they get “*sensory overload*” (Angel) which makes them “*overwhelmed and panicky*” (Atlas) and “*I feel very very tired*” (Zoe). This impacts the girls physical and emotional wellbeing and “*the teachers need to know when this happens and how to help me*” (Rose).

“corridors so noisy and very very loud. I feel like I have to be hidden from the noises. I can’t stand it. I can’t do what I want, can’t go to my class and I get a headache. I shutdown. I can’t talk or speak, I can’t hear, my body does not sit and I can’t help it” (Rose).

The autistic girls also spoke about how sensory school experiences impact their ability to access learning and experience academic success. They explain that “*noisy environments make it hard to concentrate*” (Zoe) which may cause some of them to “*tune out a lot, I will get very quiet and I won’t get any work done*” (Jade) or go into “*a fight or flight mode*” (Zena). This leads to the girls leaving “*school not having absorbed any information and this usually makes me really upset*” (Jade).

The participants explained that they will “*bottle it up until I get home*” (Ava) and “*when I get home I will be in a bad mood*” (Zoe). The long term implications of sensory overload in the school environment was also highlighted and how this impacts the girl’s resiliency.

“also with the noise so my school is quite big and it gets really noisy and back in lower school there is huge classes and it gets really noisy and really also towards the end of term cause I have done so much I

tend to burn out at the end of term or half term and I need a more prolonged break more than just a weekend” (Mimi).

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This thesis explored autistic girls' school belonging experiences and the impact on their wellbeing in mainstream school settings across England. This was done by capturing the meaning of 'sense of belonging' for autistic girls and exploring what they perceive as facilitating factors of and barriers to their sense of belonging at mainstream school.

This study utilised a qualitative approach, exploring autistic girls' school belonging experiences. Data were thematically analysed and five themes (with fifteen sub-themes) were identified. The themes described the autistic girl's constructs of belonging as well as the facilitators of and barriers to feeling a sense of belonging. A range of negative consequences were associated with lack of belonging, which impacted the girls' wellbeing, identity and friendships.

This chapter aims to discuss the findings in relation to the research questions, placing these within the context of the broader literature. The results are then framed using an experience sensitive view of wellbeing at school. Following this the strengths and limitations of the study will be discussed before making suggestions for future research. Next, implications for schools and EPs are considered. Finally, key recommendations are made based on the autistic girls' perspectives.

5.2 Research Question 1: How do adolescent autistic girls define a sense of belonging at school?

A key aspect of the current research was to explore autistic girls' constructs of belonging, who attend secondary mainstream schools. Only two studies have explored autistic adolescent girls' school belonging experiences (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019). The current study extends on this small body of research by exploring how autistic girls define school belonging, thus

contributing to a clearer understanding of what school belonging means for the autistic girls. This was salient as belonging is a social construct which means all individuals may have different ways of interpreting what this means to them (Shaw, 2019). Thus, educational professionals need to understand what belonging means to autistic girls to create and improve a sense of school belonging. Although, it should be noted that the girls in this study reported more negative school belonging experiences (with the exception of one girl) on the PSSM scale. Thus, the perceptions of belonging reported in this study may apply to girls with reduced sense of belonging.

Similar to Hagerty and colleagues (1992) model of belonging, which suggests that part of belonging is feeling accepted and valued by others, the girls defined belonging as receiving external validation from school staff and peers. This is in line with previous research which reported that “the girls were hidden but wanted to be seen” (Moyses, 2021, p.146) and part of being included in mainstream school settings means “being respected for the persons they are and being valued, despite their differences” (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019, p. 18). This study contributes to this new idea that autistic girls want to be seen for who they are and extends the research by discussing the nature of external validation. The autistic girls explained that external validation may come in the form of school staff and peers showing an understanding of who they are, including parts of their identity, interests and functions of behaviours. Furthermore, the girls postulated that part of feeling valued is receiving an appreciation from school staff and peers of who they are as unique individuals, by noticing what is happening in their lives such as a recent achievement or absence from school. Similar findings were reported by Myles and colleagues (2019) of autistic girls wanting their experiences to be acknowledged and valued. Thus, according to the autistic girls, when people in mainstream school settings validate their identity and their unique experiences, they experience belonging.

Another part of feeling validated is when school staff provide opportunities for the autistic girls to share their voices. The girls’ constructed belonging as feeling heard or listened to when school staff show an understanding of their

individual needs and make the necessary changes to accommodate their needs. This makes the girls' feel validated, heard and involved in discussions about themselves. Previous research has shown the important role pupil views play in feeling a sense of belonging for all CYP attending a mainstream school (Riley, 2019; Shaw, 2019) and for autistic girls (Moyle, 2021; Sproston et al., 2017). However, this study showed that an important part of feeling heard by school staff was making the required changes in school based on the girls' views. Once the girls' felt heard by school staff this supported the development of trust which helped the girls feel comfortable to further share parts of their experiences such as what could be done at school to facilitate belonging. Riley (2019), reported that when non-autistic pupils have a trusting relationship with their teachers this enhances belonging. Thus, this study extends these findings for autistic girls. When school staff seek pupil views and respond to the girls' needs by making the necessary adaptations to the teaching practices or environment the girls feel trusted, validated and heard. This encapsulates what it means to belong in school for the autistic girls.

This practice of school staff listening to pupil views and taking actions to remove barriers is congruent with Article 12 of the UNCRC, which holds that it is the right for CYP to be heard and for their voices to be considered (see section 1.2.1). Moyle (2021) reported that the implications of not listening to pupil views results in the absence of the girls from education as they no longer associate "school as a place where they felt seen, valued and as though they belonged" (p. 159). Gaining the girls' views may reveal simple adjustments in school, such as wearing headphones or not wearing the school jumper as the girls in this study discussed, which may make the difference to whether they attend school or feel like they belong. When autistic pupils have the agency to share their views they become active agents of their lives, which is linked with positive self-esteem and wellbeing (Todres et al., 2009).

The autistic girls' defined belonging as participating and contributing to their schools by exercising their hobbies or participating in social activities. This is in line with previous research which documents that autistic girls want to feel

like a valued member of their school's community "as opposed to being the unnoticed outsider" (Goodall, 2020, p.1304). Further, research on autistic girls has shown that they want to participate in enjoyable activities at school (Moyses, 2021). The girls in this study discussed how they specifically wanted to be included in extracurricular activities in school settings, such as clubs. The autistic girls also shared that they wanted to be involved in social groups where they could meet people and form connections. This is similar to previous research which has reported that schools offer a unique context to facilitate the development of friendships through structured social groups (Myles et al., 2019; Moyses & Porter, 2015a). When the girls are offered opportunities to meaningfully participate and contribute to their school, without compromising what makes them unique, including their interests and hobbies, or their wellbeing, such as their happiness and enjoyment, they could experience belonging at school. This would entail uncovering the types of activities the girls would be interested in participating in school and making adaptations to such activities to ensure they felt safe and comfortable to engage. Including autistic CYP in decision-making about their learning is good practice for inclusion and mandated by the SEND CoP in England (2014).

Neurodiversity informed school practices was identified by the girls' as an important part of belonging. In line with previous research (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019) the girls' identified the lack of understanding of autism in mainstream settings which leads to school staff and peers making assumptions about autism or using language that ostracises the girls'. Autistic YP are also reported to be especially vulnerable to school staff misunderstandings of autism due to lack of appropriate training (Roberts & Simpson, 2016). A unique finding in this research was that the girls believed that their stories and voices should be at the heart of neurodiversity training or education. The participants highlighted that this was essential as school staff and peers often base how they perceive or understand the girls on what they think about autism. This usually includes viewing the girls from a deficit framework, rather than considering the girls' spectrum of experiences, including their strengths and unique interests. This research shows that school staff should give the girls the agency to share

their stories which will allow schools to raise awareness about autism from the perspectives of autistic girls. This reinforces the autistic girls' belief that school belonging entails being externally seen and heard. When individuals are provided the opportunity to share their journeys they give meaning to their experiences and are able to make sense of who they are and experience positive wellbeing (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2019). Research suggests that disabled CYP have powerful insights to make about their educational experiences (Parsons et al., 2009) and that by giving them the chance to share their personal stories this helps them embrace and make sense of their experiences (Valente & Danforth, 2016). When schools give the girls the opportunity to make sense of their experiences they are acknowledging that "a person's world is one of personal meanings" and that this knowledge is valid and valuable (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011, p.6-7). Consequently, neurodiversity approaches that include autistic girls' personal stories may help raise awareness about autism and allow the girls to be tellers of their journeys and do so in ways that make sense to them.

When autistic girls feel like they are a part of a school community that understands and accepts them, they experience belonging as they feel comfortable to show parts of themselves. This is the first study to show how overt acceptance makes the girls feel safe and comfortable to assert their individuality, including parts of their identity. Autistic women in Pesonen and colleagues (2015) study reported that extrinsic social acceptance increases intrinsic acceptance of the self and provides agency to make choices about their life. Thus external validation from school staff and peers may impact the girls' internal acceptance of who they are. The autistic girls in this study explained that they experience this external acceptance by people in school who have similar interests to them and by pupils with similar needs, as they don't feel judged. This also impacts the girls' wellbeing, as being around people who accept them and allow them to be their true self positively influences the girls' mood and reduces anxiety that is related to hiding parts of autistic identity.

Interestingly, the girls' that attended mainstream schools which had an autism resource base described the stark difference between their experiences, where they felt safer and more comfortable in the autism resource base to show parts of themselves and not mask their behaviours. Previous research showed that autistic girls attending special schools did not mask (Cook et al., 2017) and autistic girls in mainstream schools with a specialist resource base felt comfortable to share parts of their autism identity and externalised behaviours without concealing difficulties linked with their autism, in the specialist resources base (Croydon et al., 2019; Halsall et al., 2021). The girls in this study shared that they felt less judged around fellow neurodivergent peers and thus put less pressure on themselves to hide their autism identity and behaviours. It is possible that mainstream schools with specialist resource spaces enhance belonging as the girls can access a space in the school where they feel accepted and less inclined to hide parts of their identity. However, this requires further investigation as Halsall and colleagues (2021) reported that autism resource bases may act as a barrier to autistic girls developing friendships with mainstream peers, as the girls struggle to blend into mainstream social groups.

5.2.1 Summary

In line with the aim of this study, to provide a platform for autistic girls to share their voices, a novel contribution of this research was that it explored how autistic girls define, construct and make sense of school belonging.

Overall the autistic girls constructed belonging as receiving external validation, which entails feeling seen for who they are and having their views heard. Part of school staff validating the girls involves listening to their voices and considering the girls' perspectives for provision. This research shows that when school staff act on the information shared by the girls this facilitates a sense of trust between the girls and school staff. When the girls feel seen, validated and listened to this gives them the agency to make choices and further share their views about their experiences. This could make the girls feel like provision is provided with them rather than on them.

The autistic girls also defined belonging as participating in the school community. This study shows that the girls want to be more involved in daily school activities and routines and have opportunities in school to meet peers and maybe form friendships. Mainstream schools should create opportunities for the girls to be actively involved in parts of school settings, without compromising their wellbeing. This can be done by seeking the girls' views on the types of school activities they would like to be involved in and co-producing provisions and strategies needed to ensure they feel comfortable to join in and contribute to the activities.

Although previous research has reported that raising awareness about autism improves belonging for autistic girls (Myles et al., 2019), this study is the first to document the importance of including the girls' voices and experiences in whole school approaches. Thus, this study contributes to the belonging literature by showing how the autistic girls want to be involved in raising awareness or education about their experiences, so that non-autistic people can learn about autism from the very people who are autistic. This further highlights their desire to be seen and heard. Practically, mainstream schools could provide the girls the opportunity to share their personal stories, through preferred means, with the school community.

A novel finding of this study was that when the girls experience external acceptance and validation from people in school, they feel more comfortable to show their true self. This may offer them the chance to intrinsically accept parts of their self and identity. The autistic girls experience this external acceptance by people in school who have similar interests to them and by pupils with similar needs such as other autistic pupils, as they don't feel judged for who they are.

5.3 Research Question 2: What do adolescent autistic girls feel are the facilitators and barriers to school belonging in mainstream secondary school, and the impact on wellbeing?

5.3.1 Relationships

Existing literature examining school belonging for all pupils documents the fundamental role relationships play in feeling a sense of belonging (Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Sancho & Cline, 2012; Shaw, 2019). This study contributes to the small body of research which reports that relationships with peers and school staff facilitate autistic girls' sense of belonging in mainstream schools (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019).

5.3.1.1 Relationships with peers

In line with previous research (Calder et al., 2013; Myles et al., 2019; Sedgewick et al., 2016; Tierney et al., 2016), the current study found that autistic girls were motivated to form friendships and develop close bonds with peers which enhanced their sense of belonging. Similar to Myles and colleagues (2019) the girls in this study highlighted that having friendships supports their wellbeing. A new finding reported in this study was that the girls found it helpful when their friends understood their difficulties and made their school experiences easier by removing some barriers. This is in line with the girls' desire to feel noticed and cared for by people in school which makes them feel like they belong. Furthermore, the current study supports previous research showing that social relationships and school belonging impact on school attendance (Anderman, 2003; Havik et al., 2015), as the girls shared that friendships with peers influenced their motivation to attend school.

Despite relationships underpinning the autistic girls' wellbeing, academic engagement and belonging, the girls report feeling lonely and isolated at school. Similar findings of autistic girls being overlooked by pupils and being on the periphery of friendship groups were documented in previous research (Dean et al., 2014; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019; Tierney et al., 2016). The girls in this study shared that they have a different way of understanding the expectations of the social world, such as communicating emotions, which was a barrier to forming social connections. A new and important finding in this study is that despite experiencing these barriers to

forming and maintaining friendships, the girls' emphasised the consistent effort they put into attempting to form friendships with peers, which they perceived to be unreciprocated by non-autistic peers. Thus, the autistic girls in this study explained that they perceived peers to have less interest in having a relationship and put limited effort and time to develop and nurture a friendship with them. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to understand the underpinning factors of these unmatched social efforts from peers, one of the girls commented in her poetry "*Nobody makes an effort, and I often wonder why? But it's not solely about why, instead it's about what their actions imply.*" Cridland and colleagues (2014) reported that adolescent autistic girls were excluded by others due to them being perceived by peers as being disabled. Since it is well established that social relationships facilitate autistic adolescent girls' sense of belonging, it is important for future research to investigate non-autistic pupil's motivations to form friendships with autistic girls.

The girls in this study explained how they feel a sense of despair over how hard they try to fit in and to make friends throughout their school journey, however they were often unsuccessful. This repeated cycle of attempting to make and sustain friends and feeling alone and unwanted has negative implications on the girls' sense of self as they shared that they perceive the peer rejection as something internally wrong with them. This may have an impact on their future relationships and connections as adults as research reports that lack of belonging during schooling years impacts autistic women's self-efficacy later in life (Pesonen et al., 2015). Therefore, experiencing connections and social bonds during adolescence is vital in feeling a sense of belonging which may impact the girls' sense of worth as a person who is deserving of friendships later in life.

5.3.1.2 Relationships with school staff

Relationships with school staff was identified as another facilitator of belonging for the autistic girls. The participants shared that the nature of the relationship with school staff includes teachers taking the time to understand

and get to know the girls. Goodall and MacKenzie (2019) reported similar qualities of the relationship with autistic girls and school staff, highlighting that teachers should invest time in listening and understanding the girls' experiences. Similarly, a recent study reported that autistic pupils in mainstream schools value feeling that their needs are understood and appropriately supported by staff members who focus on the needs of the individual pupil rather than the needs of the class (Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021). Research suggests that when autistic CYP feel their needs are understood by others they are able to develop positive relationships and experience healthy wellbeing (Milton & Sims, 2016). In fact, a worldwide study reported that the wellbeing of pupils in England "was lower than all but one other country" and that "poor relationships between teachers and students" was a contributing factor (Reay, 2016, p.326). Consequently, it could be argued that positive relationships between autistic girls and school staff is not only vital for feeling a sense of belonging but could also impact wellbeing. Moyses' (2021) research highlights the detrimental implications of poor relationships between autistic girls and school staff which is a lack of school attendance. Thus, since teacher-pupil relationships facilitate belonging and impacts wellbeing, it is important for mainstream schools to consider how to build and foster relationships between school staff and autistic girls (see section 5.7 for information on how mainstream schools can foster attuned relationships with autistic CYP).

This study builds on the literature on relationships with school staff and reports that relationships with teachers facilitates academic engagement. Although previous studies have reported the link between belonging and academic motivation and success for non-autistic pupils (Arslan, 2019; Benner et al., 2008; Pittman & Richmond, 2007), this study extends this finding for autistic adolescent girls as the participants explained that a good pupil-teacher relationship improves their interest in the lesson and motivates them to pay attention and want to do well.

5.3.2 Masking

Congruent with previous research on autistic girls who attend mainstream schools (Bargiela et al., 2016; Halsall et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2016) many of the autistic girls in this study described how they used masking strategies to hide their differences and identity to fit in. This included self-developed strategies as a coping strategy to protect themselves from misunderstanding and judgements from people (Moyses & Porter, 2015a). As reported in Tierney and colleagues (2016) study, the autistic girls' self-developed masking strategies relied on carefully observing peers' social behaviours and communication styles and mirroring these during social interactions. The close connection between motivation for connections with peers and masking has been documented in previous literature (Cook et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). The girls in this study discussed how they masked to avoid the negative consequences of being different which was social isolation. While some of the girls reported that the masking strategies were successful in the sense that they were a part of a social group, other girls describe the detrimental impact of masking on their wellbeing and identity.

This study shows that the cost of masking is the girls' wellbeing, which acts as a barrier to school belonging. As documented in the literature, the autistic girls described the tremendous energy they exert masking and the exhaustion they felt as a result of masking (Cook et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016), with some girls describing masking as "*school work*". The girls' also discussed how masking can lead to social burnout. Research on autistic adults' reports that burnout is initially experienced during adolescence and that masking was the main reason they experienced burnout (Mantzalas et al., 2022; Raymaker et al., 2020). Social burnout may impact the girls' participation in school routines and could put them at risk for being absent from school, as it is reported to lead to "loss of skills and reduced tolerance to stimulus" (Raymaker et al., 2020, p. 133). A unique contribution of this study is that the girls described how sometimes they struggle to stop masking in school, as it requires further energy to come out of the act of masking and return to the self. This could influence how school staff and peers perceive the

girls (Moyses & Porter, 2015b) and whether they can detect emotional or psychological distress commonly reported to be experienced by autistic girls such as anxiety or depression (Cook et al., 2018; Honeybourne, 2015). The fact that school staff might not recognise signs that the girls' mental health is in jeopardy is a serious safeguarding concern for secondary schools. Further, if signs of distress are not recognisable, due to masking, the girls would not have access to the necessary support.

Another important cost of masking was that the girls felt disconnected from themselves and sometimes struggled to tell the difference between their true self and their masking self. This link between masking and identity has not been fully investigated for adolescent autistic girls, despite this developmental period being identified as a pivotal time for development of identity (Blakemore, 2018). However, Pearson and Rose (2021) reported that masking triggers a detachment from the self which creates psychological distress. The mental health implication of the impact of masking on identity during adolescence requires further investigation, especially since it has been reported that the result of masking for autistic girls is self-harm and suicide (Camm-Crosbie et al., 2019; Cassidy et al., 2020; Hunsche et al., 2020).

Overall, this research shows that while masking is described to facilitate social acceptance for some girls, it is a barrier to the girls emotional and psychological wellbeing. It is interesting that the autistic girls constructed belonging as feeling comfortable to share their autistic identity (see section 5.2), however in order to be socially accepted the girls felt like they had to hide parts of themselves. Consequently, this study contributes to the literature by showing how the girls fit in when they mask however they truly belong when they are seen for who they are. These findings are congruent with the research showing that a sense of belonging is a protective factor for wellbeing and mental health and needs to be enhanced within school settings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DfE, 2016).

5.3.3 Stigma and marginalisation

Research has shown that autistic people's identity is largely shaped by how others perceive them (Pearson & Rose, 2021). This might be especially relevant during adolescence as they are starting to make sense of who they are and what they believe about themselves (Blakemore, 2018). The current study shows how some autistic girls identify autism as inseparable from the self and others describe how difficult it is to be autistic, focusing on the barriers they experience. This may be because the stigmatization of autism as a deficit in schools was internalised by some of the girls which led them to negatively relate to their autism identity. Internalised stigma is reported to be a predictor of poor mental health for autistic individuals (Botha & Frost, 2020). This study is one of the first to report that stigma can be damaging to adolescent autistic girls' identity, and can put them at risk for mental health difficulties.

A novel finding in this study is that autistic adolescent girls feel like they have very little control over their school experiences, as their experiences are a result of how school staff and peers perceive them and their attitudes towards them. The girls explained that these perceptions and attitudes are largely underpinned by stigma. This marginalises the girls as instead of getting to know the girls, people make assumptions about them which are based on misinformation and stigma. Botha and colleagues (2020) reported that autistic adults experience this tension between their own perception of autism and others perceptions as "burdensome" (p.9). This research shows that stigma impacts how people perceive autism and girls which is a barrier to feeling a sense of belonging and further highlights the importance of seeing the girls for who they are and not what school staff think they are. This may impact how school staff respond to the girls as the support provided may be underpinned by assumptions. This finding also highlights the importance of seeking the girls' views and perspectives, so that they can be understood and seen for who they are.

The attitudes of school staff as perceived by the autistic girls in this research need to be considered as they shaped how the girls made sense of themselves and their sense of school belonging. Sproston and colleagues (2017) reported that school staff attitudes played a significant role in the reasons the girls were missing from mainstream education and that teachers should have more flexible and approachable attitudes with the girls. Within the current study, the results suggest that it is important to have inclusive attitudes, by understanding the needs of the girls from their perspectives. This may provide external validation which the girls in the study constructed as feeling a sense of belonging. The findings also suggest that it is important to reflect on internalised stigma and the impact this may have on perceiving autistic girls and helping them in schools. This is vital as research has recently reported that mainstream school teachers have limited knowledge on autism and this impacts their perceptions of how they believe “schools should run and about how children should behave” (Oliver et al., 2021, p.12). It is important to note however, that this may not apply to all teachers as research shows that teachers with experience successfully working with SEN pupils have developed confidence and competence to support this group of CYP and thus have more positive attitudes towards inclusion (Avramidis et al., 2000).

Another form of marginalisation identified by the autistic girls are the practices and strategies that school staff use in mainstream schools. A unique contribution of the study is that the girls describe how schools make adaptations to the learning environment in an attempt to support them, such as a time out card or quiet spaces which might be suitable for some neurodivergent pupils but not all of them. Consequently, the girls shared how these practices are inappropriate and a barrier to their belonging as they are usually based on what the teachers think the girls need or what they think will help the girls, rather than the girls’ actual needs or what the girls perceive as support. This further reinforces the importance of seeking the girls’ views and including these in school practices so that the girls feel like they are a part of a school that wants them to belong.

5.3.4 Sensory experiences

In line with previous research, the autistic girls identified that secondary mainstream school environments are not sensitive to the girls' sensory needs (Myles et al., 2019; Sproston et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). The autistic girls in this study highlighted the impact of their sensory experiences on their wellbeing and learning in school. Similar to Tierney and colleagues (2016) study, the girls spoke about how they experience sensory overload in schools, from the noises, smells and textures of the uniform, which leads to emotional distress. This is concerning since research shows that autistic girls internalise their feelings (Solomon et al., 2012), thus sensory experiences at school can impact the girls wellbeing. The girls explained that they have to physically remove themselves from the overwhelming sensory space, which means they may miss out on important social and academic routines.

Building on Howe and Stagg's (2016) research, this research shows that sensory experiences in the classroom impacts learning and concentration. The autistic girls shared that when they feel sensory overload they "*shutdown*" which is a barrier to listening in the classroom and processing information. A new finding from this research is that these sensory experiences impacted the girls' learning and achievement in the long term as the girls reported that sensory experiences resulted in missing lessons and internalising their anxiety and exhaustion associated with sensory overload.

Mainstream secondary schools need to consider the sensory needs of autistic pupils to enable school belonging. As documented in previous research and constructed by the autistic girls in this study, schools should include reasonable adjustments to accommodate the girls' sensory needs (Sproston et al., 2017). These reasonable adjustments need to be based on what the girls consider appropriate to manage the sensory demands of school settings.

5.3.5 Summary

Relationships are a key facilitator of belonging. The autistic girls described how having connections and bonds with peers made school better and positively impacted wellbeing and school attendance. A novel finding from this study is that the girls emphasised the effort they put into forming friendships, however expressed the despair they felt as these efforts were unreciprocated by peers. These unmatched social efforts left the girls completely alone and feeling unwanted, which is a barrier to feeling a sense of belonging. The unreciprocated social efforts the girls received from peers resulted in some of the girls rejecting themselves as they believed there was something inherently wrong with themselves.

