

A case study of one partnership further education college in England and the experiences of visually impaired students.

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Abstract

This thesis presents a case study of one partnership further education college in England, illustrated by the individual experiences of visually impaired students. Partnership education can take many forms such as, specialist and mainstream schools being located within the same physical space or the sharing of resources such as staff and learning equipment. In England, research has shown that there is much to be gained by closer and more collaborative contact between special and mainstream education settings. Existing research has found that partnerships can and do promote inclusion of disabled students and discovered how they ensure the needs of disabled students are met effectively. However, previous research has generally focused on compulsory aged schooling. Therefore, best practices for the inclusion of visually impaired students in further education settings still needed to be adequately explored.

This study demonstrates that students' experiences are uniquely different regardless of being educated in the same environment, and this is crucial in fostering inclusion for this group of students. Data were collected through participant observation and a research journal and represented in the form of an autoethnographic account. In addition, semi-structured interviews were used to collect participant experiences (students n=5, staff n=3). The data identified previous barriers to learning, for example over-supportiveness of staff and families, created by a range of social and environmental factors that limited inclusive activity and participation in both their education and wider society. However, their experiences were considerably more positive in partnership further education because it addressed the barriers mentioned above to learning through individualised, supportive, practical and collaborative methods. Therefore, this study proposes a new model of partnership further education based on the fundamental aspects of the college, as identified by participants in the research, that facilitate inclusion for the group of students involved in the research. As emphasised by the students and staff, these factors of partnership further education will improve teaching and learning in the sector, optimising experiences that visually impaired students have in such provision, provided that there is a partnership model to further education that embodies inclusion.

For you, Gran.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the thesis

This thesis presents a case study of the experiences of visually impaired students in one specialist-mainstream partnership further education (partnership-FE) college in England. A unique characteristic of the study is the specialist-mainstream partnership of the college where the research occurs; this will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4 – The Findings Part 1. This study will provide stakeholders, such as students, teachers, support staff, parents and the general public, with detailed insight into the experiences of visually impaired students in this specific further education environment. Furthermore, this research will point to a range of outcomes for this particular group of students both educationally and further into their post-education lives.

1.2 Terminology

Before outlining the structure of this thesis, it is pertinent to justify some of the language used. This thesis has been challenging to write in terms of grappling with the appropriate terminology and language with which to describe participants in the research; because of the tensions surrounding ableist language used when talking about disability (Brown, 2014; Croft, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Feely, 2016; Goodley, 2014; Kattari, 2015; Kattari et al., 2020). First, it is necessary to identify and acknowledge the shortcomings and socially constructed implications of choices in terminology around disability in general and also visual impairment more specifically. Although identity is not the focus of this research, it is a politically charged area of debate. Therefore, it is essential to consider how identity is created through stakeholders' language. This research is informed by the legal definition of disability within the anti-discriminatory legislation in England, which states individuals are disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if they have 'a physical or mental impairment and the impairment has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' adverse effect on people's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities' (Equality Act, 2010: 6). In addition, educational institutions are legally required to comply with the statement in the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that individuals categorised under their definition of disability are not subject to direct and indirect discrimination (Department for Education, 2014). Whilst this definition has been critiqued due to its medical model connotations (Bunbury, 2019; Geffen, 2013; Koyithara, 2018; McTigue, 2010), this research aims to examine the barriers that may be contributing to disabling factors within visually impaired students' lives rather than focusing on their vision impairment alone.

The debates around person-first language and identity-first language are longstanding and require careful thought. As a result, I spent a significant amount of time deciding on the most appropriate choices for my research. Person-first language, for instance, ‘persons with disabilities’, emphasises the person and then the disability (Wright, 1991); it is believed that in order to accentuate their humanity, people should be grammatically positioned ahead of their disability (McCarthy, 2011). Furthermore, in North America, traditional writing guidelines in academia have necessitated the use of person-first language (Dunn and Andrews, 2015; Gernsbacher, 2017; Peers, Spencer-Cavaliere and Eales, 2014; Simonsen and Mruczek, 2019). Whereas outside of the United States, there has been an increased demand for the use of identity-first language, particularly among the disability rights community in the United Kingdom (Best et al., 2022; Ferrigon and Tucker, 2019; Wilson and Martin, 2018), where this research took place. Identity-first language, for example, ‘disabled person’, places disability before the person (Andrews, Powell and Ayers, 2022). In support of identity-first language, it has been argued that person-first language reinforces a negative view of disability (Andrews et al., 2013; Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021; Dunn and Andrews, 2015; Gernsbacher, 2017; Gomes, 2018; McGuire, 2016; Vivanti, 2020), through its claims that normalcy can be attained if society continuously emphasises that disabled people are, in fact, people (Titchkosky, 2001). The person-first approach to disability language has been challenged by both self-advocates (Bickford, 2004; Lane, 2005; Okundaye, 2021) and scholars (Andrews et al., 2013; Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021; Gernsbacher, 2017; Hoffman, Hengesbach and Trotter, 2020; Titchkosky, 2001). Although the term ‘disabled people’ is equally contested (Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021; Flink, 2021; Gernsbacher, 2017; Goodley et al., 2019; Welsh, 2020), it has also been supported widely by those it concerns, therefore, it is adopted in this study as it is synonymous with the concept of doing research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ disabled people (Oliver, 1990; Oliver and Barnes, 2012; Titchkosky and Michalko, 2014). Moreover, Virhia (2022) argued that when speaking of disability, it is imperative to listen to how disabled people define themselves and, if in doubt, ask how they would like to be described. So, because the terms ‘disabled person’ and ‘visually impaired person’ are recognised and preferred by the participants and reflect the position of identity-first language, they are used in this thesis.

Language around vision impairment, including blindness and sight loss, seems to take on many forms, and these forms are used interchangeably within England. For example, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, the United Kingdom’s leading sight loss charity, uses varied terminology, including visual impairment, blindness, sight loss, partially sighted, and sight problem (RNIB, 2022a).

As such, I use the terms visually impaired, blindness, sight loss and partially sighted, partly as a way of avoiding connotations of deficit that may be associated with the latter term 'sight problem', as I would argue the word 'problem' places the individual person as the problem which would be contradictory of the social model underpinning of this research. Furthermore, the RNIB (2022b) states that anyone registered as blind or partially sighted will be automatically covered within the Equality Act, meaning they are entitled to access support and the provision of reasonable adjustments, further substantiating the social model of disability. All the students and some staff participants were registered as either blind or partially sighted, contributing to my terminology decisions. I have thoroughly considered the language used in the Equality Act. With that, it feels pertinent to point out that it could be argued that the Act reflects a medicalised view and construction of disability because it focuses on individual abilities to undertake what the act terms as 'normal' activities. The debates around normalcy will be covered in more detail in chapter two, the literature review; for now, as I have referred to the Equality Act (2010) earlier in this chapter, it felt appropriate to signpost to what is to come in the next chapter.

Irrespective of these debates, the priority in this thesis was to emphasise terminology used by the participants. Therefore, whilst some may contest the terms, the participants in this study all referred to themselves as individuals experiencing sight loss, registered blind, partially sighted, or visually impaired people. As these were their preferences, identity-first language seemed the most appropriate choice as their own language reflects this style. The term 'visually impaired' is an umbrella term in this thesis and refers to all participants who experience a functional impairment of vision. Moreover, the terms 'disabled people' and 'visually impaired' people or students are used in this thesis as these are the accepted inclusive language terms in England, where this research took place (Cabinet Office, 2021). However, it is essential to note that these terms are not necessarily considered politically neutral, nor do they clarify whom or what this research is about. Instead, they are used because, in this study, the terms will be problematised to raise awareness of the issues around disability terminology and language. Moreover, it is evident that vision impairment indicators vary considerably across different countries and contexts (Levy, Li, Sharif and Reinecke, 2021; Rahman et al., 2020), and I encourage the critical examination of terminology throughout the thesis. My epistemological position of interpretivism reflects this as it supports a commitment to exploring and conceptualising the intersections of being a student, being disabled, being visually impaired, and being a visually impaired student from the subjective interpretations of individuals (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017).

1.3 Researcher Positionality

This section is divided into two sub-sections. The first section identifies my position regarding disability. I explore how I align with and work within the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983). In addition, I emphasise the tension this brings in terms of being a non-disabled researcher researching the field of disability. The second section discusses how my personal experiences brought me to research the experiences of visually impaired students in this partnership further education setting. Previous research choices heavily influence my research interest, and it is essential to acknowledge these for transparency (Dean et al., 2018). Furthermore, Sheridan (2013) emphasises the importance that researchers acknowledge their narrative to be clear about their motivations for undertaking the research.

1.3.1 The social model and being a non-disabled researcher

I align most with the social model and its understanding of disability as empowered and maintained through societal attitudes. The social model places responsibility on society to enable equal opportunities for disabled people by addressing and changing socially constructed barriers (Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Bates, Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2017; Oliver, 1983; Swain, French and Cameron, 2003). During the many years that I have worked alongside visually impaired students, I have noted that when they are in supportive environments, they appear to face very little disablement, for example, within the safety of the college where this research took place. However, away from these environments, students can face challenges which often result in barriers to accessing public places and spaces. The social model perceives disability as the socially constructed barriers within the law, policy, practice, and society, that disadvantage and exclude people (Brandon and Pritchard, 2011; Peterson, Karlawish and Largent, 2020). In addition, the social model separates impairment from disability and argues that people do not have disabilities; instead, they have impairments; people are not disabled by their impairments (Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2006). As such, when a body does not fit with its social environment, individuals experience disadvantages (Goering, 2015). This disadvantage is caused by discrepancies in the social world that the social model sees as problematic. Disability is therefore socially constructed.

By aligning my positionality within this research with the social model of disability, I recognise that I cannot see visual impairment or any disability fully through the social model lens because I still need

to acknowledge it within its medically enshrined definition. Through a medical diagnosis, visually impaired individuals can access the specialist support and resources necessary to break down some socially constructed barriers that students encounter (Anthony, 2014; Osborne, 2019). Furthermore, this can be substantiated by the need for individuals to be diagnosed as disabled before accessing specialist support and resources. Therefore, until access to support is no longer dependent upon a medical diagnosis, it is realistic to align rather than solidify my work with the social model of disability. However, through my research, I challenge the idea that specialist support depends upon the requirements of an externally applied medical diagnosis.

As a non-disabled researcher, I cannot claim that I know or understand what it means to live as a disabled person, and I recognise how challenging it can be to write about the experiences of disabled people from the position of a non-disabled person. For example, the role of non-disabled researchers has raised questions regarding control, and the absence of personal experience of disability has been linked to a lack of legitimacy (Barnes and Mercer, 1997). However, there is a role within disability research for non-disabled researchers. It recognises the importance of considering the status of disabled people and adopting methods to empower them rather than seeking an authoritative position which will only enhance the power of the non-disabled researcher (Callus, 2019; Drake, 1997; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003). Walmsley (2004) also emphasised that if non-disabled researchers avoid sharing their expert knowledge and skills, they risk contributing to the continued disempowerment and disrespect disabled people experience. Additionally, research that fails to expose the real barriers experienced by disabled people, such as those imposed by society, is in danger of inaction to change the situations of marginalised groups (Brittain, 2002).

Opting to describe myself as a non-disabled researcher rather than able-bodied is a conscious choice to avoid placing normality on a non-disabled starting point (Svendby, Romsland and Moen, 2018). Further, it enables a challenge against discrimination towards the socially constructed group of disabled people (Campbell, 2009). In addition, the United Kingdom's inclusive language guidance suggests using the term non-disabled instead of able-bodied (Cabinet Office, 2021). Moreover, problematising ableism is pertinent in this thesis through the emphasis I have placed on hearing, listening, understanding, and providing space to share the visually impaired students' personal experiences to disrupt the notion that disabled people are defined by their disability. Furthermore, it is problematic to think of any group of people, for example, disabled or non-disabled, as being a uniform group that shares the same experiences of disability (Lindsay, 2011; Hardie and Tilly, 2012;

Mietola, Miettinen and Vehmas, 2017; Svendby, Romsland and Moen, 2018). As this thesis continues, recognising the terms used in this study as overly simplified makes room for critical awareness of such categorising language. Taking this kind of self-critical gaze, I hope to contribute to the discussions around ableism, that disability studies scholars have hoped would encourage non-disabled people to reflect on their relationship with disability (Campbell, 2009; Ellis, 2010; Friedman and Owen, 2017).

Because of my lack of experience in disabling barriers, my contribution to the students' experiences in this study lacks authenticity (Humphrey, 2000). However, I am not claiming to know what it feels like to experience the world as my participants do. As Sheldon (2017) explains, even if someone identifies as disabled, this does not automatically give them special insight into disability from the perspective of everyone who experiences it. Non-disabled researchers have a responsibility to understand their role in the lives of disabled people (Callus, 2019; Mellifont, 2019; Sherlaw and Hudebine, 2015). Everyone has their insight, and it is crucial for all involved in disability research to deconstruct their identity.

As such, I draw on my experience within the visually impaired community in one special-mainstream partnership further education college. When beginning this study, I was already heavily involved with some stakeholders from the setting, including visually impaired students, which gave me the initial motivation to begin this research and has contributed to my ability to gain a level of understanding of the experiences of this group of students. Furthermore, Michalko (1999) suggested through his account of how people observe him and his guide dog that many sources construct visual impairment. For me, these include academic work, professional experiences, the accounts shared with me, and the stories I have created with students along my journey. People make assumptions based on their beliefs, stereotypes, and experiences about what it is to be visually impaired, and these assumptions construct a broader narrative about who we are.

1.3.2 Personal motivations for the research

My interest in the research emerged due to my professional interest and academic study in this field. My undergraduate degree was in the field of education, and this raised my awareness of theoretical perspectives on the educational and social dimensions of disability (Barnes, 1991; Oliver, 1983; 1990; Shakespeare and Watson, 1998; Terzi, 2004; UPIAS, 1976) as well as the under-

researched aspects of further education generally (Hughes et al., 1996; Hyland and Merrill, 2003; James, Biesta and Hodkinson, 2007; Solvason and Elliott, 2013; Rudd and Evans, 1998) and more specifically, disabled students' experiences in further education (Ash et al., 1997; Keil and Crews, 2008; Morris, 2014; Shah, 2007; Skellern and Astbury, 2014; Pitt and Curtin, 2004). It was during this time that it became my intention to explore the field of special educational needs more deeply, which led me to undertake a master's degree that allowed me to conduct a small-scale research project in an area of my choosing. For this research, I opted to focus on visual impairment, more specifically, visually impaired students and their use of assistive technology. I located a further education college to accommodate my master's research, which later became the setting for this doctoral project after discovering recommendations for more research about the partnership was needed in the field. Whilst conducting this small project, I quickly realised that visually impaired students were the minority in the cohort. This was a surprising finding because, at the time and since opening in the late 1970s, the college was part of the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB). The RNIB sold all its educational facilities in 2019, and the college has since been taken over by a different charity, which will be kept anonymous as per the ethical research guidelines. This charity has a central aim of supporting everyone living with complex disabilities. Through my professional practice spent here and subsequent study, I became aware that very little attention had been paid to the discrete group of visually impaired people in post-compulsory education settings and even less attention to those settings with a partnership nature. This awareness reinforced my personal motivation in this specific field and made me aware of the gap this research could contribute towards filling.

1.4 Background and justification

Historically, disabled people have faced deep-rooted structures of inequality; a range of societal barriers mean they face marginalisation and deprivation with unequal access to social participation, employment, and education (Gannon and Nolan, 2005). The medical model of disability largely contributed to this by classifying and labelling impairments (Barton, 2009; Bishop and Sunderland, 2013; Brisenden, 1986; Haegele and Hodge, 2016; Minich, 2016; Reiser, 2012). As a result of a global awakening to the human rights of disabled people, disability discrimination laws were introduced in the 1990s (Disability Discrimination Act, 1995) and were critical in the growth of the disabled rights movements and, later, the social model of disability which created greater awareness of the barriers disabled people face towards their full engagement in society (Oliver, 1990). As a result of these movements, legislation developed further in England and a commitment was made to promoting

greater inclusion of disabled people in all aspects of society, including education (Equality Act, 2010). Furthermore, the United Kingdom ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2009, meaning the government agreed to work towards ensuring the education system is inclusive at every level and is driven by the goal of supporting disabled people to participate equally in society and to achieve their full potential (Rieser, 2012).

There are differing interpretations of disability; it is multi-faceted and cannot be defined by one single definition. Disability is affected by several factors, including, but not limited to, social norms, stereotypes, the interaction between impairments, and the societies in which people live (Swain and French, 2008; WHO, 2015). The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2015) defines disability as an umbrella term for participation limitations – experienced by people in life situations, impairments – a structural or functional bodily problem, and restriction to activities – any difficulty a person experiences in completing an action or task. By recognising these, the organisation acknowledges the complexity of disability as features of the society an individual lives in and the features of the body that are impacted by disability.

If we consider the notion of disability as an ‘umbrella term’, meaning it covers a broad category of things, the medical and social models of disability (Finkelstein, 1993; Oliver, 1983; UPIAS, 1976) can be highlighted as two of the most influential views around disability within England. Thereby, they are necessary to interrogate if we are to understand what thoughts and beliefs underpin disability generally. The medical model (sometimes called the individual model) of disability states that disability stems from a person’s biological or psychological limitations, leaving social and economic structures untheorised (Oliver, 1990). Medical professionals are expected to cure or rectify impairment of any kind, and if they are unable to do so, the consequence is that the disabled person will be unable or have a limited ability to participate in society (Bunbury, 2019; Terzi, 2004; Woodhams and Corby, 2003). However, this notion has been widely challenged by disabled people themselves as it underpins the sick role view that society places on disabled people and emphasises their need for a level of care (Bunbury, 2019; Finkelstein, 1998; Terzi, 2004). Also known as the personal tragedy model (Thomas and Woods, 2003), the medical model is arguably broken in how it regards disability as objectively wrong, a tragedy for all disabled people and their families (Swain and French, 2008). As such, the medical model assigns power to the professionals who diagnose and treat disabled people (Retief and Letsosa, 2018), which is in direct contrast to the fundamentals of the social model.

The social model of disability recognises the importance of an individual's impairment experience, specifically when attempting to eliminate social exclusion (Oliver, 1983; 1996). In this study, I am acknowledging this group of students' impairments (vision) and any associated difficulties that are attached to having a visual impairment but still focusing on their individual experiences and views around their educational journeys within the college where the research is set. There is, at present, a lack of research concerning the experiences of visually impaired students in specialist further education settings generally, including those with a special-mainstream partnership nature. Instead, the literature concentrates on other people's experiences, for example, professionals or parents (Satherley and Norwich, 2021; Stalker et al., 2011; Parsons et al., 2009), and also is typically focused on compulsory education or higher education (Croft, 2020; Bishop and Rhind, 2011; Hewett et al., 2017; Lourens and Swartz, 2016).