Relationships with school staff were also identified as a facilitator of belonging. The autistic girls postulated that the nature of the relationship with school staff entails getting to know the girls for who they are. Furthermore, having a positive relationship with school staff enhances the girls' academic engagement in school.

In an attempt to be socially accepted by peers, the autistic girls describe how they mask parts of their identity and behaviours. While the girls explained that these masking behaviours were sometimes successful in being a part of a social group they also shared the costs of masking. Similar to previous research, the girls described the impact of masking on wellbeing, including how exhausting and anxiety provoking masking was for them. A unique contribution of this study is that the girls described how sometimes they struggle to stop masking in school, as it requires further energy to come out of the act of masking and return to the self. A further cost of masking was that the girls felt disconnected from themselves. Overall while masking might offer temporary social acceptance, it is a barrier to belonging as the girls defined belonging as being in a school where they feel comfortable to show their autistic self and feel accepted by peers.

The autistic girls describe stigma and school staff attitudes as damaging to their identity and limiting their belonging experiences in school. The girls explained that school staff tend to base how they perceive and understand them on assumptions and stigma around autism. This usually confers negative meanings onto autism and the girls, which may have been internalised by some of the girls and impacted how they related to their autism. Another important finding from this study is that these negative and stigmatised attitudes created negative school experiences as the girls did not feel like they had control over what people thought about them. Thus, school staff attitudes and stigma are a barrier to belonging and a threat to the autistic girls' identity and school experiences.

A unique finding in the study, not documented in other research, is that school practices and adaptation are inappropriate and a barrier to belonging. The girls describe how these practices are largely based on what teachers think will help the girls or what they assume the girls need to belong, rather than on the girls' actual needs. Consequently, these practices reinforce the otherness that autistic girls experience attending a mainstream secondary school.

Finally, the girls identified sensory experiences in mainstream secondary school environments to be a barrier to their sense of belonging. This has an impact on their wellbeing as the girls share the exhaustion and distress they experience when overloaded from sensory stimuli. The girls' sensory experiences at school have a further impact on their academic engagement, as they reported that it affects their ability to concentrate during lessons. A novel finding from this study is the impact of school sensory experiences on the girls' long term educational experiences and attendance.

5.4 Framing results through an experience sensitive approach of wellbeing at school

Using the lifeworld-led approach, this study attempted to capture the personal lived and living experiences in autistic girls' terms, as opposed to pathologizing narratives based on the medical model where autistic people

are considered from a deficit view. This experience sensitive approach acknowledges that autistic people have a spectrum of experiences including strengths and possibilities as well as difficulties and limitations, rather than fixed positive or negative experiences. In line with the lifeworld-led framework, this study drew our attention to the humanising dimensions of autistic girls' school belonging experiences, such as the need to feel seen, valued, heard and involved. However, at the same time the girls shared that they can be vulnerable due to lack of friends, the school sensory environment and stigma. Consequently, this study builds on the lifeworld- led framework used in Pavlopoulou and Dimitriou (2019) research, by discussing the opportunities and struggles of belonging in the autistic girls' school experiences. This is in contrast to previous studies highlighting autistic girls' vulnerabilities (Tierney et al., 2016).

The lifeworld-led approach comprises eight dimensions. Each dimension captures the human experience and reflects the strengths and vulnerabilities of autistic girls. Each dimension is considered as a spectrum where the girls are either given the opportunity by the systems, organisations and professionals around them to have for example agency or not which will make them vulnerable. The dimensions of the lifeworld-led approach are discussed in terms of how professionals working with autistic girls, such as EPs, educators, health care professionals and researchers can recognise the lived experiences of wellbeing. It is hoped that this will improve professionals and researchers' capacity to view autistic girls' needs and experiences through a sensitive and humanistic lens.

Insiderness vs objectification

Viewing autistic girls from a strength based and relational approach rather from a behaviourist perspective, ensures that they are not seen by educational (e.g. teachers and EPs) and healthcare professionals and researchers as a record of problems and risks because they are autistic. Autistic girls must be given the opportunity to be seen, understood and accepted for who they are.

Agency vs Vulnerability

The girls in this study show that they want to be agents of themselves by sharing their views with school staff to improve their belonging experiences and educate people on neurodiversity. Sense of agency is closely related to wellbeing as people can make choices, develop relationships with those they are comfortable with and take responsibilities. When autistic girls are not afforded agency they are passively dependent on educational and health care professionals and services and are not given the opportunity to voice their needs or feel a sense of belonging. For example, autistic girls may experience wellbeing when EPs explore their views on belonging, empowering them to share the factors that contribute to and take away from feeling a sense of belonging in school. Vulnerability could be experienced when EPs provide psychological advice and provision that is not individualised, contains psychological jargon and not in line with what the girls believe will support their needs.

Uniqueness vs Homogenisation

Researchers and health care professionals usually categorise autistic girls as a community at risk. In this study the autistic girls considered themselves be autistic, students, friends and teenagers. One of the girls commented that *“my autism doesn’t make people think any differently about me. They are the ones thinking differently about me in relation to my autism”*. It could be argued that the way non-autistic people relate to autistic people objectifies them as it makes them fit into a category of what they think about autism, rather than considering what makes them unique as humans. This form of objectification diminishes autistic girls’ unique identity and their right to act how they want and be who they want. The autistic girls in this study defined belonging from a relational perspective, as they want to be seen, heard, valued and involved in the school community with peers and school staff.

Sense making vs Loss of meaning

The autistic girls in this study shared their meanings of autism and belonging which incorporated vulnerabilities as well as strengths and positive parts of school life. Educational and health professionals and researchers should consider autistic girls' experiences of wellbeing which will enrich their views on the girls.

Personal journey vs Loss of personal journey

The autistic girls shared their previous and current stories as well as what they hope to have in the future. Researchers, school staff and EPs should be proactive on facilitating autistic girls' personal paths by supporting them to reach their goals.

Sense of place vs Dislocation

Autistic girls should feel welcomed in mainstream school settings and safe in their schools and surrounding contexts. It is important that teachers and EPs are considerate of the girls' needs and the impact of lack of belonging on the girls' wellbeing. Neurodiversity informed whole school practices may facilitate acceptance of autism and provide autistic girls the sense of community and belonging they long for.

Embodiment vs Reductionism

Autistic girls' experiences should be considered beyond a narrow definition of autism based on deficits and disabilities. EPs and schools play a crucial role in supporting the development of positive identities by giving the girls the opportunity to view themselves as capable of reaching their goals and taking care of their needs. Enabling autistic girls to develop a healthy sense of self is salient for their wellbeing.

Togetherhness vs Isolation

This study shows that although the girls are often hidden behind their masking strategies, they want to be externally validated. This suggests we need to rethink how autistic girls are perceived. The girls value spending time with peers and school staff and would like more opportunities to form bonds with people who they can have fun with, such as peers, and people who can listen to their views and implement change through reasonable adjustments, such as teachers, senior leadership teams in schools and EPs.

5.5 Strengths and limitations of the research

5.5.1 Strengths

The inclusion of the autism community in this study was a significant strength. This was in response to the urgent need to include autistic peoples' perspectives in research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Milton & Bracher, 2013; Pellicano et al., 2014).

The AAG provided consultation for pre-study considerations including how to make the information sheets, consent forms and the research poster user friendly. Another strength of including the AAG was that they provided consultation on various adjustments to methods to facilitate participation in the research and minimise any possible anxiety or stress. This included, meeting the autistic girls prior to the interviews, answering questions and sharing the aims of the study which was vital for building rapport. The AAG also provided consultation on thematic analysis, which helped contextualise and nuance coding in the data analysis. The AAG's consultation on data analysis enhances the trustworthiness of the study as it reduces the potential of researcher bias impacting the results (Birt et al., 2016).

In line with this study's efforts to be inclusive, the participants were provided questions in advance which gave them the chance to process the information before the interview and consider their responses without the pressure of

time. Using visuals of what was expected from the girls was effective for enhancing the girls' understanding and giving the girls the flexibility of having their camera on or off and having a family member or close friend sit with them during the interview reduced the social demands of the interview. Finally, participants had the choice to respond to the interview questions verbally or non-verbally via email. Overall, these adaptations facilitated the richness of the autistic girls' views and underpinned a comprehensive analysis of school belonging according to the girls' perspectives.

A further strength of this study is that it included the participants in the research process by providing them the opportunity to construct their definitions and meaning of belonging through the personalised activities. This allowed exploration of what belonging means from the autistic girls' perspectives. This qualitative approach was used as it acknowledges the girls' autonomy of thinking, including their views and ideas (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2020). Participants were also involved in the data analysis process as they were asked to comment on codes and emerging themes. This is known as member checking and is argued to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative results (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking ensures data are accurate (Dockett et al., 2009), reduces researcher bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and is congruent with the ethical process of continuous informed consent (van den Hoonaard, 2002). There are several advantages of including the autistic community in the research process: it addresses power imbalances autistic people usually experience in school settings; autistic participants have the opportunity to share how they make sense of and understand the concept being explored, which in this study is school belonging; and finally participants have the chance to reflect on their interviews which they may find rewarding (Dockett et al., 2009).

This study examined how autistic girls define belonging within different mainstream school contexts across England, which is an additional strength of this study. Providing a platform for autistic girls to share their school belonging experiences, brings a unique contribution to belonging research. This was enhanced by the fact that the girls are adolescents, as research

shows that this stage of development is critical for autistic girls (Tierney et al., 2016). Focusing on adolescent autistic girls' experiences was therefore important in understanding the impact of belonging experiences on their development of the self.

5.5.2 Limitations

There are limitations to this study that need consideration. While previous research investigating autistic girls school belonging experiences recruited between two and eight participants (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019), this study managed to recruit eighteen autistic girls. This allowed for rich and in-depth exploration of the girl's school belonging experiences, however the generalisability needs to be considered. Interviewing eighteen girls could have generated different findings as they might have had unique experiences from those who did not choose to participate in the study. It could be argued that this limitation is reduced by including participants across various mainstream school settings. Further, previous research investigating autistic girls lived experiences have documented similar experiences of relationships as facilitators of belonging (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019) and masking, school staff attitudes and sensory experiences as barriers to belonging (Cook et al., 2017; Sproston et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016), thus this study contributes to the generalisability of these results.

The sample of participants could have been more diverse. Seventeen participants were White and only one was black. This is a notable limitation especially since research with black and ethnic minority communities autistic YP is scarce. Furthermore, all eighteen girls who participated in the research were self-identified academically able and potential autistic girls who were non-verbal could have chosen not to take part in this research. Whilst this research made accommodations to the methodology to include all autistic YP, such as interviewed by email, it is acknowledged that the methodological tools may have been limiting. It also seems that the majority of the participants were from a middle class background which limits the generalisability of the findings to those participants from different socio-economic backgrounds.

While the AAG is a clear strength of this study (see section 5.5.1) it is important to note that this group consists of one autistic adult (who is a colleague of the researcher) and one autistic adolescent, and while offering a unique autistic voice, cannot represent the voice of all autistic girls who attend a mainstream secondary school. Moreover, since members of this group knew the researcher and the research aims, this may have influenced their consultation to support the overall aims of the study.

Although the qualitative coding was checked by the research supervisors, whom are both trained qualitative researchers, the AAG and the participants were given the chance to check initial coding of their individual transcripts, it is possible that another trained qualitative researcher could have checked the qualitative coding to ensure inter-rater agreement in the codes by producing an inter-rater reliability score (Bryman, 2016), which would further enhance the rigour of the study (Yardley, 2015).

Though the two sessions provided participants the opportunity to become familiar with the interview questions and consider what information they would be comfortable sharing, it is possible that the participants adopted masking strategies across the two-week period, which research shows is common for autistic girls when they are concerned about how others would perceive them (Moyses & Porter, 2015a). This could have impacted the information they shared in the semi-structured interviews.

Finally, the PSSM scale used in this study to gather quantitative school belonging experiences, was designed for American adolescents and thus might not have been relevant to the British population of pupils. Moreover, the quantitative data was analysed concurrently with the qualitative data. This could have impacted my perception of the participant's experiences and thus the results that were reported.

5.6 Future research

Whilst this research answered the research questions, new questions surfaced during the research process which offer scope for future research. Although this study provides insight into the school belonging experiences of autistic girls within mainstream secondary schools, this continues to be an under researched topic. Moreover, this research specifically focused on the school belonging experiences of autistic girls. Research shows that feeling a sense of belonging is a basic psychological need for all people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Maslow, 1943). Existing research suggests that autistic people are more likely than people with the predominant neurotype to identify as non-binary gender (Strang et al., 2020), thus studies that explore the belonging constructs and experiences of both sex and gender may be valuable in understanding how to facilitate belonging for all autistic YP.

While it seems that there is increasing research considering autistic pupils' perspectives on their experiences and what they believe they need to access education, it is interesting to consider whether school staff use this insightful information in their daily practices. Future research could explore whether school staff are considering autistic CYP's lived experiences being documented in research and are reflecting on their practices and how they might incorporate autistic CYP's views in their practices. This is important since provision for autistic pupils can be enhanced if teachers are actively reflecting on their assumptions and are given the resources and time to consider how to best meet the needs of autistic CYP in school settings.

Finally, future researchers could examine features of evidence-based interventions that are effective for supporting autistic girls. Since autistic girls are known to experience social interactions and relationships differently to autistic boys and non-autistic people (Jamison & Schuttler, 2017) and engage in masking behaviours, it seems likely that they could need a different approach to intervention. Furthermore, these social challenges increase during adolescence, as social interactions become more complex during this developmental period and thus require different social communications skills

(Kirkovski et al., 2013). It could be helpful if future research develops a framework of protective and risk factors which could inform interventions, so that professionals could consider what social skills promote or inhibit autistic girls' wellbeing. This however should be used in conjunction with an individualised approach in interventions, so that autistic girls are empowered to understand their strengths and needs.

5.7 Implications for mainstream school settings

Various implications for mainstream school settings and school staff discussed in relation to the research questions warrants further consideration. The autistic girls constructed feeling a sense of belonging as being seen for who they are and listened to by school staff. The girls emphasised the impact of having teachers who understand and accept their differences. However, the girls also discussed that teacher's attitudes towards them impacts how they feel about themselves and that staff should have more flexible and inclusive attitudes which considers the girls' experiences from their perspectives. This may support the development of pupil-teacher relationships and allow for effective communication. Given that a good teacher-pupil relationship facilitates belonging for autistic girls, it is important for mainstream settings to consider the factors that support development of attuned relationships between school staff and pupils. Research suggests several important factors of developing attuned relationships with autistic CYP; offering time and space for pupils to share their thoughts or experiences (Moyses, 2021), adults being curious about pupils' strengths and interests and celebrating these (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019), teachers having nurturing and caring approaches when interacting with pupils (Noddings, 2013), and building trusting relationships by believing CYP's experiences and needs (John, 1996). Moyses (2021) research suggests that less time spent fostering attuned relationships with autistic girls can have a larger impact than more time with a less nurturing staff member. Consequently, it is possible that a nurturing approach, underpinned by caring, trusting and curious attitudes, is fundamental for developing connection and positive accepting relationships between autistic girls and school staff. This

may help the girls feel seen and heard, which they constructed as feeling a sense of belonging.

Schools need to acknowledge the importance to autistic girls of an adult they feel comfortable to talk to and trust that they will listen and provide the necessary support. Therefore, the autistic girls should be given the agency to choose the adult that might be a mentor or a key person for the girls to talk to. Listening to pupil voices is vital in understanding the autistic girls' experiences from their perspectives and developing strategies and provision to resolve the problems. Furthermore, all evidence of pupil views should be included in all school records and shared with all professionals working with the pupil, not only because it is required by the law but also because it shows them that their views are important and matter.

The autistic girls' defined belonging as participating and contributing to their schools by exercising their hobbies or participating in social activities. Mainstream school settings need to make adjustments to the environment to help autistic girls access these activities, without compromising their wellbeing or identity. According to British legislation, mainstream settings should and must make reasonable adjustments to inhibit "substantial disadvantage" to disabled CYP, such as autistic girls (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015, p.4). This means providing the "best possible education" (p.6) and an adjustment is considered reasonable to do "if it costs little or nothing to implement" (p.9). One of the key ways the girls identified feeling a sense of belonging was when they were involved in some way or contributing to their schools. It could be argued that this is a reasonable request to schools and underpins their rights to the best education.

Mainstream school settings could provide autistic girls opportunities to participate in groups, clubs or events such as a school play by seeking their views on the types of activities or clubs they might be interested in and co-producing how these groups could be set-up so that they feel comfortable to participate. For example, if the pupil experiences sensory sensitivity to noise school staff may provide the pupil the agency to share strategies to regulate

when this occurs or means to keep the noise to a minimum during such times, so that their wellbeing is not compromised. There are various tools that can be used to seek such views, such as Talking Mats, where pupils sort visual cards into 'likes', 'dislikes' and 'in-between' (Bradshaw et al., 2018) or drawing or writing activities to share views, as done in the current study.

Another construct of belonging, according to the girls' perspectives, is attending a school that appreciates neurodiversity and raises awareness about autism. The autistic girls in this study reported that autistic CYP's stories and experiences should be at the centre of neurodiversity informed practices, as they hold the truths about the meaning of their experiences. This finding has implications for mainstream schools.

Schools can adopt neurodiversity practices or approaches by including autistic girls' stories and experiences at a whole school level. Schools may accommodate the girls' needs by providing multiple ways for the girls to share their stories with school staff and peers, such as drawings, poetry, models, speaking and many more, such as seen in the methods of this study. These can be shared during whole school gatherings such as assemblies or in a less direct way such as through posters or pamphlets. Furthermore, schools can share the girls' stories in the curriculum, such as the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) lessons as mentioned by the participants. PSHE education became statutory in 2020 under the Children and Social Work Act and the DfE (2021) evidence review reported that it can improve pupils' psychological wellbeing. Research suggests that disabled CYP have powerful insights to make about their educational experiences (Parsons et al., 2009) and that by giving them the chance to share their personal stories this helps them embrace and make sense of their experiences (Valente & Danforth, 2016). Consequently, neurodiversity approaches that include autistic girls' personal stories may help raise awareness about autism and allow the girls to be tellers of their journeys and do so in ways that make sense to them.

Overall, belonging according to the girls' is being a part of a school that adopts neurodiversity approaches and values the girls' stories as a key

element in raising awareness. This is important as autistic advocates are pushing back on negative ways of viewing autism and are seeking recognition of how they perceive the spectrum of their experiences (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012).

5.8 Implications for EP practice

The EP implications will be considered in terms of the five main functions of the EP role including, training, consultation, assessment, intervention and research (BPS, 2018). These implications will be rooted in the experience-sensitive approach adopted in this research, using an ethos that celebrates neurodiversity.

Training

EPs need to develop knowledge and raise awareness of autistic girls and the factors that contribute to school belonging. This should include the impact of lack of belonging on the autistic girls' school experiences and wellbeing, including loneliness, loss of autistic identity, sensory overload and social burnout. This is supported by EPs dedication to developing the knowledge base on autistic girls and school belonging. EPs have the skills to do this through training and offering workshops in which families and school staff can be signposted to other support.

Alongside raising knowledge and awareness of autistic girls' school belonging experiences, EPs can provide support at a systemic level by supporting mainstream schools to adopt neurodiversity informed practices. EPs can support the development of psychoeducational curriculum for PSHE lessons with the aim to improve knowledge about autism and autistic girls' experiences. The autistic girls in this study constructed belonging as attending a school that talks about the spectrum of their experiences from their perspectives. Consequently, EPs could support school staff in co-producing materials with autistic girls that documents their experiences.

Consultation

This study highlights the important role pupil voices play in feeling like the girls belong in a school community that values and appreciates them. A key implication for EPs is to consider how they capture autistic girls' voices during individual casework and statutory work. EPs should be gathering the girls' voices and providing them the opportunity to share their views in home-school consultations and statutory work such as annual reviews. EPs could adopt similar practices used in this research to explore autistic girls' constructs of belonging by drawing on their strengths such as through art work, making models, writing poems or stories. EPs could then co-construct the meaning of the piece of work by using the SHoWED protocol (see section 3.4.1) and with pupil's permission could share this in consultation with parents and school staff. While the strength of this approach is that it is flexible and can be individualised, it might not be accessible to autistic girls with learning difficulties. Other approaches that have been successfully used with autistic pupils with complex needs includes Photovoice, where pupils take photographs that depict their experiences (Cluley, 2016), Talking Mats, where pupils sort visual cards into 'likes', 'dislikes' and 'in-between' (Bradshaw et al., 2018) and Graffiti Wall, where pupils are given two different coloured post-it notes and are asked to write or draw good things about school on one colour and bad things about school on a separate colour (Hill et al., 2016).

It seems then that there are various ways EPs can gather autistic girls' views. This is drawing on EPs strength of working collaboratively in consultation with pupils, school staff and families to gain information, propose hypotheses and co-produce outcomes (Nolan & Moreland, 2014; Wagner, 2000). Thus EPs can build a bridge between the girls and school staff by allowing the girls an opportunity to share their unique constructs which give meaning to their experiences. EPs can also develop awareness of the facilitators and barriers to belonging through consultations with school staff and parents.

Assessment

EPs can use the lifeworld-led framework as a guide to uncover qualitative accounts of how the girls make sense of their lives. The eight dimensions enable EPs to explore autistic girls' experiences in a dynamic way, that considers for example ways in which the girl's sense of agency co-exists with vulnerability and how that impacts their experiences. EPs can then take this information and equip school staff with the strategies and practices to help them understand and support the girls.

EPs strength is their ability to unpick the specific needs and strengths of pupils using personal construct tools, such as the Ideal School (Kelly, 1955) to "understand the child's unique perspective in life" (Moran, 2001, p.600). EPs can use this method to help autistic girls engage in the assessment process in a way that has personal meaning for them (Moran, 2001) and EPs are well placed to support the girls to articulate their views in ways that make sense to them (Atkinson et al., 2013). For example, the Ideal School could be used with autistic girls where EPs could first ask the girls to describe the type of school they would not wish to attend, which could provide useful information on the nature of activities, environment, and people that are barriers to belonging or inclusion. Then EPs could ask about the ideal school, exploring the girls' constructs on the parts of school that facilitate belonging and inclusion. Personal constructs can help EPs identify possible solutions and support change (Moran, 2006), which could be a good tool to adopt when working with girls who are at risk of exclusion or stopping to attend school. This could help those girls as underpinning personal construct tools is the idea that all people's constructions are valid unique truths and that there are no 'right' answers (Burr, 1995). EPs can also utilize person-centred approaches such as Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) (Pearpoint et al., 1993) to help the girls set goals for their future and be involved in the discussions about what can change at school to facilitate them reaching their future aspirations. This approach may be key during the adolescence period when the girls are developing a sense of self (Blakemore,

2018), as it could promote their independence and increase their self-esteem as the approach highlights strengths and skills (Pearpoint et al., 1993).

These approaches can also be used to help the girls consider their identity and sense of self, which this study shows are negatively impacted by existing stigma and masking tendencies. It is clear then that EPs play a significant role in providing autistic girls agency to share their constructs and perspectives. EPs are also crucial in providing the autistic girls the opportunity to co-construct with professionals, school staff and parents what can be put in place to support their needs and enhance their strengths and aspirations. This ensures co-production of outcomes and provision, which will make the girls feel like provision is created with them not produced for them. This echoes the SEND CoP (2015) which emphasises that CYP with SEND have the right to be meaningfully engaging in ways to meet their needs. However, research indicates that autistic adolescents have limited inclusion in the development of outcomes and targeted interventions suggested to support them (Jamison & Schuttler, 2017; McDonald & Machalicek, 2013), thus indicating the saliency of EPs role in seeking and promoting autistic pupils' voices.

Intervention

Part of the EP role involves recommending strategies and interventions to support autistic YP's needs. Current interventions involve teaching autistic girls how to adjust their social skills and communication styles to fit within the cultural and gendered expectations. Interestingly, however, much of the evidence base for social skills intervention includes autistic boys (Jamison & Schuttler, 2017). This study shows that belonging is having opportunities to participate in school routines and structured social activities, without having to adapt social behaviours. Furthermore, belonging is feeling comfortable to show their true self without having to mask autistic identity or behaviours. This presents an interesting challenge to the current evidenced based interventions, as the social skills interventions being recommended might be compromising the girls wellbeing and identity. This combined with the extreme loneliness and social isolation reported by the girls in this study may have a

significant negative impact on their mental health. EPs therefore must consider the intervention being suggested to schools by seeking autistic girls' views on what type of activities the girls would like to be involved in at school and what adaptations may be needed to access these activities that would not compromise their wellbeing or identity.