The social model of disability has afforded much debate around special education and has previously led to scholars calling for inclusive educational systems for disabled students (Oliver and Barnes, 2013). Inclusion remains a highly debated educational concept. In England, this is primarily a result of the regular revisions in the legislative guidance, for example, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015). Definitions are contested, and the concept of inclusion tends to move with societal transitions (Trussler and Robinson, 2015). Those promoting an inclusive agenda within education have frequently argued that the special educational needs system does not promote a fully inclusive educational experience. Instead, they believe that special educational needs processes serve to isolate individuals through the emphasis on a medical diagnosis which can be linked back to the medical model of disability, individualised provision, and segregation when needs cannot be met by the mainstream (Kenworthy and Whittaker, 2000; Thomas and Loxley, 2001). Notwithstanding the arguably universal agreement on the goals of inclusion and mainstreaming, special education establishments have proved resilient (Merrigan and Senior, 2021) and still exist. Moreover, one approach to achieving the goal of inclusion is the establishment of collaborative partnerships between specialist and mainstream facilities (Avisar, 2018).

This research is being undertaken in a singular specialist-mainstream partnership further education college, pseudonymised as Crescent College. Crescent College specialises in education for post-

compulsory age disabled students and carries the label 'special' school or college. I have emphasised the term 'special' because this is a term used by many when discussing support materials for disabled people. However, 'special' is a highly contested term (Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Walton and Marais, 2022), and the use of ableist language and euphemisms such as 'special' have become extremely popular for disability discussion, yet scholars encourage writers to avoid them because of their condescending nature (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Gernsbacher et al., 2016). Berger (2013) explains how the term 'special needs' has increasingly been used as a euphemism for disability. Alongside others (Barnes and Sheldon, 2007; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020), I question the term 'special' when describing anything related to disability (for example, an educational setting or support). Atkinson (2015) offers an inclusive stance on this topic by stating how we are all variations of a human, concerning everything from whether someone wears glasses to whether someone uses a wheelchair or can walk. Previously, Shakespeare (2010) stated how changing parlance would be ineffective if society does not shift its attitudes towards disability because, ultimately, negative associations will cling to any word we choose to use when discussing disability. Unfortunately, there continues to be a misrepresentation of disability through the use of ableist language (Gallagher, 2020; Shaw, 2021), and whilst researchers must understand what ableism is, historically, disabled people have not been allowed to control the referent disability nor the language used to linguistically represent the difference referred to as disabilities (Bottema-Butel et al., 2021). Therefore, it is commonly suggested that researchers use terms that disabled people use themselves (Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021; Bottema-Butel et al., 2021; Shakespeare, 2017). The evolution of words will undoubtedly make this societal shift alone, as Kattari et al. (2020) suggested language about disability is constantly evolving. Thus, influencing my decision to consistently use the terms disability, disabled people, special school and college, or mainstream school and college, as these are the terms used by the participants in this research who experience visual impairment.

1.4.1 Policy context

From a policy perspective, disability has been defined as a mental or physical impairment that has a long-term impact on a person's daily activities (Equality Act, 2010). Visual impairment and blindness are lifelong conditions which impair sight in those who experience them, creating a range of functional difficulties, such as living independently. The Equality Act (2010) demonstrated a commitment to equality of access and opportunity by ensuring all publicly funded education providers have a duty not to discriminate against disabled students. As a result, there are specific implications for schools and colleges to ensure disabled students receive reasonable adjustments to remove barriers in order for students to demonstrate the required competence skills (Draffan, James

and Martin, 2017; Hewett et al., 2017). Section 149 of The Equality Act (2010) states that the steps that should be taken to meet the needs of disabled people are often different from the needs of non-disabled people and that the equality objectives must be measurable and specific. Therefore, schools and colleges must have adequate procedures to monitor inclusive teaching and learning practices. This is particularly relevant as research has shown the importance of student contribution to their experience, and it has been argued that the current legislation can present the unintended consequence of neglecting to recognise the role of the individual student in helping to mould their experiences within education (Hewett et al., 2017).

Crescent College is owned and operated by a charity that supports people aged 16-25 by offering individually tailored further education programmes as per the learners' goals for the future. This college was one of the first specialist colleges in the England to secure a formal partnership alongside a mainstream college. Both settings share the same campus, and students attend classes across both. It is one of just 19 further education colleges in England that specialise in supporting visually impaired students. Moreover, it is particularly rare in that only a select few of these colleges offer students the opportunity to attend classes at a mainstream college; in other words, the partnership element. Recent inspection data from the college found the partnership arrangement to be 'very effective' from their lesson observations, quality assurance levels, and staff development opportunities. Having such a unique partnership is something that the college is proud of, considering many perceive the educational provision for students with disabilities as a continuum of facilities with the mainstream school at one end and the special school at the other (Day, Prunty and Dupont, 2012; Farrell, 2010). Research, therefore, supports the positioning of special education on a continuum. They consider that there will always be disabled students whose learning needs cannot be appropriately met in mainstream schools due to the limited provision of specialised education and resources which support certain students' needs (Day and Prunty, 2010).

The Equality Act (2010) protects disabled people by ensuring they are legally afforded the same opportunities and rights as non-disabled people. In the context of this research, the reasonable adjustments duty is crucial as it recognises how they are sometimes necessary to ensure disabled people can fully participate in education and access the services and resources available to all students (Equality Act, 2010).

1.5 Further education

As existing literature about visual impairment commonly has a medicalised focus and tends to focus on those under the age of 16 in compulsory education or those aged 18 and over in higher education (Bishop and Rhind, 2011; Croft, 2020; Hewett et al., 2017; 2020; Lourens and Swartz, 2016), the experiences of students in further education have seldom been explored. In 2022, the number of students identified as having a vision impairment in compulsory education was 18,691 or 0.18% (View, 2022). In post-compulsory further education settings, the incidence level is significantly lower and more difficult to determine. However, in 2015 the Department for Education published an Equality and Diversity report which highlighted that 9,220 visually impaired students aged 16 to 24 were participating in further education. Moreover, one in three young people aged 16 to 25 with sight loss were students in further or higher education (Department for Education, 2015).

The statistics show that visual impairment is a low-incidence disability, and this causes additional challenges, such as the need for specialist services, knowledge, and provision (Kiel and Crews, 2008). The RNIB (2022c) states that although the participation of disabled students in inclusive education is well established in policy and practice, the quality of provision is 'patchy'. Furthermore, there has been a movement towards more generic services that deprive visually impaired students of the specialist support they need. There are currently four main options for visually impaired students in England when they reach the post-compulsory education age. If they are in a mainstream school, they can remain there until Year 13 (providing such provision is available), or they can attend a mainstream further education college, move to a specialist college or go into work or training (RNIB, 2022d). The latter option can sometimes include the opportunity to take up residential status. However, resources and funding in England differ between local authorities, which means there are significant disparities in providing educational opportunities for visually impaired students. Hewett, Douglas and Keil (2017) emphasised the system as a postcode lottery of specialist support.

Whilst there has been previous research in related areas (Croft, 2020; Frank, 2017; Hewett, Keil and Douglas, 2014; Lourens and Swartz, 2016; Manitsa and Doikou, 2022; Morris, 2014), these studies are predominantly framed in the broader experience of disability generally in compulsory or higher education. Therefore, this specific area of experiences of visually impaired students in further education has yet to be successfully addressed or examined. The research gap framing this project is the lack of understanding and knowledge in society around partnership further education

environments and how these shape students' lives. Furthermore, it is essential to listen to students' experiences and use these interpretations to influence the type of support and education these individuals receive. Finally, engaging with the broader implications of being visually impaired is vital if this research is to shed light on what being visually impaired means.

1.6 Research aims and questions

This study aims to explore and analyse the experiences of visually impaired students concerning their lives in one unique partnership further education college in England. Concerning this overall aim, this research focuses on the following two aims:

1. Explore how the unique partnership affects education and everyday life for visually impaired young people in one college.
2. Understand how students perceive their opportunities as a result of attending this further education college.

Three main research questions focus on the experience of visually impaired students in the context of their further education. The first research question is centred around the autoethnographic element of the study and recognises the need to create a sense of feel and place for those who do not understand the research context. Therefore, the first research question is as follows:

Q1: What is the context of this partnership further education setting?

As briefly mentioned and will be discussed further in chapter two, the majority of the literature to date focuses on disabled students in compulsory or higher education, which may or may not include visually impaired students (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Bishop and Rhind, 2011; Croft, 2020; Frank, 2017; Kendall, 2016; Khadka et al., 2012; Hewett, Keil and Douglas, 2014; 2015; Lourens and Swartz, 2016; Manitsa and Doikou, 2020; Morris, 2014; Vickerman and Blundell, 2010). Therefore, research is limited concerning the experiences of visually impaired students and those in further education, which are critical components of this study. Therefore, the second research question focuses on the experiences of visually impaired students, and so the research question is as follows:

Q2. What are the experiences of visually impaired students in one partnership further education setting?

Considering the reality of needing a definition of visual impairment in order to qualify for attending a college of this nature (Equality Act, 2010) and the opportunities it affords students to participate fully in education, the third research question is as follows:

Q3. Within the context of this study, what aspects of partnership support the inclusion of visually impaired students?

These research questions contributed to the formulation of initial interview schedules that I used with students, acting as a guide in directing participants' thoughts about experiences within the college.

The methods of data collection to answer the research question are as follows. Participant observation and a research journal which are represented in the form of an autoethnographic account (Chapter Four). In addition, semi-structured interviews were used to collect participant experiences, and these are elicited in Chapter Five along with further data from the observations.

1.7 Structure of thesis

I began chapter one with my justifications of terminology before presenting my positionality as a researcher, including how I align most with the social model of disability, the nature of being a non-disabled researcher, and where the motivation for the topic emerged. I then provided the background, justification and policy context around visual impairment and disability in education before introducing special-mainstream partnership further education, where I detailed gaps in research in this field. Finally, the chapter concluded with an introduction to my research aims and questions and the structure of the thesis.

Chapter two considers and critically analyses the existing literature related to the phenomenon explored in this research. First, the chapter discusses the history of disability, including the medical, social and affirmative models of disability. Second, it explores how critical disability studies intertwine with the research. Third, how these aspects of disability have shaped my understanding of visual impairment is outlined. Fourth, I analysed education and disability, focusing on transitions and post-compulsory further education. Fifth, I consider the relationships between disability and technology generally before considering the label 'assistive' and stigma attached to technology use, to consider what this means for visually impaired people using it. Finally, the sixth aspect of chapter two concludes with a chapter summary.

Chapter three opens with a justification of interpretivism, setting out my ontological and epistemological positions. Next, I provide my considerations and reasoning for utilising a qualitative methodology before moving into a detailed discussion about my research design, a case study. Within this section, I outline the part autoethnography plays in my research and how I came to incorporate this. The chapter then moves on to explore the processes of my research design, including participants, sample, methods, semi-structured interviewing, observation and research journaling. Next, ethical considerations are uncovered, including informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, conducting research with disabled people, and validity and reliability. Then the chapter outlines the data collection and analysis processes before closing with a summary.

Chapter four focuses on the autoethnographic aspect of the research by providing an account of my experiences with special education, my first visit to the research setting, and my initial meetings with staff and students. By including these personal reflections, I set the scene for the research, intending to give the reader a sense of what to expect.

Chapter five presents the findings derived from my thematic data analysis. Six main themes are described; previous education experiences, reasons for accessing further education, why students chose this specific college, sources of support for visually impaired students, factors affecting accessibility and belonging, and life after college. In addition, subthemes are uncovered within the main themes.

Chapter six considers the findings with the literature presented in chapter two of my thesis. I combine the evidence I have collected and interpreted through my research journey to form a discussion that offers the most appropriate explanation for the facts I have gathered. This chapter concludes with a proposed new model of partnership-FE to address the original contribution to knowledge, theory, policy and practice.

Chapter seven summarises how the findings have addressed the research questions, before illuminating the original contributions to knowledge. I outline the implications of the proposed model, the limitations and my recommendations from the study, including any potential areas for

future research. Finally, the thesis concludes with my reflections on the processes I used to conduct this doctoral project.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Within this chapter, I will draw on a range of sources to consider the literature that relates to my project, providing an analysis of previous thinking about disability, visual impairment and education and an investigation of critical issues that relate to these, including; a critique of normalisation, stigma, and attitudes around disability. The overarching aim of this chapter is to understand the importance of focusing on students' experiences and views, to unpick normative conceptions of special education and visual impairment, and to identify the impact these might have upon the educational experiences of the participants in partnership further education. Students experiences provide knowledge that can form part of a dialogue, one that supports the involvement of the participants in research that concerns them. Moreover, this study intends to contribute towards a positive change away from normalising principles and towards less oppressive conceptualisations of visual impairment and special education.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: in the first section, the history of disability, including societal perspectives and resultant stigma, will lead into an exploration of the medical, social and affirmative models of disability. Following this, various branches of critical disability studies will be looked at in relation to my study. Their role in shaping the understanding of disability today will be explored to show how they have contributed towards reconceptualising my thinking. In the next section, I will consider my understanding of visual impairment, challenging the ideas that have emerged from previous models of disability and research. Then the analysis of disability and education will be looked at together before considering the literature surrounding educational transitions, specifically Multiple and Multi-Dimensional Transitions theory. I will then focus on the notion of further education precisely. In the final section, 'assistive technology', I will consider the language used and the blurring of boundaries to unpick normative assumptions surrounding technology use by disabled people. Assistive technology is an umbrella term for technology that is adapted (The World Health Organisation, 2018) for people who deviate from the socially constructed norm (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Sumskiene, Jankauskaite and Grigaite, 2016), and this is something I seek to analyse in this section through a critique of the terminology. Technology plays a significant role in the experiences students have at Crescent College. As technology, by its very nature, is designed to be assistive, I will argue that by giving it the label 'assistive', we may normalise

it and, therefore, wrongly encourage binary distinctions between ‘mainstream’ technology and ‘assistive’ technology and ‘normal’ and ‘non-normal’ people to continue. I will argue that the current view of technology is problematic as it focuses on the disability of the proposed user, and such ideas need to be expanded in order to concur with the complex nature of disability. In this section, I will also explore the use of assistive technology by visually impaired young people before focusing on the potential stigma and issues surrounding aesthetics for the students involved in my research. The chapter will close with a summary of the gaps in the literature that have led me to conduct this study.

2.2 The history of disability

It is necessary to consider what disability is and how disability theory has developed over time before embarking on research surrounding it. In the introduction chapter, I explored disability and its multi-facets, which make it impossible to define by a singular definition (Francis and Silvers, 2016; Timpe, 2022). Indeed, definitions of disability suggest that individuals may be disabled in ways other than their impairment, for example, by a particular cause or by social and environmental factors, and these are the factors that underpin the medical, social and affirmative models of disability (Retief and Letšosa, 2018).

This section will offer a synthesis of the literature discussing and critiquing models and theories of disability. Four models and theories are identified: the medical model, which views impairment as a problem located within the person, the social model, which finds a distinction between disability as the experience of social oppression and impairment as the physical, the affirmation model, which challenges the notion that the ‘problem’ of disability lies within the individual or their impairment, and finally the critical disability studies model, which questions the dualism between disability and impairment. The movement from the medical model to the social model of disability, which the affirmative model expands on, and towards critical perspectives of disability is fundamental to understanding how society views disability today.

2.2.1 Perspectives and stigmatisation

Perspectives on disability vary significantly across societies, and cultural beliefs about the causes of disability often underpin stigma (Rohwerder, 2018). For most of the twentieth century, the

dominant disability discourse in Western societies has focused on the medical model (Barnes, 2014; Berghs et al., 2016; Lawson and Beckett, 2021). It has been concerned with terminology such as 'crippled', 'flawed' bodies, 'suffering', and the idea of disabled people as 'victims'. In short, disability has primarily been viewed as a 'personal tragedy' and, in turn, a burden on the rest of society (Barnes, 2014; Ghosh, 2012). These extreme views can be associated with the notion of stigma, which is often attached to the idea of a 'flawed' body (McLaughlin, 2017) and can present itself in many ways.

Stigmatised people are often marginalised by society, blamed for their disability, and seen as incompetent, arising from the ableist discourses within society (Campbell, 2009; Friedman and Owen, 2017; Goodley, 2014). The foundations of stigma were presented by an American sociologist Erving Goffman (1963), and they have been embraced and critiqued in disability literature (Grinker, 2020). Goffman's argument was that social expectation about how 'normal' bodies look and function influence how society responds to disabled people's impairments (Goffman, 1990), and it is the 'views' of others that force disabled people to feel as though they should appear as 'normal' as possible even if that means creating more barriers for themselves. Therefore, impairment is not inherently stigmatising; society and social interaction ascribe stigma to bodies different from the social norm. Goffman transformed stigma into a way of viewing, classifying and understanding various discriminatory social attitudes and practices (Hacking, 2004; Tyler and Slater, 2018). Disability is often used as an example of something that is counter to norms of social interaction, and often disabled people manage their embodied differences to minimise the disruption their impairment may have on their everyday lives (Read, Morton and Ryan, 2015). Disability stigma is inextricably linked to the materialisation of environments and relationships that exclude or include certain people, and it is the world, not disabled people, who should have to transform to fit to these environments or relationships (Garland-Thomson, 2011). When disabled people do not fit in an environment, the concept of the 'misfit' occurs. The 'misfit', as initially applied by Garland-Thomson (2011), is a critical concept that has been produced because of a societal failure to meet the needs of disabled people (McKinney, 2016). The problem is one of juxtaposition and is used as a way to explain the incongruent interactions between 'a body that is disabled and a world that is not' (Lourens and Swartz, 2016: 3). Lourens and Swartz (2016) discovered that some disabled students hide away, avoiding social encounters and physical environments because of the immense physical and emotional effort the misfit between their bodies and the world create. In this way, misfitting resists the notion that the disabled body is the problem needing correction and locates the physical world as the site of ableist oppression and prejudice (Cleary, 2016).

Ableist pressures to normalise or hide disability force some disabled people to go to extreme lengths to conceal, ignore or avoid their difference (Cohen and Avanzino, 2010). Examples include isolating themselves from others; some visually impaired people can learn to fake eye contact (Cureton and Hill, 2018) or will wear glasses to hide signs of impairment altogether (Hansen, Wilton and Newbold, 2017). These concealment examples reflect Foucault's concept of transgression, best described as the practical and playful resistance to disability (Foucault, 1994). These acts of transgression enable visually impaired people to exercise control over their bodies and how others perceive them and challenge the limits placed upon them (Allan, 2011). Through transgression, marginalised individuals can destabilise norms, such as visual impairment being a 'problem', which ultimately forces them to present as marginal over and over again (Allan, 2011). Furthermore, the idea of disability being an individual problem has been challenged by alternative theoretical models that emerged from the disability movement, whereby disabled people campaigned for policy change and condemned their status as 'second-class citizens' (Oliver, 2004: 31).