EPs could be involved in developing a psychosocial curriculum for autistic girls. This could support the development of emotional literacy and social communication skills, as well as enhance their resiliency and wellbeing. Research conducted by Jamison and Schuttler (2017) reports that social skills interventions for autistic adolescent girls should focus on relationships and the complex conversation skills that underpin female adolescent interactions. Within the current research, the girls shared that they wanted to participate in school activities and routines, such as clubs or social groups. It is possible that interventions that involve role play activities could support autistic girls' awareness, understanding and generalisation of nuanced social skills that are important in forming relationships with others.

The girls' shared that feeling a sense of belonging includes feeling safe and comfortable to show their true self and not engage in masking. The negative impact of masking was also discussed such as the impact on energy levels, sense of self and wellbeing. This is supported by the literature which documents that masking strategies have been linked with depression and anxiety (Cook et al., 2018; Honeybourne, 2015). Thus, an intervention focused on developing autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing, through psychoeducation and therapeutic approach is needed. EPs are uniquely placed to help with the implementation and delivery of such interventions in schools, due to their role in education and mental health (Atkinson et al., 2013). It is likely that each autistic girl will need an individualised intervention, underpinned by the girls' perspectives on how they experience the demands of mainstream school environments. Additionally, EPs can help school staff to notice signs of mental health concerns and encourage them to speak with their link EP when they are concerned about autistic CYP's mental health

about evidence-based interventions to facilitate good mental health at an early stage.

The girls in this study constructed belonging as receiving external validation from school staff. According to the girls this includes feeling noticed, heard and appreciated. Practically, this may suggest that it is important for school staff to get to know the girls on a personal level by learning about their strengths and interests. EPs could recommend interventions, such as daily check-in sessions with an attuned adult, that offer autistic girls and school staff the opportunity to learn about what is happening in the girls' lives, how they are coping socially and academically and parts of the school environment that may be changed or adapted to facilitate belonging. This intervention could offer the girls that validation they deeply desire. Moreover, EPs may also suggest that schools create groups of pupils with similar needs or difficulties, which meet weekly with an adult and share their experiences. This group could provide validation of the girls' experiences as well as enhance belonging and connection with peers.

Finally, when considering whole school approaches, EPs could play a role in developing school policies and initiatives that encourage positive neurodiversity narratives that move away from pathologizing narratives based on the medical model where autistic people are considered from a deficit view. EPs can support schools to develop narratives that focus on framing disability as a subject of equality in the classrooms. This could allow all CYP to understand disability and actively promote empathy, understanding and support for all disabled children. These inclusive values towards disability need to be rooted in the school ethos, which can be done by actively involving pupils and their families in co-producing the policies, ethos and values of the school.

Research

It is helpful for EPs to carry out research on best practice for supporting school staff to reflect on their knowledge and practices used to support

autistic CYP. EPs could also supervise future TEPs in research to further develop the evidence-base on autistic girls.

5.9 Recommendations for all professionals working with autistic girls

Four key recommendations are made to all professionals working with autistic girls based on the girls' perspectives.

1. ***“Pay more attention to what I am trying to say. Just listen to me” (Issac)***. In line with the SEND CoP (DfE, 2014) and the statutory guidance in the Children and Families Act (2014), providing a platform for the voice of the child is essential to understanding their needs and individualised requirements (Crane & Pellicano, 2017). A key construct of belonging according to the autistic girls' perspectives, is school staff listening to what the girls want to share about their experiences. When the girls feel heard by others they feel validated and appreciated, which underpins feeling a sense of belonging.
2. ***“Never assume anything about me” (Sadie)***. This research shows that autistic girls feel severely misunderstood by school staff and peers. Underpinning these misunderstandings are assumptions and stigma related to autism, which impacts school staff attitudes and perceptions of the autistic girls. This is not only a barrier to feeling like the girls belong in school but also serves to marginalise them. Furthermore, this study shows that strategies and provisions offered to the girls are largely inappropriate as these stem from what the teachers think the girls require rather than what the girls actually need to access learning and the school environment. School staff need to be more curious about autistic girls so that they can understand their strengths and differences, provide person-centred support and foster caring and open relationships. A reduction in stigmatised perceptions of autism can positively affect the girls' wellbeing and mental health.

- 3. “If you want to know about peoples’ experiences learn about it” (Candice).** It is evident from the autistic girls’ experiences that some school staff and peers did not understand autism. This contributed to the girls feeling like they were attending a school that did not understand them and contributed to lack of appropriate support. Therefore, neurodiversity training is a key recommendation which schools are accountable for providing to all staff, not just the senior leadership team, according to the Children and Families Act (2014) and the SEND CoP (2017).

- 4. “Focus less on the fact that I have special needs and more on how I am a part of the school community” (Jade).** The girls in this study identified participation in school activities and routines as a facilitator of school belonging. Mainstream schools need to make reasonable adjustments to the environment to help autistic girls access these activities, without compromising their wellbeing. While some of the girls spoke about wanting structured social activities to meet people and form friendships, others spoke about needing accommodations to the school environment for their sensory needs. Attending a school that cares about the girls’ relationships, safety and sensory input are not unreasonable requests of the girls.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Literature review searches

A thorough literature review was carried out between 2020-2022. The literature search was conducted electronically, using a range of databases including, ERIC (PROQuest), ERIC (EBSCO host), British Education Index, PsychINFO (including psyARTICLES), Web of Science and Google Scholar. Initial searches included research on CYP and belonging. The purpose was to provide a baseline of existing knowledge and understanding. Key search terms included 'School Belonging', 'Sense of belonging', 'mainstream school', 'adolescent'. The final searches aimed to explore previous research into the school belonging experiences of autistic adolescent girls at secondary mainstream schools. Search terms included a combination of 'Autistic', 'ASC', 'ASD', 'Sense of belonging', 'Social relationships', 'Females', 'Girls', 'Mainstream schooling'.

For the final search I read abstracts of each article and decided whether they met the inclusion criteria: participants must include at least one autistic girl, who had been formally diagnosed. Due to the limited studies examining autistic adolescent girls school belonging experiences, research conducted with autistic female adults around topics of belonging were included. The searches excluded studies of CYP not of school age and not relevant to the theme of belonging in school.

Appendix B: Autistic advisory group consultation notes

Pre-study considerations:

- Researcher should add a friendly looking picture to information sheets and consent forms;
- Add visuals of examples for personalised activities in pupil information sheet;
- Provide example questions for semi-structured interview in pupil information sheet;
- Add red (indicative of 'no') and green (indicative of 'yes') images on pupil consent forms.

Data collection:

- To reduce anxiety considered the following:
 - Researcher meet with participants twice as means to build rapport;
 - Participants can choose video on or off during sessions;
 - Participants can have a family member or friend present during sessions;
 - Researcher offer to complete background measure in session one together with participant;
 - Researcher send interview schedule two weeks before semi-structured interview to consider unique processing speeds;
 - Participants may choose how to answer the semi-structured interviews. Provide option to reply over email or in chat function.

Data analysis:

AAG Comments on data analysis	Solution
Make themes more dynamic. E.g. replace master theme <i>Autistic girl's personal constructs of belonging</i> with	I changed master theme 1 from <i>Autistic girl's personal constructs of belonging</i> to

<p>a theme that sums up what the girls are saying.</p>	<p><i>Autistic girls want to be seen and heard.</i></p>
<p>Sub-theme: <i>celebrating autistic self</i>- is it that other people celebrate autistic identity or is it that the girls celebrate their own identity. Consider using another word to replace to <i>celebrate</i>.</p>	<p>I changed sub-themes: <i>celebrating autistic self</i> for <i>validating autistic identity</i> to capture the idea that belonging is receiving validation for who the girls are as unique individuals.</p>
<p>Sub-theme: <i>difficulty accessing school practices</i> suggests the problem is with the girls, thus following the deficit model. Consider rephrasing this sub-theme in a way that does not hold the girls accountable.</p>	<p>I changed sub-theme: <i>difficulty accessing school practices</i> to <i>Inappropriate school practices</i>.</p>
<p>Consider combining sub-theme <i>opportunities to form connection</i> with sub-theme <i>participating in the school community</i> as both ideas encapsulate the idea of participating in school activities/routines</p>	<p>I added sub-theme <i>opportunities to form connection</i> to sub-theme <i>participating in the school community</i></p>

Appendix C: Final Interview schedule

1. Can you describe what a good day at school looks like for you?

Prompts

- a. Can you tell me what happens on a good day at school?
 - b. How does it feel when you have a good day at school?
2. Can you describe what a bad day at school looks like for you?

Prompts

- a. Can you tell me what happens on a bad day at school?
 - b. How does it feel when you have a bad day at school?
3. What help were you given when you had a bad day?
 - a) Did this help? How?
 - b) What would have helped?

Introduce Circle of belonging activity (see image 1): "this is called the circle of belonging. Think of the circle as your school. The pupils in the centre of the circle feel a sense of belonging. The pupils outside the centre of the circle do not feel belonging or accepted at school"

4. Would you say you are on the inside or the outside of the circle most of the time at school?
5. Which circle would you like to be in most of the time at school?
6. What does it mean to you to be inside the circle of belonging at school?
7. If you could give your school advice about what they could do to make you feel accepted and valued what would it be?
8. Do the people you spend time with affect how you feel about school?
9. What experiences or thoughts might keep you awake at night or affect your mood?
10. What experiences at school make you feel happy and calm?
11. Tell me what it is like for you when you wake up in the morning and know you have to go to school

Prompts

- a. What are some of the thoughts you may have? Or what pops into your mind?
 - b. How does this make you feel?
12. Can you tell me about the people you like to spend time with at school

Prompt

- a. Why do you like spending time with them?
- b. Why are these people important to you?
- c. What about these people make you feel comfortable?

13. Do you think people at school understand you?

Prompt

- a. What does feeling understood mean to you?
- b. What do you think needs to happen for others to understand you?

14. Is there anything that would help people to understand you better?

15. Can you tell me which school routines you enjoy and feel comfortable with?

Prompt

- a. What about these parts of school make you feel comfortable?

16. Can you tell me which school routines you don't enjoy and make you feel uncomfortable?

Prompt

- a. What needs to change about these parts of school so that you can feel more comfortable?

17. Are there parts of school that make you feel lonely or anxious?

Prompt

- a. If so, what parts/aspects of your school day make you feel this way?
- b. What do you think could decrease these feelings of loneliness or anxiety?

18. Is there anything hard about making friends at school?

- a. Which people did you find it hardest to communicate and get along with?
- b. What do you do to manage when you are having problems with friendships?
- c. What helps you to make friends at school?

d. Is there anything else you think I need to know to help me understand your difficulties in school?

19. What does autism mean to you?

Prompt

a) How does being autistic make you feel?

b) Did these feelings change when you were diagnosed?

20. Do you think being autistic impacts on your school experiences?

Prompt

a) Does being autistic play a role in feeling accepted and included in school?

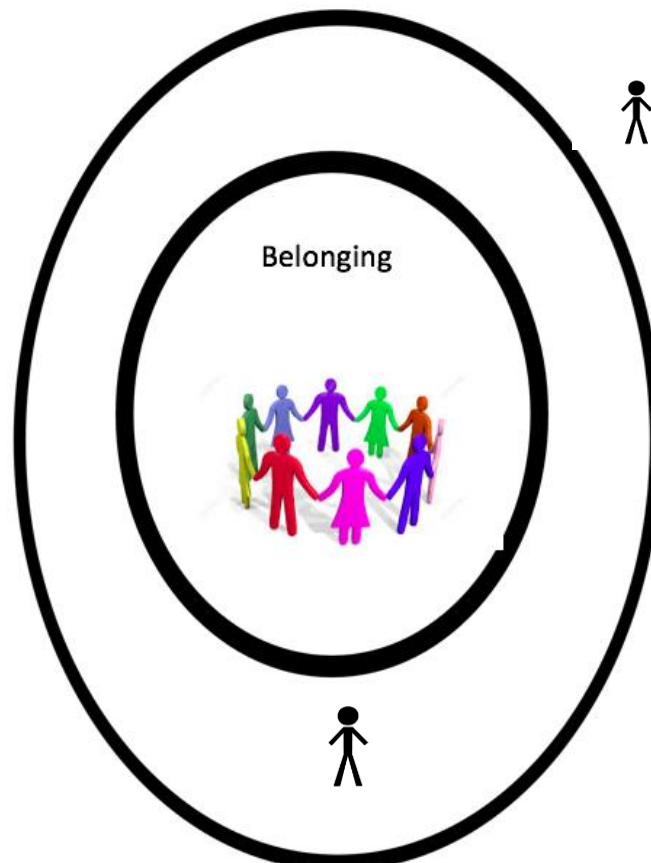
b) Does being autistic play a role in feeling anxious or isolated?

21. If you could give advice to people at your school about you and autism, what would it be?

If you could describe your school experiences in three words, what would it be?

22. Has the pandemic impacted your routine impacted on your school experiences?

Circle of belonging



Appendix D: Background measures

Measure	Description
Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Questionnaire (Goodenow, 1993)	<p>This is a self-report questionnaire which explores school belonging felt by adolescents. This scale consists of 18-items which were developed through testing with both urban and suburban pupils (N=611) in America. All pupils involved in Goodenow's (1993) initial study obtained a mean PSSM score of 3.84 (SD=0.72). Internal consistency reliability ranges from .77 to .88. The scale asks how much do you agree or disagree with the statements using a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree). Scores were reversed for negatively phrased questions (items 3, 6, 9, 12 and 16).</p> <p>The PSSM questionnaire explore the school belonging felt by adolescents. Example items include "most teachers at this school are interested in me" and "I feel proud of belonging to this school".</p>
Me and My School (Deighton et al., 2013)	<p>This is an 18 item scale which was standardised using pupils from primary and secondary schools in England. Items consist of short statements that participants were required to respond by selecting either "never", "sometimes" or "always". Cronbach's alpha range for each section ranges from .72 to .80.</p> <p>The M&MS measure explores two broad areas including emotional difficulties and behavioural difficulties. The cut-off scores of 10 to 11 for borderline and 12 and over for clinically significant for emotional difficulties subscale for the M&MS. Example item for</p>

	<p>the emotional difficulties subscale include “I feel lonely”</p> <p>The cut-off score of 6 for borderline and 7 and above for high risk for behavioural difficulties subscale for the M&MS. Example item for the behavioural difficulties subscale include “I lose my temper”.</p>
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Appendix E: Amendments to interview schedule following pilot study

Problem	Solution
Participant found it difficult to go straight into the questions- as the interview progressed she found it easier to answer the questions	Start interview with an informal conversation
Review of the audio recording showed that some of the questions were over-explained or confusing	Rewrite interview schedule; repeat back the answers to confirm understanding
Asking general questions about school belonging experiences became repetitive	Simplify questions in this section
Participant commented that the circle of belonging activity was confusing	Re-write this section and explain activity using simple language- check understanding before ask related questions

Changes to the interview questions following pilot:

- Question: “can you describe how you feel about going to school” was deleted and used as a prompt to “can you describe what a good day at school looks like for you?”
- Question: “if you could give your school advice about what they could do to make you feel accepted and valued, what would it be?” was added
- Question: “are there parts of school that make you feel lonely or alone” and “are there parts of school that make you feel anxious?” was combined and changed to “are there parts of school that make you feel lonely or anxious?”

Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute of Education (staff, students or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified **you must be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office before you submit your ethics application for review.** To do this, email the complete ethics form to the UCL Data Protection Office. Once your registration number is received, add it to the form* and submit it to your supervisor for approval. If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

Please note that the completion of the UCL GDPR online training is mandatory for all PhD students.

Section 1 – Project details

- a. Project title: Exploring how a sense of well-being and belonging is constructed in the accounts of autistic girls who attend mainstream schools in the UK
- b. Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678): Nastassja Brennan De Vine 16032735
- c. ***UCL Data Protection Registration Number:** Z6364106/2021/02/23
 - a. Date Issued: 05/02/2021
- d. Supervisor/Personal Tutor: DR Georgia Pavlopoulou / DR Christopher Clarke
- e. Department: Psychology and human development
- f. Course category (Tick one):
PhD

EdD

DEdPsy

- g. **If applicable**, state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.
- h. Intended research start date: March 2021
- i. Intended research end date: September 2022
- j. Country fieldwork will be conducted in: England
- k. If research to be conducted abroad please check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be required before ethical approval can be granted: [UCL travel advice webpage](#)
- l. Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

Yes

External Committee Name: Enter text

Date of Approval: Enter text

No **go to Section 2**

If yes:

- Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply)

- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Questionnaires
- Action Research
- Observation
- Literature Review
- Controlled trial/other intervention study
- Use of personal records
- Systematic review – **if only method used go to Section 5**
- Secondary data analysis – **if secondary analysis used go to Section 6**
- Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups

Other, give details: Enter text

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). *Minimum 150 words required.*

Purpose of research:

The purpose of the research is to address the need to better understand the lived school experiences of adolescent autistic girls at mainstream school by exploring school factors that have an impact on their sense of belonging and well-being. This will be done by capturing the meaning of 'sense of belonging' and well-being for autistic girls and exploring what they perceive as facilitating factors of and barriers to their sense of belonging at mainstream school. This study will also explore what autistic girls believe would support their sense of belonging in mainstream school settings.

Research aims:

- To explore how autistic girls define their sense of belonging and well-being such as mood, sleep, and eating.
- To describe the factors that contribute to and take away from their sense of belonging in their mainstream school
- To explore what parts of 'belonging' in school make a difference to their educational progress and well-being (such as eating, sleep and mood)
- To understand the needs and aspirations of autistic girls in a mainstream school environment (what they wish their teachers and peers knew)

Rationale:

The research addresses a topic of urgent concern for 4 reasons.

1. Lack of research into autistic girls

Research investigating autism has developed over the last few years, however a majority of the research have used samples that are disproportionately male (Halladay et al., 2015). This is most likely due to the higher number of males than females receiving a diagnosis of autism, which has led to a greater understanding of autism as it typically presents in males (Cridland et al., 2014). While there is a growing body of research investigating autistic girl's experiences, teachers that work in schools are reporting limited knowledge on how to support autistic girls (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). This is particularly important as the number of girls being diagnosed with autism is increasing (Lai et al., 2015). This research aims to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of adolescent autistic girls to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of this overlooked group.

2. The staggering exclusion rates of autistic people and mental health concerns

In England if the pupil's behaviour does not conform to the school's behaviour policy or causes harm to peers or staff they may be at risk for exclusion (Department for Education, 2012). Although children with disabilities are protected under the Equality Act (2010), with schools having to take positive action to reduce exclusions of children with disabilities, pupils with special educational needs (SEN) account for up to seven of every ten permanent exclusions in England (Department for Education, 2015). This is a particular problem for autistic pupils, with 4,500 being excluded in one year which is a 60% increase since 2011 (Ambitious About Autism, 2018). The All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (2017) raised concern about the high numbers of young people on the autism spectrum being excluded from school and have seen this as an indication that autistic pupils' needs are not being met. Furthermore, the Department of Education (2018) found that pupils with autism as a primary diagnosis are over 3 times more likely to receive a fixed term exclusion than pupils without SEN. Exclusion from school puts autistic people at greater risk for mental health difficulties (Sproston, Sedgewick, & Crane, 2017). This is particularly true for autistic girls who experience a high level of anxiety which poses a risk to their well-being (Sproston et al., 2017). Therefore, it is critical to explore autistic pupil's experiences and perspectives on the facilitating factors of school belonging and the barriers to school belonging, as a means to promote school belonging and well-being and reduce the exclusion figures.

3. School belonging is linked to well-being however is under-researched in autistic girls

Sense of belonging is proposed to be linked to psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Research has reported high rates of isolation and mental health concerns amongst autistic girls (Nichols et al., 2009). Studies have shown that poor relationships between pupils and school staff influence self-esteem and are linked to poorer attainment and poorer mental health (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Teachers have reported that they find it difficult to build relationships with autistic girls as they are unsure how to support their needs (Moyle & Porter, 2015). Thus, schools should be investing additional efforts to track autistic pupils well-being and provide the support required.

Exploring the lived experiences of autistic girls in terms of their sense of belonging experiences could provide vital insights into the factors contributing to and taking away from their well-being. However, there are limited studies that have explored the sense of belonging experiences of adolescent autistic girls in mainstream settings.

4. The potential for an experience based approach to co-produce knowledge about autistic girls with autistic girls

An advisory group of three autistic girls will work with myself and Dr Pavlopoulou to define the study objectives and review my information sheets, consent letters and interview schedule. These individuals have been self-identified as volunteers to help with the topic, recognising the importance of this research. Furthermore, interview methods will include participant-driven photos, collages, stories, drawings or models to facilitate participant's expression of experiences and ideas around school belonging and well-being. This approach will increase involvement of participants during data production. The hope is to share autistic girl's views and perceptions of the factors that contribute and take away from feeling a sense of belonging in school environments with schools, teachers and relevant professional such as Educational Psychologists.

Research questions:

1. How do adolescent autistic girls define a sense of belonging at school?
2. What do adolescent autistic girls feel about their school belonging experiences in mainstream secondary school?
 - a. What do they feel are the facilitating factors of school belonging?
 - b. What do they feel are the barriers to school belonging?
3. In what ways do school belonging experiences impact on well-being?
4. What do autistic girls wish school staff and peers knew about their school belonging experiences and well-being?

Research framework:

The conceptual framework of this study adopts a lifeworld-led framework. This is an experience-based collaborative and flexible approach to understanding how autistic girls experience school (Dimitriou & Pavlopoulou, 2019; Pavlopoulou, 2020). An experience-based approach embedded in humanistic psychology could serve as a basis to explore school belonging experiences with autistic girls rather than on or for them. The roots of this approach can be traced in ethics of care, compassion, and it declares a deep appreciation towards neurodiversity (Milton, 2014 as cited in Pavlopoulou, 2020). It is hoped that this framework will serve as a holistic and valuable method for reflective practice, in coming to understand autistic girls lived experiences.

Research Design:

A qualitative approach seems appropriate for this research as this approach can be used to "understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage and live through situations (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999, p.216).

Methodology:

Advisory group

Through pre-existing charity contacts an advisory group of three autistic girls will review my interview schedule. The interview schedule (see appendix 1) will include questions based on the existing literature and will consider gaps on the topic. The advisory panel will also offer feedback on the information sheets and consent forms.

Piloting interview schedule and tasks

I will pilot the interview questions, with two participants and will modify as per their feedback. I will consider whether the questions are appropriate and whether the questions answer the aims of the research. The interview schedule will be finalised after the pilot study.

Conducting personalised interviews

I will meet with each participant virtually, either online or over the phone, to describe the aims of the study and the types of questions I will ask them. Each participant will be given different options of how they would like to answer the interview questions. I will explain that they can choose between taking photos, making collages, drawing pictures, writing stories, making models from clay or Lego or just speaking with me. This information will also be provided on the pupil information sheet. Thus, each participant will be given the choice to respond to the interview questions using preferred means. This way I can initiate topics that are relevant to their experiences of school belonging and well-being. Participants will be given two weeks to complete these activities if they choose any of the aforementioned activities to answer the interview questions. All interviews will be done virtually, either online using MS Teams with the option of having video on or off or over the phone. This can be decided by the participants, as I aim to make them feel as comfortable as possible. The interviews will last between 40 minutes to 1 hour.

If participants choose to bring their own photos to the interview I will go through an Ethic Photographer List (Pavlopoulou, 2020) which will include key guidance such as:

- Pictures taken must not intrude into ones' privacy, must not disclose embarrassing facts about others, must not place individuals in a false light, must not be taken advantage of for profit
- Importance of obtaining permission from photo targets using a consent form (includes information about project, right to refuse to participate)
- The importance of not taking photos that are unsafe, disrespectful, or illegal

If the participants decide to use photos, collages, drawing, stories or models as a means to answer the interview questions I will use the SHoWED Protocol to guide the discussion. The SHoWED Protocol includes;

S- what do you **See** happening here?

H- what is actually **Happening** here?

O- how does this relate to **Our** lives?

W- **Why** does the barrier/facilitator exist?

E- how could this photo or drawing **Educate** others about the school belonging experiences of autistic girls?

D- what can we **Do** about it?

The purpose of using these questioning techniques is to “identify the problem or the asset, critically discuss the roots of the situation, and develop strategies for changing the situation” (Wang et al., 1998). In line with this study, the goals of the discussions will be to explore the meanings of school belonging to the participants, to explore their facilitating factors of and barriers to school belonging, and to discuss the changes they want to see in their lives.

The research will comply with BPS (2018) code of ethics and conduct.

Background data measures

- Socio demographic and family history record
- Goodenow’s (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership Questionnaire. This is a self-report questionnaire which explores school belonging felt by adolescents. This scale consists of 18-items which were developed through testing with both urban and suburban pupils. Internal consistency reliability ranges from .77 to .88. The scale asks how much do you agree or disagree with the statements using a five-point Likert scale; 1= ‘strongly disagree’, 2= ‘disagree’, 3= ‘neither agree nor disagree’, 4= ‘agree’, 5= ‘strongly agree’. Example items include “most teachers at this school are interested in me” and “I feel proud of belonging to this school”.
- The Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile (Dunn, 2002) will be used to measure sensory processing patterns and effects on functional performance. This is a self-reported questionnaire that consists of 60 questions. Example items include “I only eat familiar foods”, “I trip or bump into things” and “I dislike having my back rubbed”. These items use a Likert scale; almost never, seldom, occasionally, frequently, almost always.
- Wellbeing Measurement for Schools Wellbeing Measurement Survey. This is a self-report survey that measures wellbeing in schools, including friendships, feelings and school life. The results obtained from this survey can be used to consider areas of the pupil’s strengths and positive qualities and to identify priority for the school to improve pupil wellbeing. Items on this survey cover emotional difficulties (example items include ‘I feel lonely’) and behavioural difficulties (example items include ‘I lose my temper’) using a 3-point Likert scale; never, sometimes, always. Items on this survey cover life satisfaction (example items include ‘I have what I want in life’) using a 6-point Likert scale; strongly disagree, moderately disagree, mildly disagree, mildly agree, moderately agree, strongly agree. Items on this survey cover family support (example items include ‘at home, there is an adult who is interested in my school work’), school support (example items include ‘at school, there is an adult who really cares about me’) and wider support (example item ‘away from school, there is an adult who I trust’) using a 5-point Likert scale; never-always. Items on this survey cover peer support (example item include ‘are there students at your school who would choose you on their team at school’) and participation in home and school (example items include ‘I help my family make decisions) using a 5-point Likert scale; never to always.

(<https://www.corc.uk.net/media/1739/survey-screen-shots-v2.pdf>)

Recruitment plan and procedure

I will conduct qualitative research with autistic girls, gaining access through existing networks with schools in the local authority I am currently working, and building on Dr Pavlopoulou's collaborations with charities including National Autistic Society and London Autism Charity. We will also make use of relevant social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook and general Interest pages. This is to ensure a diverse sample for the study.

I will email school information sheets (see appendix 2) to headteachers and SENCOs of the school the females attend in the local authority I am currently working. Dr Pavlopoulou will send charity information sheets (see appendix 3) to the charities and will also recruit through relevant social media platforms.

Once potential participants have been identified I will contact parents/guardians and email information sheets (see appendix 4) and consent forms (see appendix 5).

Once written consent has been provided by parents/guardians I will reach out to the participants and ask if they are willing to meet with me to learn about the research and decide if they would like to participate. I will explain that they can choose from different options including, taking photos, making collages, drawing pictures, writing stories, making models from clay or Lego or engaging in dialogue with me. I will explain that participants will have 2 weeks to do this or they can choose to just speak with me and answer some questions. These options are provided to personalise and facilitate participant's authentic expression. This initial meeting will be done virtually held either online (via MS Teams) with the participants having the option to have their video on or off or it could be held over the telephone. This can be decided by the participants to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible. This meeting will last between 30 and 40 minutes, depending on the questions asked by the participants.

Following the initial virtual meeting I will send the participants the pupil information sheet (see appendix 6) and pupil consent form (see appendix 7). Pupils will be required to provide written consent to participate in the study. Parental permission can be superseded by a young person's refusal at any point.

Once written consent has been provided by the participants, I will arrange an online (via MS Teams) or telephone meeting for the semi-structured interviews.

Participants can decide which method they feel most comfortable with. If the participant chose to complete the activities, I will ask them to bring the activity along for the interview. If they don't want to bring the activity along that is fine. The interview would involve questions about the photos, drawings, collages, stories or models to explore what they mean to the participant and what can be done to reduce barriers to school belonging to improve mental health and well-being. If the participant chose not to complete an activity, I will just speak with her and ask her questions about school belonging experiences. The interview will last approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour. The semi-structured interview will be audio recorded, which is stipulated in the pupil information sheet. There will be no video recording of the semi-structured interviews.

I aim to recruit 20 autistic girls. This research will use purposive sampling as participants will be selected on the following inclusion criteria:

- Girl
- Aged 12-18 years old
- Formal diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder
- Attending mainstream secondary school (including unit/provision attached to mainstream) for at least 6 months. This will include girls who have been home schooling during the COVID 19 lockdown.
- Able to express themselves verbally

Analysis plan

The descriptive statistics data will not be statistically analysed due to the sample size, however, will be used to help contextualise the results and help the readers understand the profile of the participants.

The interview data will be analysed using thematic analysis by applying the six-phase process adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of 1) becoming familiar with the data and seeking meanings and patterns 2) generating initial codes using Excel 3) developing broader themes to re-organise the identified codes using visual schemes and organising them into themes and sub-themes with coloured grids on Excel 4) reviewing the accuracy of themes 5) defining the themes and 6) producing the study report.

Section 3 – research Participants (tick all that apply)

- Early years/pre-school
- Ages 5-11
- Ages 12-16
- Young people aged 17-18
- Adults please specify below
- Unknown – specify below
- No participants

I will establish a database of semi-structured interviews, comprising 20 interviews with autistic adolescent girls. The interviews will be virtual, either online using MS Teams or over the phone.

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC).

Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

- a. Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?
Yes* No

- b. Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?
Yes* No
- c. Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?
Yes* No

* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable)

- a. Will you be collecting any new data from participants?
Yes* No
- b. Will you be analysing any secondary data?
Yes* No

* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

*If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) **and** if you have answered **No** to both questions, please go to **Section 8 Attachments**.*

Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

- a. Name of dataset/s: Enter text
- b. Owner of dataset/s: Enter text
- c. Are the data in the public domain?
Yes No
If no, do you have the owner's permission/license?
Yes No*
- d. Are the data special category personal data (i.e. personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation)?
Yes* No
- e. Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?
Yes No*
- f. **If no**, was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?
Yes No*
- g. **If no**, was data collected prior to ethics approval process?

Yes No*

* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

If secondary analysis is only method used **and** no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to **Section 9 Attachments**.

Section 7 – Data Storage and Security

Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.

- a. Data subjects - Who will the data be collected from?
Females aged between 12-18 years old
- b. What data will be collected? Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected
I will collect data on self-declared ethnicity and class. The interviews will involve information about the girl's schools.

Is the data anonymised? Yes No*

Do you plan to anonymise the data? Yes* No

Do you plan to use individual level data? Yes* No

Do you plan to pseudonymise the data? Yes* No

* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

- c. **Disclosure** – Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?
The pseudonymised data will be used in my final thesis write-up, academic articles if my thesis is published, briefings for dissemination to the schools, females with autism, the families and relevant professionals such as Educational Psychologists
Disclosure – Will personal data be disclosed as part of your project?
No
- d. Data storage – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e. UCL network, encrypted USB stick**, encrypted laptop** etc.
UCL data safe haven, encrypted data on laptop. Data will be pseudonymised in its transcribed form, and only one 'master' list will be held with original identities, stored separately to the transcriptions.

** Advanced Encryption Standard 256 bit encryption which has been made a security standard within the NHS

- e. **Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution)** – Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes and departments)?
Yes No

- f. How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?
Data will be retained for 10 years as required by UCL. The data will be stored on UCL Data Safe Haven.

Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with GDPR and state what these arrangements are)

No

Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.)

No, as this is a small-scale study

- g. If personal data is used as part of your project, describe what measures you have in place to ensure that the data is only used for the research purpose e.g. pseudonymisation and short retention period of data'.
Data will be pseudonymised in its transcribed form, and only one 'master' list will be held with original identities.

** Give further details in Section 8 Ethical Issues*

Section 8 – Ethical Issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

All issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

- Methods
- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics
- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/Anonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

The research will be conducted in an ethical manner, especially informed by a co-production group of three autistic girls to feedback on the aims, methods and interview schedule.

Sampling and recruitment:

To ensure a diverse sample, my supervisor and I will invite participation through my connections to schools in the local authority I work, through relevant social media platforms (e.g. twitter), and via Dr Pavlopoulou's collaborations with charities including National Autistic Society and London Autism Charity. I will ask interested parents/ guardians if they think their daughter might be open to speaking to me. However, parental permission can be superseded by a young person's refusal at any point. I will ask interested participants to self-declare socio demographic information and will ask schools for school attendance records. I will also ask participants to fill out various self-reports including; Goodenow's (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership Questionnaire, The Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile (Dunn, 2002), Wellbeing Measurement for Schools Wellbeing Measurement Survey, Myself-As-A-Learner Scale (MALS), and the Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS).

All meetings with participants will be done virtually, either online (via MS Teams) or over the phone. Participants can choose which method they prefer. The semi-structured interviews will be audio recorded (as stipulated in the pupil information sheet) but not video recorded. This is to ensure I can transcribe the data and analyse the data.

Informed consent:

I have produced information sheets for parents/guardians, young people, schools and charities. I have produced consent forms for both parents/guardians and young people. These use accessible English, and highlight anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point without an explanation.

Written consent from parents/guardians and young people is required to participate in this research. However, parental permission can be superseded by a young person's refusal at any point.

Potentially vulnerable participants:

I seek to interview up to 20 autistic adolescents. I will first obtain written consent from the parents/guardian and then from the young person, emphasizing the young person's rights of refusal and withdrawal. I will ask the participants to represent their school belonging experiences, including parts of school that make them feel accepted, valued and included and parts of school that make them feel isolated, anxious or excluded, through a choice of photos, collages, drawings, story writing, models or just speaking. The participants are given the freedom to choose based on their interests and preferences. These representations will help guide the conversations with the adolescent females. I am aware of the emotional nature of discussing inclusion and exclusion school experiences and the anxiety and distress that these issues may cause for some participants, which may be particularly so for people with autism. Should the participants show signs of distress, I will immediately pause the interview and offer to terminate it without an explanation needed. I will also signpost phone lines and online materials if they want to seek help, such as Samaritans Young Minds.

Strategies to minimize any anxiety, embarrassment or discomfort that participants might experience

There is a low risk that participants will experience anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment in meeting and talking to me, an unfamiliar person. There are a number of steps the researcher will take to minimise any anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment:

- The participants can choose how they would like to have the initial meeting with the researcher and the interview. This may be over the phone or online (via MS Teams) with or without their videos on. The aim is to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible.
- During the initial meeting the researcher will build rapport with the participants by playing ice-breaker games
- The researcher will clearly explain to the participants that they can choose a made-up name to be referred to in the final research write-up. It will be explained to the participants that this will help keep their confidentiality and anonymity.
- The researcher will clearly explain to the participants that there are no right or wrong answers

If situations of anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment arise, the researcher will immediately stop the task and ask if the participant is willing to continue or would rather opt out without having to provide a reason.

Data storage and security, data confidentiality and anonymity:

Data will be securely stored in the UCL data safe haven. I will immediately ask the participants to choose a pseudonym, and if they don't want to I will choose one for them. I will also apply pseudonyms to names of schools and other potential identifiers. There will only be one list containing un-anonymised data and it will be secured being encrypted with a password, known only to myself and stored away from the dataset on the UCL network.

Reporting:

All participants will receive copies of the project briefing designed for young people and families with autism. School's will also receive a copy.

Please confirm that the processing of the data is not likely to cause substantial damage or distress to an individual

Yes

Section 9 – Attachments. *Please attach the following items to this form, or explain if not attached*

- a. Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research (List attachments below)

Yes No

- Appendix 1: Interview Schedule
- Appendix 2: School Information Sheet
- Appendix 3: Charity Information Sheet

- Appendix 4: Parent Information Sheet
 - Appendix 5: Parent Consent Form
 - Appendix 6: Pupil Information Sheet
 - Appendix 7: Pupil Consent Form
- b. Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee Yes
- c. The proposal ('case for support') for the project Yes
- d. Full risk assessment Yes

Section 10 – Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.

Yes No

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.

Yes No

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name Nastassja Brennan De Vine

Date 22/01/2021

Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.

Notes and references

Professional code of ethics

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:

British Psychological Society (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*

Or

British Educational Research Association (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*

Or

British Sociological Association (2017) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the Institute of Education Research Ethics website.

Disclosure and Barring Service checks

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE.

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

Further references

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

Departmental Use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name:

Student department:

Course:

Project Title:

Reviewer 1

Supervisor/first reviewer name: Georgia Pavlopoulou

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

No, Nastassja has worked hard to prepare this plan and has made great efforts to create a flexible and inclusive engagement plan. Her pilot questions are good and she has considered key Ethic issues that may arise in a satisfactory way.

Supervisor/first reviewer signature:

Date: 8/02/2021

Reviewer 2

Second reviewer name: Christopher Clarke

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

No. Nastassja has worked very closely with her supervisors to make sure that the needs of the participants have been at the forefront of her thoughts and decisions. Nastassja has made her consent and information forms accessible and transparent allowing informed decisions from participants to be made about their consent to take part in the research.

Second reviewer signature:

Date: 05.02.2021

Decision on behalf of reviewers

Approved

Approved subject to the following additional measures

Not approved for the reasons given below

Referred to the REC for review

Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC:

Comments from reviewers for the applicant:

Once it is approved by both reviewers, students should submit their ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team: IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk.

Appendix G: Research poster



Exploring how a sense of well-being and belonging is constructed in the accounts of autistic girls who attend mainstream schools in the UK

Here is a picture of me



Research is approved by UCL IOE Ethics Committee



Who am I and why am I doing this?

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist, studying at IOE UCL, supervised by Dr Georgia Pavlopoulou and Dr Chris Clarke.

I would like to understand what factors contribute to and take away from feeling a sense of belonging in school and how this affects your well-being. This study will also explore what autistic girls believe would support their sense of belonging in mainstream school settings.

I hope that this research can help school staff and policy makers to make schools a better place for autistic girls.

Who is eligible to participate?

- Girls
- Between the ages 12-18
- Diagnosis of autism
- Attending a mainstream school

Sample of activities



What is required?

We will meet online.

You will be asked to complete an activity if you want to. If you don't want to that's fine, you can just answer some questions.



Appendix H: Information sheets

Charity Information Sheet

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Nastassja Devine. I am currently completing a Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child, and Adolescent Psychology at University College London, Institute of Education (UCL IOE) and I am working for the Hertfordshire Educational Psychology Service. I am undertaking research into girls with autism as part of my Doctorate. I am writing to explain my research project and to ask if you would mind sharing this sheet with potentially interested individuals.

Title of research

Exploring how a sense of well-being and belonging is constructed in the accounts of autistic girls who attend mainstream schools in the UK

Why is this important?

Research investigating autism has developed over the last few years, however the majority of the research have used samples that are disproportionately male. This is most likely due to the higher number of males than females receiving a diagnosis of autism, which has led to a greater understanding of autism as it typically presents in males. Therefore, research on autistic girls is particularly limited which is problematic as the number of females being diagnosed with autism is increasing and there is little known about how to support them in school. This research aims to address this gap by exploring the sense of belonging felt by adolescent autistic girls to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of this overlooked group.

Sense of belonging is proposed to be linked to psychological well-being. Research has reported high rates of isolation and mental health concerns amongst autistic girls. Exploring the lived experiences of autistic girls in terms of their sense of belonging experiences could provide vital insights into the factors contributing to and taking away from their well-being. However, there are very limited studies that have explored the sense of belonging

experiences of adolescent autistic girls in mainstream settings.

What would this involve

I will meet with the young person twice, either online using MS Teams (video on or off) or over the phone. This will not be during school hours and I will arrange this with the participant's parents.

The first time I will meet with the young person, I will go through the aim of my study and some of the questions I will ask her if she chooses to participate in the study. I will explain that over the next two weeks she can document the factors that contribute to and take away from feeling a sense of belonging in school. I will provide her with different ways she may wish to do this; photos, collages, drawings, writing stories or making models using clay or Lego. The participant will be given 2 weeks to complete this. I will also explain to the pupil that she doesn't have to document her experiences, and if she prefers she can meet with me another time to answer some questions about her school experiences.

The second time I meet with the participant, I will ask interview questions. If the participant chose to complete one of the activities, I will ask her to bring the activity along for the interview. If she doesn't want to bring the activity along that is fine. The interview would involve questions about the photos, drawings, collages, stories or models to explore what they mean to the participant and what can be done to reduce barriers to school belonging to improve mental health and well-being. If the participant chose not to complete an activity, I will just speak with her and ask her questions about school belonging experiences. The interview will last approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour. With the participant's consent, pictures of the activities may be included in the research write-up. The pupil or identifiable school features would not appear in these photographs.

Interviews will be recorded on a dictaphone and later transcribed. Once transcribed, recordings will be deleted.

When and where will the research take place?

The research will take place between March and December 2021. Due to COVID-19 restrictions the interview will have to be done remotely. This can be over the phone or online (MS Teams) where the participant can choose to have her video on or off. I aim to make the participant feel as comfortable as possible.

How is confidentiality maintained?

The participant will be asked to choose a code name and the school will remain anonymous in the research write-up. This is to ensure the pupil and the school is not identifiable. Interview transcriptions will be held in confidence and will be completely anonymous. All data will be stored in a password protected computer and will be destroyed when the analysis and final research paper is complete. The final report will be used for my doctoral thesis.

How is consent obtained?

The parents/guardian needs to provide written consent for their child to participate in the study. I will meet with the potential participant, virtually, to introduce myself and explain the study. If the young person is interested in participating in the study she will have to provide written consent. Parental permission can be superseded by a young person's refusal at any point.

Can the participant withdraw consent?

Participation is voluntary and the participant can withdraw their consent at any point without needing reasons. All contributions made by the participants at this point can be destroyed if the participant wishes.

Contact details

For further information about this research please contact me, Nastassja at

With many thanks and best wishes,

Nastassja Devine
Trainee Educational Psychologist



Data Protection Privacy Notice: The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Office provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. UCL's Data Protection Officer can also be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-research-participant-privacy-notice>

SCHOOL INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Nastassja Devine. I am currently completing a Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child, and Adolescent Psychology at University College London, Institute of Education (UCL IOE) and I am working for the Hertfordshire Educational Psychology Service. I am undertaking research into girls with autism as part of my Doctorate. I am writing to explain my research and would be very grateful if you could read the following information.

Title of research

Exploring how a sense of well-being and belonging is constructed in the accounts of autistic girls who attend mainstream schools in the UK

Aims of the research

This study seeks insight into the school belonging experiences of adolescent autistic girls in mainstream school, with a focus on the facilitating factors of and barriers to feeling accepted, valued and included. It will also consider how schools and professionals can address any challenges that are highlighted.

Why is this important?

Research investigating autism has developed over the last few years, however the majority of the research have used samples that are disproportionately male. This is most likely due to the higher number of males than females receiving a diagnosis of autism, which has led to a greater understanding of autism as it typically presents in males. Therefore, research on autistic girls is particularly limited which is problematic as the number of females being diagnosed with autism is increasing and there is little known about how to support them in school. This research aims to address this gap by exploring the sense of belonging felt by adolescent autistic girls to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of this overlooked group.

Sense of belonging is proposed to be linked to psychological well-being. Research has reported high rates of isolation and mental health concerns amongst autistic girls. Exploring the lived experiences of autistic girls in terms

of their sense of belonging experiences could provide vital insights into the factors contributing to and taking away from their well-being. However, there are very limited studies that have explored the sense of belonging experiences of adolescent autistic girls in mainstream settings.

What would this involve

I will meet with the pupil twice, either online using MS Teams (video on or off) or over the phone. This will not be during school hours and I will arrange this with the participant's parents.

The first time I will meet with the pupil, I will go through the aim of my study and some of the questions I will ask her if she chooses to participate in the study. I will explain to the pupil that over the next two weeks she can document the factors that contribute to and take away from feeling a sense of belonging in school. I will provide her with different ways she may wish to do this; photos, collages, drawings, writing stories or making models using clay or Lego. The pupil will be given 2 weeks to complete this. I will also explain to the pupil that she doesn't have to document her experiences, and if she prefers she can meet with me another time to answer some questions about her school experiences.

The second time I meet with the pupil, I will ask interview questions. If the pupil chose to complete one of the activities, I will ask her to bring the activity along for the interview. If she doesn't want to bring the activity along that is fine. The interview would involve questions about the photos, drawings, collages, stories or models to explore what they mean to the pupil and what can be done to reduce barriers to school belonging to improve mental health and well-being. If the pupil chose not to complete an activity, I will just speak with her and ask her questions about school belonging experiences. The interview will last approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour. With the pupil's consent, pictures of the activities may be included in the research write-up. The pupil or identifiable school features would not appear in these photographs.

Interviews will be recorded on a dictaphone and later transcribed. Once transcribed, recordings will be deleted.

Where and when will the research take place?

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I will interview the pupil either via the telephone or online (MS teams). This does not have to be during school time. I arrange a time for this with the pupil and their family.

How is confidentiality maintained?

The pupil will be asked to choose a code name and the school will remain anonymous in the research write-up. This is to ensure the pupil and the school is not identifiable. Interview transcriptions will be held in confidence and will be completely anonymous. All data will be stored in a password protected computer and will be destroyed when the analysis and final research paper is complete. The final report will be used for my doctoral thesis.

How is consent obtained?

The parents/guardian needs to provide written consent for their child to participate in the study. I will meet with the potential participant, virtually, to introduce myself and explain the study. If the young person is interested in participating in the study she will have to provide written consent. Parental permission can be superseded by a young person's refusal at any point.

Can the participant withdraw consent?

Participation is voluntary and the participant can withdraw their consent at any point without needing reasons. All contributions made by the participants at this point can be destroyed if the participant wishes.

Contact details

For further information about this research please contact me, Nastassja at or

With many thanks and best wishes,

Nastassja Devine

Trainee Educational Psychologist



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PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Nastassja Devine. I am currently completing a Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child, and Adolescent Psychology at University College London, Institute of Education (UCL IOE) and I am working for the Hertfordshire Educational Psychology Service. I am undertaking research into autistic girls as part of my Doctorate. I am writing to tell you about my research and to invite your daughter to take part in this research.

Title of research

Exploring how a sense of well-being and belonging is constructed in the accounts of autistic girls who attend mainstream schools in the UK

Why is this important?

Research investigating autism has developed over the last few years, however the majority of the research have used samples that are disproportionately male. This is most likely due to the higher number of males than females receiving a diagnosis of autism, which has led to a greater understanding of autism as it typically presents in males. Therefore, research on autistic girls is particularly limited which is problematic as the number of females being diagnosed with autism is increasing and there is little known about how to support them in school. This research aims to address this gap by exploring the sense of belonging felt by adolescent autistic girls to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of this overlooked group.

Sense of belonging is proposed to be linked to psychological well-being. Research has reported high rates of isolation and mental health concerns amongst autistic girls. Exploring the lived experiences of autistic girls in terms of their sense of belonging experiences could provide vital insights into the factors contributing to and taking away from their well-being. However, there are very limited studies that have explored the sense of belonging experiences of adolescent autistic girls in mainstream settings.

What will my child do?

I will meet with your daughter twice, either online using MS Teams (video on or off) or over the phone. This is completely up to your daughter, as I aim to make her feel as comfortable as possible.

Firstly, I will meet with your daughter, to discuss my research and some of the questions I will ask her if she chooses to participate in the study. I will explain to your daughter that over the next two weeks she can document the factors that contribute to and take away from feeling a sense of belonging in school. I will provide her with different ways she may wish to do this; photos, collages, drawings, writing stories or making models using clay or Lego. Your daughter will be given 2 weeks to complete this. I will also explain to your daughter that she doesn't have to document her experiences, and if she prefers she can meet with me and answer questions about her school experiences.

The second time I will meet with your daughter, I will ask her interview questions. If your daughter chose to complete one of the activities, I will ask her to bring the activity along for the interview. If she doesn't want to bring the activity along that is fine. The interview would involve questions about the photos, drawings, collages, stories or models to explore what they mean to your daughter and what can be done to reduce barriers to school belonging to improve mental health and well-being. If your daughter chose not to complete an activity, I will just speak with her and ask her questions about school belonging experiences. The interview will last approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour. With your daughter's consent, pictures of the activities may be included in the research write-up. Your daughter would not appear in these photographs.

I will make the process as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. Your daughter can choose which method she feels most comfortable using. Additionally, your daughter can include you or a person of her choosing to accompany her during the interview if this would make her more comfortable.

Interviews will be recorded on a dictaphone and later transcribed. Once transcribed, recordings will be deleted.

When and where will the research take place?

The research will take place between March and December 2021. Due to COVID-19 restrictions the interview will have to be done remotely. This can be over the phone or online (MS Teams) where your daughter can choose to have her video on or off. I aim to make your daughter feel as comfortable as possible.

How is confidentiality maintained?