In non-Western, developing countries, negative beliefs about disability vary significantly, with some countries still viewing it as a punishment for evil deeds (Rohwerder, 2018; Stone-MacDonald and Butera, 2014) or the outcome of witchcraft carried out by others (McConkey, Kahonde and McKenzie, 2016; Mostert, 2016). Other examples of negative cultural and religious beliefs about disability in developing countries include disability as an ancestral curse (Mostert, 2016) or that disability comes as a result of the actions of parents (Mostert, 2016; Stone-MacDonald and Butera, 2014). However, things are changing, and it could be argued that this is a result of critical theorisations around disability that are helping to change the narrative of medicalised approaches to disability created in both Western and non-Western countries (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009).

2.3 The medical model of disability

The medical model of disability locates disability within the body, holding disability as a problematic 'within-person' characteristic (Cologon, 2016). It reduces people to their bodily impairment and assumes that total capacity as a human being is only achievable if impairment can be cured (Siebers, 2008). The medical model is often also viewed as a tragic model because it defines disability in a fundamentally negative way, again deeming disability as objectively wrong and something to be prevented or cured (Carlson, 2010). It is an outdated, traditional model of disability that emphasises

impairment and how it can be treated to eliminate any problems disabled people experience (Harpur, 2012). This model does not attempt to address any societal issues or barriers disabled people may face due to these. The medical model separates disabled people from society through its measuring of disability which, in turn, creates many limitations for disabled people in society (Haegele and Hodge, 2016). On the contrary, the medical model developed categorisations which can lead to funding and support for disabled people. For example, the Disabled Students' Allowance, which is available for home higher education students with a formal diagnosis of a disability, or the Personal Independent Payment, which formally diagnosed disabled people can access to help support them with extra living costs, there is also specific allowance for those registered blind or severely sight impaired (HM Government, 2022).

The issue is that disability has traditionally been regarded as an embodied characteristic, and this can be reflected in the definitions set out by the World Health Organisation in which disability was, for a long time, understood as any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner considered 'normal' for a human being (WHO, 1980). Such definitions echo the medical model of disability, identifying it as an individual problem and something which is part of people. The notion of what it means to be 'normal' is determined by societal and cultural expectations and an individual's acceptance of these (Cislaghi and Heise, 2018; Llewellyn and Hogan, 2000). These ableist narratives sit at the core of the medical model of disability, reinforcing a divide between disabled and abled identities (Campbell, 2009). They position disabled people as tragic and produce a network of uncritical beliefs regarding the superiority of able-bodiedness (Campbell, 2001; Lalvani and Broderick, 2013). Ableism creates categories which impose limits on how individuals are permitted to think, act, move, and exist in the world (McGuire, 2016). Ableism can manifest itself within the context of education, and it has been argued that ableist structures exist through categorisation processes (e.g., special and mainstream education) (Cosier, White and Wang, 2018; Lalvani and Broderick, 2013). Disabled people have reported perceptions of otherness resulting from oppressive policies, practices and attitudes surrounding disability, thus affecting their safety and independence within these spaces (Bê, 2019; Galkiene, 2014; Fisher and Purcal, 2017; Singer and Bacon, 2020).

In many educational environments, there are disability support services which strive to meet an individual's needs. However, it could be argued that these support the medical view of disability in that they are professionally run services for disabled people, and it has been known that

professionals sometimes understand their primary task as one to normalise disabled people (Oliver, 1993; Shakespeare, Lezzoni and Groce, 2009; Slack, 1999). Such medicalised discourses could continue to place the blame on the individual for their impairment and may also reinforce the idea that disabled people need to be dependent on medical professionals in order to participate fully in society (Evans, 1988; French and Swain, 2001; Hayes and Hannold, 2007). Processes such as assessment, diagnosis, and intervention all reflect the medical model (Dirth and Branscombe, 2017; Shyman, 2016) and the traditional formulation of disability as an objective medical condition in need of treatment and rehabilitation (Smart, 2009). Under the medical model lens, a disabled person would be primarily understood according to their diagnosis (e.g. visual impairment, hearing impairment), the aetiology of the condition, and the following prognosis (Goering, 2015).

The medical model view on disability affects societal thoughts about disabled people. For example, disabled bodies have been objectified, placed under surveillance and regulated, leading to discrimination (Goering, 2015; Meekosha, 1998). The International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH) was introduced in 1980 by the World Health Organisation and has since been heavily criticised for its disabling language and perception of 'normalcy' (Barnes, 2003a ; Llewellyn and Hogan, 2000). Moreover, such language has provided space to concentrate on the social construction of 'norms' which are particularly useful to consider when attempting to understand and employ an inclusive approach to education (Slater and Chapman, 2017).

Disabled people's perceptions of themselves are rooted firmly in them by their environment and the society and culture they live in (Karagiozakis, 2010), meaning stigmatised ways of thinking about disability that influence non-disabled people could consequently affect the way disabled people view themselves (Goffman, 1968). However, in education, the medical model has arguably enabled disabled students to access specialised support and resources through its categorisation and measurement of disability, which is often necessary in order for students to access funding to enable such support (Massoumeh and Leila, 2012; Wishart and Jahnukainen, 2010). This example can be applied to the role of special educational establishments such as specialist colleges, in which the medical model of disability allows particular groups of students the ability to access education through these unique types of further education colleges.

Scholars have acknowledged that medical approaches to disability have some value, for example, for people with specific disabilities, medical intervention may be necessary to maintain well-being (Crow, 1996; Hogan, 2019), and formal diagnosis of disability can facilitate access to extra support services (Cawthon and Cole, 2010). However, medical interventions are not the only answer, and disability rights activists rejected this approach through the social model of disability, which proposed that the social conditions of our society actually cause the problems mentioned above, and if we alter these conditions, we can positively impact opportunities for disabled people (Bunbury, 2019; Zajadacz, 2015).

2.4 The social model of disability

A key turning point for disabled people came as a result of the disabled activist movement, which came from academics and disabled activists, who contributed towards a shift away from a heavily medicalised or individualistic approach to a social model view of disability, rejecting the limitations of the former deficit model (Barnes, 1991; Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1990). The regularly cited landmark in the development of disability studies in the United Kingdom was the publication of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) document (UPIAS, 1976), which defined disability as being the disadvantage disabled people face as a result of the actions of a social organisation, and it sparked a growth of debate around disability. Finkelstein (1980) argued that impairment was not the topic of debate; instead, disability as a purely political and cultural concept was. Another key scholar, Oliver (1990: 22), built on Finkelstein's original position and argued that disability is 'culturally produced and socially structured'. The importance of the social interpretation of disability is that people's impairments are no longer the determining factor in creating disability (Anastasiou and Kauffman, 2011; Bunbury, 2019; Goering, 2015). The social model definition brought attention to the labelling of disabled people in relation to environmental barriers and social values (Bailey et al., 2015; Bunbury, 2019; Campling, 1981; Lawson and Beckett, 2021; Oliver, 1990).

Similarly, Barnes (1991) stated that disability resulted from discrimination rather than individual impairment. The social constructionist epistemology of the model clarified disability in terms of social measures and culturally produced norms (Vehmas and Makela, 2009). For example, it has been argued that categorisations of disabled people, such as 'special educational needs', are burdened with socially constructed value judgements loaded with inferred meaning (Barton and Tomlinson, 1981; Cureton and Wasserman, 2020). The social model rejects the discourses of the

medical model and dominates the conceptualisation of disability by bringing an alternative understanding - the medical or individualistic model attributes difficulties to within the person. In contrast, the social model searches for attributes outside the person (Allan, 1999). Townsend (1981) explains how such oppositions reflect wider ideological pressures and are common in theorising education and, specifically, special education. Researchers have previously highlighted the theorising of special education as a critical component towards the modernisation of education, whereby individualistic ideas of disability (e.g., the medical model) have been abandoned in favour of social models (Barton, 1993; Oliver, 1996).

As the social model of disability emerged from the work of disabled activists' examination and subsequent rejection of the limitations developed from the medical model (Lang, 2001), it addresses the issues disabled people face as a result of society, including but not limited to, discriminatory acts, socially stigmatising attitudes, environmental, and cultural barriers (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). Societal problems like these present barriers to disabled people's participation in society. Disability within the social model can be defined as the disadvantage of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation (UPIAS, 1976). The social model assumes that disability is not something people have; instead, it is something done to people with impairments through the ways people are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society (UPIAS, 1976).

In education, the social model has fundamentally altered how laws and policies concerning the right to education for disabled people are developed and monitored (Mole, 2013). For example, the enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 (DDA, 1995) later amended by the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 (DDA, 2005). The DDA has since been replaced by the Equality Act 2010, which mirrors the aspects of the DDA and recognises that societal barriers can be removed to allow for greater participation for disabled people (Equality Act, 2010).

Oliver (1993) explains how disability is a contested identity, and this has been the key concentration of the disabled people's movement, which strives to change the way that disability is talked about, acted upon, and thought about in daily life. Scholars began interrogating the social model and its binary dichotomies, such as impairment/disability and individual/society, in the late 1990s (Corker, 1999; Meekosha, 1998; Patterson and Hughes, 1999). The literature argued for a reassessment of binaries related to disability because they encourage hierarchical ordering and instability (Corker,

1998; 1999). It has been argued that binary opposites deceive us into 'valuing one side of the dichotomy more than the other' (Corker, 1999: 638). More recently, authors are still dismantling the ability/disability binary (De Schauwer et al., 2021; Leshota and Sefotho, 2020). Additionally, it can be argued that impairment and disability should be reconceptualised to deconstruct these binaries and the oppression faced by people who experience bodily 'difference'. This presents disability as a collective experience of oppression rather than of normalising constraints imposed by dichotomous terms. Furthermore, I recognise that such experience should be considered, as it contributes to ensuring research does not deny the existence of bodily impairments such as visual impairment, but it challenges how such impairments are treated and understood. It is argued that impairments are not intrinsic defects; they are creations through economic and social measures; they can be transformed and shaped depending on many factors (Tremain, 2015). Thus, the supposed 'problems' of disability may be seen as socially constructed. Equally, the notion of a 'special' learning environment could arguably have been a contribution from the normalisation principle. The 'normal' versus 'special' education distinction generated much debate and revolutionised educational provision for young people labelled as having 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN) (Department of Education and Science, 1978; Education Act, 1981).

Having discovered issues with terminology, classification, and binary ways of thinking that have existed for a long time and still occur today, it is questionable whether these issues will ever cease to exist. This is not to say the nature of the setting and its approaches to education are negative or normalising, but it might be argued that the terminology used to distinguish between the two are an example of the 'problems' of disability that have been socially constructed, for example, binary ways of thinking.

The possibility of using other theoretical tools to critique the normalisation principle directly is welcome. From the 1970s onwards, the social model of disability started to become increasingly influential and, arguably, became the dominant approach to thinking and talking about disability (Dewsbury et al., 2004). Normalisation and the medical model of disability both stress the need for correction and to make people 'normal' if they are seen to differ from the socially constructed idea of the norm (Loja et al., 2013). However, the former ignores disability in favour of mainstreaming or living as close to 'normal' as possible (Konza, 2008), whereas the latter recognises disability as something that needs to be fixed or eliminated (Titchkosky and Michalko, 2009). Thinking about disability in this way does not celebrate difference; therefore, the concept of normality is embedded

within the medical model. Eventually, the social model of disability proposed a distinction between impairment, which is understood as a state of the body that is non-standard, and disability, as a social process rather than as a medical condition (Oliver, 1996b).

Whilst the social model of disability served as a tool towards political change and has been termed 'the big idea' of the British disability movement (Hasler, 1993), it also came under critique, and the very successes of it can now be viewed as its main weaknesses. First, the social model reduces disability and impairment to definitions and is normatively objective. Second, the social model created a binary view of disability. I think of this as viewing disability as black and white, and it is problematic because it is straightforward and limiting. Additionally, such binary discussion that can also be seen within a medical view of disability is something to be avoided because disability is a complex phenomenon; therefore, many perspectives are needed to come to a holistic understanding of it. Moreover, such unsustainable distinctions between disability (social creation) and impairment (bodily difference) can be critiqued by the simple question of, 'where does impairment end and disability start?'

The social model of disability is further critiqued; for example, it has been debated by disability studies theorists that the social model deliberately ignores the limiting aspects of living with impairments that are not created by the society we live in and are simply a direct result of living with an impairment (Oliver, 1990; Owens, 2015; Thomas, 1999; Thomas, 2010). An example of this could be impairment in the form of chronic illness, fatigue, pain, and depression, all of which may curtail activity and participation to the extent that the barriers from the outside world are irrelevant, and yet impairment remains without restrictions playing a part (Crow, 1996; Goering, 2015), Thomas (2012) refers to these aspects as impairment effects. The extent to which the social model disowns the medical model is so severe that it has been criticised for implying that impairment is not a problem (Shakespeare, 2010) and excludes the fundamental dimensions of disabled people's lived experiences (Barnes, 2019). Furthermore, a significant proportion of the critiques refer to the privileging of experiences and dominance of male, white, middle-class wheelchair users; concerns appertaining to undermining disabled people's diverse identities (Bury, 1996; French, 1993; Swain and French, 2000).

The medical model and social model have often been utilised to emphasise opposing interpretations of disability (Bunbury, 2019; Hogan, 2019; Terzi, 2004); however, limited examination of their evolving meanings has led to confusion. For example, strict adherence to the social model of disability would ignore the life-changing benefits of the medical model; rather than offering an opposing view, it can be viewed as an outright rejection of medicalisation even though the original theorists may not have intended this interpretation (Shakespeare, 2010). This can be further reflected by the response to the ongoing critique that the social model disregards impairment and its associated disadvantage (Samaha, 2007); the social model of disability does not deny that individuals can experience unpleasant experiences as a result of impairment; however, these experiences are not classified by the social model as 'disabilities' (Beaudry, 2016). Furthermore, Oliver (1996b) emphasised that disability is exclusively social, having no bearing on a person's body. Building on the social model and further rejecting the medical model, we now turn to the affirmative model to explore a non-tragic view of disability that encompasses individual and collective positive identities for disabled people (Swain and French, 2000).

2.5 The affirmative model of disability

An alternative viewpoint through which we can examine visual impairment is the affirmation model of disability. While the medical model positions disability as a problem within the body, and the social model locates this so-called problem in society (Haeghele and Hodge, 2016), the affirmative model builds on but also critiques the social model of disability. The social model has been criticised by disabled feminists for over-emphasising 'socio-structural barriers and ignoring personal and experiential aspects of disability' (Cameron, 2014: 109). We know that the social model of disability separates disability and impairment. However, it can be argued that 'the society that implements full civil rights and participation for disabled people might still view impairment as a personal tragedy' (Swain and French, 2000: 571). An affirmation model emerged because of the belief that even if the social model of disability was put into practice, meaning all barriers were removed to give disabled people equal access, for instance, to inclusive education, employment, housing, leisure, and public transport; it would still be possible for impairment to be viewed as a personal tragedy and for disabled people to be regarded and treated as victims of misfortune (Swain and French, 2000). Swain and French (2000) proposed an affirmative model of disability which embodies a non-tragic view of disability and impairment and is grounded in celebrating the benefits of life experiences of being disabled and impaired. The affirmation model offers a different perspective whereby disabled people are not considered disabled by their impairment. Instead, it puts society in the limelight as

oppressive, disabling and discriminatory by suggesting that disability is a role imposed upon individuals by the world around them. As such, the affirmative model retains the definition of disability as being located in social structures, with the addition of a subversion of the dominant cultural narrative, which views disability or impairment as inherently harmful (Alice and Ellis, 2021).

The affirmation model of disability rejects discourses of ableism, and therefore it is valuable to critique the notion of ableism to make a case for the affirmative model in relation to this research. 'Ableism, like other socio-political issues, references a combination of discrimination, power and prejudice related to the cultural privileging of able-bodied people' (Eisenhauer, 2007: 8). Consequently, attention is shifted from the processes that maintain disablism (oppression of those with perceived impairments) to those that inaugurate the norm and preference ability (ableism) (Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012). Further, ableism obscures the role of social environments and institutions, causing people to 'falsely treat impairments as inherently and naturally horrible and blame the impairments themselves for the problems experienced by the people who have them' (Amundson and Taira, 2005: 54). As such, the affirmative model 'challenges tragedy-based discourses and positions disability cultures and the resulting cultural issue of ableism in similarly complex ways to the way class, race and gender have been theorised' (Davis, 1997: 1). Instead of viewing difference as lacking, an affirmative model of disability firmly upholds the role of institutions, environment and wider society in disabling individuals (Rapley, 2010). Thus, an education environment informed by an affirmative model of disability interrogates students' own assumptions and ideas about disability.

Swain and French's (2000) original model was criticised for being ambiguous, and therefore it can be helpful to consider the following definitions of impairment and disability:

Impairment: Physical, sensory and intellectual difference to be expected and respected on its own terms in a diverse society.

Disability: The loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in community life on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers. (Cameron, 2008: 24).

Why should impairment be rehabilitated or eradicated? Non-disabled people's views of disability have centred around believing they are constantly striving for normalcy, and this perception has

contributed to a misconception that disabled people are unable to live a fulfilled and prosperous life (Swain and French, 2000). On the contrary, the affirmative model of disability encourages people to proclaim a positive identity through their disability (McCormack and Collins, 2012), and disabled people have been found to affirm disabled lifestyles. For example, disabled people are statistically more likely to lead sedentary lives than non-disabled people (Carty et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). However, Lucy Shuker is a prime example of how disabled people resist and empower through their impairment. Lucy redefined her disability and envisaged herself as an expert rather than a victim (Carpenter, 1994). This led her to become a British Paralympic wheelchair tennis player; a once 'ordinary' person turned world-class athlete (Kavanaugh, 2012). Moreover, through sharing personal narratives which challenge the dominant tragic view of disability, society can recognise how life can 'begin and flourish with disability' (Kavanaugh, 2012: 69). In this way, the affirmative model of disability rejects the discourses of ableism as it directly challenges presumptions of personal tragedy.

The affirmative model is not without its critics. Grue (2015) emphasises how the affirmative model is beneficial in explaining how being disabled can embody a positive identity; however, it holds difficulty with the idea that having an impairment is valued because people with impairments achieve positive things. For example, many forms of impairment make specific achievements possible, such as the Paralympic Games (Grue, 2015). The models of disability are practical tools on their own; however, they require expansion through a critical disability studies lens to create even more enabling platforms and better their explanatory power (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009; Owens, 2015). By consistently scrutinising the models of disability, researchers determine their usefulness and suitability.

The models of disability are not singular (Gabel and Peters, 2010), and disability studies scholars such as Shakespeare and Watson (2001) have gone to great lengths to acknowledge physical pain and value medicalised aspects of disability. For example, visual impairment can result in the necessary use of a cane, which would mean those individuals would be invested in the social aspects of their disability, such as accessible public transportation and accessible entrances to buildings. Disability studies emerged as a framework towards disability that did not ignore biology in the way it had been previously (Connor, 2019). Instead, it set out to contextualise disability within social and political domains and make room for many views of disability to exist simultaneously (Disability Studies in Education special interest group, 2019). Critical disability studies build on the foundations

of disability studies theories; however, it does not condemn disability studies before the critical turn; instead, it has forged a path that encompasses a variety of views from both within and outside of the disability experience (Goodley et al., 2019).