Your daughter will be asked to choose a pseudonym (code name), which I will use when writing up the research. This is to ensure she is not identifiable. Interview transcriptions will be held in confidence and will be completely anonymous. All data will be stored in a password protected computer and will be destroyed when the analysis and final research paper is complete. The final report will be used for my doctoral thesis.

Can I withdraw my consent?

Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw your consent at any point without needing to give reasons. All contributions made by your daughter at this point can be destroyed if you wish.

What should I do now?

I would greatly appreciate your daughter's participation in this study. If you are happy to proceed please complete the **parent/guardian consent form and email it me, Nastassja.**

Contact detail

For further information about this research please contact me, Nastassja at

This research will help your daughter's school understand and support her needs more effectively. I would like to thank you very much for taking the time to consider your daughter's participation.

With many thanks and best wishes,

Nastassja Devine

Trainee Educational Psychologist



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Pupil Information Sheet

School experiences: autistic girl's experiences
Hello, my name is Nastassja (Nas-tass-ja)

Here is a picture of me:



I am a trainee Educational and Child Psychologist at a University called UCL in London.

I visit lots of different schools and I work with children and young people to think about how we might make school better. I need your help to understand your school experiences

Please read the following information that explains what I will ask from you if you agree to take part in my project.

What is the project about?

This project aims to find out about the school experiences of girls who are described as being on the autistic spectrum. This project wants to understand what factors make school better and what factors make school difficult.



What would I need to do?

I would like to meet with you and ask you some questions about school. This is important because teachers and psychologists want to learn and understand what school is like for autistic girls. This information will allow schools and psychologists to support positive school experiences for all autistic girls.

What questions will I ask?



Can you describe how you feel about going to school?



What experiences at school make you feel happy and calm?



Can you tell me about the people you like to spend time with at school?



Can you describe what breaktime is like for you?



Can you tell me about your relationship with your teachers?



Can you tell me about your relationship with other pupils?



Is there anything difficult about making friends at school?

What will happen if I decide to take part?

First, I will meet you to explain what the project is about. I will go through the questions I will ask you. This can be over the phone or it can be online with or without video. This is completely up to you.

Next, I will ask you to choose if you want to do an activity. This activity will be about parts of school that make you feel like you belong and parts of school that make you feel like you don't belong. You could:

- Take photos
- Draw pictures
- Make collages
- Write stories
- Make models from clay or Lego
- Just speak

You can choose if you want to do any of these activities. You will have 2 weeks to do these activities. If you don't want to do any of these activities, you can speak with me and answer some questions.

I want to find out what parts of school makes you feel accepted, needed and valued in school and if



any parts of school make you feel anxious, lonely or isolated.

These could be pictures, stories, drawings or models of....

- Activities or favourite things you do at school
- Activities or things that make school difficult
- Anything that helps make school better
- Activities you do with teachers or friends
- Playground, PE, music
- The school or classroom environment
- Daily routines, such as assembly and lunch time



I will make another appointment with you. If you chose an activity we can talk about your photos, drawings, collages, written stories or models you made. If you just want to talk and answer some questions that is fine. This meeting can be over the phone or online with or without video. This is completely up to you.

Your photos, drawings, collages, stories or models should show me how you feel about school. They can show me what makes you feel happy and accepted and what makes school difficult.



<p>I will ask you if you are willing to show me your pictures, drawings, collages, stories or models. If you are, I would like to use them to explain the parts of school that help to make you feel accepted and valued and parts of school that make you feel alone and anxious.</p>	
<p>I would like to audio record our conversation, if that's ok with you. This will not be a video recording and you can choose to have your video off. I will not keep the recording for long, it is just to help me remember what you say</p>	
<p>When I talk to you, there are no right or wrong answers. I just want to listen to you. You can stop at any time. That's okay.</p>	
<p>I will talk to other girls in the study and will write about what you tell me. I won't use any one's real names in my project. You can choose a pretend name.</p>	

Do I have to take part?

You can choose if you want to take part in the project. You can change your mind at any time if you do not want to take part anymore.

What do I do now?

If you want to take part in this project, **please sign your name** on the form called **Pupil Consent Form**. I will contact you to arrange a call either over the phone or online (over zoom or MS Teams) with or without video. You can choose what you feel most comfortable with.



Want to know more?

If you want to get in touch with me now, or any time, to ask questions, this is how to do it:

Telephone:

Email:

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this.

Nastassja Devine

Trainee Educational Psychologist



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Appendix I: Consent forms

PARENT CONSENT FORM

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions about what my daughter's participation will involve. **YES/NO**
2. I understand that any information which my daughter provides will be anonymised and used only for the purpose of this research, which may include publication. **YES/NO**
3. I understand that my daughter does not have to take part and she can withdraw consent any time. **YES/NO**
4. I understand that all information collection will be anonymized, and once the research project is completed all data will be destroyed securely. **YES/NO**
5. I give consent for my child to participate in the research. **YES/NO**

Name:

.....

Signature:

Date:



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Pupil Consent Form

I have read the information sheet and agree to take part in this study.

Please circle one of the answers below:

YES



NO



I understand that all information collected will be anonymized, and my real name will not be used.

Please circle one of the answers below:

YES



NO



I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can leave the study at any time, without giving reasons.

Please circle one of the answers below:

YES



NO



I am happy for the photographs, collages, drawing, written stories or models I complete to be used in the study.

Please circle one of the answers below:

YES



NO



Name:

.....

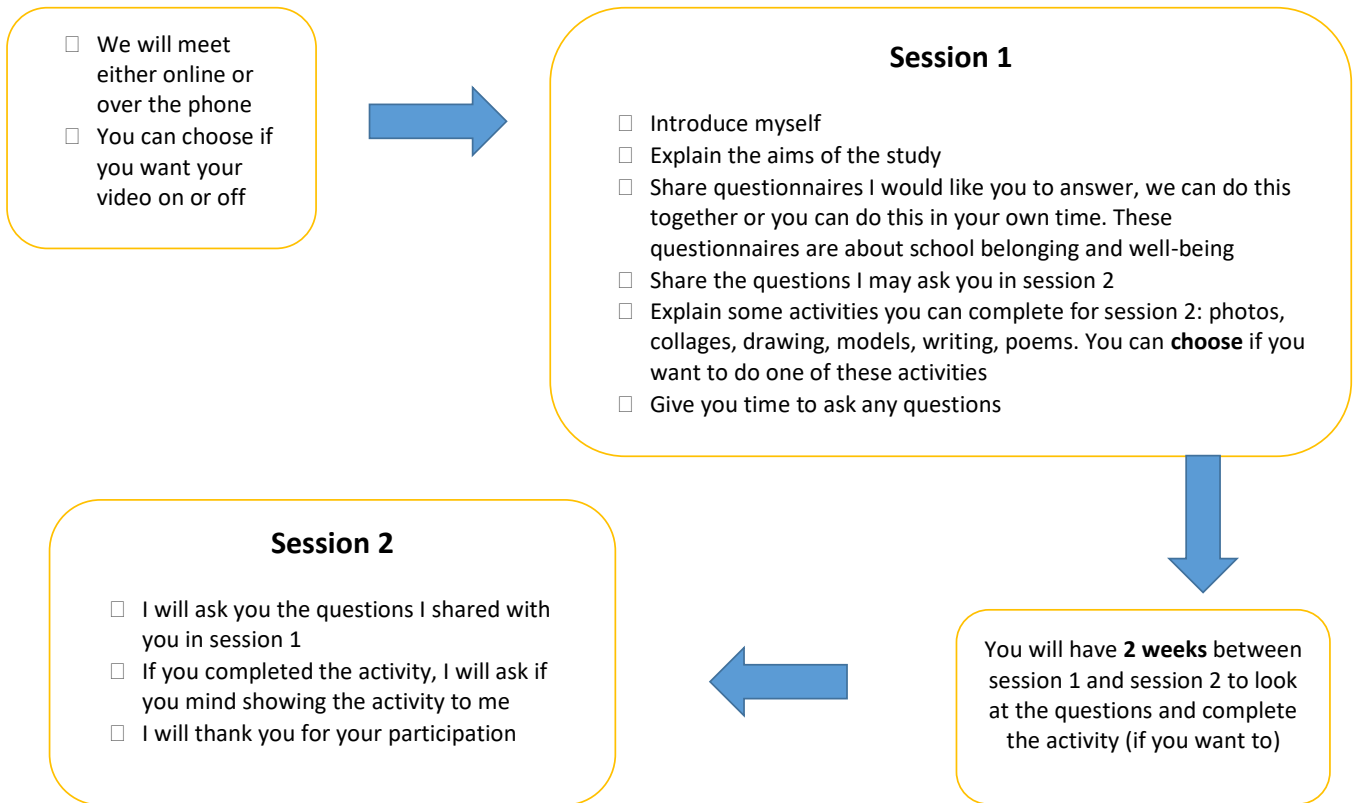
Signature:

Date:



Data Protection Privacy Notice: The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Office provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. UCL's Data Protection Officer can also be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-research-participant-privacy-notice>

Appendix J: Visual diagram of sessions



Appendix K: Script for session 1 and 2

Session 1:

1. Hello my name is Nastassja. Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study, it is lovely to meet you.
2. Thank you for signing the consent form to say that you want to take part in this study.
3. Today I will explain the **main aim of the study** and I will explain what you may have to do if you still want to participate in the study
4. I will **share** with you the **questions** I will ask you next time we meet
5. I will **share** a variety of **activities** you can do, which may show aspects of school that make you feel like you belong, accepted or valued or that make you feel anxious, lonely or isolated
6. I will share examples of activities you may want to choose; photos, drawings, collages, writing, Lego or clay models
7. I will ask you to fill out some questionnaires about your school belonging and well-being. I will give you the choice to do this together or in your own time.
8. It's important that the activity you may chose represents **your** experiences, as you may recall things differently to others
9. I will ask you to **choose a different name**, so that no one can identify you when I am writing this study-
10. I will ask you if you have **any questions** about the study or your participation
11. There are no silly questions, you can ask me any questions

Session 2:

1. Hello, as you know my name is Nastassja.
2. So that I know that you are uncomfortable or want to stop the interview please let me know. You can raise your hand, type in the chat box or just verbally let me know.

3. Today we will speak about parts of school that make you feel accepted, valued and wanted and parts of school that make you feel isolated, lonely and anxious
4. There are no right or wrong answers. I only want to hear what you think
5. I will be **recording** the interview and will be your scribe. If you want to check what I have written I am happy to share this with you.
6. Everything you share with me will be **confidential**. This means I will not share what you said with anyone. The only time I would share what you told is if I judge you are not safe or in danger.
7. Do you have any questions before we start?
8. We will first start with the interview, where I will ask you the questions I shared with you in session 1
9. Then I will ask you if you mind sharing your activity, if you chose to do complete the activity.
10. At the end of the session I will share a leaflet with you that contain my contact details if you want to add any further information you may think of after the session. The leaflet will also contain contact details of organisations if you feel you need someone to talk to after the sessions.

Appendix L: Example of SHoWED Protocol used in interview



Figure 8. Sample of a drawing under the subtheme: Entrapped in sensory environment by Jade, 17-year-old autistic student

Researcher using SHoWED Protocol	Participant response
<p>“Can you tell me what I am looking at?”</p>	<p>“This is me in the study room when it is too loud in there and umm I have a little spot where I sit at the table but I also have a spot where I sit between two lockers and I like it there cause its more enclosed and I sit there and kind of like it there. So that’s me sitting between the lockers in the room cause it’s too loud. And when I get overwhelmed I vocally stim and say ahhh so like there that too”</p>
<p>“ok and what does the stimming do for you?”</p>	<p>“it is usually me letting out stress and also it’s like helps drown out other noises”</p>

<p>“What is actually happening here, why did you draw this”</p>	<p>“well I am frustrated cause it loud and this affects me at school. And the anxiety mark is above my head.”</p>
<p>“ok and how does this relate to your daily life? “</p>	<p>“also like if there is a lot of sounds then any stress I feel gets amplified”</p>
<p>“ok and does it help when you have access to this space when you are stressed”</p>	<p>“I actually have a lot of these spaces around the school so like little crannies around the school. At first people are like why is she there but now people are used to it. And also so like free periods happen a lot and umm in these periods I either get work done or if it’s a bad day I don’t get anything done. This reflects my school life cause when I am having a bad day I am usually in the corner of the study room on the floor “</p>
<p>“why do you think this barrier exists? So why do you think you have to reach the point where you are sitting on the floor as in this picture”</p>	<p>“ahh cause school environment are not sensitive to the noise experiences we have. But there is no way to eliminate crowds but I can take myself away”</p>
<p>“ok and how do you think we could use this drawing to educate others about what its like to be autistic girl “</p>	<p>“about how umm it’s like for us. So when people first see me in these nooks they are like why is she is there and they will ask why are you there. And this can show that I am here cause I want to be alone and have space to regulate”</p>
<p>“so it can show others why you need this space.... and is there anything your school can do to help you not reach this point”</p>	<p>“umm well allow me to have headphones so this will stop me from being to this point”</p>

Appendix M: Post interview poster

Thank you for your participation!

If you have any questions or would like to share further thoughts, please contact me either via email:

Where can I get help?



You can get lots of advice online, or call their confidential helpline for more support

- Bullying at School 0808 800 2222 <http://www.bullying.co.uk/bullying-at-school/>
- CyberBullying 0808 800 2222 <http://www.bullying.co.uk/cyberbullying/>



The place to start if you have any mental health or wellbeing worries. There are separate sections for parents and for young people. http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_children_young_people



Lots of different concerns are covered, from bullying, to refusing to go to school, to what to do in a crisis. There are signposts to resources, and there are free chunks of online learning too, for areas such as gender identification and eating disorders. <http://minded.e-afh.org.uk/families/index.html>

Appendix N: Example of transcript

Jade Interview Transcribed

X= participant

N= researcher

N= can you describe what a good day would like for you?

X= ahh usually a good day is I turn up and I you know go into lessons and during my free period I go into the study room and get some work done

N= can you tell me more about the free periods?

X- so since I am a sixth former I get free periods where you are supposed to study or get work done

N= hmm ok

N= and how do you feel when you have a good day?

X= well usually if I manage to get work done I am proud of myself

N= ok and can you describe what a bad day would look like for you?

X= umm usually on a bad day I get really overwhelmed, not able to focus in classes or study periods. So I will leave school not having absorbed any information and this usually makes me really upset

N= ok, you used the word overwhelmed. What usually makes you feel this way

X= well loud noises or if it's just not a good day it feels more distressing than it should

N- hmm ok and what happens when it's not a good day?

X= I tune out a lot, I will get very quiet and I won't get any work done. So during study period I will just sit in the corner and focus on something. I will also do something to destress like watch YouTube videos

N= ok but im trying to understand what would trigger a bad day?

X=ahh well usually it's like you know loud noises or if someone honks their horn to me in the morning that will ruin my day.

N= ok and what support was given to you when you had a bad day?

X= majority of my teachers trust me to know what helps and they will let me listen to music during lessons to help me calm down. And you know some teachers don't like it cause they think it's not a proper working environment but it's like they trust that I

know what helps. As long as I don't listen to music when the teachers are speaking then its sensible I think

N= ok, it helps when teachers allow you to tell them what works and provide you the agency to use those strategies?

X= ya cause some teachers have in their head what we should do but the best teachers are the ones that give me leeway to choose what works for me as long as it doesn't disrupt other students or comprise the work environment

N= ya brilliant and I am curious, how do you think you reached this point with some teachers where they allow you to have input into what works for you

X= well one teacher has known me for ages so she just knew what worked for me. Others got my report at the start of the year and knew I am autistic so when I went to them to say can I listen to music they said ya sure

N= ok great

N= ok let's move onto the circle of belonging. So this is something I designed and it's called the circle of belonging. The people inside the circle who represent those pupils who feel included, accepted, wanted in your schools. And the people on the outside of the circle would be those pupils who feels lonely, isolated and excluded from school. So I am interested to hear about where you think you are most the time at your school?

X= ahh I don't feel particularly excluded but I don't feel included either

N= ok

X= so between the inner and outer circle. And this is because I don't really connect with people. And also it doesn't bother me that much that I am not included

N= ok so where would you like to be in the circle of belonging at school?

X= I am ok where I am. I don't talk to the other students that much. I only talk to them as much as I need to so like for homework projects. And I probably wouldn't change that cause it works fine the way it is.

N= ok and so what would belonging mean to you?

X= I guess it would mean have ahhhhh a discernible friendship group and people who know you quite well and can have conversations with you and like you know will consider you when talking about the class as a whole and you know I never really got there cause I was always an outside person but like I don't mind it that much. I mean logically I don't make the effort to connect with other people so you know I see why they don't connect with me very much

N= hmm ok and would you like it if others made an effort to get to know you

X= well I feel that I am not very good with relationships, like It would be cool to get along with others but I feel like I would be taking a lot out of others cause I don't probably pull my weight in relationships that much. So I am fine being a member of the school like officially cause I go there to learn but unofficially I am not really there

N= ok but for you belonging would be having connections with others

X= ya

N= ok and if you could give your school advice on how they could make you feel more accepted and valued what would you say to them?

X= I don't really know. I mean the problems I have had is people don't understanding that I will need to have ears plugged

N= ok but what about advice to your school about how they could help you connect with others? You have said this would make you feel more included and feel like you belong

X= I mean the only I have been in a significant group was last year in my drama course when we were put in a group to rehearse something and like that was the only time I had been to someone house. So like group work, but like set support groups for the entire term to do multiple pieces of homework together with

N= ok let's move on. So do you think that the people you spend time with affect how you feel about school?

X= ahh probably. So I used to be in friendship groups and depending on how others were feeling this would affect my mood. And I would also think that like if someone is in a bad mood I would immediately think that it's because of me like I did something to make them mad

N= oh right ok and do you think this has impacted on your desire to be in friendship groups?

X= I mean maybe it is one of the reasons I have stepped back from people cause I am really bad at noticing if I am sad for myself or if I am sad for someone else. I guess stepping back from people will stop me from being upset for no reason. I need to focus on myself and my exams rather than others

N= ok, and what experiences or thoughts might keep you awake at night?

X= no nothing

N= ok and what is it like for you when you awake up in the morning and you know you have to go to school

X= usually its ok and I will wake up and look my lessons and free time

N= ok and is there anything that might be happening at school that makes it hard to know you have to go to school

X= ahhh nothing no

N= ok. Can you tell me about the people you like spending time with at school?

X= ahh I tend to get very attached to teachers and if I click with a teacher my year will be way better. It just boosts my enjoyment of the lesson. And also if the class has a good vibe then I feel more comfortable in that class

N= ok and what about these teachers makes you feel comfortable with them?

X= well a lot of them tend to be very chatty with me and umm so because they teaching the subject and if I have an interest in the subject they will recognise it and it made me have a connection with them

N= ok and can you tell me more about this classroom environment that has a good vibe

X= ok so it's the English class, it has 20 people and each person has their own insight or interpretation of the text so like

N= ok, and how much do you feel like people at school understand you

X= umm I feel like they don't understand me in any psychic way but they are patient and like you know patient

N= and is there anything that could change so others understood you better?

X= ahh not really but ahh I do think people focus less on the fact that I have special needs and more on how I am a part of the school community

N= ok let's move to school routines. Which routines do you feel comfortable with

X= ahh so there is a short breaktime where I tend to stay inside cause I don't like transitional periods

N= ok and why is that

X= cause we got a breaktime in middle of a lesson so I just wait until it's over and people come back. I also ahh bring my lunch cause I hate the hall its very loud and irritating

N= anything else about transitions I should know

X= well the hallways are crowed and loud and so like ya

N= ok and are there parts about school that might make you feel lonely or anxious

X= ahh not really

N= is there anything difficult making friends at school

X= I have struggled with maintaining friendships. It's like a gender difference, so like girls want a lot of emotional literacy and to understand that they feeling a different way to what they are saying. And then I don't get that and I feel disconnected cause in their head they think that they have implied that they feel bad but then I don't pick up on that and it makes it hard to maintain

N=ok so are you saying it's hard to understand what someone is saying when they imply it but don't direct say it

X= ya so sometimes like ahh they might say, I am feel a little down and I want to curl up and lie in bed and I hear she want to lie in bed not I need comfort which is what they seeking

N= ohh ok and what would help decrease these difficulties

X= well they need to know that if they say things in a certain way I won't understand it and so they need to be upfront about what they want

N= and is there anything else you think I need to know to understand some of the difficulties you experience at school?

X= I don't think so no

N= so what does being autistic mean to you?

X= umm developmental disorder but in terms of how it affects me it affects how I communicate, how I approach social situations and how I process information. so autistics see things one at a time in great detail not the whole picture, like with language I tend to focus on one word and then will only understand what you have said based off that one word.

N= do you think being autistic impacts on your school experiences?

X= I mean ya, it basically affects everything like how I function. Sometimes I look back and I can tell how it went wrong in the past and its usually cause of my autism.

N= N= and if you could give advice to your school about you and autism, what would it be?

X= I mean I tend to say to people to let me do what I know works best. I don't expect everyone to know how to treat people with autism but just ask them what works and roll with it. So like it's unrealistic to not do anything and expect the teacher t know I am upset cause the class is too loud. But I think it's reasonable for like the teacher to allow me to wear ear plugs

N= and if you could describe your school experiences in three words, what would it be

X= ahhh its crowded, well there is learning, and ahhh community cause everything has to bounce off each to work properly

N= and do you feel a part of that community?

X= well no but I still play a role and I can tell them how to make me feel a part of it

N= N= ok last one, how do you think the pandemic has impacted your school experiences

X= SO NOW THERE IS bubbles and it has helped and the school day has been staggered and that has helped cause it's not as crowded and cause of the way the school day works. So I now I can stay in the classroom during break and not feel weird about it or stressed

N= anything else

X= well wearing masks in school is in some ways is ok cause it kind of like is necessary and sometimes it makes people feel less weird when I don't smile back and like less obviously dead pan face so makes others more comfortable

N= so would you wearing a mask takes ways the social pressure

X= yes cause the mask hides my face and it makes people feel less rejected cause they don't get the wrong cue from my face and I feel less misunderstood

N= ok did you choose do an activity

X= ya here is a drawing

N= ok, can you tell me what I am looking at?

X= this is me in the study room when it is too loud in there and umm I have a little spot where I sit at the table but I also have a spot where I sit between two lockers and I like it there cause its more enclosed and I sit there and kind of like it there. So that's me sitting between the lockers in the room cause it's too loud. And when I get overwhelmed I vocally stim and say ahhh so like there that too

N= ok and what does the stimming do for you

X= it is usually me letting out stress and also it's like helps drown out other noises

N= ok and what is actually happening here, why did you drew this

X= well I am frustrated cause it loud and this affects me at school. And the anxiety mark is above my head.

N= ok and how does this relate to your daily life?

X= also like if there is a lot of sounds then any stress I feel gets amplified

N= ok and does it help when you have access to this space when you are stressed

X= I actually have a lot of these spaces around the school so like little crannies around the school. At first people are like why is she there but now people are used to it. And also so like free periods happen a lot and umm in these periods I either get work done or if it's a bad day I don't get anything done. This reflects my school life cause when I am having a bad day I am usually in the corner of the study room on the floor

N= ok and why do you think this barrier exists? So why do you think you have to reach the point where you are sitting on the floor as in this picture

X= ahh cause school environment are not sensitive to the noise experiences we have. But there is no way to eliminate crowds but I can take myself away

N= ok and how do you think we could use this drawing to educate others about what its like to be autistic girl

X= about how umm it's like for us. So when people first see me in these nooks they are like why is she is there and they will ask why are you there. And this can show that I am here cause I want to be alone and have space to regulate

N= so it can show others why you need this space

N= and is there anything your school can do to help you not reach this point

X= umm well allow me to have headphones so this will stop me from being to this point

Appendix O: Example of coded transcript

Jade interview coded

<u>Description of code</u>	<u>Transcript</u>	<u>Code</u>
Routines facilitate learning	<p>N= can you describe what a good day would like for you?</p> <p>X= ahh usually a good day is I turn up and I you know go into lessons and during my free period I go into the study room and get some work done</p> <p>N= can you tell me more about the free periods?</p> <p>X- so since I am a sixth former I get free periods where you are supposed to study or get work done</p> <p>N= hmm ok</p> <p>N= and how do you feel when you have a good day?</p> <p>X= well usually if I manage to get work done I am proud of myself</p> <p>N= ok and can you describe what a bad day would look like for you?</p> <p>X= umm usually on a bad day I get really overwhelmed, not able to focus in classes or study periods. So I will leave school not having absorbed any information and this usually makes me really upset</p>	<p>Attend school</p> <p>Complete school work</p> <p>Complete school work</p> <p>Difficulty focusing</p> <p>Not retaining information</p> <p>Overwhelmed</p>

<p>Loud noises impact on learning & cause overwhelmed feelings</p>	<p>N= ok, you used the word overwhelmed. What usually makes you feel this way</p> <p>X= well loud noises or if it's just not a good day it feels more distressing than it should</p> <p>N- hmm ok and what happens when it's not a good day?</p> <p>X= I tune out a lot, I will get very quiet and I won't get any work done. So during study period I will just sit in the corner and focus on something. I will also do something to destress like watch YouTube videos</p> <p>N= ok but im trying to understand what would trigger a bad day?</p> <p>X=ahh well usually it's like you know loud noises or if someone honks their horn to me in the morning that will ruin my day.</p> <p>N= ok and what support was given to you when you had a bad day?</p>	<p>Sensory experiences</p> <p>Sensory experiences inhibit focus and learning</p> <p>Loud noises</p>
<p>Person centred practices- adults have time to listen to pupils</p>	<p>X= majority of my teachers trust me to know what helps and they will let me listen to music during lessons to help me calm down. And you know some teachers don't like it cause they think it's not a proper working environment but it's like they trust that I</p>	<p>Listen to pupil voice</p> <p>Trust pupil knows what is best</p>

<p>Person centred practices- adults have time to listen to pupils</p>	<p>know what helps. As long as I don't listen to music when the teachers are speaking then its sensible I think</p> <p>N= ok, it helps when teachers allow you to tell them what works and provide you the agency to use those strategies?</p> <p>X= ya cause some teachers have in their head what we should do but the best teachers are the ones that give me leeway to choose what works for me as long as it doesn't disrupt other students or comprise the work environment</p> <p>N= ya brilliant and I am curious, how do you think you reached this point with some teachers where they allow you to have input into what works for you</p> <p>X= well one teacher has known me for ages so she just knew what worked for me. Others got my report at the start of the year and knew I am autistic so when I went to them to say can I listen to music they said ya sure</p> <p>N= ok great</p> <p>N= ok let's move onto the circle of belonging. So this is something I designed and it's called the circle of belonging. The people inside the circle who represent</p>	<p>Listen to pupil voice</p> <p>Teachers learning about pupil's needs</p>
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	<p>those pupils who feel included, accepted, wanted in your schools. And the people on the outside of the circle would be those pupils who feels lonely, isolated and excluded from school. So I am interested to hear about where you think you are most the time at your school?</p> <p>X= ahh I don't feel particularly excluded but I don't feel included either</p> <p>N= ok</p> <p>X= so between the inner and outer circle. And this is because I don't really connect with people. And also it doesn't bother me that much that I am not included</p> <p>N= ok so where would you like to be in the circle of belonging at school?</p> <p>X= I am ok where I am. I don't talk to the other students that much. I only talk to them as much as I need to so like for homework projects. And I probably wouldn't change that cause it works fine the way it is.</p> <p>N= ok and so what would belonging mean to you?</p> <p>X= I guess belonging would mean having a discernible friendship group and people who</p>	
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<p>Belonging is having close connections with others</p>	<p>know you quite well and can have conversations with you and like you know will consider you when talking about the class as a whole and you know I never really got there cause I was always an outside person but like I don't mind it that much. I mean logically I don't make the effort to connect with other people so you know I see why they don't connect with me very much</p> <p>N= hmm ok and would you like it if others made an effort to get to know you</p> <p>X= well I feel that I am not very good with relationships, like It would be cool to get along with others but I feel like I would be taking a lot out of others cause I don't probably pull my weight in relationships that much. So I am fine being a member of the school like officially cause I go there to learn but unofficially I am not really there</p> <p>N= ok but for you belonging would be having connections with others</p> <p>X= ya. Also I think students in general but especially autistic kids benefit a lot from being actively shown that they are a valued member of</p>	<p>Belonging is having friends</p> <p>Feeling valued in school</p>
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<p>Pre-selected groups to facilitate peer interactions to improve belonging</p>	<p>the class community- a lot of us feel excluded because of how we differently process basically everything.</p> <p>N= ok and if you could give your school advice on how they could make you feel more accepted and valued what would you say to them?</p> <p>X= I don't really know. I mean the problems I have had is people don't understanding that I will need to have ears plugged</p> <p>N= ok but what about advice to your school about how they could help you connect with others? You have said this would make you feel more included and feel like you belong</p> <p>X= I mean the only group I have been in a significant group was last year in my drama course when we were put in a group to rehearse something and like that was the only time I had been to someone house. So like group work, but like set support groups for the entire term to do multiple pieces of homework together with</p> <p>N= ok let's move on. So do you think that the people you spend time with affect how you feel about school?</p>	<p>Externally shown that they are important</p> <p>Excluded due to unique processing</p> <p>Lack of understanding of need</p> <p>Structured groups to form connections</p>
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<p>Lack of understanding of feelings & how to process barrier to forming connections</p>	<p>X= ahh probably. So I used to be in friendship groups and depending on how others were feeling this would affect my mood. And I would also think that like if someone is in a bad mood I would immediately think that it's because of me like I did something to make them mad</p> <p>N= oh right ok and do you think this has impacted on your desire to be in friendship groups?</p> <p>X= I mean maybe it is one of the reasons I have stepped back from people cause I am really bad at noticing if I am sad for myself or if I am sad for someone else. I guess stepping back from people will stop me from being upset for no reason. I need to focus on myself and my exams rather than others</p> <p>N= ok, and what experiences or thoughts might keep you awake at night?</p> <p>X= no nothing</p> <p>N= ok and what is it like for you when you awake up in the morning and you know you have to go to school</p> <p>X= usually its ok and I will wake up and look my lessons and free time</p>	<p>Friends feelings impact self</p> <p>Internalise others reactions as something wrong with you</p> <p>Difficultly understanding feelings</p>
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	<p>N= ok and is there anything that might be happening at school that makes it hard to know you have to go to school</p> <p>X= ahhh nothing no</p> <p>N= ok. Can you tell me about the people you like spending time with at school?</p> <p>X= ahh I tend to get very attached to teachers and if I click with a teacher my year will be way better. It just boosts my enjoyment of the lesson. And also if the class has a good vibe then I feel more comfortable in that class</p> <p>N= ok and what about these teachers makes you feel comfortable with them?</p> <p>X= well a lot of them tend to be very chatty with me and umm so because they teaching the subject and if I have an interest in the subject they will recognise it and it made me have a connection with them</p> <p>N= ok and can you tell me more about this classroom environment that has a good vibe</p> <p>X= ok so it's the English class, it has 20 people and each person has their own insight or interpretation of the text so like</p>	<p>Relationships with teachers</p> <p>Teacher-pupil relationship improve enjoyment of lesson</p> <p>Shared interest in subject facilitates teacher-pupil relationship</p>
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<p>Sensory experiences during transitions</p>	<p>N= ok, and how much do you feel like people at school understand you</p> <p>X= umm I feel like they don't understand me in any psychic way but they are patient and like you know patient</p> <p>N= and is there anything that could change so others understood you better?</p> <p>X= ahh not really but ahh I do think people focus less on the fact that I have special needs and more on how I am a part of the school community</p> <p>N= ok let's move to school routines. Which routines do you feel comfortable with</p> <p>X= ahh so there is a short breaktime where I tend to stay inside cause I don't like transitional periods</p> <p>N= ok and why is that</p> <p>X= cause we got a breaktime in middle of a lesson so I just wait until it's over and people come back. I also ahh bring my lunch cause I hate the hall its very loud and irritating</p> <p>N= anything else about transitions I should know</p> <p>X= well the hallways are crowed and loud and so like ya</p>	<p>Patient and understanding</p> <p>Inclusion in school community</p> <p>Transitions are difficult due to sensory experiences</p> <p>Transitions are difficult due to sensory experiences</p>
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<p>Double empathy problem- autistic girl not understanding non-autistic girls and vice versa</p>	<p>N= ok and are there parts about school that might make you feel lonely or anxious</p> <p>X= ahh not really</p> <p>N= is there anything difficult making friends at school</p> <p>X= I have struggled with maintaining friendships. It's like a gender difference, so like girls want a lot of emotional literacy and to understand that they feeling a different way to what they are saying. And then I don't get that and I feel disconnected cause in their head they think that they have implied that they feel bad but then I don't pick up on that and it makes it hard to maintain</p> <p>N=ok so are you saying it's hard to understand what someone is saying when they imply it but don't direct say it</p> <p>X= ya so sometimes like ahh they might say, I am feel a little down and I want to curl up and lie in bed and I hear she want to lie in bed not I need comfort which is what they seeking</p> <p>N= ohh ok and what would help decrease these difficulties</p>	<p>Hard to understand ambiguous language in friendships</p> <p>Difficultly understanding feelings</p>
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<p>Mono-processing/selective attention- focusing on parts rather than the whole</p>	<p>X= well they need to know that if they say things in a certain way I won't understand it and so they need to be upfront about what they want</p> <p>N= and is there anything else you think I need to know to understand some of the difficulties you experience at school?</p> <p>X= I don't think so no</p> <p>N= so what does being autistic mean to you?</p> <p>X= umm developmental disorder but in terms of how it affects me it affects how I communicate, how I approach social situations and how I process information. so autistics see things one at a time in great detail not the whole picture, like with language I tend to focus on one word and then will only understand what you have said based off that one word.</p> <p>N= do you think being autistic impacts on your school experiences?</p> <p>X= I mean ya, it basically affects everything like how I function. Sometimes I look back and I can tell how it went wrong in the past and its usually cause of my autism.</p>	<p>Unambiguous language facilitates friendships</p> <p>Being autistic impacts communications and social abilities</p> <p>Monotropism</p> <p>Being autistic affects functioning</p>
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	<p>N= N= and if you could give advice to your school about you and autism, what would it be?</p> <p>X= I mean I tend to say to people to let me do what I know works best. I don't expect everyone to know how to treat people with autism but just ask them what works and roll with it. So like it's unrealistic to not do anything and expect the teacher t know I am upset cause the class is too loud. But I think it's reasonable for like the teacher to allow me to wear ear plugs</p> <p>N= and if you could describe your school experiences in three words, what would it be</p> <p>X= ahhh its crowded, well there is learning, and ahhh community cause everything has to bounce off each to work properly</p> <p>N= and do you feel a part of that community?</p> <p>X= well no but I still play a role and I can tell them how to make me feel a part of it</p> <p>N= N= ok last one, how do you think the pandemic has impacted your school experiences</p> <p>X= SO NOW THERE IS bubbles and it has helped and the school day has been staggered and that</p>	<p>Include autistic people in decisions made about them</p> <p>Pupil voice</p>
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<p>Less sensory input more positive feelings</p>	<p>has helped cause it's not as crowded and cause of the way the school day works. So I now I can stay in the classroom during break and not feel weird about it or stressed</p> <p>N= anything else</p> <p>X= well wearing masks in school is in some ways is ok cause it kind of like is necessary and sometimes it makes people feel less weird when I don't smile back and like less obviously dead pan face so makes others more comfortable</p> <p>N= so would you wearing a mask takes ways the social pressure</p> <p>X= yes cause the mask hides my face and it makes people feel less rejected cause they don't get the wrong cue from my face and I feel less misunderstood</p> <p>N= ok did you choose do an activity</p> <p>X= ya here is a drawing</p> <p>N= ok, can you tell me what I am looking at?</p> <p>X= this is me in the study room when it is too loud in there and umm I have a little spot where I sit at the table but I also have a spot where I sit between two lockers and I like it there cause its more enclosed and I sit there</p>	<p>Bubbles decrease sensory input</p> <p>Masks decrease social pressure</p>
<p>Sensory experiences are overwhelming- stimming to regulate feelings in a quiet space</p>		<p>Overwhelmed from Sensory experiences</p> <p>Hiding from noise</p>

<p>Sensory experiences increase stressor- become overwhelmed</p> <p>Safe space to regulate when overwhelmed</p>	<p>and kind of like it there. So that's me sitting between the lockers in the room cause it's too loud. And when I get overwhelmed I vocally stim and say ahhh so like there that too</p> <p>N= ok and what does the stimming do for you</p> <p>X= it is usually me letting out stress and also it's like helps drown out other noises</p> <p>N= ok and what is actually happening here, why did you draw this</p> <p>X= well I am frustrated cause it loud and this affects me at school. And the anxiety mark is above my head.</p> <p>N= ok and how does this relate to your daily life?</p> <p>X= also like if there is a lot of sounds then any stress I feel gets amplified</p> <p>N= ok and does it help when you have access to this space when you are stressed</p> <p>X= I actually have a lot of these spaces around the school so like little crannies around the school. At first people are like why is she there but now people are used to it. And also so like free periods happen a lot and umm in these periods I</p>	<p>Stimming reduces stress</p> <p>Sensory experiences cause anxiety</p> <p>Noises increase stress</p> <p>Hiding from sensory experiences in school environment</p>
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	<p>either get work done or if it's a bad day I don't get anything done. This reflects my school life cause when I am having a bad day I am usually in the corner of the study room on the floor</p> <p>N= ok and why do you think this barrier exists? So why do you think you have to reach the point where you are sitting on the floor as in this picture</p> <p>X= ahh cause school environment are not sensitive to the noise experiences we have. But there is no way to eliminate crowds but I can take myself away</p> <p>N= ok and how do you think we could use this drawing to educate others about what its like to be autistic girl</p> <p>X= about how umm it's like for us. So when people first see me in these nooks they are like why is she is there and they will ask why are you there. And this can show that I am here cause I want to be alone and have space to regulate</p> <p>N= so it can show others why you need this space</p> <p>N= and is there anything your school can do to help you not reach this point</p>	<p>Insensitive school environments</p> <p>Needing space to regulate</p>
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	X= umm well allow me to have headphones so this will stop me from being to this point	Person centred practices
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Appendix P: Initial bank of codes

1. Enjoyable lessons (N=7)
2. Difficulty asking for help in lessons (2)
3. Difficulty accepting help in lessons (5)
4. Limited opportunities to raise issues with school staff (2)
5. Despite efforts to belong left alone (2)
6. Double empathy problem (6)
7. Accepted for self (14)
8. Awareness of autism (9)
9. Understanding needs (9)
10. Reduced sensory experiences (4)
11. Sensory experiences negatively impact mood (3)
12. Sensory experiences inhibit focus and learning (4)
13. Lack of sleep negatively impacts mood (2)
14. Relationships impact well-being (8)
15. Rumination (8)
16. Autism is separate from self (4)
17. Autism is who I am (10)
18. Unique processing speed (5)
19. Difficulty understanding feelings (2)
20. Pre-selected groups (6)
21. Friends (10)
22. Positive relationships with adults (7)
23. Structured activities (8)
24. Provide explicit information to prepare (7)
25. Relating to others with same difficulties (4)
26. School clubs (2)
27. Autism base can be self (2)
28. Unambiguous language (2)
29. Masking to fit in (6)
30. Masking to protect self (4)
31. Masking to avoid isolation (5)
32. Weak central coherence (2)
33. Difficulty communicating (4)
34. Lack of understanding of autism (16)
35. Lack of adapted/person centred practices (5)
36. Unplanned/unexpected events (3)
37. Attitudes & stereotypes (6)
38. Bullying (3)
39. Difficulty socially interacting (6)
40. Limited friends (7)
41. Relationships with teachers (4)

Appendix Q: Final themes, sub-themes, codes and quotes across participants

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Autistic girl's want to be seen and heard	Validating autistic identity (N=18)	<p>-Accepted for self (5)</p> <p>Feeling understood (2)</p> <p>Feeling appreciated(3)</p> <p>-being heard/listened to/(6)</p> <p>trusted to know what is best (3)</p>	<p>Mia: "I am happy when I am accepted by others" "people knowing why I am the way I am and it's just someone who needs a little extra help"</p> <p>Angel: it would be me feeling comfortable to be my true authentic self and being accepted.. and being included in things like people making an effort</p> <p>Zoe: "I would be happy and I would be accepted for who I am. Because if I was in the middle of the circle I could be myself. People would like me for who I am"</p> <p>Ava: "feeling appreciated for who I am and feeling wanted"</p> <p>Kitsune: "if I felt like I belonged in school then everyone would be a bit more accepting towards</p>

		<p>to me and they probably wouldn't give me the stink eye which is when everyone looks at you with a negative emotion on their face. And so like I would feel like I belong if people accepted me for who I am so like my personality and like if they were respectful and kind I would feel like I belong"</p> <p>Rose: "I like being with people with understand me. So people that understand my stimming behaviours, understand why I don't like loud noises"</p> <p>Atlas: "so my English teacher just understands that I learn differently and accepts me and that really helps make school better"</p> <p>Ava: "so when you are not there someone to be there the day after and go oh where were you or why weren't you in or.. just people to say</p>
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		<p>hello to you in the corridor”</p> <p>Jade = “I think students in general but especially autistic kids benefit a lot from being actively shown that they are a valued member of the class community- a lot of us feel excluded because of how we differently process basically everything.”</p> <p>Vera: “ it would feel good if I felt like I belonged to the school and proud and feel like people would appreciate me and its not just a place where we do lessons and that kind of stuff.</p> <p>Sadie: “being able to say something and people actually listen to you”</p> <p>Issac: “but like just listen to us. When I say something is unbearable listen to me. Cause like when I got my diagnosis they didn’t care much about the jumper but like why did it</p>
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			<p>have to get to that point. Like I told them what I needed”</p> <p>angel= maybe people listen more, actively listen</p> <p>R= what do you mean</p> <p>angel=not just hearing the words but like hearing something and doing something about what you heard</p> <p>Mia: “my Spanish teacher used to put a post it note on my table and used to ask me if I am ok and if I need anything and then would stay with me for a minute cause she knew I didn’t want to draw attention to myself. I mean the reason I get upset is cause I worry that I have missed something or I have done something wrong. So if they took a moment and sat with me and said if I am ok that would really help”</p>
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			<p>Jade: “majority of my teachers trust me to know what helps and they will let me listen to music during lessons to help me calm down. And you know some teachers don’t like it cause they think it’s not a proper working environment but it’s like they trust that I know what helps”</p> <p>Mimi: “I have begun to trust them more I mean I realised ages ago but subconsciously realised recently that like it is ok to tell them and not mask because they have demonstrated that if I raise an issue to them then they will go that’s fair what can we do about that rather that oh I don’t think you have an issue with that you will be fine go on, which is what I experienced quite a lot previously”</p> <p>Vera: I mean I tend to say to people to let me do what I know works best. I don’t expect everyone to know how to</p>
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	<p>Participating in school community (N=8)</p>	<p>-actively involved in school (4)</p> <p>-feeling contribution is valued (1)</p> <p>-structured activities to form bonds (4)</p>	<p>treat people with autism but just ask them what works and roll with it. So like it's unrealistic to not do anything and expect the teacher t know I am upset cause the class is too loud. But I think it's reasonable for like the teacher to allow me to wear ear plugs</p> <p>Mia: "I would say belonging is being happy where you are and contributing towards something.</p> <p>Alice: "it is being involved in school activities"</p> <p>Jade: "I think people should focus less on the fact that I have special needs and more on how I am a part of the school community"</p> <p>Vera: I guess it is when you are in involved in any way so like you do some clubs or kind of extra</p>
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			<p>curricula stuff. So you would be a person who would contribute to the school, feel appreciate and are welcomed. And you feel like you deserve to be there I suppose and kind of noticed for your achievements and are supported. That's kind of what belonging is like for me"</p> <p>If I were able to find a few people in the school with similar interests to me this would be good cause then we could have fun and do things we enjoy like anime stuff...and I won't get judged cause we like the same stuff" (Kitsune)</p> <p>Zena: "I think just make use of opportunities to help me form bonds with other people. So many people in my tutor group have bonds with other people and I think this</p>
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			<p>time could be used to form close friendships. Like more activities where others can come and join and I might get to know people that way”</p> <p>Ella: “well my best friend is in year below me. I think the school should have more joined activities with the other years”</p> <p>Rose: “I would say the school could help create opportunities to make friends. so like that we are not isolated and stuff like that”</p> <p>Sadie: asking people how happy they are and how many friends they have and then bringing people together who don't have many friends</p>
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	<p>Normalising neurodiversity (N=12)</p>	<p>raise awareness about autism (7)</p> <p>-raise awareness about LGBTQ (2)</p> <p>-talk about the spectrum of autism(1)</p> <p>Lack of awareness of autism leads to misunderstanding N=9</p> <p>Not understanding need N=3</p>	<p>Zena: “I think autistic peoples stories being told means they can understand it because the more that we talk about something the less it feel like that foreign thing that we shy away from.”</p> <p>Vera: “I think it’s hard in a mainstream school but I think they could do a talk on neurodiversity or something cause I am sure that I am not the only one in that whole school who is autistic so they could kind of talk about that more.”</p> <p>maybe the spectrum on experiences cause we all so different</p> <p>Atlas: “a key thing I have noticed a lot at school is people saying offensive words and terms like ‘that is so gay’ and I think if there could be more education and consequences for that, that would be</p>
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			<p>better because hearing that sort of stuff when I am queer and autistic is hurtful. Like a boy in my form the other day said if he was autistic he would kill himself. and he didn't mean it but if people could be more accepting in that sort of way. So like people have been less homophobic around me cause they know I am gay. But I have to tell them what is acceptable and what isn't. but for some neurodiverse people, people will make sounds and say 'I am making an impression of so and so' and people will get angry about this cause they know it's wrong, but the people doing it don't know it's wrong"</p> <p>Ava: "oh just autism and stuff.. at school there is no awareness like they talk about mental health awareness which is good but if you talk about people who are different then it will not get</p>
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		<p>people feel great you know. just sort of teaching that people are different or being a bit kind sort of thing cause they don't really do that cause it is difficult to make people kinder”</p> <p>Rose: “They can help people from umm knowing the effects of autism. and like why I am quiet, why I am scared. Also they shouldn't say autism and speak about it so negatively. Instead of saying it's a disability, they should them that this is who I am- I am autistic- it's not all bad, there are positives too. ya and also make it normal. We are all scared at time. But why does it feel worse for me.”</p> <p>Addie: “I think schools need to be educating students about autism but not only that like also the LGBTQ plus community and sexual health”</p> <p>Zena: = “So there has never been an assembly or</p>
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			<p>PSHE lesson where they have had a conversation about autism and I think it's so important and not talked about at all. Like I had no understandings of it at all like before I was diagnosed and umm it's so when I told my friend I had autism she was like, so it autism like depression where you go to therapy and it goes away and I was like ahh no its not. And also I don't want it to go away cause if I didn't have autism I wouldn't be who I am. so I think there needs to be discussions but not necessarily like I wouldn't want teachers at school to go and do half and half research on autism and be like cool done I know what it is. I think it would have to be someone who knows about it or a specialist. I really don't think teachers understanding what is autism"</p> <p>"And I think autistic peoples</p>
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			<p>stories being told means they can understand it because the more that we talk about something the less it feel like that foreign thing that we shy away from. We shouldn't shy away from things that are strange and unusual and things that we don't understand but the more that we talk about it the more we can understand and the less strange it will appear"</p> <p>Mia: "I feel like just more awareness about autism, especially because I am the only girl with autism in my school but I can list ten lads maybe in the whole school so the stuff that they get let off for I think I would never be allowed to do that and I do feel like the lads get it a lot easier than the girls. But I don't know any other girls with autism but maybe they haven't been diagnosed. I also don't think people know that girls can get autism. so</p>
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			<p>like maybe having assemblies that explain what is autism is and show that it's not something to make fun of it needs to be understood. Or even like having posters to give to people around the school"</p> <p>Candice: "I also think people misunderstand and they think that autism is having anxiety or autism is why you are depressed or autism is why you have an eating disorder. But it is not cause autism is autism and isn't anxiety or depressions. Autism just means things emerge from that"</p> <p>.. like when I told my class that I was not going to be in school for a while cause I was going to hospital and I didn't say why cause I didn't want to and when someone asked quite a while later and they find out it was cause of mental health they</p>
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			<p>were like that doesn't make sense cause like you go into hospital for physical stuff and not mental health. And I felt like people at school would view mental health as something that could make a meme of so they would joke about being emo, being depressed, having anxiety, being suicidal and stuff and they would make distasteful jokes and were homophobic and transphobic and like didn't understand aspects of someone's identity or autism or you know a bad relationship with food and like.. one of my special interests is frogs and they didn't understand like why I like frogs so much so ya</p> <p>Ava: .. at school there is no awareness like they talk about mental health awareness which is good but if you talk about people who are different then it will not get</p>
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			<p>people feel great you know</p> <p>Zena: “So there has never been an assembly or PSHE lesson where they have had a conversation about autism and I think it’s so important and not talked about at all. Like I had no understandings of it at all like before I was diagnosed and umm it’s so when I told my friend I had autism she was like, so it autism like depression where you go to therapy and it goes away and I was like ahh no its not.</p> <p>Jade: “I don’t really know. I mean the problems I have had is people don’t understanding that I will need to have ears plugged”</p> <p>Alice: An adult or teacher a little – if it’s a student then probably a lot less. Maybe because teachers don’t understand that much”</p>
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			<p>Kitsune: “well the popular people make me feel like I am some sort of weird person and like or I am rude or something. But actually when they think I am being rude all I am doing is trying to defend myself and like it makes me feel annoyed cause they just don’t understand me sometimes”</p> <p>Addie: But then out in mainstream they don’t really know about autism or what it is or at least they don’t fully understand it cause one of the things about autism, unless there is a member of your family who is autistic or you are close with someone who is autistic then it doesn’t really concern them to understand well what is autism. everyone at the base understands autism. many mainstreamers haven’t even heard of the term autism and even when we tell them about autism I don’t think they</p>
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			<p>know what it is. Like I have told some mainstreamers about it and they probably think it some kind of disability”</p> <p>Rose: “they need to understand us more. I will stim in class and the teacher will come and say what are you doing and I can’t say nothing. They just don’t understand”.</p> <p>“I am so misunderstood by people in school. You can ask people in my school what is autism and they don’t know. We are frightened by things that normal people do not even think about, like asking a question or how we react in some situation”</p> <p>Sadie: Once I PE I was flapping my hands because I was excited and nervous at the same time and that boy was doing impressions of me and I didn’t feel happy</p>
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	<p>Dropping the mask (N=6)</p>	<p>-people with similar needs and interests (6)</p> <p>-less pressure to mask around neurodivergent people (2)</p>	<p>Vera: “ if I was surround by people in school that I felt comfortable with or being around other people that are like autistic would be good cause they get me and will like me and I don’t get as stressed or tired after talking to them cause we are similar. So definitely being around all day definitely affects my mood</p> <p>Vera: “So they could set up a group with neurodiversity people, cause like in school we talk about feminism or racism but not but special needs or neurodiversity and umm I guess I don’t feel included in the school so I am waiting for uni where I can meet others like me. “</p> <p>Kitsuni: “if they were able to find a few people in the school with similar interests to me</p>
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			<p>and a similar personality to me”</p> <p>Candice: “I have known them for a long time, we grew up together, been on holiday together and like two of them are autistic and we get along really well”</p> <p>Mimi: in the autism base I would say I am always on the inner part of the circle because you know we are all autistic and it is chill and everything is fine there..</p> <p>I find them funny and we share that same weird random humour umm.. also same chaotic humour and I think some of us have gone through the same experiences so we relate to each other and the fact we have come from other schools where we have experienced things that upset us or made us feel excluded and now its less like that and... I don't know..</p>
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			<p>Addie: “I would say in the inner part of the circle, well especially in the base because we can be ourselves a bit more and then it’s a bit more awkward out in mainstream. well we are all autistic and we all know about it at the base. We even joke about it.</p> <p>Sadie: I don’t know like maybe people in a similar situation as me who would get what it is like</p> <p>Mimi: “I think there is less expected that I will be a normal in quotation marks child like I am going to act neurotypical and also like ahh I feel less pressure to mask there.. so I mask quite a lot when I am in mainstream and generally in life but I feel less pressure to mask and try to.. I don’t know it feels like I have to do less to fit in. perhaps it is because we are all autistic in the base and we all</p>
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			<p>functions in completely differently ways and no one bats an eyelid and it is like my brain works completely differently to yours but it is fine cause you know we all function in different ways and no one cares it doesn't matter. So belonging means not feeling the pressure to mask</p> <p>Addie: "I would say in the inner part of the circle, well especially in the base because we can be ourselves a bit more and then it's a bit more awkward out in mainstream. well we are all autistic and we all know about it at the base. We even joke about it. But then out in mainstream they don't really know about autism or what it is or at least they don't fully understand it cause one of the things about autism, unless there is a member of your family who is autistic or you are close with someone who is autistic then it</p>
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			<p>doesn't really concern them to understand well what is autism. everyone at the base understands autism. many mainstreamers haven't even heard of the term autism and even when we tell them about autism I don't think they know what it is. Like I have told some mainstreamers about it and they probably think it some kind of disability"</p>
<p>The joys and pains of mutuality</p>	<p>Good peer relationships enhance belonging N=11</p>	<p>Feeling comfortable around friends N=6</p> <p>Having people to speak to N=4</p> <p>Having company N=3</p> <p>Common interests N=2</p> <p>Having friends impacts school attendances N=2</p> <p>Friends that help with difficulties N=1</p>	<p>Sadie: "probably having five or more friends, being able to say something and people actually listen to you, people at school sometimes say jokes so being able to do that without being made fun of, having a group of people to sit with at lunchtime and breaktime"</p> <p>Zoe: "I think there are only like two or three people I feel comfortable to be myself around and I think it's because I have known them a very long time"</p>