2.6 Critical Disability Studies

The previous sections of this chapter have framed disability in terms of the medical model, social model, and affirmative model perspectives. I now turn to critical disability studies, a framework that ‘welcomes debate, discord and disagreement’ (Goodley et al., 2019: 6). This study is informed by the theoretical underpinning of critical disability studies in that it challenges the oppression of marginalised groups through highlighting their voices within research. For example, the inclusion debate has been criticised for focusing too much on the practicalities of education, overlooking the views and voices of students affected (Ainscow and Messiou, 2018).

Critical disability studies engage with an interdisciplinary theoretical stance to examine the experiences of disability whilst disrupting the traditional notions of impairment, disability, ability and difference (Goodley, 2011). Like the affirmative model, critical disability studies rejects the positioning of disability as a tragedy and looks to alter conventional notions of disabled people as ‘pitiable.. victims’ who must adapt to the world around them (Reaume, 2014: 1248). It has been suggested that it can be viewed as a platform to consider, act, contest, relate, communicate and connect with others against the amalgam of discrimination and oppression (Goodley, 2012). This standpoint can be related to visual impairment specifically in that ‘if the only valid ontology is the sighted one, then we are clearly committing a dangerous negation of other ontological positions (or lives)’ (Goodley, 2014: 155). I draw on critical disability studies in this study to challenge the gaze placed on visual impairment by society, and in taking a critical stance toward traditional practices of ‘inclusive’ education, I seek to shift the focus away from the students’ visual impairments (their diagnosis), toward the people, beliefs and systems that seek to include them (Watson, 2017). Drawing on a critical disability studies framework underpins the distinctiveness of this research whilst fulfilling the opportunity to explore visual impairment in a way that invests in the uniqueness of the college and individual experiences.

The field of critical disability studies is informed by poststructuralist and postmodernist views such as those explored by Foucault (e.g. Foucault, 1994; 1980; Tremain, 2005). Critical disability studies uses these perspectives to question the fundamentals of concepts such as disability and impairment as cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomena (Vehmas and Watson, 2014). Critical disability studies also focus on the linguistic and cultural constructions of disability and, like the social model, oppose the medical understanding of disability (Owens, 2015). The boundaries between the social model and critical disability studies are blurred (Berghs et al., 2016). However, the latter model is focused on the idea of rethinking how disabled people have become marginalised by the society they live in, and a vital aim of the movement is to move thinking towards the potential, capacity, interconnection, and possibility of disabled people's bodies and minds (Goodley, 2014; Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2000). Critical disability studies enables links to develop and challenge concepts related to disability, such as its critical interrogation of binaries (Corker, 1999; Meekosha, 1998). Furthermore, critical disability studies challenges and deconstructs the dichotomous, binary modes of thinking about disability as informed by the social model, including; society versus the individual, and disability versus impairment, by highlighting their hierarchical instability (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009; Roets and Goodley, 2008; Tremain, 2005). Goodley (2013: 634) furthers this idea by stating how a materialist social model fails to allow for the experience of impairment which he emphasises 'is a predicament and can be tragic'. Furthermore, Franck (2018) suggests that in order to commit to the move beyond binary ways of thinking; critical disability studies makes way for research and researchers to hold disability as fluid and inherently unstable, akin to the instability of the concept of identity. Scholars in this field are united by their desire to extend the social model of disability to examine the construction of normalcy (Eilers, 2020). As such, critical disability studies incorporates the social model of disability but encapsulates a much more complex conceptual understanding of disability oppression (Eilers, 2020; Goodley, 2013; Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009).

Critical disability studies is a developing discourse (Eilers, 2020; Goodley, Liddiard and Runswick Cole, 2018) used by researchers to define the socio-political constructions of disability and then trace the impacts of these constructions on oppressed individuals. In this way, it examines the impact of systemic factors on the experiences of individuals to whom the concept of disability attaches and others, in an attempt to transform the circumstances these individuals experience (Hall, 2019). Therefore, it is relevant for this study which is concerned with visual impairment, and in adopting a critical disability studies approach, I can challenge cultural norms that may risk further narrowing conceptualisations of visual impairment, such as stigmatisation (O'Brolchain and Gordijn,

2018). With that, this section will seek to explore critical disability studies and how it relates to my project, by unpicking stigma and the normalisation principle, which sees people different from the norm, as devalued citizens who hold stigmatised identities (Wolfensberger and Tullman, 1982).

What I initially thought would be a study about students' experiences of being visually impaired has changed considerably to one that seeks to understand the effects of partnership further education and how visually impaired students experience it. Critical disability studies has challenged my original thinking by raising important questions and conflicts about ideas that may or may not relate to visual impairment and special education. A significant change has been my reconceptualisation of the idea of the norm and the normalisation principle (Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2013; Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009; Shildrick, 2012). It is essential for me to problematise systems that seek to normalise the human body in order to open up a space in this thesis to critique these. As a result of my reading and theorising with branches of critical disability studies, I have realised the importance of challenging ideas, theories and practices. I now understand disability as something that does not categorically deny that cognitive or bodily impairments exist. Furthermore, how people think, understand, and treat such impairments can lead to normalisation, marginalisation, inequality and unfairness. Therefore, I seek to deconstruct how such oppression has dominated previous disability research and, therefore, has contributed to limited conceptual thinking around disability.

For my research, deconstructing this principle and its binary distinctions is particularly useful due to the primarily medicalised approaches often applied to visual impairment. Furthermore, professionals and wider society often view technology under a medical model lens as a tool to rehabilitate those who deviate from the norm. It can be argued however, that rehabilitation makes unreflective assumptions about the value of a 'sighted' person over that of a person who experiences visual impairment by linking the former with 'normal' or 'mainstream' education and the latter with 'specialist' education. These values underpin rehabilitation programmes for the latter individual and assist people in achieving norms and trajectories and in resisting the reification of normalcy (Goodley et al., 2019). As a result, society attempts to address disability and objectify bodily difference by bringing in resources to 'deal' with or rehabilitate it.

Critical disability studies recognise disability as a 'lived reality', and therefore, the perspectives of people who experience visual impairment as a 'lived reality' are crucial in addressing barriers that

may limit them, for example, normative approaches to their educations (Eilers, 2020; Hall, 2019; Reaume, 2014). 'Dominant discourse; defined power relationships; the validity of involvement; the timing of participatory exercises; and disability identity and stigma' (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012: 284) are all aspects that can affect students' involvement, perhaps in the case of this research, students' involvement in their education programmes. Furthermore, I cannot possibly understand other persons lived realities without listening to and interpreting their individual views on the matter. As students, the participants can speak directly from their own experiences (Ashby, 2011; Dennis, 2014; Martino and Schormans, 2018), for instance, about how they use specialist resources for educational purposes. I support the argument that people should be listened to, and that action should be taken due to the value placed on student voices. Consequently, this could contribute to identifying barriers that might limit inclusion, access and participation; Charlton's (2000) book, 'nothing about us, without us' recognised the need for this shift in research, pointing out that people's views have historically been ignored. Therefore, in the past, it could be argued that research has failed to focus on the issues that are of most relevance to people (Barnes, 2003b). In order to reach my aim of contributing to a reconceptualisation of normative societal opinions about visual impairment, the lived experiences and perceptions of my participants are vital as they can offer less oppressive ways of conceptualising the terms by way of becoming-in-the-world-together (Shildrick, 2009).

2.6.1 Crip theory and Normalisation

Crip theory is a branch of critical disability studies that builds on queer theory's critical tradition of norms to develop new analyses (Schalk, 2013). One of the most significant aspects of queer theory applied to crip theory is the radical critique of the concept of normativity (McRuer, 2006). Crip theory enables disabled people to reclaim their identities by resisting the tragic, broken identities that have historically been applied to them (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013). By problematising ableism and what constitutes an able-body, crip theory encourages disabled people to use the word crip provocatively to openly show their stigma instead of conforming to normalising discourses and hiding away (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013).

Whether or not to recognise and respond to bodily differences is a complex matter (Norwich, 2008; Turner, 2012), as both cases pose some negative implications or risks. These can include denying relevant and quality opportunities and rehabilitation, which can influence stigmatisation, rejection and devaluation (Rohwerder, 2018). When considering this idea of 'responding to difference' in relation to disability, I am pushed to ask, 'different to what?' and as a result of such questioning, I

recognise that difference is, in fact, a fictitious 'norm'. A norm that is socially created and serves some but not all. Normalisation is a concept that I consider in relation to visual impairment, as it views people who appear to differ from a 'norm' as having stigmatised identities and as devalued citizens, which can result in some people living devalued lives (Kumar and Thressiakutty, 2015; Wolfensberger, 2000). Moreover, normalisation promises to improve the lives of these individuals by advancing services which supposedly tackle the issue of devaluation and, thus, create 'valued' lifestyles. It has been argued that this enables those who differ from the 'norm' to be associated with and to associate themselves with 'valued' identities (Chappell, 1992). However, normalisation fails to consider different people's views on matters that concern them, and therefore, the unbalanced power relationship of the 'abled body' which precedes the 'disabled body' remains intact (McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain, 2014). This principle is based on what society believes life and services should look and be like for people and not on the arguably more valuable unique characteristics of those affected. The whole concept of normalisation is highly dysfunctional and problematic regarding the theoretical assumptions it employs, its application in practice, and the conclusions it reaches (Campbell, 2008; 2009; Race, Boxall and Carson, 2005; Tremain, 2005). The most relevant of these criticisms are concerned with its failure to respect the freedom of individuals; consequently, it reproduces the imbalance of power between people who differ from the norm and professionals, the former holding less power than the latter over their own lives. Moreover, the normalisation principle perpetuates a realist understanding of ontology concerning the nature of impairment. It is apolitical as it passes the responsibility of the oppression of 'different' groups to the individuals they are made up of from society. Normalisation is conformist in its positioning of how it understands the notion of being 'normal', which forces people to believe it is correct and, thus, has proven to be a difficult principle to be challenged or critiqued (Christensen, 2020).

It has been argued by Nirje (1980) and Bank-Mikkleson (1980) that normalisation gave rise to the concept of integration, yet it is important to note the main concern for Bank-Mikkleson (1980) and Nirje (1980) in their conceptualisation of normalisation was issues surrounding equality and human rights. However, their ideas were criticised for being unproductive and for focusing too much on equality and human rights, which came at a price that 'devalued' people could not maintain (Wolfensberger, 1980a). Moreover, the normalisation principle suggested integration and equality are unsuccessful without the abandonment of segregation, henceforth Wolfensberger (1980a) introduced a revised interpretation model which placed its focus on all devalued and deviant groups in society rather than Nirje and Bank-Mikklesons' model, which focused solely on people with intellectual disabilities (Wolfensberger, 1980a). Normalisation, as explained by Wolfensberger (1972:

8), is the 'conditions at least as good as that of the average citizen' to 'as much as possible enhance or support their behaviour, appearances, experiences, status and reputation'. Therefore, according to Wolfensberger, normalisation suggests that people who do not integrate, in turn, remain 'different' and may find it challenging to become valued by others. Additionally, society may place these individuals in what Wolfensberger (1980b) terms 'social devaluation' and 'negatively valued differentness'. Moreover, he believed under his theory that society is likely to maintain these stereotypical and 'devaluing' labels and attitudes. There certainly was a timeframe whereby the philosophy of normalisation became so embedded in society and people's everyday musings that even researchers dared not to question it (Culham and Nind, 2003). However, concerns were raised with the principle, and people started questioning the concept of 'normal', who is and what is (Oliver, 1990). More recently, Shildrick (2002: 45-46) offered a revision rather than a rejection of the normalisation principle as it 'imposes its own meta-narrative on young peoples experiences' and is a 'potentially destructive concept'. A revision rather than rejection is suggested to acknowledge the complexity of disability in contemporary times, highlighting the importance of analysing disability through normalisation, thus, being 'respectful of the 'building blocks' of disability studies, especially the social model of disability' (Goodley, 2016: 192).

Students resist disclosure if disability services providers and other educators engage with students using ableist narratives (Pearson and Boskovich, 2019). These narratives cause students to feel that their disability is terrifying, tragic, and will transform their life in negative ways (Holmes, 2010). Abes and Darkow (2020) introduced the notion of the 'cripping campus cultures' in which they suggest that by revealing the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness shape educational campus culture, crip theory makes apparent how students who do not meet ableist student norms are typically viewed as tragic burdens. This negative and pitying attitude often prevents settings and staff from taking proactive steps to create accessible courses and campus environments. Crippling the campus culture and shifting attitudes depend on a cripistemology framework for perceiving disabled students. Cripistemology is knowledge production from the perspectives of disabled people (Johnson and McRuer, 2014). It embraces the multiple ways that bodies and minds produce and understand knowledge (Abes and Darkow, 2020). Disabled people are therefore valued for the contributions they make to education campuses because of their disabilities rather than in spite of their disabilities. Embracing a cripistemological perspective means that the culture is not about only proactively providing accommodations but also creating accessible environments shaped around disabled people's realities. For instance, offering courses and co-

curricular opportunities from a crip time perspective means designing syllabi and programming that allow for flexibility in scheduling and deadlines, rest, and other atypical ideas.

2.6.2 The rhizome

Researchers have advocated a more extensive engagement with theory (Allan, 2011; Gustavsson, 2004) and, specifically, with the philosophers of difference, including Deleuze and Guattari and Foucault. This group of philosophers share a concern with the underrepresentation of minority social groups and offer ways to facilitate a different conceptualisation of disability (Allan, 2011).

I consider rhizome philosophy as it offers an additional philosophical lens with no beginning and no end and can signify change. Furthermore, the concept of the rhizome allows the fluidity of identity to be explored and requires researchers to embrace complexity when conducting research that explores experiences (McKay, 2016). Rhizomatic thought is in direct contrast with Arboles thinking (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Arboles thought is characterised as linear, hierarchic, sedentary, and full of segmentation and striation.

The concept of rhizomatic learning is partially informed by the work of post-structuralist French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus* introduced rhizomatic thinking as a new way of making sense of knowledge and contrasted this with arboles thinking which they argue has a tree-like hierarchical structure, inflexible linear pathways and encourages binary thinking (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Deleuze and Guattari used the metaphor of the rhizome which sends out roots in multiple directions continuously spreading and self-replicating in a 'nomadic' style to reconceptualise sense-making. Rhizomatic learning recognises that learning is a complex process of sense-making to which each learner brings their own context and has their own needs. It overturns conventional notions of instructional pedagogy by suggesting that the students are the curriculum; that learning is not designed around content but is instead a social process in which we learn with and from each other (Brailas, 2020). Rhizomatic learning is messy, unbounded and does not fit comfortably within current structures of formal education (Wright, 2020). In that way, it poses a fundamental challenge to traditional modes of thinking by re-imagining the role of the teacher, removing conventional measurement frameworks and encouraging those involved to adopt a mindset of unrestricted and creative inquiry.

In relation to disability, the rhizome offers value in its capacity to recognise forms of learning in their essence, rather than in relation to norms and expectations (Allan, 2011). Furthermore, as Goodley (2007: 324) discussed, through the concept of a rhizome: 'The disabled learner is no longer a lacking subject nor a fixed entity. She is ever moving. A body no longer embodied. She is rhizome'. To acknowledge the complexity of disability within this thesis, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer the rhizome as a model of thought to challenge both knowledge and the means of acquiring knowledge. Conventional knowledge, such as medicalised discourses around disability, are rigid and hierarchical, encompassing a tree-like structure. In an educational sense, when students learn through conventional methods, they have little opportunity for variation due to the binaries such knowledge conveys. This tree-like knowledge relies on the logic of binarism, such as able/disabled, normal/abnormal, and as such, these binaries have a hierarchy applied to them whereby those who identify on the latter side of the binary can be viewed as targets for control.

Rather than continuing the rigid structure of knowledge, they proposed the idea of a rhizome, which travels and grows in unpredictable and, usually, unconventional ways (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). We are neither binaries nor trees; rhizomes have an array of points and connections but no foundation (Roets, Goodley and Hove, 2007). They ultimately contribute to a rejection of binary thinking and knowledge by releasing us from linear relationships (Roy, 2003) and thus making space for new lines of flight and forms of knowledge. As rhizomatic learning is always ongoing and never complete, researchers can use it as a theoretical lens to understand the participants' experiences in their research. Furthermore, it can be a space that belongs to everyone and is inclusive as it presents new challenges and ways of experiencing learning that both the researcher and their participants may have never experienced before (Mackness, Bell and Funes, 2016).

2.6.4 Transgression

I consider Foucault's concept of transgression, which explores how disabled people can and do contest the disabling barriers they encounter. Foucault suggests transgression is the practice and playful resistance to limits (Foucault, 1994), and doing this can allow individuals to detach themselves from disabled identities (Allan, 2007).

Having not engaged with the philosophers of difference until my doctoral studies, I have reflected on a previous research project which was also undertaken at Crescent College and now recognise how

evidence of transgression was apparent by the visually impaired students I worked with during this time. One key example of what I now know was evidence of transgression, is a new student with rapidly deteriorating vision had learnt strategies to overcome certain barriers that might occur when his vision worsened, to move away from a disabled identity. As an independent individual, he initially rejected the help of a learning support assistant due to fear of being seen as different by his peers at the mainstream college. Eventually, it became apparent that he was pretending to see more than he could, as he could not complete tasks in class. Acts of transgression enable students to challenge the limits placed upon them and exercise control over others (Allan, 1999). Avoidance of his deteriorating vision enabled him to escape the imperative to perform his visual impairment in a public scenario, for example, needing extra support at the mainstream college. Transgression is not 'antagonistic or aggressive'; there is no winner; instead, it enables people with disabilities to exercise control over their identities by 'subverting the norms that compel them to perform as marginal' repeatedly (Allan, 2011: 154). However, these albeit subtle forms of challenge by disabled people (Allan, 2011) can also have specific implications for individuals as they are temporary acts which need to be repeated. Moreover, having experienced this from students at Crescent College in a previous project, considering transgression as a conceptual tool within this doctoral research was imperative.

2.7 Visual Impairment

Binary distinctions can be applied to more than just impairment and disability. As previous discussion has centred around the deconstruction of the norm concerning disability and education, I will now seek to critique visual impairment with the norm. In this case, the norm could be applied to 'sighted people', and anyone who does not fit under this category could be viewed as a deviation from the supposed norm. This creates a binary of sighted versus non-sighted, the former being associated with the idea of a 'normal' person and the latter being labelled deviant. Furthermore, these assumptions between sighted/non-sighted and normal/abnormal can create barriers to understanding between sighted and non-sighted individuals.

Binary ways of thinking emerged within the social model of disability and served as a critique of the medical model of disability, which would view visual impairment as a person's individual medical problem. As such, within the emergence of a medical model approach to disability came oppressive levels of power, exclusionary practice and dependency, and those in power, such as medical

professionals, were deemed responsible for returning the 'disabled' body to the socially accepted 'norm' (Oliver and Barnes, 2012). I find myself questioning this because if a person is born 'different', one might argue that is their 'norm' and, therefore, what exactly should they return to if this lived reality of difference has always been their 'normal'? Within this responsibility of restoring people to the 'norm', medical professionals ultimately controlled people's entire lives (Rieser, 2006), including where they should work, whether they should work, and even if and where they should attend school. From the medical view, people were 'situated within a hierarchy of bodily traits that determined the distribution of privilege, status and power' (Garland-Thomson, 1997: 6); and those who deviated from the socially constructed 'norm' were positioned at the lower end of this hierarchy. However, the social model of disability counter-argued that these hierarchies resulted from society. Whilst the social model was powerful, it has since been argued that its conceptualisation of disability as singularly socially caused 'presents a partial and, to a certain extent, flawed understanding of the relationship between impairment, disability and society' and thus, sets 'a framework that needs clarifications and extensions and presents limits to achievement of its own aim of inclusion' (Terzi, 2004: 141). What is problematic about medicalised and normalised approaches to visual impairment is that conclusions are made based on what those in power think is right. For example, sighted experts decided the term 'blind' should be used to label someone who experiences limited or no sight. There is no recognition or consideration of the people who actually experience sight loss, and in a sighted world, people are confused, ignorant, and indifferent to visual impairment. In light of this, it might be argued that people have a choice about the way they view themselves, and this view is unique to the individual. Kleege (1998) serves as an influential character for this theorisation of visual impairment as her work does not define the term in a way that it can be applied to a general population; she offers a unique interpretation of her experience of visual impairment:

. . . ninety-nine % of my days are just fine. I get up, I go to work, I teach, I read, I write. The fact that I use aids and assistants to do some of these things is not really central to my consciousness. When everything works, I consider myself "normal." My blindness is just a fact of life, not an insurmountable obstacle blocking my path. I work around it. I ignore it. On a lot of days, it matters less than the weather. (Kleege, 1998: 62)

Kleege offers her experience of visual impairment, and in doing so, it could be argued that she is exceeding the expectations society has constructed about her disability, such as her ability to live an independent life due to her use of aids and assistants; Kleege could be labelled an 'overcomer' in this sense. Traditionally, this concept could be seen as a positive aspect of being labelled a 'visually

impaired' person, and an example of such exception is shown through the hailing of people who experience visual impairment as 'living libraries' due to their supposedly immense store of memorised knowledge (Kirtley, 1975). However, despite the attempt towards a more positive conceptualisation of visual impairment, the term 'living libraries' is objectifying in itself. It illustrates that difference can appear positive and not always obviously negative:

The Other is invested with all of the qualities of the 'bad' or the 'good'. The 'bad' self, with its repressed sadistic impulses, becomes the 'bad' Other; the 'good' self/object, with its infallible correctness, becomes the antithesis to the flawed image of the self, the self out of control. The 'bad' Other becomes the negative stereotype; the 'good' Other becomes the positive stereotype. The former is what we fear to become; the latter, we fear we cannot achieve. (Gilman, 1985: 20).

Therefore, in an attempt to portray visual impairment in a positive light, this approach is contradictive in the way that it points out the personal tragedy yet again by recognising people as 'overcomers' (Loftis, 2020). The point to draw on here is that the so-called positive stereotyping of people who experience visual impairment is certainly not superior to the overtly negative material since an object position is being defined, and the subject position is taken by a 'sighted' individual (Cheryan and Bodenhausen, 2016; Czopp, Kay and Cheryan, 2015; Shi and Zhu, 2020). Bolt (2006) termed this overcoming concept of positive stereotyping as 'Beneficial' blindness, beneficial only to inadvertently, unintentionally prejudiced individuals. This covers those who operate within the discourses and systems they are given, as few people step outside these or have the privilege to attempt to. Therefore, the binary logics of the 'sighted' and the 'visually impaired', the 'normal' and the 'abnormal', and the 'abled' and the 'disabled' continue, and as a result of this continuation, positive stereotyping persists (Bolt, 2013; 2014; Bulk et al., 2020). It is important to recognise that whilst many 'able-bodied' people view such success stories (for example, 'living libraries') of people who experience visual impairment as inspiring and therefore accept these binaries as suitable, there are limited accounts from the individuals who are the subject of such stories. Perhaps this is a direct result of the realisation that these stories refer back to the acceptance of the socially constructed norm and emphasise a criterion for being established into a society that is difficult to meet but not impossible. Moreover, the idea that people would be thankful for being hailed an 'overcomer' or a 'hero' for meeting such criteria could be seen as overtly disabling.

Visual impairment is subject to stigma as a violation of the 'norm' through the binary tradition that favours sight and what supposedly constitutes a 'normal' human body (Goffman, 1963); sight could be associated with the construct of 'normal', and therefore, visual impairment could be considered an 'abnormal' trait (Grue, 2015). Moreover, people labelled as the latter may always be stigmatised due to the societal desire to maintain the adhesion to socially constructed norms. This way of looking at disability problematises the idea of visual impairment as a natural deviation from the supposed norm and argues against this narrow concept. Disability is emblematic of the body and the human, and if we reconceptualise our thinking in this manner, we can seek to overturn the binaries attached to disability, thus, influencing new, non-dualist methods of thinking about disability. Therefore, it might be argued that society needs to turn away from the notion of privileging sight towards an openness of visual impairment and the realisation that the concept of the 'normal' human body is intimidating and not visual impairment itself.

In order to achieve a reconceptualisation of narrow thoughts which recognise visual impairment as an abnormality, we can consider the idea that 'there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education' (Dewey, 1938: 20). This can be applied to sightedness and visual impairment because they can act together to achieve a sense of reality. Michalko (2002) argues that this application of thinking is a way to achieve reconceptualisation of the prevailing constructs of visual impairment. Furthermore, in questioning the entire concept of sight in this way, we take an ever-mindful idea of what a body can do, being cautious, never defining it. The issue in previous approaches to disability research involves resistance to include people in it, for example, when decisions affect a person's life by 'sighted' professionals. This emphasises how society perceives 'abled' experts' opinions as more valid than the views of people who appear to deviate from a 'norm' and whom the outcome truly affects. One of the reasons this has, and still does, occur is due to fear. Fear appears as a pernicious effect of normalisation; for example,

The disabled person's 'strangeness' can manifest and symbolise all differences between human beings...for the able-bodied world, we are representatives of many of the things they most fear... [attacking] everyone's sense of well-being and invincibility (Hunt, 1966: 156).

Such fear of embodiment stems from the worries of the 'able-bodied' danger that I have explored, which needs to be disputed because it resonates dangerously closely with the medical model of disability. Visual impairment contradicts what it supposedly means to be a 'normal' human being,

and instead of keeping a closed-off, fearful view of it, we should seek to work with those who experience such a bodily difference to complicate this norm. The students' bodies in this study are situated within the fluid and changing contexts and situations, meaning how they construct meaning and experience education is through their bodies; therefore, they are vital to this research.

As discussed, there are many issues in holding the view of disability as being socially caused, and one of the most crucial in this research stems from the binary understanding between visual impairment and sightedness. In addition, visual impairment still holds a negative representation due to ignorance because sight is considered an aspect of normality. Moreover, the whole notion of a dichotomy is that it is formed of two distinct opposites; in the case of this research, these are visual impairment and sightedness. Nevertheless, there are blurred boundaries between the two opposites, and this is problematic because being classed as visually impaired does not mean the individual has a total loss of sight, nor does a sighted person classification require the person to have 20/20 vision, thus, resulting in a highly dysfunctional and confusing view of this binary. By researching and theorising from and through a position of non-normative embodiment, I can challenge the range of binary norms associated with aspects of my study, for example, visual impairment and sight, researcher and subject. Therefore, offering a non-dualist approach to visual impairment whereby the dualism can be turned on its head and, consequently, opened up to a critical difference (Vehmas and Watson, 2014).

Within this section, I have critiqued some crucial aspects of the literature that further substantiate the argument that visual impairment is more complex and nuanced than society might imagine. Visual impairment exists as a spectrum from what a person can perceive to how a person identifies oneself. Although there is a legal classification of visual impairment, it is important to realise that the realities of the visual impairment spectrum extend far beyond a meaningless classification. 'The modern 'legal' definition of blindness is arbitrary, and many feel that it causes more problems than it solves to have a specified point of legal blindness' (Kleege, 1999: 33). For example, if a person only just minimally misses the visual acuity needed to be defined as visual impairment, they might struggle as a result of such a definition. This could have dramatic consequences regarding access to funding for resources that might improve their learning experience since a person needs to be defined to be considered for receiving specialist assistance from disability aids. In addition, in attaching the label 'assistive' or 'specialist' to certain resources, there is a risk of limiting the scope of the proposed user to those who 'qualify' under the legal definition of visual impairment.

2.8 Disability and education

One of the most critical revolutionary moves saw the drive towards integrating young people labelled as having special educational needs in mainstream schools instead of segregating them in specialist schools. It was believed, and can still be true, that placing a young person in a special residential school or program away from his peers could subject them to further stigmatisation (de Boer, Pijl, Post and Minnaert, 2011; Efthymiou and Kington, 2017). Furthermore, classifying students into classes or educational establishments using specific terminology such as ‘normal’ and ‘special’ implies that such categorisation is constantly subject to revision and is tentative (Algraigray and Boyle, 2017). The concept of deterritorialisation is applicable here as a way to think through how traditional understandings of inclusion and special education can be undone to achieve an education that is ‘smooth and full of creative possibilities’ (Allan and Harwood, 2014: 417). The traditional policy of inclusion, with its vision of everyone being educated in mainstream schools for the entirety of their educational careers, is unachievable in practice (Hornby, 2015). As such, there is no clear understanding of inclusive education. Some scholars view special education as a form of inclusive education, whereas others suggest that all students should, for the majority, learn together in an inclusive setting (Hornby, 2015). ‘Inclusion for some’ considers the particularities of the learner, understanding special education as the most appropriate and tailored option, and ‘inclusion for all’ stresses participation and learning amongst peers above anything else (Leijen, Arcidiacono and Baucal, 2021).

2.8.1 Multiple and Multi-Dimensional Transitions

Transitioning to any level of education is educational, of course, but it can also be social, psychological, and geographical (Jindal-Snape, 2012). Previous research concerned with educational transitions, albeit limited, has focussed on either compulsory schooling transitions (Barlow, 2021; Dunlop, 2021; Stack, Symonds and Kinsella, 2020) or higher education transitions (Bethel et al., 2020; Glazzard, Jindal-Snape and Stones, 2020; Mateu et al., 2020), suggesting a gap in the research for students experiencing post-16 further education transitions. Packer and Thomas (2021) conducted a study focusing specifically on the transition from secondary school to post-16 provision and discovered that post-school transition could be a challenging period in the lives of young people, and there is limited research that focuses on the transitions of students to and during post-16

provision. With that, as this research is centred around the context of further education, it is pertinent to consider the literature on transitions.

Traditionally, transitions are thought of as a three-phase process, first, pre-transition identity; second, the ritual (a liminal phase where individuals are neither one thing nor another); and third, post-transition identity (Beech, 2011). This linear approach has dominated transition literature (Bridges, 2004; Kralik, Visentin and van Loon, 2006). However, linear thinking fails to acknowledge the complexity of educational environments and the multiple dimensions of transitions that occur within a young person's educational journey. Instead, Multiple and Multi-Dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory acknowledges that transitions are not linear, finite processes (Jindal-Snape, 2016).

Transitions are multi-dimensional in that they can also initiate transitions for individuals' most significant others (Glazzard, Jindal-Snape and Stones, 2020). Jindal-Snape (2016) identified MMT Theory and states how it recognises the complexity and breadth of transitions, emphasising that individuals experience multiple transitions simultaneously in multiple contexts and domains, and all transitions impact each other. Gordon et al. (2017) further explained that these multiple transitions trigger transitions for significant others. MMT Theory is based on the Rubik's cube analogy whereby, in the context of my research, one colour may represent a student, and any change in one dimension will trigger changes in other dimensions (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021). Transition is relevant in this study because the students have transitioned from a different setting to Crescent College, but it is also possible that they might have experienced synchronous transitions. Therefore, MMT Theory may serve as a useful theoretical lens to explain and understand the experiences students may disclose about their previous education experiences and their recent experiences of becoming students within partnership further education provision.

2.8.2 Disability and further education

The literature exploring the experiences of disabled students in further education is limited, dated (Ash et al., 1997; Johnstone, 1995; Peart, 2014) and often applicable to countries other than England or zones in on aspects of education that are not useful for this research (e.g., Leyser and Greenberger, 2008; Pitt and Curtin, 2004). 19 'specialist' colleges in England offer services for students who experience disability, including vision impairment, and all of the colleges also provide for students with profound and additional needs (Vicka, 2019). These colleges promote themselves

in their prospectuses because they provide a range of services to help students get the most out of their further education experience and, further, through leading independent lives. In addition to educational services, the college this study is concerned with also offers more than formal qualifications through the practice of life skills, such as mobility, career advice, and daily living skills. Such extracurricular opportunities could be the resonating drive behind the labelling of certain colleges as 'specialist'. However, even though these services are available, there is little detail on the perceptions of those educated within such unique further education settings.

Inadequate funding, lack of appropriate transport and specialised advice and guidance are some significant barriers to learning for disabled students in mainstream further education (Grehan, 2008). Alongside these, teacher attitudes and positive staff-student relationships play a crucial role in attainment and well-being. However, it has also been reported that disabled students on the path to becoming economically active participants in society receive better-tailored support than others (Spenceley, 2012). Thus, suggesting a negative side to staff-student relationships and a barrier towards fully inclusive practices in mainstream further education environments. Similarly, parental roles have been found to significantly impact disabled students experiences, specifically their level of emotional, financial and practical support (Carroll and Dockrell, 2012; Palikara, Lindsay and Dockrell, 2009). Such barriers may be a driving force for disabled students to seek to move into specialist further education environments that eliminate the inequalities they can often experience in mainstream further education.

In a study that looked at the experiences of a group of disabled students moving from mainstream school into special needs further education, the main reasons for their move to specialist education included physical access and resources, support levels in class, access to therapy, extracurricular activities and social life, and concerns about the attitude of the local mainstream college towards their disabilities (Pitt and Curtain, 2004). This is because students enter further education at a challenging time, they are young people on the verge of adulthood, and specialist further education environments cater for their needs and enable students to focus on their learning whilst affording them the opportunity to be treated like adults (Pitt and Curtain, 2004). McGuckin et al. (2013) support this further through their study, which found that disabled students experience greater independence and self-reliance when they reach further education, highlighting that the progression to further education is often more than gaining a formal qualification.

A recent study of disabled students in further education found concern about how those around them perceive them, shared experiences of loneliness, fear of being stigmatised and feeling less able than their non-disabled peers (Mason-Roberts, 2020). Moreover, awareness of the stigmatised views within society around disability and difference can hinder a young person's developing sense of self (Pyszkowska and Stojek, 2022). For example, stigmatised people have been found to anticipate rejection and discrimination, leading them to experience heightened social isolation, depression and anxiety and decreased employment, leisure and social opportunities (Kong et al., 2021). These can be viewed as failures by young people, which, in turn, may result in decreased quality of life, self-esteem and self-worth (Kong et al., 2021). External stigma is then transferred into internal, affective-cognitive processes, resulting in internal stigma, referred to as 'self-stigma' (Goffman, 1963). On the other hand, some studies have found that having a disability is not always a defining factor for young people, as they often identify with other groups, such as their favourite sports team (Smith et al., 2015). Therefore, further education settings might also have the ability to allow disabled young people to develop a positive sense of self and to achieve a sense of belonging through association with non-disabled peers. However, it should be emphasised that the studies mentioned in this section explored the perspectives of young people with a range of disabilities, and no study explicitly focused on the experiences of visually impaired young people, so the findings may not be transferable to this group.

Exploring the aims of Crescent College to give my discussion some context is relevant. The main aim of the college is to prepare people for as fulfilling an adult life as possible by maximising independence. This includes progression to an occupation such as paid employment, voluntary work, mainstream education or active involvements in community activities, and as independent a lifestyle as possible in own housing or a family home. It could be argued that such specialist colleges have the potential to marginalise further students who choose to attend, and this may be a result of their aims which may reflect normalising principles (Florian, 2019; Schuelka, 2018). However, it could also be argued that the construction of normalcy informs this oppressive way of thinking, not the college mantra itself. Social constructions of what constitutes a 'normal human body' inform an understanding of the concept of 'abnormality' (Retief and Letsosa, 2018; Wetering, 2020). Therefore a 'normal' or mainstream further education college is, in fact, the driving force distinguishing between 'normal' and 'specialist'. This brings me back to the binary debate yet again; such categorisation could be a vital issue in implementing specialist support in the participants'

educations. In particular, for the students in this research, if they are already feeling stigmatised as a result of the opposing views that can be attached to the specialised nature of their college, will they be reluctant to use the range of services the college boasts in their prospectuses? (For example, innovative and potentially useful assistive technologies). I will argue this further in the next section, considering the suggestion that the term 'assistive' technology creates more barriers than opportunities.

In addition, The Education and Training Foundation (2022) recently published a report that focused on how partnership-working between specialist and general further education settings can improve provision for disabled students. The report outlined a number of distinct factors that are critical to success for these partnerships. These include; shared values, vision and ethos, a lack of competitiveness between the two organisations, openness, honesty, generosity and trust, equal commitment, and putting in time to work on project actions. These critical success factors ultimately allow the partnerships to develop and foster a shared sense of ownership.

2.9 Assistive technology

I have demonstrated in the previous sections of this chapter that terminology such as 'disability' and 'impairment' and binaries such as sightedness/visual impairment have undergone theoretical displacement and critique. I have explored the awareness that has been brought to disability, recognising that sight and visual impairment no longer need to be divided into two completely separate entities, and they can be used to challenge the concept of what constitutes a 'normal' human body. However, assistive technology and what I will term mainstream technology for this section are still treated as a dichotomy. I use this term to challenge the questionable use of the word 'assistive' because, as I understand it, technology assists its user regardless of whether they are considered 'disabled' or not. Furthermore, I argue that the concept of assistive technology, which can be conceptualised as technology that is exclusively for people who experience disability, needs to undergo questioning and critical analysis similar to that of normalisation and visual impairment, considering the potential stigma associated with the use of assistive technology.