			<p>and that makes school better”</p> <p>Mimi: “I had a lot of issues at my old school but I had friends especially like I didn’t make loads of friends in my old school but we grew up together and they were all close especially my best friend she really just gets me, none of us know why but supposedly cause we grew up together.. but I think that really affected the fact that I could still go to school”</p> <p>Mia: “So like I have three friends who are the closest to me and will help me and I can ask them questions if I need to. So I definitely think that my friends make school better. So like the one time I got upset in a lesson and had to leave and then people in the class started talking about me and then my friend said to them that nothing is wrong and I just had to use the toilet. so that</p>
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		<p>helps a lot cause they know I get worried about what people think of me so they will like play It down but then they will check on me because they know it is a bit more than that “</p> <p>Ella: “I think in the centre, cause my friends make me feel included”</p> <p>Candice: “Belonging is if your friends weren’t there then you would have another person to talk to. I would just like to have good relationships “</p> <p>Issac: “ I am not bothered that much about feeling like I belong at school. As long as I have a few mates I am fine”</p> <p>Kitsune: “I like spending time with (names removed) cause they are nice and funny and like anime”</p> <p>Ava: “A good day is when I can eat my lunch with somebody cause I don’t normally eat</p>
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			<p>my lunch with somebody”</p> <p>Jade: “I guess belonging would mean having a discernible friendship group and people who know you quite well and can have conversations with you and like you know will consider you when talking about the class as a whole and you know I never really got there cause I was always an outside person”</p> <p>Zena: “Belonging is people having strong bonds with each other and feeling comfortable with each other and being able to have a good time with each other”</p>
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	<p>Relationships with school staff (N=7)</p>	<p>Student/teacher relationship impacts lesson enjoyment and participation N=2</p> <p>Student/teacher relationships improves comfortability in school N=3</p> <p>Having teachers to speak to N=1</p> <p>Teacher accepting needs N=2</p>	<p>Jade: “I (historically) have clicked a lot better with teachers than peers, because the relationship is easier to understand. And having a positive teacher student relationship helps me relax and therefore helps me concentrate.”</p> <p>“I tend to get very attached to teachers and if I click with a teacher my year will be way better. It just boosts my enjoyment of the lesson. And also if the class has a good vibe then I feel more comfortable in that class. well a lot of them tend to be very chatty with me and umm so because they teaching the subject and if I have an interest in the subject they will recognise it and it made me have a connection with them”</p> <p>Issac: “So my sociology teacher, she umm is kinda like just understands and accepts me and definitely has a</p>
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			<p>preference for me.”</p> <p>Candice: “really good relationship with my school nurse cause like I have had mental health problems which progressed to a physical health problem and so I knew the school nurse really well”</p> <p>Ella: “my teachers affect how I feel”</p> <p>Sadie: “the lesson but also the teacher. she seems quite forgiving she gives people second chances and like she only shouts at people for a good reason I think. She isn’t one of those teachers that feels the need to shout for no reason”</p> <p>Mimi: I think more generally the teachers are more relaxed and I know the teachers now where in sixth form we got more close and have a good relationship with them which I find a lot easier</p>
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	<p>Long to belong N=7</p>	<p>Loneliness N=4</p> <p>Effort to form and maintain friends N=3</p> <p>Difficulty understanding emotions in relationships N=1</p> <p>Feeling no one likes them N=1</p>	<p>Atlas: “so my English teacher just understands that I learn differently and accepts me and that really helps make school better”</p> <p>Zena: “ So while I do have two friends there are a lot of times I am still alone in school and feel very lonely. So I wrote this from that perspective of me feeling very lonely and feeling like it will never end.</p> <p>I think that since my friendship group fell apart I felt really lonely and it feels well I joined by school when I was ten and I have spent four years trying to get rid of the social anxiety, trying to make friends and trying to fit in only to be where I am today and to feel like I am in the exact same place as I was five years</p>
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			<p>ago is very difficult</p> <p>Jade: “I have struggled with maintaining friendships. It’s like a gender difference, so like girls want a lot of emotional literacy and to understand that they feeling a different way to what they are saying. And then I don’t get that and I feel disconnected cause in their head they think that they have implied that they feel bad but then I don’t pick up on that and it makes it hard to maintain. ya so sometimes like ahh they might say, I am feel a little down and I want to curl up and lie in bed and I hear she want to lie in bed not I need comfort which is what they seeking”</p> <p>Kitsuni: “mostly I don’t feel included into the group and like not like people don’t really pay much attention to me”</p> <p>Candice: “.... I guess when a lot</p>
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			<p>of people collectively outwardly don't like you, you start to find a dislike within yourself like why does nobody else like me and it makes you feel bad.. and like you know you feel like you are not good enough for the people and that's why they don't like you or are mean about you and then you start to feel bad about how you look and then you think well then maybe there is something wrong with how I look"</p> <p>Ava: "oh because I try to sort of fit in or I try to communicate with other people but it never seems to work or it doesn't last very long and you feel shoved out the picture cause everything you try and do you are just put on the outside and you don't know why and you don't know what you can do"</p> <p>Rose: "I don't have many friends and everyone is kind of sitting together and</p>
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			<p>having a good time with their friends and I am on my own. it is lonely”</p> <p>Sadie: = knowing I have to go into school when I only have one friend</p>
Marginalisation links with invalidation	Autistic girl’s heterogeneous constructs of autism N=12	<p>-autism creates barriers(N=6)</p> <p>-autism is inseparable to self (N=5)</p> <p>-autism means being different, but so is everyone N=6</p> <p>autism diagnosis brought relief N=2</p>	<p>(autism creates barriers(N=5))</p> <p>Ava: I see it (autism) as being negative like something that gets in the way</p> <p>Vera: it means I have some disadvantages</p> <p>Zoe: umm it makes me feel different. I think it makes me feel more isolated cause I put on an act to try and hide it.</p> <p>Mimi: “I think it leads to me needing extra support at school umm.. I think it makes me stress about things more than my peers do</p> <p>Candice: and then autism well the world isn’t</p>

			<p>designed for autistic people it is just designed for you know the neurotypical man so it means there is a lot you just have to make it work “</p> <p>-autism is inseparable to self (N=6)</p> <p>Alice: I am proud of it, one brain is neuro-typical and the other is an autistic brain and they are just wired differently.</p> <p>Addie: its just a part of who I am</p> <p>Atlas:....is part of my identify. There is not cure for autism umm but like it's obviously a part of me cause it affects how I feel, what I do, what I talk about.</p> <p>Rose: mainly that I do things differently. I stim to make me feel safe. Don't tell me stop. You are telling me to not be me.</p> <p>Zena: And also I don't want it to go</p>
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		<p>away cause if I didn't have autism I wouldn't be who I am"</p> <p>autism is having different experiences</p> <p>Zena: "I think it just means that my brain works differently. It means that I don't like going into town cause there is loads of people and its very overwhelming. And I think that's ok cause I completely acknowledged that before I even knew I had autism.</p> <p>Mia: "my brain processes information differently"</p> <p>Mia: "It is not a mental disorder and there is nothing wrong with me, I just get overwhelmed sometimes. We have more connections in our brain that makes us react or behave in a certain way but if others had same brain then they</p>
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		<p>would react the exact same “</p> <p>Mimi: “I think it means my brain functions differently and I find neurptypical people don’t also make sense to me”</p> <p>Sadie: “I have understood it as that my brain works in a slightly different way”</p> <p>Addie: “well autism makes us no different to others cause I think being autistic means that we have little quirks, or we need to move around a bit more or we don’t understand emotions the same. Also we don’t pick up on social cues or understand sarcasm”</p> <p>Candice: “Autism is a big wheel with different colors where yellow is anxiety and blue is loud sounds and sensory stuff and everyone is a different place cause there are infinite colours and everyone has different</p>
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			<p>experiences. also people are not inherently different cause they are autistic, it is not as if autistic people are neon green and come from a planet where there is big ear defenders all the time”</p> <p>autism diagnosis brought relief</p> <p>Zena: when I was diagnosed with autism it felt like a big relief cause all of the problem I had made sense cause I never been severely bullied or there had never been a really big event that happened that would have led me to have the sort of social anxiety I had. So it made me feel like I wasn't making a big deal of things cause I had a great family, I had safe home and I was like why do I feel like this and it felt like quite a relief to have an explanation for that. It felt like it wasn't my fault and now I feel like there is a way for me to fit into the</p>
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			<p>world and also I could find other people like me”</p> <p>Issac: umm I don't really know. Being autistic like when I was told I could be autistic was year 8. It kinda connects the dots and makes me feel less weird. It has also given me more options on how I can treat the symptoms and like behave better cause now I understand them</p> <p>Researcher: so having a diagnosis has helped you understand yourself better?</p> <p>Issac: ya I would say so</p>
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	<p>Stigma and attitudes challenge autistic self N=8</p>	<p>stigma othering autistic girls (N=6)</p> <p>Teacher language (N=1)</p> <p>Teacher attitudes towards difficulties (N=3)</p>	<p>Zena: “I think one of the things I find jarring is the way dyslexia is spoken about versus how autism is spoken about because a girl in my science class has dyslexia and the PowerPoint was changed for her and she is allowed to write on pink paper and I think its so jarring that she is allowed that and it wouldn't be mistaken for she is a strange person. But for me if people knew I was autistic they would automatically think I am strange cause of the stigma around autism”</p> <p>Ava : I think that it is a barrier in some sense cause as soon as you find out that you are different and all of that then the stigma around it I guess it is like anything like people's ideas and misconceptions about it so if you try to explain to somebody and also people if you try and explain it then they will say</p>
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		<p>so what people get overwhelmed with work like what is so special about you so I see it as being negative like something that gets in the way</p> <p>Candice: “yes also just cause of people’s response to autism. my autism doesn’t make people think any differently about me. They are the ones thinking differently about me in relation to my autism”</p> <p>Mia: “I remember my mate asking me about it and saying oh I think I have got autism and then others saying, oh I definitely have got that. So like the assemblies will help with that understanding. it feels like they making my experiences not a big deal, like sweeping it under the rug. I look at them and say you just don’t understand and it feels like they are undermining my experiences and what I have to live with”</p>
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			<p>Mimi: so I have had quite a lot of kids at my current school and old school be like.. oh wait you are autistic you don't look autistic.. and then I am like ya there is a reason for that just cause I don't fit what you think (othering)</p> <p>Ava: well I guess it is not spoken about at school and you are just sort of labelled that people are different and oh then they are weird that's it end of not oh I am going to talk to them. it is like they put up a wall and then you can't go talk to them"</p> <p>Angel: ... so I feel like people have an idea in their heads of what autism should look like and if you don't fit into that idea then nobody takes you seriously</p> <p>Angel= I feel like people attitudes towards autism in general cause</p>
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		<p>people have a lot of myths or stigmatised views about autism and maybe that needs to change. People need to learn and understand autism better</p> <p>Ava: “like in year ten we asked them and they were like oh no we can’t do that sorry and then my mum was emailing going why not it is only one assembly and they did it cause we asked so that has only ever happened once”</p> <p>Candice: “they actually need to do stuff about it because I have had really bad things happen to me and I don’t feel like the school did nothing like they said oh it’s been a misunderstanding and then expect us to move on”</p> <p>Candice: “but when it came to other pupils being mean and homophobia I didn’t feel like they did a lot they were just like sit</p>
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			<p>down and be friends and move on and lets just all be friends.. and then its like well this person did something to negatively impact me but nothing is happening”</p> <p>Mia: I think it’s mostly the fact that the teachers are just aware of it and so they just let me go. But I only got diagnoses in November 2020 so the teachers haven’t been aware of it for that long. Like they know that I get really upset but I haven’t had the opportunity to set up a plan of what can happen when I am upset. So I have always just gone to the toilet</p> <p>Attitudes</p> <p>Luna: “particular teacher at her old school who um had kind of favourites basically and who there was that sense of injustice and it somethings not being fair and different people not getting different treatment and you know he</p>
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		-	<p>told her off about something she hadn't done and basically and that rankles with her till this day just the injustice of that so I think that there is it one element of it is around a sense of wheather the teachers are fair or not"</p> <p>Atlas: "probably just their attitudes to change or just to get to know me and usually when they judge you about something it's because you don't have time to explain it. Also I think people need to go below the surface to fully understand me"</p> <p>Zena: I think sometimes the way that teachers phrase things like, 'well if you are really really not ok' or 'if you are really struggling' then you don't have to do this or something. I am not good at validating my emotions to say that I am not ok.</p> <p>"well it goes back to the teachers language and I</p>
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	<p>Inappropriate school practices N=6</p>	<p>Feeling like needs are too much (N=1)</p> <p>-Difficulty explaining need for practices (N=3)</p> <p>-Embarrassed accepting help as it draws attention (N=4)</p> <p>feeling like a burden (N= 2)</p>	<p>guess attitudes. I just don't think they get how hard it is sometimes "</p> <p>Zena: "And sometimes I feel guilty taking the high road too much and maybe it should have been enough for me that I was taking the test in my teachers office</p> <p>Issac: I have a card I can use in class to tell the teacher I am not ok. But I don't use this cause it makes me feel uncomfortable "it draws attention to me, so if I am having a rough day or I am stimming or doing weird stuff. I think having a card just draws way to much attention "</p> <p>Angel= there is a card system. So I have a yellow card for when I cant speak and I don't use it cause I don't know what to use it and I am</p>
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			<p>a bit sacred to use it.. and the red card is when I would like to leave and go to the art room</p> <p>R= and why do you think you are scared to use the yello card</p> <p>Angel= I think sometimes cause it will draw a lot of attention to myself and like I feel quite embarrassed I guess.. I feel like people will judge me</p> <p>Zoe: “so there is the space where you can go and I have a pass to go there but I feel really embarrassed to get there cause then I think others will think I am just trying to get out of lessons. So then I think I shouldn’t go there. And also I am allowed to use a fiddle toy but then I don’t cause I don’t want to be different.”</p> <p>Mia: “so the lads get to go sit in a different room and get extra time. But I wouldn’t want that for myself</p>
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			<p>cause you have to stand on the side while the examiner reads the instructions and everyone can see you and the people</p> <p>Vera: “when I have a bad day I suppose the school offers a quiet room thing so I can go and sit in the head of years room for break or lunch if I don’t want to interact. But I haven’t used that cause I don’t want to explain why I am there or why I am leaving and all that kind of stuff”</p> <p>Zoe: “the teachers just don’t have the time or make the time to ask”</p> <p>Researcher: And is there someone you can go speak to if you having trouble with friendships?</p> <p>Zoe: yes but I am embarrassed</p> <p>Researcher: why do you think this is</p> <p>Zoe: cause I feel like I am wasting there time</p>
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Sensory fatigue	Entrapped in sensory environment N=7	<p>Sensory overloaded school environment N=4</p> <p>Uncomfortable sensory experiences (e.g. Noise, Smells, Flickering lights, texture of uniform) N=7</p> <p>Spaces in school to hide from sensory experiences N=1</p>	<p>Jade: = “I actually have a lot of these spaces around the school so like little crannies around the school. At first people are like why is she there but now people are used to it. And also so like free periods happen a lot and umm in these periods I either get work done or if it’s a bad day I don’t get anything done. This reflects my school life cause when I am having a bad day I am usually in the corner of the study room on the floor. The school environment are not sensitive to the noise experiences we have. But there is no way to eliminate crowds but I can take myself away”</p> <p>Mia: “well the noise really really bothers me in exam halls, so the pens or the breathing so having really</p>