2.9.1 Critique of terminology

Definitions of assistive technology often refer to the difference between the proposed user and the socially constructed norm. For example, a screen reader is designed for computer, laptop, smartphone, and tablet users who have little, or no vision (RNIB, 2022e) and sight is viewed as the 'norm' (Almog, 2018). Additionally, assistive technology is often a visible sign of difference (McNeil and Coventry, 2015), such as the speech output from screen reading software. By terming certain technologies as assistive, we are, in essence, labelling them as something different from mainstream technology and, therefore, are likely to perceive the technology user as different. I would argue that the entire concept of mainstream technology has emerged due to the assistive label placed on some, but not all, technologies. Thus, mainstream technologies can now be considered the 'norm', and assistive technologies are a deviation from this.

In considering assistive technology as 'special', society heightens barriers to access and socially creates obstacles; for example, assistive technologies can help provide disabled people 'the life they would like to lead' (Desmond et al., 2018: 437). As such, they can facilitate a mainstream/assistive technology binary that could contribute to ableist discourses. However, if the whole point of technology is to assist the user (Desmond et al., 2018), it might be argued that the labelling distinctions only serve to create more binary issues, as critiqued by Corker (1999) in relation to disability. Therefore, the potential assistive/mainstream technology binary needs to be addressed.

The labelling of technology designed to support disabled people as assistive generates a subsequent label of other technology as mainstream. It emphasises a difference between being disabled and non-disabled, requiring the former to be 'excluded' first and then be 'included' with the normative group through the aid of assistive technology (Ochsner, Spohrer and Stock, 2022). In seeing assistive technology as 'special', we generate barriers for disabled people with regard to overcoming socially, culturally, or technologically created obstacles. Ochsner, Spohrer and Stock (2021) proposed an understanding of dismediation in their study, which critically reflected on the entire concept of assistive technologies as objects or systems that enable resolutions for disabled people to be included. An example of this in practice can be shown through the ignorance that even students with the same degree of vision loss will likely need instruction in different types of assistive technology based on their unique needs (Presley and D'Andrea, 2009). In other words, educators are unaware that simply giving students access to assistive technologies is inadequate; students need to be taught how to use them to support them and their unique needs best. Understanding the field of

assistive technology through an understanding of dismediation means recognising the entanglements of disability and technology (Mills and Sterne, 2017).

2.9.1.1 Blurring of boundaries

As a result of the expansion of assistive technology, mainstream technology companies and developers have come under pressure to make their products available to all, and what we are now seeing is a blurring of what is mainstream and what is assistive technology (Chambers, 2020; Jack, 2017; Ludlow, 2014). What has previously been viewed as a technology only for disabled people, text-to-speech software is now 'assisting' all members of society; an example is the 'Read Aloud' function which is now a standard feature of Microsoft Word. On the contrary, speech-to-text was built as purely assistive technology (Derosier and Fraber, 2005), yet it influenced the growth of voice recognition technologies that all of us use every day, such as Siri for Apple, Cortana for Microsoft, and Alexa for Amazon (Hoy, 2018). These affordances, the goal-oriented opportunities that technology enables the user to carry out (Gibson, 1977; Volkoff and Strong, 2013) that initially supported individuals with visual impairments are now applicable to all users. This convergence of technology (Alper and Haller, 2016) can also be reflected in other examples such as voice notes which everyone increasingly uses to communicate with others as they can be more efficient than typing a written message, and automatic subtitles within platforms such as YouTube and Netflix. The Office of Communications conducted a study in 2006 which found that 7.5 million people in the United Kingdom used subtitles, and of that number, only 1.5 million had hearing impairments (Ofcom, 2006). Although this figure is 16 years old, the increased subtitle use was found to correlate with the growth in mobile device use as many people consume video on commutes (Davies, 2019), and subtitles allow users to watch their favourite programmes in a sound-sensitive environment (Gorman, Crabb and Armstrong, 2021). Furthermore, one of the main reasons for those without hearing impairment choosing to use subtitles was that they can help maintain concentration and engagement, thus providing a better experience for all (Gernsbacher, 2015). Therefore, technology assists us in more ways than the narrow-minded view of assistive technology permits, and the word assistive can be applied to anything and everything that helps us perform tasks to a better ability.

All technology is 'assistive' technology, and in arguing this, I challenge the reader to think about these three questions. What technology are you currently using that is not assisting you? Your laptop? Your reading glasses? Your smartphone? All three of these examples are assistive in multiple ways. For example, they might provide navigational information or assist you in augmenting or

enabling a sensory experience such as reading this thesis. I argue that making an overt distinction about technology implies a separate grouping of devices specifically designed for groups of people who fit with particularly narrow diagnostic criteria; in other words, those who present with impairments. By thinking about technology in this way, I aim to challenge the culturally designating thoughts about impairments needing 'special' attention in the form of assistive technology. Instead of labelling some technologies as assistive and others as not, we should be more concerned with the danger of emotional harm that can come with labelling through these binary distinctions, such as mainstream technology/assistive technology (Ahmed, 2018), in order to contribute towards eliminating the disabling perceptions that can be attached to these.

2.9.2 The use of assistive technology

This subsection considers the use of assistive technology by young people before exploring the relevance of braille for this specific population. The use of assistive technology is complex and can present challenges for self-identity. Therefore, as a starting point, it is helpful to understand that for some, assistive technology may represent restriction, decline, or disability, and for others, it can embody possibility and ability (Desmond et al., 2018). These meanings can alter depending on contextual factors, such as their educational environment, the level of family support they have or the social experiences they have (Hammel et al., 2015). Therefore, living, social, and educational circumstances are fundamental for determining an individual's interaction with their environment and relationship with technology (Scherer, 2005).

Many young people cannot access the technology and information their peers can access without struggle. However, with access, assistive technology use has been proven to afford disabled students the same benefits as their peers by providing easy access to information they would have otherwise missed (Hasselbring and Bausch, 2005; Soderstrom and Ytterhus, 2010). For example, Alves et al. (2009) mentioned how visually impaired students often have trouble reading and writing. This is sometimes combatted with non-digital magnifiers; however, these optical aids frequently fail to adequately help the student because they have limited magnification capabilities and distasteful design (Dyment, 2009). Whereas when these students have the aid of assistive technologies, for example, inbuilt magnifiers, speech synthesisers and screen readers, they are more likely to overcome the barriers they experience to reading and writing (Alves et al., 2009; Dyment, 2009).

Studies have shown that screen readers often come out as the primary tool visually impaired people utilise to access information online (Verma, Singh and Singh, 2012). Furthermore, this is often because they reduce their dependence on significant others and professionals and allow them to work at their own pace (Chandra, 2021). This notion of using assistive technology to gain a higher level of independence can also be reflected in young people's use of the white cane, which has been found to create more privacy than if they relied on a sighted guide. However, views around assistive technology differ among the visually impaired community. For example, in a study by Söderström and Ytterhus (2010), young people experiencing complete blindness found assistive technologies such as speech-to-text software worthwhile in terms of allowing them to participate in their community of peers. In addition, they suggested they facilitated independent use of mainstream devices; however, those with a partial vision impairment typically rejected using them (Söderström and Ytterhus, 2010). This rejection stems from young people not wanting to be seen as different from their non-disabled peers or out of fear of facing barriers (Faucett et al., 2017). Participants believed assistive technology drew unwanted attention to their impairment (Söderström and Ytterhus, 2010), thus suggesting that those who were able would avoid using it out of fear of standing out.

There is clear evidence that assistive technology benefits education and academic achievement for disabled people (Bouck, Park and Stenzel, 2020; Fortes Alves, Pereira and Pereira Viana, 2017; Sivakova, 2020) and their ability to live autonomous lives (Cooper and Nichols, 2007; Harper, Kurtzworth-Keen and Marable, 2017; McNicholl, Desmond and Gallagher, 2020). However, significant barriers can hinder the use of assistive technologies by visually impaired students (Zhou et al., 2011). Lack of knowledge about and skills in using assistive technologies from teachers of students with visual impairments is a contributor (Byrd and Leon, 2017; Coleman et al., 2015; Lee and Vega, 2005). This means that many educators lack confidence and therefore are reluctant to teach assistive technology to students with visual impairments (Zhou et al., 2011). The personal opinions of teachers can also impact the extent to which students use assistive technology. For instance, some perceive it as a tool that leads students to success, and others are convinced it labels students, which can cause emotional harm and make students dependent on teachers to support them (Ahmed, 2018; Edyburn, 2006). Additionally, most assistive technologies are inaccessible due to cost (Al-Tayar et al., 2019; Atanga et al., 2020; Cote, 2021; MacDonald and Clayton, 2013; McNicholl et al., 2021). For instance, the BrailleNote device is promoted as 'more than a computer' which sounds exciting, yet it could be argued that the only aspect that makes the BrailleNote 'more than a computer' is its six-thousand-pound price tag. Cost, therefore, may significantly affect the

successful implementation of them in many students' educations. It has been argued by those who adopt a medical approach to disability that well-designed assistive technologies help increase social inclusion and autonomy because of their ability to remove barriers to inclusion (O'Brolchain, 2018; Owuor et al., 2018). Yet, there is still an issue with accessibility, whereby some people do not have access due to funding, lack of training or insufficient assessment (Ahmed, 2018). Moreover, even those with access to technology are often still socially marginalised and experience stigma (Owuor et al., 2018).

The literature has shown that young people use assistive technologies partly because they facilitate access to information, support mobility, promote safety, and improve quality of life (Khan and Khusro, 2021; Manduchi and Coughlan, 2012). However, despite this, assistive technology has come under intense scrutiny (Wahidin, Waycott and Baker, 2018) because it has been argued that it undermines traditional methods, such as reading braille (Bolter, 2001). Only seven per cent of people who are registered blind or partially sighted in the United Kingdom use braille (RNIB, 2022f). Traditionalists have previously emphasised that they want children experiencing sight loss to learn braille and for adults to continue using it because they believe it is a meaningful attribute for the world of visual impairment and blindness (Martiniello, Haririsanati and Wittich, 2022; McCall, McLinden and Douglas, 2011). Moreover, braille is extremely important for literacy. It allows children with visual impairment to learn about grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure, which cannot be learnt by simply listening to words through technological devices (McCarthy et al., 2016).

'To become literate, one needs to engage with text in some form' (Hoskin et al., 2022: 1). Therefore, it is no surprise that traditionalists are against losing braille altogether. However, technology has not signalled the end of traditional print for sighted individuals, so there is no reason it should contribute towards an end of traditional braille. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider how traditionalist views pose implications. As traditionalists are not necessarily people who experience the reality of sight loss, it could be questioned whether traditionalists should place responsibility on assistive technology itself for undermining braille. Another reason for what Americans termed the braille literacy crisis is a common misconception that braille carries a stigma (Hoskin et al., 2022). However, a more reasonable argument might be that braille is challenging and time-consuming to learn for young people and adults whose vision has deteriorated over time (Farrow, 2015). For example, Sacks, Hannan and Erin (2011) discovered through their study with children that there was nothing

they enjoyed about reading and writing braille, which influenced their non-use. In a more recent study, Wiazowski (2014) found that visually impaired children often lag behind their sighted peers when learning to read because braille is significantly more challenging to learn than printed text. In addition, the stigma attached to using braille and braille technology is a critical factor in young people's non-use of braille, with young people explicitly stating their favour of using mainstream technology because assistive technology is aesthetically different. Thus, braille adds to their psychological stigma (Tsatsou, 2021). Instead of seeing it as a replacement, technology can be viewed as a new dimension of traditional methods as technological developments have been found to make braille much easier to use (Martiniello, Wittich and Jarry, 2018). Therefore, perhaps the problem is not with the technologies that have introduced innovative ways of listening to braille, which are often used in favour of reading it, but with the terminology used to define these 'specialist' devices. Moreover, it could be argued that traditionalists are not against new braille forms, such as the BrailleNote tablet. Instead, their potential rejection of these new devices might be due to the assistive label that society has attached to them (Barbareschi et al., 2021; Faucett, Ringland and Cullen, 2017).

Despite technology impacting and revolutionising the field of education (Raja and Nagasubramani, 2018), it is concerning that resources being sold under the label of assistive technology are largely unquestioned and are simply accepted as the most appropriate choice of technology for the disability it claims to aid. Much like how the social model of disability made a significant impact in its initial development and is now simply being talked about (Oliver, 2013); therefore, it has remained unchallenged for a number of years. Moreover, Oliver (2013) argued that a re-invigoration or even a total replacement of the social model of disability was needed due to the lessened debate around it. It has also been argued that the usefulness and limitations of the social model of disability were talked about for two decades before any real effort was made toward implementing it (Shakespeare, 2006). The same may be true about assistive technology.

2.9.3 Stigma and aesthetics

Stigma and assistive technology often go hand in hand with users feeling stigmatised due to the way technology looks and how it is accepted or, instead, not accepted socially (Shinohara and Wobbrock, 2011). Non-use of assistive technology is also found if it reinforces stereotypes, brings adverse social reactions and exposes individuals' disabilities to the world (Faucett et al., 2017; Martiniello et al.,

2020). Moreover, this can drastically affect disabled people's lifestyles. It has been reported that they sometimes fear facing barriers or feeling exposed, which often leads to some abandoning assistive technologies altogether (Faucett et al., 2017). Visually impaired people, however, cannot easily abandon their assistive technologies as it would significantly reduce their independence (dos Santos et al., 2022). For example, the white cane is a mobility aid that helps visually impaired people locate obstacles in their path. However, it is also a visual indicator that the user has a vision impairment (Hersh, 2015). The white cane is a prime example of how the functionality rather than aesthetics of the device are usually prioritised during the development of assistive technologies (de Jonge et al., 2016). This is problematic because, as studies have shown, visible assistive technologies can reinforce stereotypes and, in turn, draw negative attention to disability (dos Santos et al., 2022; Faucett et al., 2017). As such, assistive technology needs to meet the user's needs without social embarrassment (dos Santos et al., 2022).

Young people's reasons for not wanting to use assistive technologies are complex, and often, the reality is that they do not want to stand out or appear different from their peers (dos Santos et al., 2022). Their perception of seeing themselves as different can influence their reluctance towards making effective use of the technologies offered to them:

I was told that I was stupid for so long that I started to believe it. I couldn't read without my computer, and there was no way I was going to use it when everyone was watching. I had to go to the back of the classroom to use the computer. It was humiliating. So I didn't use it. (McIntosh, 2010: 21).

Additionally, in a later study, Faucett et al. (2017) emphasised how disabled people can fear facing barriers or having their impairment exposed due to the stigmatising effects of assistive technology. Söderström and Ytterhus (2010) also found that the benefits of mainstream technology are often applied to assistive technology. How individuals use technologies can reinforce and accentuate certain values due to the symbolic meaning society has attached to them. Aesthetics significantly influence how non-disabled people see and judge users of assistive technology. If a device brings negative symbolism, then users are less likely to adopt and more likely to abandon assistive technologies (dos Santos et al., 2022). Therefore, how assistive technology users are perceived by society and the aesthetic appeal of both the technology and how people look using the technology can influence people's abandonment of their device(s) (de Jonge et al., 2016). Young people have reported they would not use assistive technology if there were a chance it might attract negative

attention and emphasise a preference for devices with a 'neutral appearance' (dos Santos et al., 2022: 155). It was also found that this view is maintained regardless of whether the assistive technology promises significant improvement for the user (dos Santos et al., 2022), demonstrating further how stigmatisation is attached to the aesthetics of assistive technologies and can create barriers to success.

Technology generally is thought to symbolise independence, belonging and capability, yet assistive technology, in reality, can symbolise dependency, disparity, and restraint for disabled people. Henceforth, mainstream technologies and assistive technologies have intrinsically conflicting associations with one another. It is unethical to abide by the ideologies society already has regarding mainstream technology when it comes to uncovering the impacts of assistive technologies. Several researchers believe that visually impaired young people refuse assistive technologies wherever possible to conform as 'normal' young people (Shinohara and Tenenberg, 2009). However, we know that young people today are glued to mainstream technologies (Joshi et al., 2019), a finding that is substantiated by Ofcom reports (Ofcom, 2022). Since mainstream technologies have undergone considerable advancements and are embedding accessibility features, disabled young people have reported feeling less stigmatised, and there has been improved user acceptance (dos Santos et al., 2022). An example of this can be shown through smartphones, considered one of the most advanced forms of digital technology. The universal design, built-in accessibility features, third-party accessible applications, and the fact that they are commonplace in society all contribute to a less socially stigmatising experience for visually impaired users (Senjam, 2021). Users of assistive technology have employed personal methods towards limiting stigma, such as hiding away (Cohen and Avanzino, 2010) or transgressing (Foucault, 1994), as discussed earlier in this chapter. Smartphones can help them employ these methods by drawing less attention to their impairment and, thus, resisting barriers that previously limited them. Having already witnessed transgression through smartphone use in action by previous students within Crescent College during my masters project, it will be insightful to see how further development of mainstream devices influences the students participating in this study.

2.10 Summary

This chapter has drawn from various sources to consider the historical and up-to-date literature related to my research. It has provided an analysis of previous thinking about disability, visual impairment and education, and an investigation of critical issues that relate to these, including; a critique of normalisation, stigma, and attitudes around disability. The literature review has identified a paucity of research around the experiences of visually impaired students in further education. There is a need for further research which explores how special-mainstream partnerships can facilitate greater awareness of visual impairment. There is also limited research on how further education provision can support the development of students' independence through individually tailored academic and personal support, access to specialist resources and assistive technology and opportunities to learn formal and vocational qualifications. These opportunities may lead to improved outcomes for visually impaired students which will, in turn, facilitate greater inclusion in society.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into nine sections: paradigm, methodology, research design, participants and sample, methods, ethical considerations, data collection, data analysis, and closes with a summary of justification for the approaches used in order to analyse the data collected for the project.

The construction of research methodology is a crucial component of any study as it shows how the researcher was influenced; to choose their research questions, to choose the participants, and to generate and analyse the data (Creswell, 2013; Wellington, 2015). Therefore, my own belief about the nature of reality (ontology) and about how the world should be understood (epistemology) were vital in shaping this research into what it is (Hammond and Wellington, 2012). With that, the students' realities were socially constructed, and their experiences in Crescent College were shaped by national policy (Equality Act, 2010), legislation (SEND Code of Practice, Department for Education, 2014), and institutional policies. Epistemologically, I needed to use methodologies and methods that captured perceptions rather than facts or truths (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017) in order to understand students' experiences to the best of my abilities whilst recognising that these experiences were unique to each individual.

Paradigms and positioning matter because they allow the reader to learn something about the researcher's relationship with the participants and whom they believe can provide the most valuable sharing of this knowledge (Lincoln, Lyndham and Guba, 2011; Sparkes and Smith, 2013). There are two overarching paradigms of research methodology, positivism and interpretivism (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Both underpin approaches to educational research (Gray, 2013) and will be explored in this chapter with a focus on interpretivism.

3.2 Paradigm: Interpretivism

Researchers need to have an awareness of the different theoretical paradigms that exist in order for them to choose the one that fits best with their research (Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009; Kivunja and Kyani, 2017) and is harmonious with their philosophical beliefs about what constitutes reality (Mills, Bonner and Francis, 2006). My study adopted an interpretivist paradigm which is based on the notion that research should aim to understand the world from the subjective experiences of

individuals via specific social, historical and cultural contexts (Chowdhury, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Hammond and Wellington, 2012; Lincoln and Denzin, 2011; Yin, 2014). However, the subjective beliefs, notions and perspectives of participants within an interpretivist paradigm are also what scholars have criticised it for (Grix, 2004; Hammond and Wellington, 2014; Mack, 2010). This means that interpretivist studies can lead to a bias whereby the researcher's beliefs and interpretations go unquestioned and affect the research outcome (Hammond and Wellington, 2012). However, in taking an interpretivist stance to my research, I interpreted the phenomenon in light of my pre-understandings, pre-judgements and prejudices. Thus, I minimised my own bias by reflecting upon personal assumptions and biases that could have affected how I conducted my research. Reflections were noted in my research journal, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Patnaik (2013) found that working on their own values, attitudes and biases enabled them to gain much deeper insight into their inquiry. In addition, my pre-existing notions of partnership-FE and visual impairment are critiqued in detail through my autoethnography chapter (Chapter Four). Patnaik (2013) also discovered that being reflexive and understanding one's own biases is a fundamental tool to guarantee that the focus of the research remains on the study and its participants. Interpretivists are interested in the lived experience of those who live it (Andrade, 2009). Therefore, they are actively involved in acquiring, highlighting, and summarising the knowledge gathered from the participants in a study (Thomas, 2009).

In contrast, positivism allows researchers to predict future events based on previous findings and is rarely seen as the most appropriate paradigmatic perspective for education research (Hammersely, 1993; Panhwar, Ansan and Shah, 2017). Interpretivism is viewed in direct opposition to positivism (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2013). As such, interpretivism asserts that participants' views cannot always be explained in the way they are in science-based research. Instead, interpretive research seeks to understand rather than explain (Bryman, 2016). I adopted an interpretive paradigm because I recognise that every human being is unique and has their own motivation, intention and meaning (Goodsell, 2013), and interpretive work aims to explore a deeper level of human activity (Antwi and Hamza, 2015). For example, in the case of the visually impaired students in this research, each individual has a different variation of sight loss and may have differing motivations for choosing to attend Crescent College.

Scott and Usher (2011) further clarify how interpretive research rejects an objective understanding of reality that is independent of perceivers' observation and argues that individuals are always

subjective because their unique understanding anticipates giving meaning and pre-understanding ideas. Individuals offer their interpretation of reality as they experience it, and reality exists as an interpretation by them. The role of the researcher in an interpretivist study is to attempt to understand the participants' realities despite being influenced by pre-understandings of it (Gadamer, 2004). While researchers cannot simply eliminate pre-understandings, they can employ them to acquire knowledge once they know their reality within the research process. By incorporating an element of autoethnography mainly concerned with my own experiences with special education from an early age right through to my journey within Crescent College, I am being explicit about my preconceived ideas around the topics concerning this research including my early introduction to visually impaired people, special education and how these early childhood experiences shaped my understanding pre-entering the college. Within the autoethnography findings chapter, I then lay out how these pre-understandings altered once I had entered Crescent College, thus signifying why it is so crucial that researchers are aware of their preconceived notions around their topic (Maxwell et al., 2020).

The ontological and epistemological understandings of relativism and interpretivism influence me. The idea is that knowledge and reality are moulded by society, and our approach to building meaning about things is socially and culturally mediated. Furthermore, I align with understanding disability as a socially created category, not an essential part of a person (Valle and Connor, 2019).

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology is the study of being (Crotty, 1998). It explores whether reality is independent of our understanding of it; it relates to the philosophical concept of what the fundamental nature of reality is (Scotland, 2012; Sider, 2013). The extremities of what some scholars have called a spectrum of how we view knowledge are realism and relativism (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Levers, 2013). The former ontological position suggests there is a way people accept an absolute truth that can be measured externally (Crotty, 1998). Whereas the latter is the positioning that reality is subjective and changes from person to person, and thus, the ontological position of interpretivism is relativism (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Levers, 2013). A relativist ontology means I, as the researcher, believe the phenomenon I am exploring has multiple realities. I can make meaning of or reconstruct these realities through human interaction with the research participants (Chalmers, Manley and Wasserman, 2005).

From the outset, I intended to hear stories of the students and their teachers while interpreting the individual human experience through these. In adopting an ontological positioning of relativism, I perceive social realities as being multiple, flexible (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017), and mind-dependent (Smith and McGannon, 2017). Moreover, an interpretivist paradigm approaches reality as relative, meaning there can be no objective truth (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, views about partnership, special or mainstream education for visually impaired students may differ from one participant to the next.

The ontology of disability, in general, has been debated by many (Cluley, Fyson and Pilnick, 2020; Riddle, 2013; 2020; Vehmas and Makela, 2009). In addition, conceptualisations of disability have more recently taken an ontological turn (Feely, 2016; Goodley, 2014; Schildrick, 2015). When biological conditions are not seen as a reality, disability can arguably become something we feel indifferent about (Gallagher, Connor and Ferri, 2014). An essential aspect of this research was to understand the perspectives of the students themselves, and the experiences they encountered as visually impaired individuals within one partnership setting. Therefore, the characteristics of a relativist ontological positioning were well suited to this aim. Focusing on the notion that multiple realities exist due to varying knowledge, views, interpretations and experiences (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017) reflected the emphasis this research placed on individuals' unique perspectives.

To summarise, the ontological assumptions underpinning this study accept and allow the appreciation of multiple perceptions of reality. Moreover, in applying a qualitative methodology, this research fosters an enriched consideration of experience (Lewis, 2015).

3.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemological positions can develop from ontological beliefs (Grix, 2004), as epistemology is a particular view of what counts as knowledge. Therefore, researchers should ensure their epistemological position explicitly underpins empirical claims (Holloway and Todres, 2003).

An influential writer in disability studies once stated, 'I always treat disability as an interpretive issue' (Titchkosky, 2007: 24), and as an interpretivist researcher, I am interested in how society can be viewed as a subjective and how knowledge is constructed around disability (Andrews, 2012). In

adopting the epistemological positioning of interpretivism, I assume how I come to know about social reality is subjective, and the process of inquiring must include interpreting the views, experiences, and perceptions of others as well as my own.

The overall aim of this study was to explore and analyse the experiences of visually impaired students within one unique partnership further education college in England. As research situated in the interpretive paradigm is concerned with understanding the world from the subjective interpretations of individuals (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2009; Ngozwana, 2018), it was a logical decision. However, all research can be inherently flawed, and a highly contested view of interpretivism is that it is challenging to evaluate what the truth is amongst a plethora of truths (Berryman, 2019; Hiller, 2016) as it places equal legitimacy on all participants' realities. Although I do not claim to be seeking out the truth, nor do I claim to believe there could be just one truth to come from such a diverse participant population. Therefore, this drawback of interpretivism does not apply to my research. Instead, this study can be better described as one that sought to shed light on students' personal views and experiences without expecting to discover truths amongst these. Instead, this research aims to elicit experiences and emphasise that these are unique to the individual. Additionally, interpretive projects do not seek conclusive answers 'there is no single, observable reality' (Merriam, 2009: 8).

3.3 Qualitative Methodology

This thesis' guiding question aimed to develop accounts of students' experiences of their educational journeys in one unique partnership further education college. Research that acknowledges the voices of those directly affected by the phenomenon emphasises individuals as experts of their own experience, and rightly so (Barnes and Sheldon, 2007; Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Pazey, 2020; Smith-Chandler and Swart, 2014). However, critics have challenged the right to speak for and represent others, arguing there are no justifications for speaking for others (Maclure, 2009). Alper (2017) suggests that 'giving voice' supposes that voice does not belong to the individual and instead belongs to the researcher or designer of the study, and they advocate for the idea of supporting voice rather than giving it out. This emphasises that research participants already have existing opinions, and it is the researcher's role to adapt our methods towards best understanding these (Wilson et al., 2020). Whilst I respect and recognise the usefulness of research that emphasises professionals as 'experts', it was not the most appropriate nor fair way to undertake this project as

the sole purpose was to emphasise the students' perspectives. However, it was essential to use reflexivity on my life and journey towards and within this research (see Chapter Four) to problematise my pre-existing ideas about the phenomenon. Moreover, students' perspectives and experiences offered a crucial angle to challenge existing and arguably dominant research methods around disability. This reflected the critical disability studies angle of using participant views to guide the research process when there is an aim to reconceptualise concepts, as critiqued in the literature (Goodley, 2013, 2016; O'Brolchain and Gordijn, 2018; Reaume, 2014).

Thomas (2011) emphasises how the design phase of a research project will not only involve detailing the design frame but also outlining and justifying the data collection methods and methods used to analyse data. A logical design will link the data and findings from the data to the study's primary question(s) (Maxwell, 2012; Yin, 2009). In order to make an informed decision on the most appropriate research design frame for this project, the following three areas were considered; the research problem, the students involved and the researcher's experience, which eventually led to my making an informed decision (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings to make sense of it; they are particularly interested in uncovering and understanding meanings people have constructed through their experiences in the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). As such, the research problem, which was confirmed earlier in the thesis, identified little exploration or understanding of the individual experiences of visually impaired students in partnership further education settings, thus confirming a gap in the field and the literature and a purpose of achieving an understanding of this unique education setting and individuals' lives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2009) highlights how the participants should play a significant part in designing an appropriate research project. This was crucial in constructing this case study because connections had previously been established. This study emerged due to previous research experience conducted with the college and its students at the time. Not surprisingly, this meant I had already met some, but not all, potential participants involved in this doctoral study. Most of the people I had already met were staff members, as, by the time I reached the data collection phase, students involved in my earlier study had reached the end of their journeys at Crescent College. This was useful because I had established some relationships and, therefore, might be classed as an insider researcher due to my pre-understandings of how I could design a study effectively in this setting (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). However, while researcher pre-understandings are believed to be an advantage, others have viewed it as a significant challenge (Fleming, 2018). Insider researchers have been ethically criticised for having the potential to coerce participants during the recruitment process (Fleming, 2018). Though, the risk of

coercion was eliminated. This was because, firstly, the idea for this doctoral project emerged from the findings of my masters project, which included visually impaired students and found partnership further education to be a significantly under-researched topic. Secondly, because I was able to recruit new students who had no prior relationship with me. I was, however, fortunate to utilise this prior experience to make knowledgeable decisions on the most effective and appropriate design for this study based on what I had learned from previous students and staff.

Qualitative research is open-minded by nature and is quite challenging to define as it means different things to different people (Smith and Caddick, 2012). Qualitative studies are concerned with social worlds and understanding the meanings participants attach to phenomena (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003); accordingly, this research was primarily based on interviews with participants. Qualitative research is the collection and interpretation of the views of the participants by the researcher;

All researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers like to make explicit those values. ... In a qualitative study, the inquirers admit the value-laden nature of the study and actively report their values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of information gathered from the field. We say that they 'position themselves' in a study (Creswell, 2007:18).

As this methodology was qualitative and not strict, it was relevant to reflect on and consider my position. Critical disability studies call for researchers to be self-critical and recognise where they sit within their research (Goodley et al., 2019); I intended to adopt this element into my study as it concerns disability. Furthermore, I understood my responsibility to listen, interpret, learn from, and respond in order to contribute to the students' lives. This research presented visually impaired students with a platform and, therefore, an opportunity to share their perspectives to educate and challenge societal views on a topic that related specifically to their lives, such as their further education experiences.

When initially designing the proposal for this project, participants needed to share personal moments from their lives. Having had prior knowledge from my previous masters level study conducted in the same setting that answers could be lengthy and descriptive, qualitative research was the logical choice as it involves gathering dense and large volumes of data (Creswell, 2015).

Qualitative research can be focused on the views and beliefs of participants (Pathak, Jena and Kalra, 2013) and therefore generated the best opportunity to explore the questions raised in this study. Silverman (2013) explains qualitative research as multi-method in its focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. In addition, qualitative research attempts to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Furthermore, qualitative studies stress that researchers should assume nothing about the phenomenon under investigation is irrelevant (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative approaches can take many forms. For Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 78), they serve as a means 'to relay dominant voices or can be appropriated to "give voice" to otherwise silenced groups and individuals'. Admittedly, this study initially set out to 'give voice' to students. However, the more I examined and learned about disability studies theories I came to realise this initial aim could have been more harmful than beneficial. The term 'give voice' is troubling for many researchers, and it has come under criticism (Ashby, 2011; Goethals, De Schauwer and Van Hove, 2015; Riddell, Wilkinson and Baron, 1998). Regardless of the researcher's intentions, a fundamental critique is that giving voice can reinforce the very systems of oppression it attempts to amend (Ashby, 2011; Jackson and Mazzei, 2009). My original ideas put my study at risk of unfairly assuming that students did not have a voice before participating in this project. This would have likely benefitted me more than the students and would have been hugely contradictory as I have claimed the perspectives of students being at the heart of this research. Instead of utilising a qualitative approach to 'give' students a 'voice', I came to realise that they already had their voice, and rather they needed a platform to express these; thereby, my study did not further contribute to the stigmatisation of disabled people's voices in research (Ashby, 2011).

This research design comprises extensive qualitative data gathering methods and thematic analysis of data collected during fieldwork, consisting of semi-structured qualitative interviews, participant observation and reflexivity in the form of a reflective research journal which also contributed to my autoethnographic account. The key aspects of qualitative data need to be more straightforward, and such research has previously been criticised for its vagueness (Aspers and Corte, 2019; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Similarly, Long and Godfrey (2004) argued that there is no single definition of qualitative data, which is problematic because researchers can struggle to know exactly what it is. Attempts have been made to find a precise definition of qualitative data to address its distinct features; however, instead, what has emerged are key terms such as understanding, interpretation, 'getting close' and making distinctions (Aspers and Corte, 2019). So, the term can mean many things

to many people (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), which can be represented in various approaches that fall under the umbrella term.

A qualitative study can be adopted through many different designs (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Ormston et al., 2014). However, most designs share an aim to understand experiences from the perspective and positioning of the participants (Ormston et al., 2014). Although, other qualitative research designs, such as phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative, were not appropriate because of their lack of alignment with this study's purpose. A phenomenological design is most appropriate when a study aims to understand social phenomena from the participants' perspectives, and the goal is to understand the lived experiences of persons who share a common phenomenon (Magrini, 2012; Sousa, 2014). Whilst this research was looking at students' perspectives, the main focus was on the nature of the setting of this research. Ethnographic research usually seeks to describe and interpret shared patterns. Through extended participant observation, 'ethnographers study the behaviour, the language, and the interaction among members of the culture-sharing group' (Creswell, 2007: 68). There would have been potential within an ethnographic study to gather rich data on the perspectives and day-to-day experiences of students as these occurred. However, identifying the students as a 'group' could have resulted in shared rather than distinct individual perspectives on the experience of attending the college. Therefore, would have resulted in a narrow answer to research question two. Grounded theory designs are frequently used to examine research areas that have not yet been studied in-depth and tend to focus on developing a theory grounded in field data from the participants' views (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Moreover, grounded theory can only be applied to research when the researcher has no preconceived ideas of the phenomenon they are studying (Mills, Bonner and Francis, 2006; Urquhart, 2013). This was inappropriate for my research as I had already been in the setting and worked amongst visually impaired students. I have also been explicit about my preunderstandings of my research from the outset. Finally, narrative designs aim to explore individuals' lives by hearing their stories. Whilst participants' stories needed to be and were listened to, this study did not seek to deeply explore participants' entire life experiences as this would have generated a mass amount of data, of which only a small proportion would have been relevant for answering the research questions. After analysing the possible options for the design of this study, I decided a case study would be most appropriate as the project sought to analyse students' experiences within one education setting, the college being the case. My methodology adopts elements of other designs, such as autoethnography. However, a case study was the most appropriate choice as the

phenomenon being explored is one partnership further education environment (the case) and the experiences of students, staff and my own experiences as a researcher within it.

Given the inappropriateness of other qualitative research designs, a case study design was chosen. First, because it focuses on developing an in-depth understanding and analysis of a single case (Haven and Van Grootel, 2019; Suter, 2011) and second, because I had already successfully used this approach with other visually impaired students at the college, albeit through a smaller masters research project.

3.4 Research Design: Case Study

Yin (2005) emphasises that a sound case study design requires the researcher to define their case, justify their decision of single or multiple-case study, and purposely adopt or minimise theoretical perspective. Case studies are stories about real-life situations facing individuals or groups of people and how they navigate them (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003). Therefore, a single, descriptive case study design was employed to generate rich data about Crescent College and how visually impaired students' experience further education there. Researchers often have an intrinsic interest in studying a particular case, and selecting the case is a crucial aspect of undertaking case study research (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2005). Moreover, as individuals' perspectives drove the research on their experiences of an identified phenomenon (further education within one unique partnership setting), the case study approach could be deemed the most relevant. This can be backed up by Yin (2014), who explains that case study design is most pertinent when the study investigates a phenomenon in a real-life situation. Furthermore, Yin (2006) explains that case study design addresses explanatory and descriptive research questions and is appropriately suited for research that aims to understand events or individuals first-hand. Therefore, supporting the aim of this project to deeply understand the event of visually impaired students attending Crescent College.

The context of the setting of this case study is important to address as it played a large part in the way this research was constructed; more context will be provided through my autoethnographic account in Chapter Four of this thesis. All data collection occurred in one partnership further education college for students aged 16 to 25. The college has a unique partnership with a neighbouring mainstream further education college whereby students can study mainstream college

courses with additional support through the partnership offered by the college. By focusing on a specific college, I restricted the topic of examination to one specific context (Zainal, 2007) to find meaning and understanding of students' experiences at that particular location. By focusing on and exploring personal education journeys, I could understand the specifics of Crescent College and provide some insight for further research in a similar location. Furthermore, whilst helping others understand the effect of these types of further education colleges on the lives of visually impaired students. Crescent College is unique in its specialist-mainstream nature, and its overall aim is to provide further education to disabled students. Therefore, because of the unique nature of the college it is not appropriate for me to provide more detail as only a small number of colleges in England operate in this way, meaning the college could be easily identifiable if I disclosed any further detail. As previously mentioned, I had worked at and with Crescent College previously, and the proposal for this doctoral project emerged as a result of this previous experience.

Case study research involves gaining a multiple-source perspective, which means lines of inquiry can be converged, and triangulation of the data collection methods can be facilitated (VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007). In this study, the use of observation, reflective journaling, which led to an autoethnographic aspect, and detailed, semi-structured interviews as part of a single case analysis contributed to addressing the multiple source necessity of case study design.