			<p>small headphones that go in my ears would be so helpful”</p> <p>Zoe: “I don’t like it when we go from lesson to lesson cause there is no moving time. So when the bell goes they expect us to just go to the next lesson. And it gets so crowed and I get pushed around and this stresses me out cause it gets very loud”</p> <p>Atlas: “Like I get that it makes us look smarter but actually I can’t sit in a lesson sometimes cause of the texture of the trousers on my legs”</p> <p>“Or sometimes smells too so if the boys have sprayed links deodorant around or if the lights are flickers and go from bright to dim”</p> <p>Ella: “I would rather do work at home. I don’t feel comfortable at school. It’s too loud and I don’t get space”</p>
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			<p>Issac: “so maybe more leniency on school uniform. The uniform has horrible textures and it’s just not good. the jumper is so bad in terms of textures. I get physically ill. They are so strict with what we have to wear to assembly. So like they would make us take off all jewellery and put on a jumper which I obviously never have with me cause I hate it on my skin. They did not care that I literally cannot handle that on my skin.”</p> <p>Vera: well the one things is the school uniform so I hate the skirt and tights so much on my skins, so if I could wear trousers or something different that would really help</p>
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	<p>Sensory build up leads to emotional and academic shutdown N= 8</p>	<p>Sensory experiences lead to feeling overwhelmed N=6</p> <p>Fight or flight mode N=1</p> <p>Distracted from learning N=3 Difficulty concentrating N=3</p> <p>Drains energy N=2</p> <p>Affects mood n=3</p>	<p>Angel: "...if the lights are too bright and then I get sensory overload and having either a meltdown or shut down when I get home"</p> <p>Jade: "on a bad day I get really overwhelmed, not able to focus in classes or study periods. So I will leave school not having absorbed any information and this usually makes me really upset. I usually get overwhelmed by loud noises. I tune out a lot, I will get very quiet and I won't get any work done. So during study period I will just sit in the corner and focus on something. I will also do something to destress like watch YouTube videos"</p> <p>Zena: "on the day of the surprise fire alarm the head of year 9 who is the maths teachers. I had a maths test immediately afterwards so I was in tears just sobbing throughout break and I took the test"</p>
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			<p>in her office instead of in the classroom so I didn't have to be around other people which was helpful but it was hard to do a test when I am in fight or flight mode"</p> <p>Mimi: "I think sometimes classes get very noisy especially when I was in lower school now I am in 6th form but when I was in GCSE's in lower form it would get quite noisy and also very distracted umm... obviously some days it seems to be random where I can't concentrate at all and probably because I don't have very much energy and as much as I try my brain is just ahh I assume I just can't process what is going on very well"</p> <p>"also with the noise so my school is quite big and it gets really noisy and back in lower school there is huge classes and it gets really noisy and really also towards the end of term cause</p>
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			<p>I have done so much I tend to burn out at the end of term or half term and I need a more prolonged break more than just a weekend”</p> <p>Zoe: “noisy and disorganised environments. This makes me feel very overwhelmed. And when I have a bad day I feel very very tired when I get home and will be in a bad mood”</p> <p>“also noisy environments make it hard to concentrate”</p> <p>Ava: “oh it is really loud and with people walking through the corridors then got bells going off it is really loud and like doors slamming cause that’s what they do. umm it just makes the day more stressful and then you have to be able to calm down and focus and go to your lesson and that is hard to do cause I get all worked up cause it is really loud and then you</p>
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		<p>have to kind of bottle it up until you get home”</p> <p>“umm well sometimes it can be so stressful to get it right or there is a lot going on or you have not understood what you have been learning about and then you are told to join in an activity and you are like whoa I don't know what I am doing or what I have learned.. and it is really hard to channel your energy into what you are supposed do. because there is a lot going on or it either too busy trying to understand the content then you trying to apply it where do you begin.”</p> <p>Mia: “I think mostly transitions between lessons. I really really hate being late so when my class finishes I have to get to the next class on time. So when people are messing about in the corridors or blocking the doors I really start panicking. ya and</p>
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			<p>it's like so so so loud and I found that I have to calm myself down from this experience before I can go to my lessons and then I might miss something that was said in the lesson and then I get really upset”</p> <p>Rose: “corridors so noisy and very very loud. I feel like I have to be hidden from the noises. I can't stand it. I can't do what I want, can't go to my class and I get a headache. I shutdown. I can't talk or speak, I can't hear, my body does not sit and I can't help it. The teachers need to know when this happens and how to help me”</p> <p>Atlas: “sensory overload which makes me overwhelmed and panicky. mainly the noise in classroom or in design and technology, the noise of the equipment can set me off.</p>
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<p>Losing myself under the mask</p>	<p>Finding a way to fit in while disappearing (N=7)</p>	<p>Hiding true self (N=6)</p> <p>- uncomfortable to share autism diagnosis N=1</p> <p>-appearing neurotypical (N=3)</p>	<p>Vera: I am very good at masking, you know pretending to be a completely different person to who I actually am, so it's probably my fault that they don't understand me cause I haven't been truthful cause if I was myself I would probably be sitting in a corner and chose to do nothing so I would say that people don't understand me at all</p> <p>I guess cause I don't really know how to be myself, I haven't really told them about the neurodiversity thing umm so that the barrier I guess to be feeling like I belong to this group</p> <p>Angel: .. even though I am masking with them it just shows I don't feel like I would be accepted if I wasn't masking so that's why I don't belong</p> <p>Mimi: by appearing more neurotypical there is less for people to pick at umm...</p>
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			<p>there is less... for me to feel like I don't fit in.. even though masking makes me feel like I don't fit in cause I have to do an extra step that no one else has to do and in some ways even if I am in a situation where I know people are very sort of not accepting towards me like anything to do with me not quite fitting in perfectly its... that defence mechanism of I will mask I will not show you cause I know you will take everything the wrong way and that's gonna use more energy and also be in a worse situation</p> <p>Issac: "I guess it just easier to be the same as everyone else then have to deal with others comments"</p> <p>Mia: I have to hide who I am and then when I go home I can just let it out and have a meltdown and whatever.</p>
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	<p>Masking for peer approval (N=6)</p>	<p>masking to protect self against rejection (N=2)</p> <p>-hide self to make friends (N=3)</p> <p>-masking to avoid loneliness (N=4)</p>	<p>Sadie: I don't necessarily show it when I have a bad day because I feel as if in school I am forced to follow the rules and I don't want to disrupt my teacher</p> <p>Rose: "And also I want to be like others, and copy others and basically be them. cause them don't get laughed at. If I act like them I won't get laughed at. Let's just say I used to walk very differently than I do now. I changed the way I walk to be like others. So I now walk with my arms by my side with my head up. I am basically just copying because I think I am doing it wrong and they are doing it right.</p> <p>Vera:"I figured out from primary</p>
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		<p>school time that being myself isn't the most successful way to make friends and in my school, if you want to make friends you have to be loud and funny and popular and make jokes and I think that masking has worked cause I do have friends now. but it does get frustrating that I can never be myself until I am at home or with people I trust so and ya"</p> <p>Zena: "I think it has meant that there have been long periods of time where I don't feel like I have friends or I have been very alone or isolated. I felt very misunderstood and I would think maybe I should force myself to do things I wasn't comfortable with."</p> <p>Mia: I think I am inside the circle of belonging but only because I am masking at school. So I know my teachers think I am smart and my friends think I am funny and nice</p>
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			<p>but if I stopped masking then people would like I am weird and wouldn't really want to be around me</p> <p>Rose: "I don't want to be alone. But nobody is like us so I have to be like them. I am only doing things because I don't want to be alone, not because I want to"</p> <p>Vera: I don't really feel fully comfortable around anyone really but it took me years like three years to get into this group in my class and now like they are nice people but they very loud, make jokes I don't understand, they are interested in things that I will never be and they super social and love social media and all that stuff so ya we very differently. But they are nice and would never purposefully hurt me. But I feel like I am hanging on the edge of a group I am not fully in and the</p>
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			<p>only really I am staying there is so that I don't look like I am alone.</p> <p>Mia: . A few of my mates at school know I am masking but I would never feel like I can stop masking cause I don't want to change the way that they see me. And I don't know if they would see me differently but I don't want to embarrass myself . so I don't really feel isolated</p> <p>Zoe: "there are many things but the main thing is that I have to adjust my personality like sometimes into someone I don't even like. If I don't then they won't like me and they will be mean to me"</p>
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	<p>Masking is energy depleting/masking uses up social battery (N=3)</p>	<p>Labour of analysing others' behaviours N=2</p> <p>-Tiring to start and stop masking N=2</p>	<p>Vera: well I am kinda like analysing everything I am saying or that others are saying to me so like I will try and pick up on gestures or facial expressions or like you know innuendos or jokes. So I will mirror what other people will say so I sound like everyone else it's just umm takes a lot of skill and effort from me to just seem like everyone else. So that just makes me feel very tired and makes me run out of my social battery almost and then I kind of just deflate and become quite because I can't keep on producing neurotypical kind of conversations for a long time cause then I get burnt out. So it's like being social is like school work."</p> <p>Mia: well I will observe their interaction and what they are saying and when I know that oh they have this type of humour then I can get involved in the</p>
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		<p>conversation. And it's funny cause people would say I am social like I remember when a friend found out I had autism they were like I would have never expected that cause I am the most social in the in the group. So like people view me as funny and social.</p> <p>but it's like a flow chart in my head, so like I will think; they said this and then I have to be funny and say that and then if they say this I must say that so that they will like me. It's all very logical in my head but it doesn't come naturally to me at all</p> <p>Mimi: ya and it is something I do very instinctively so to actually stop masking actually takes effort if I am stressed.. I am sometimes I will be able to stop masking with my face I think.. I feel like I am not.. apparently it is hard to tell if I am stressed even though I am like look I am showing</p>
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			<p>all the signs of being stressed</p> <p>ya and I think even if I am not physically masking, sometimes I feel like my physical mask just goes and I run out of energy and I cant mask anymore.. I think my words play into it a lot as well cause I will just say I am fine.. fine is my word for I am not ok please help me</p> <p>I am just masking it cause it takes a lot of energy and I worry if that will be believed or not</p>
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Appendix R: Example of participant comments on codes and themes

<u>Emerging theme</u>	<u>Transcript</u>	<u>Code</u>	<u>Participant comments</u>
<p>Routines facilitate learning</p>	<p>N= can you describe what a good day would like for you?</p> <p>X= ahh usually a good day is I turn up and I you know go into lessons and during my free period I go into the study room and get some work done</p> <p>N= can you tell me more about the free periods?</p> <p>X- so since I am a sixth former I get free periods where you are supposed to study or get work done</p> <p>N= hmm ok</p> <p>N= and how do you feel when you have a good day?</p> <p>X= well usually if I manage to get work done I am proud of myself</p>	<p>Attend school</p> <p>Complete school work</p> <p>Complete school work</p>	

<p>Loud noises impact on learning & cause overwhelmed feelings</p>	<p>N= ok and can you describe what a bad day would look like for you?</p> <p>X= umm usually on a bad day I get really overwhelmed, not able to focus in classes or study periods. So I will leave school not having absorbed any information and this usually makes me really upset</p> <p>N= ok, you used the word overwhelmed. What usually makes you feel this way</p> <p>X= well loud noises or if it's just not a good day it feels more distressing than it should</p> <p>N- hmm ok and what happens when it's not a good day?</p> <p>X= I tune out a lot, I will get very quiet and I won't get any work done. So</p>	<p>Difficulty focusing</p> <p>Not retaining information</p> <p>Overwhelmed</p> <p>Sensory experiences</p> <p>Sensory experiences inhibit focus and learning</p>	<p>Sensory overload or even small disruptions can really throw a wrench in my day- and it's not something my peers can sympathise with, because to them it seems like I'm overreacting over a bit of noise. Me going quiet during times of stress also kind of sucks, because I can't ask for help in the moment.</p>
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<p>Person centred practices- adults have time to listen to pupils</p>	<p>during study period I will just sit in the corner and focus on something. I will also do something to destress like watch YouTube videos</p> <p>N= ok but im trying to understand what would trigger a bad day?</p> <p>X=ahh well usually it's like you know loud noises or if someone honks their horn to me in the morning that will ruin my day.</p> <p>N= ok and what support was given to you when you had a bad day?</p> <p>X= majority of my teachers trust me to know what helps and they will let me listen to music during lessons to help me calm down. And you know some teachers</p>	<p>Loud noises</p> <p>Listen to pupil voice</p> <p>Trust pupil knows what is best</p>	<p>Yeah. I think what I was saying here is that the trust between the student and the teacher, to let me do what I need, is quite important to everyone getting along and me having an environment I can work in.</p>
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<p>Person centred practices- adults have time to listen to pupils</p>	<p>don't like it cause they think it's not a proper working environment but it's like they trust that I know what helps. As long as I don't listen to music when the teachers are speaking then its sensible I think</p> <p>N= ok, it helps when teachers allow you to tell them what works and provide you the agency to use those strategies?</p> <p>X= ya cause some teachers have in their head what we should do but the best teachers are the ones that give me leeway to choose what works for me as long as it doesn't disrupt other students or comprise the work environment</p> <p>N= ya brilliant and I am curious, how do you think you reached</p>	<p>Listen to pupil voice</p>	<p>Ya. Sometimes teachers think they know what is best but I know what works for me and what doesn't. I tend to just... do what works for me, and I feel like if I'm not disrupting anyone, I shouldn't necessarily have to justify it (eg. I wear extra clothing under my uniform to help sensory regulation- I used to get told off for it- but I think that's a bit silly. I'm still following uniform code, it</p>
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<p>Listening to pupil views</p>	<p>this point with some teachers where they allow you to have input into what works for you</p> <p>X= well one teacher has known me for ages so she just knew what worked for me. Others got my report at the start of the year and knew I am autistic so when I went to them to say can I listen to music they said ya sure</p> <p>N= ok great</p> <p>N= ok let's move onto the circle of belonging. So this is something I designed and it's called the circle of belonging. The people inside the circle who represent those pupils who feel included, accepted, wanted in your schools. And the people on the outside of the circle would be those</p>	<p>Teachers learning about pupil's needs</p>	<p>helps me, and doesn't affect you.)</p>
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	<p>pupils who feels lonely, isolated and excluded from school. So I am interested to hear about where you think you are most the time at your school?</p> <p>X= ahh I don't feel particularly excluded but I don't feel included either</p> <p>N= ok</p> <p>X= so between the inner and outer circle. And this is because I don't really connect with people. And also it doesn't bother me that much that I am not included</p> <p>N= ok so where would you like to be in the circle of belonging at school?</p> <p>X= I am ok where I am. I don't talk to the other students that much. I only talk to them as much as I need to so like for homework</p>	<p>Lack of connections</p> <p>Unconcerned about inclusion</p> <p>Interactions with peers based on school work</p>	<p>Ya</p>
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<p>Belonging is having close connections with others</p>	<p>projects. And I probably wouldn't change that cause it works fine the way it is.</p> <p>N= ok and so what would belonging mean to you?</p> <p>X= I guess belonging would mean having a discernible friendship group and people who know you quite well and can have conversations with you and like you know will consider you when talking about the class as a whole and you know I never really got there cause I was always an outside person but like I don't mind it that much. I mean logically I don't make the effort to connect with other people so you know I see why they don't connect with me very much</p>	<p>Belonging is having friends</p> <p>Having conversations with friends peers who listen and care</p> <p>Lack of effort to connect</p>	<p>From my perspective my peers are asking a lot of me for little payoff- they want active social engagement, they want me to make small talk, and they don't want to hear about my special interests. I find it easier to be part of the school in the sense that I'm on the register, but not in the sense that I'm socially involved on a constant basis.</p>
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	<p>N= hmm ok and would you like it if others made an effort to get to know you</p> <p>X= well I feel that I am not very good with relationships, like It would be cool to get along with others but I feel like I would be taking a lot out of others cause I don't probably pull my weight in relationships that much. So I am fine being a member of the school like officially cause I go there to learn but unofficially I am not really there</p> <p>N= ok but for you belonging would be having connections with others</p> <p>X= ya. Also I think students in general but especially autistic kids benefit a lot from being actively shown that they are a</p>	<p>Feeling like a burden</p> <p>Feeling valued in school</p> <p>Externally shown that they are important</p>	<p>peer relationships are kind of hard to navigate because there are so many moving parts. I'm not the most emotionally literate in my own skin, and so it's really difficult to have to read a bunch of other people's emotions, and then struggle to figure out how to act accordingly, multiple times a day. It just seems like I'm using ten times as much energy as everyone else (because it doesn't come as naturally to me)- a lot of energy that doesn't seem to have much payoff.</p>
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	<p>valued member of the class community- a lot of us feel excluded because of how we differently process basically everything.</p> <p>N= ok and if you could give your school advice on how they could make you feel more accepted and valued what would you say to them?</p> <p>X= I don't really know. I mean the problems I have had is people don't understanding that I will need to have ears plugged</p> <p>N= ok but what about advice to your school about how they could help you connect with others? You have said this would make you feel more included and feel like you belong</p>	<p>Excluded due to unique processing</p> <p>Lack of understanding of need</p> <p>Structured groups to form connections</p>	
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<p>Pre-selected groups to facilitate peer interactions to improve belonging</p>	<p>X= I mean the only group I have been in a significant group was last year in my drama course when we were put in a group to rehearse something and like that was the only time I had been to someone house. So like group work, but like set support groups for the entire term to do multiple pieces of homework together with</p> <p>N= ok let's move on. So do you think that the people you spend time with affect how you feel about school?</p> <p>X= ahh probably. So I used to be in friendship groups and depending on how others were feeling this would affect my mood. And I would also think that like if someone is in a bad mood I would</p>	<p>Friends feelings impact self</p> <p>Internalise others reactions as something wrong with you</p>	
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<p>Lack of understanding of feelings & how to process barrier to forming connections</p>	<p>immediately think that it's because of me like I did something to make them mad</p> <p>N= oh right ok and do you think this has impacted on your desire to be in friendship groups?</p> <p>X= I mean maybe it is one of the reasons I have stepped back from people cause I am really bad at noticing if I am sad for myself or if I am sad for someone else. I guess stepping back from people will stop me from being upset for no reason. I need to focus on myself and my exams rather than others</p> <p>N= ok, and what experiences or thoughts might keep you awake at night?</p> <p>X= no nothing</p>	<p>Difficultly understanding feelings</p>	
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	<p>N= ok and what is it like for you when you awake up in the morning and you know you have to go to school</p> <p>X= usually its ok and I will wake up and look my lessons and free time</p> <p>N= ok and is there anything that might be happening at school that makes it hard to know you have to go to school</p> <p>X= ahhh nothing no</p> <p>N= ok. Can you tell me about the people you like spending time with at school?</p> <p>X= ahh I tend to get very attached to teachers and if I click with a teacher my year will be way better. It just boosts my enjoyment of the lesson. And also if the class has a good vibe then</p>	<p>Relationships with teachers (F)</p> <p>Teacher-pupil relationship improve enjoyment of lesson</p>	<p>I (historically) have clicked a lot better with teachers than peers, because the relationship is easier to understand. And having a positive teacher student relationship helps me relax and therefore helps me concentrate.</p>
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	<p>I feel more comfortable in that class</p> <p>N= ok and what about these teachers makes you feel comfortable with them?</p> <p>X= well a lot of them tend to be very chatty with me and umm so because they teaching the subject and if I have an interest in the subject they will recognise it and it made me have a connection with them</p> <p>N= ok and can you tell me more about this classroom environment that has a good vibe</p> <p>X= ok so it's the English class, it has 20 people and each person has their own insight or interpretation of the text so like</p> <p>N= ok, and how much do you feel like</p>	<p>Shared interest in subject facilitates teacher-pupil relationship</p>	
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<p>Sensory experiences during transitions</p>	<p>people at school understand you</p> <p>X= umm I feel like they don't understand me in any psychic way but they are patient and like you know patient</p> <p>N= and is there anything that could change so others understood you better?</p> <p>X= ahh not really but ahh I do think people focus less on the fact that I have special needs and more on how I am a part of the school community</p> <p>N= ok let's move to school routines. Which routines do you feel comfortable with</p> <p>X= ahh so there is a short breaktime where I tend to stay inside cause I don't like transitional periods</p>	<p>Patient and understanding</p> <p>Inclusion in school community</p> <p>Transitions are difficult due to sensory experiences</p>	
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	<p>N= ok and why is that</p> <p>X= cause we got a breaktime in middle of a lesson so I just wait until it's over and people come back. I also ahh bring my lunch cause I hate the hall its very loud and irritating</p> <p>N= anything else about transitions I should know</p> <p>X= well the hallways are crowed and loud and so like ya</p> <p>N= ok and are there parts about school that might make you feel lonely or anxious</p> <p>X= ahh not really</p> <p>N= is there anything difficult making friends at school</p> <p>X= I have struggled with maintaining</p>	<p>Transitions are difficult due to sensory experiences</p> <p>Hard to understand ambiguous</p>	
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<p>Double empathy problem- autistic girl not understanding non-autistic girls and vice versa</p>	<p>friendships. It's like a gender difference, so like girls want a lot of emotional literacy and to understand that they feeling a different way to what they are saying. And then I don't get that and I feel disconnected cause in their head they think that they have implied that they feel bad but then I don't pick up on that and it makes it hard to maintain</p> <p>N=ok so are you saying it's hard to understand what someone is saying when they imply it but don't direct say it</p> <p>X= ya so sometimes like ahh they might say, I am feel a little down and I want to curl up and lie in bed and I hear she want to lie in bed not I need comfort which is what they seeking</p>	<p>language in friendships</p> <p>Difficultly understanding feelings</p>	<p>I think some people are definitely self-conscious about being totally explicit in their language because it's seen as needy to explicitly say that you need a hug, or something.</p>
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<p>Mono-processing/selective attention- focusing on parts rather than the whole</p>	<p>N= ohh ok and what would help decrease these difficulties</p> <p>X= well they need to know that if they say things in a certain way I won't understand it and so they need to be upfront about what they want</p> <p>N= and is there anything else you think I need to know to understand some of the difficulties you experience at school?</p> <p>X= I don't think so no</p> <p>N= so what does being autistic mean to you?</p> <p>X= umm developmental disorder but in terms of how it affects me it affects how I communicate, how I approach social situations and how I process information. so</p>	<p>Unambiguous language facilitates friendships</p> <p>Being autistic impacts communications and social abilities</p>	<p>Yeah. I find word problems in maths disproportionately hard because I cannot for the life of me extract the needed information from a wordy question.</p>
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	<p>autistics see things one at a time in great detail not the whole picture, like with language I tend to focus on one word and then will only understand what you have said based off that one word.</p> <p>N= do you think being autistic impacts on your school experiences?</p> <p>X= I mean ya, it basically affects everything like how I function. Sometimes I look back and I can tell how it went wrong in the past and its usually cause of my autism.</p> <p>N= and if you could give advice to your school about you and autism, what would it be?</p> <p>X= I mean I tend to say to people to let me do what I know works best. I don't</p>	<p>Being autistic affects functioning</p> <p>Include autistic people in decisions made about them</p>	
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	<p>expect everyone to know how to treat people with autism but just ask them what works and roll with it. So like it's unrealistic to not do anything and expect the teacher t know I am upset cause the class is too loud. But I think it's reasonable for like the teacher to allow me to wear ear plugs</p> <p>N= and if you could describe your school experiences in three words, what would it be</p> <p>X= ahhh its crowded, well there is learning, and ahhh community cause everything has to bounce off each to work properly</p> <p>N= and do you feel a part of that community?</p>		
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	<p>X= well no but I still play a role and I can tell them how to make me feel a part of it</p> <p>N= N= ok last one, how do you think the pandemic has impacted your school experiences</p> <p>X= SO NOW THERE IS bubbles and it has helped and the school day has been staggered and that has helped cause it's not as crowded and cause of the way the school day works. So I now I can stay in the classroom during break and not feel weird about it or stressed</p> <p>N= anything else</p> <p>X= well wearing masks in school is in some ways is ok cause it kind of like is necessary and sometimes it makes people feel less weird</p>	<p>Pupil voice</p> <p>Bubbles decrease sensory input (covid)</p> <p>Masks decrease social pressure (covid)</p>	
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<p>Sensory experiences are overwhelming-stimulating to regulate feelings in a quiet space</p>	<p>when I don't smile back and like less obviously dead pan face so makes others more comfortable</p> <p>N= so would you wearing a mask takes ways the social pressure</p> <p>X= yes cause the mask hides my face and it makes people feel less rejected cause they don't get the wrong cue from my face and I feel less misunderstood</p> <p>N= ok did you choose do an activity</p> <p>X= ya here is a drawing</p> <p>N= ok, can you tell me what I am looking at?</p> <p>X= this is me in the study room when it is too loud in there and umm I have a little spot where I sit at the table but I also have a spot where I sit between two lockers and I</p>	<p>Overwhelmed from Sensory experiences</p> <p>Hiding from noise</p>	
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<p>Sensory experiences increase stressor-become overwhelmed</p>	<p>like it there cause its more enclosed and I sit there and kind of like it there. So that's me sitting between the lockers in the room cause it's too loud. And when I get overwhelmed I vocally stim and say ahhh so like there that too</p> <p>N= ok and what does the stimming do for you</p> <p>X= it is usually me letting out stress and also it's like helps drown out other noises</p> <p>N= ok and what is actually happening here, why did you drew this</p> <p>X= well I am frustrated cause it loud and this affects me at school. And the anxiety mark is above my head.</p> <p>N= ok and how does this relate to your daily life?</p>	<p>Stimming reduces stress</p> <p>Sensory experiences cause anxiety</p>	
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<p>Safe space to regulate when overwhelmed</p>	<p>X= also like if there is a lot of sounds then any stress I feel gets amplified</p> <p>N= ok and does it help when you have access to this space when you are stressed</p> <p>X= I actually have a lot of these spaces around the school so like little crannies around the school. At first people are like why is she there but now people are used to it. And also so like free periods happen a lot and umm in these periods I either get work done or if it's a bad day I don't get anything done. This reflects my school life cause when I am having a bad day I am usually in the corner of the study room on the floor</p>	<p>Noises increase stress</p> <p>Hiding from sensory experiences in school environment</p> <p>Insensitive school environments</p>	
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	<p>N= ok and why do you think this barrier exists? So why do you think you have to reach the point where you are sitting o the floor as in this picture</p> <p>X= ahh cause school environment are not sensitive to the noise experiences we have. But there is no way to elimiate crowds but I can take myself away</p> <p>N= ok and how do you think we could use this drawing to educate others about what its like to be autistic girl</p> <p>X= about how umm it's like for us. So when people first see me in these nooks they are like why is she is there and they will ask why are you there. And this can show that I am here cause I want to be</p>	<p>Needing space to regulate</p> <p>Person centred practices</p>	
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	<p>alone and have space to regulate</p> <p>N= so it can show others why you need this space</p> <p>N= and is there anything your school can do to help you not reach this point</p> <p>X= umm well allow me to have headphones so this will stop me from being to this point</p>		
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Appendix S: Mind map of final themes, sub-themes, codes



The joys and pains of mutuality

Good peer relationships
enhance belonging (N=11)

Relationship with school
staff (N=7)

Long to belong (N=7)

Feeling comfortable
around friends
(N=6)

Student/teacher relationship
impacts lesson enjoyment and
participation (N=2)

Loneliness (N=4)

Having people to
speak to (N=4)

Student/teacher relationships
improves comfortably in
school (N=3)

Effort to form and
maintain friends
(N=3)

Having friends
impacts school
attendances (N=2)

Having teachers to
speak to (N=1)

Difficulty
understanding
emotions in
relationships (N=1)

Friends that help
with difficulties
(N=1)

Teacher accepting
needs (N=2)

Feeling no one likes
them (N=1)

Having company
(N=3)

Losing myself under the mask

Finding a way to fit in while disappearing (N=7)

Masking for peer approval (N=6)

Masking is energy depleting (N=3)

Hiding true self (N=6)

Masking to protect self from rejection (N=2)

Labour of analysing others' behaviours (N=2)

Uncomfortable to share autism diagnosis (N=1)

Hide true self to make friends (N=3)

Tiring to start and stop masking (N=2)

Appearing neurotypical (N=3)

Masking to avoid loneliness (N=4)

Marginalisation links with invalidation

Autistic girls
heterogeneous
constructs of autism
(N=12)

Stigma and
attitudes challenge
autistic self (N=8)

Inappropriate
school practices
(N= 6)

Autism creates
barriers (N=6)

Stigma othering
autistic girls (N=6)

Feeling like needs
are too much (N=1)

Autism is
inseparable to self
(N=5)

teacher attitudes
(N=3)

Difficulty explaining
need for adapted
practices (N=2)

Autism means being
different, but so is
everyone (N=6)

Teacher language
(N=1)

Embarrassed accepting
help as it draws
attention (N=4)

Autism diagnosis
brought relief (N=2)

Feeling like a
burden (N=2)

Sensory fatigue

Entrapped in
sensory
environment (N=7)

Sensory build up
leads to emotional
and academic
shutdown (N=8)

Sensory overloaded
school environment
(N=4)

Sensory experiences lead
to feeling overwhelmed
(N=6)

Uncomfortable
Sensory
experiences (e.g.
Noise, Smells,
Flickering lights)
(N=7)

Fight or flight mode
(N=1)

Distracted from
learning (N=3)

Spaces in school to
hide from sensory
experiences (N=1)

Difficulty
concentrating (N=3)

Affects mood(N=3)

Appendix T: Final themes and sub-themes