It is helpful to recognise that there are many definitions for case study research (Hyett, Kenny and Dickson-Swift, 2014; Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2014; Zucker, 2009). With that, it has been argued that a plethora of definitions have emerged because of the flexibility the design maintains (Hyett, Kenny and Dickson-Swift, 2014). Much like the popular phrase used to outline the goal of critical disability studies, start(s) with disability but never end(s) with it (Goodley, 2012), it has been claimed that a case study has no beginning or end (Ragin and Becker, 1992). This offers the opportunity to add to the narrative consistently. However, a critical debate against the design is that its pliable nature can also be its downfall (Merriam, 2009). Tight (2010: 337) argued that case study design is a 'convenient label for our research' as it represents a 'catch-all' design which opens up debate concerning its inconsistency in application. Gerring (2007: 7) attempted to utilise a quantitative-based approach to counterpoise the literature, which has suggested that case study design 'survives in a curious methodological limbo'.

Similarly, Hammersley and Gomm (2000: 2) share the concern that case studies are weak in relation to their 'less-than-scientific or even unscientific character of this kind of research'. This is one of the most common concerns raised by researchers who are more comfortable with a controlled, quantitative research approach (e.g., Elman, Gerring and Mahoney, 2007) and raises questions related to qualitative design bias. Whilst a researcher's perspective will always affect a study to some degree, Yin (2014) offers a method of good practice whereby scholars should utilise a framework to organise and assist in understanding the linear yet iterative process of conducting a qualitative project, the format of this study will be addressed later. Additionally, a case study protocol that addresses the threats to case study design from differing approaches and the threat against its validity is welcome.

The case study design also has many strengths; the first relevant to this research is the potential to explain possible relationships between real-life educational programmes and their outcomes (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018; Yin, 2014). The college in which this research was undertaken offers three different educational programmes which support a wide range of students to achieve their goals. The programmes range from gaining qualifications, becoming independent young adults, and work experience, or all three combined, often with the hope of gaining employment once they leave. The work placement programme has been working effectively thus far, with over 50 per cent of students moving into paid roles post-completion of the course. A case study approach can aid in explaining why such relationships between programme and outcome may exist (Crowe et al., 2011; Gomm, Hammersley and Foster, 2000; Ridder, 2017) and whether specialist partnership provision plays a crucial role in students' success. Second, it is often used to narrow down a vast field of research into one or a few easily researchable examples (Ridder, 2017; Yin, 2014). Of course, special education and visual impairment are not entirely new phenomena that have not previously been explored (e.g., Bishop and Rhind, 2011; Croft, 2020; Douglas et al., 2011; Hewett et al., 2015; 2014; 2020; Lourens and Swartz, 2016; Satherley and Norwich, 2021; Martin, 2020; Morris and Wates, 2006). However, students' views within one unique partnership setting are a specific and valuable area that have not yet been researched in depth. Whilst this was a positive aspect of the study, if it were too narrow, critical data might have been difficult to access, thus negatively affecting the outcome (Ridder, 2017). Third, case studies can identify 'different and even contradictory views of what is happening' (Stake, 1995: 12). This was crucial in the design choice because the study sought to develop a rich image of students' voices about education specifically designed to support visually impaired people. Furthermore, to understand the ways that the individuals themselves experienced partnership further education.

Merriam (2009) highlights that the meaning of phenomena can be understood through the experiences of those directly involved. Therefore, this study was constructed to explore partnership education experiences from the perspectives of students who have a direct experience using it. Case studies are intended to suit the case and the research questions, and the study design can be widely diverse (Hyett and Dickson-Swift, 2014). For this research, the design followed a format as advised by Yin (2014), who argued that case study design is most beneficial when particular characteristics are met, such as when the focus of the research is to address exploratory questions, such as 'what' or 'how' questions. It has also been advised that case studies are helpful when the research covers contextual situations that directly affect the phenomenon being studied (Cooper and Morgan, 2008). For example, a study of student experiences or perspectives in an education environment cannot be uncovered without the context (e.g., Crescent College, the further education environment). In this project, the experiences of visually impaired students in Crescent College were the case and context under exploration, the set of circumstances being explored, and the 'something of interest' in a particular context (Yin, 2014). Despite criticisms from researchers taking a more positivist approach (Piekkari and Welch, 2018; Yazan, 2015), case study design is considered suitable for in-depth investigations which aim to provide rich data in authentic environments (Ridder, 2017).

3.4.1 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that considers researchers' autobiographical experiences as primary data in order to offer a unique angle to interpret and analyse the meanings of their experiences (Chang, 2016). I wanted to use my reflections as data to see how my views on visual impairment, special education, and partnership-FE might develop as I went through this research journey. Therefore, in choosing to use an element of ethnography – specifically autoethnography, I carry the reader into the scene of Crescent College. As Geertz (1973) explained, thick descriptive writing with emotion serves as a way to deepen the contours of meaning around the phenomenon I explored. Furthermore, it is a branch of ethnography that produces 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 739). Therefore, I opted to include an autoethnographic aspect to my methodology to describe, explore and situate personal experience within what Ellingson and Ellis (2008: 450) would describe as a 'taken-for-granted' aspect of society and group.

Due to its unconventional positioning, autoethnography has been criticised for being too zoned in on narrative, unscientific, and overly artful (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Whilst others have contradicted the idea of autoethnography as lazy, suggesting those critics cannot possibly understand the complexity of constructing and positioning it within a framework that readers will receive. However, my research does not solely rely on autoethnography; instead, I use it as a branch to deepen the case study by providing the context of Crescent College. The next chapter, chapter four, provides my autoethnographic account and sets the scene for the study. By offering my personal experience within the college, I aim to explore and demonstrate the social realities of my participants and the complex nature of the case of this research. For this study, using autoethnography as a methodology was an inspiring concept that brought an additional layer of richness to the data (Sell-Smith, 2013), both from myself as a non-disabled researcher and the visually impaired students involved.

3.5 Participants and sample

Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research projects because it gives insight into a specific experience or phenomenon (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011). Therefore, a sample is selected based on its ability to offer access to specific perspectives on a topic; thus, representative of personal perspectives rather than entire populations meaning only a small sample is necessary. The inclusion criteria were students enrolled at Crescent College with registered sight impairment (previously 'partially sighted') or severely sight impaired (previously 'blind') (National Health Service, 2021). Further inclusion criteria included being enrolled on one of the further education programmes and engaging in some specialist support, such as learning to use assistive technology to complete tasks independently. As a result, I was able to recruit five students, the whole population of visually impaired students at Crescent College at the time, through purposive sampling with the aid of a staff member within the setting.

The participants were 'knowledgeable people' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007: 115), and they were purposively chosen as they could offer first-hand experience of the case under exploration (Speziale and Carpenter, 2007). A request for recruitment was sent out to my Gate Keeper (the braille lead within Crescent College), whom I had built a trusted relationship with through my masters research project and additional voluntary work. Due to this relationship and because she was one of the leading influencers of this study, I did not doubt her ability to recruit the most

appropriate sample. Furthermore, because the college is a considerable distance from my university, I was thankful to have been in such a fortunate position. Once a list of voluntary participants was formulated, and I met each participant for an initial discussion, the data collection process began. As mentioned, five students were recruited, but only four were recruited before the initial data collection started. In addition, during the participant observations, one extra student was recruited due to her expression of interest in being a participant in this study. See table 1 below for details on the participant demographics (all names, both in this table and throughout the remainder of the thesis, are pseudonyms).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

	Name	Participant (student, staff)	Vision Impairment	Age	Gender
1	Rosie	Staff, Braille Tutor	No	N/A	F
2	Paddi	Student	Yes	17	M
3	Bella	Student	Yes	19	F
4	Ollie	Student	Yes	18	M
5	Kylie	Student	Yes	17	F
6	Sammy	Staff, Disability coordinator	Yes	N/A	M
7	Merlin	Student	Yes	20	F
8	Alfie	Staff, Previous student	Yes	N/A	M

3.6 Data collection methods

In research, one of the most difficult decisions can be which research method(s) to follow in order to gather data which best answers the research question(s) (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Dumitrica, 2010; Queirós, Faria and Almeida, 2017). However, I was fortunate to have conducted my masters research project before proposing this doctoral project. Based on the success of my previous research which utilised semi-structured interviewing and observation, these became my preferred methods for this doctoral project, with the addition of a research journal. Thus, this study was constructed in the following way.

3.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

In semi-structured interviews, the researcher develops an outline for the topics that will be covered; however, the interviewee's responses determine the interview's direction (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2014). The primary data-gathering method for this study was semi-structured interviews, which were formulated based on the need to discover students' personal perspectives about the setting, their education, and their visual impairment to challenge traditional and stereotypical views about these topics. In addition, interviews are an advantageous method when collecting data based on opinions, emotions, feelings, experiences, sensitive issues, and privileged information (Denscombe, 2010).

A weakness that might arise when opting to utilise semi-structured or unstructured interviewing methods is a lack of reliability and validity (Hofisi, Hofisi and Mago, 2014). Whilst this method allowed for free-flowing conversation, it was imperative that the same themes were addressed and questions were asked to avoid reliability issues from arising. Additionally, to address potential validity problems, all questions asked were clear and concise due to my careful drafting and redrafting until I felt they were appropriate. During this process, I also considered the uniqueness of each participant and their educational abilities to ensure the questions applied to all participants.

Another concern that previous research has raised around using interviewing as a method for gathering data is that the personal and professional qualities of the interviewer can drastically alter the interview's success (Hofisi, Hofisi and Mago, 2014; Kvale, 1996). Due to the previous work experience and research that I had undertaken at the college and being a familiar face, I had the

basis for building further upon and securing good personal relationships with the participants. However, this could have also been problematic in terms of developing overly personal connections with participants (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014; Raheim et al., 2016). In order to ensure the appropriate balance between personal and professional qualities, the same steps were taken for each participant during their interview, regardless of how well we knew one another (Fleming, 2018). Before each interview, I re-read the consent form criteria to the participant to clarify why they were selected for the sample and highlight my professional capabilities as a researcher. Another reason each interview needed to be conducted the same way was that they could potentially be biased due to poorly constructed questions. This could have led to inadequate responses and potential inaccuracy due to weak recall (Whiting, 2008). Therefore, to ensure interviews led to insightful data, I developed a list of questions I asked each student and staff member. The questions differed slightly for the different participant groups but, ultimately, were all directed to best answer the research questions. Obviously, due to the nature of the semi-structured interviewing technique, these questions allowed for individual responses. They offered the chance to gain insight into how each individual felt at the time about the matters this research is concerned with. The interview themes and questions are presented in Appendix 1.

Interviews present the opportunity for participants to feel pressure as they can bring out intense emotions (Dempsey et al., 2016); consequently, using questionnaires for collecting data does have its advantages over interviewing. For example, studies have found that participants feel more pressure in face-to-face interviewing than in questionnaires because the latter puts less pressure on respondents for an immediate answer (Gillham, 2008). Therefore, it was imperative that participants were comfortable with me. I facilitated this by establishing a relationship with them and conducting the interviews in a familiar and comfortable environment. A key benefit to utilising questionnaires over interviews for data collection is that the former can achieve a larger sample size. Therefore, the data gathered could be seen as a means to generate more generalisable findings; also, the time required to collect the data is generally much less than that of the interviewing technique (Rahman, 2020). However, for this study, a larger sample size was not achievable as the case was set within one college and was only appropriate for visually impaired students to take part. As highlighted, the college is relatively small, with only around 60 students in total at the time this research took place and having met or worked with most students in the college; I had prior knowledge that the number of students able to participate in this research would be limited. Additionally, questionnaires would have likely left out the critical deeper meanings (Kendall, 2008) within participants' perspectives and the effects of specialist education which formed the basis of this project. Furthermore, as a result of

previous experience, I have found that interviewing is much more inviting for the majority of students at the college, with most having expressed their enjoyment at having the opportunity to talk about their views with someone specifically interested in them.

To best answer the research questions, the purpose of the interviews conducted with students involved uncovering and understanding their thoughts about their educational experiences. The interviews were developed as guided conversations, allowing students to talk freely about what was important or of interest to them in the context of these research goals (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Therefore, the interviews were loosely guided by a series of questions which aimed to uncover these areas of interest. Each question was asked to every student; however, they occasionally anticipated the following question(s) in their conversation. Therefore, some questions were skipped if they had consequently been answered in the discussion. The questions ensured that the topics and concepts I wanted to explore were covered within each interview. However, the direction of the responses was left solely to the student as this would be the best way to gain meaningful data based on genuine perspective, as McIntosh and Morse (2015) discovered through their study on semi-structured interviewing.

I ensured questions were left open for students to respond in terms of their own experiences by wording questions as 'tell me' questions (Lofland et al., 2006). The wording of the interview questions was altered slightly to reflect the background of the interviewee group, and appendix 1 shows how the questions differed for students and staff members. Although this study sought to understand student perspectives from their personal experiences, I interviewed staff members who had taught the student participants. I was aware these could aid in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of why students might have felt specific ways and for more context of partnership further education. I was also interested and considered how it could have been beneficial to uncover how student perceptions contrasted or supported those of their teachers.

In total, eight interviews were conducted; five of these were with students, and three interviews occurred with staff; see table 1 above for an overview of each participant. Having conducted the earlier mentioned masters study in the setting with students, which involved interviewing and observation as data gathering methods, I had had the opportunity to reflect on my data gathering techniques. As McFayden and Rankin (2016) point out, reflecting on methods allows researchers to

recognise the implications of their work to inform future practice and, in doing so, enabled me to make informed decisions on the best possible sequencing and nature of the questions for interviews in this study. I learned that open-ended questions offered the best opportunity for detailed and varied responses, which extended the best chance to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2011; Patton, 2002). Each interview was approximately 30 minutes, and all took place at the college, most in the braille room, as suggested by staff for several reasons. First, because all students participating in the study were familiar with this room due to spending a lot of their time in it learning braille, second it is where all of the specialist visual impairment resources are kept when not in use which invited the opportunity for demonstration, and third, it was suggested it would be the room where least interruptions might happen from other students.

The procedure for each semi-structured interview was as follows:

- a) Before the interview, each participant was asked to answer the questions on the consent form and give their consent for the interview to be audio recorded.
- b) The themes and questions, as presented in Appendix 1, were asked and discussed during each interview.
- c) All interviews, except for one with the disability coordinator, were conducted within the specialist setting of the college. The interview with the disability coordinator occurred within the mainstream college at his request.
- d) Each interview was recorded using a handheld digital recorder and a laptop recording software for backup.
- e) The interviews were transcribed as soon as possible post-interview, and emergent themes were picked out after transcription.
- f) Each student was given the opportunity to discuss the emergent themes once they were identified to ensure they illustrated the perspectives and experiences the students wanted to convey through this research.

3.6.2 Participant observation

Participant observation is a valuable approach in qualitative research as the researcher takes part in the daily life of the individuals or phenomena under study, listening, questioning people, and observing everything that occurs over time (DeWalt, 2014). Moreover, it is a recommended

technique to triangulate other forms of data collection (Bergen and Labonte, 2019; Harvey, 2018). To answer the question concerning students' experiences of specialist support and resources, observations were an appropriate method as they allowed for data collection over an extended period (Brancti, 2018; Moser and Korstjens, 2017). Since I had spent a large proportion of time volunteering at the college where this study took place, I was confident that a significant amount of data would arise from participatory observation. Furthermore, the participant observation method was invaluable for developing a strong and familiar relationship with most interviewees (Bernard, 2006; Morgan et al., 2017), particularly with the students, which was crucial as their perspectives were at the heart of this study. I spent three weeks collecting participatory observational data, which was gathered from sessions, conversations and events that occurred during this time; moreover, this contributed to establishing further connections with new participants. This method also developed personal knowledge about the college, visual impairment, the charities that fund the college, specialist resources for visually impaired students, and other disabilities (Sovacool, Axsen and Sorrell, 2018).

I conducted 17 observations in total, including each student participant, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes per observation, depending on the length of the lesson. They were recorded via an observation template (see Appendix 2). The observations were looking to explore how students experience partnership further education with a specific focus on their use of specialist support and resources within the college. The participant observations took place in several lessons, including office skills, information technology, eBay, media skills, and internship development. These all contributed partly to the broader programme offered to students. However, because this research focused on visual impairment, these were the beneficial and appropriate sessions, as these were where students made use of the specialist resources offered most frequently. Other lessons, such as maths and the canteen – where students learn to cook, clean and serve customers - were also observed to uncover more detail about the different variations of programmes available within Crescent College. It is essential to highlight that the participant observations were conducted with the same students who participated in the semi-structured interviews. The choice to conduct participant observation was a conscious one, as I had previously conducted observations of a similar nature in an earlier study involving this college, and they proved to be very successful. For this research, having developed a familiarity with the college, its students and its staff, becoming a participatory researcher felt most appropriate because, as Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) explain, it is inherently interactive and relatively unstructured. Additionally, participatory observations often generate data that is 'free-flowing and the analysis much more interpretive than

indirect observation method' (Guest, Namey and Mitchell, 2013: 79). Whereas direct observation is more suited to quantitative techniques where the observer does not interact with those being studied (Kawulich, 2012). Having no communication would likely have been unsettling for many students in the sessions; as previously mentioned, the college where this research took place also provided further education for students with multiple and complex needs.

DeMunck and Sobo (1998) highlighted how participant observation raises the opportunity for researchers to witness unscheduled events. This uncovered an unexpected and insightful understanding of what participants shared in their interviews because observations occurred after the interviewing phase. Additionally, observational methods present researchers with ways to uncover who interacts with whom, check for nonverbal expression of feelings, grasp how participants communicate with each other and determine how much time is spent on different events or activities (Robson, 2003). Checking for nonverbal expression of feelings is a fundamental reason participant observation was included as one of the data collection methods in this study because it offered the opportunity to triangulate data from interviews (Kawulich, 2012), and expression and emotion reflected how participants said they felt. However, nonverbal expressions could never allow me to know how a participant truly feels; nonetheless, they are helpful in terms of understanding perspectives at a deeper and richer level (Knox and Burkard, 2009). DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) develop this further by suggesting that participant observation also has the potential to increase the validity of a study due to its ability to help researchers gain a better understanding of the phenomenon and context under study.

Observation also has its limitations, one of which is the potential of researcher bias, an aspect of qualitative research that has led people to believe this form of study is subjective rather than objective (DeWalt, DeWalt and Wayland, 1998). However, encouraging novice researchers to practice reflexivity from the very beginning of their projects helps them recognise those biases that can distort understanding and interfere with the correct interpretation of what is being observed (Ratner, 2002). Furthermore, the decision to incorporate various methods has been praised for being more respectful of the participants within a study as it ensures that what a researcher thinks is being said matches the participant's understanding (Ratner, 2002). Breuer and Roth (2003) explain this further, stating how utilising various approaches to collect data, particularly observation, leads to a richer understanding of the participants and their social context. It was vital, however, for accuracy within observational field notes, and this was ensured by allowing them to emerge from the

participants directly, without imposing any preconceived categories from disability theory, as the success of participant observation ultimately depended on my ability to observe, record and interpret what I observed. These observations also helped develop a research journal which was kept throughout the entire data collection phase.

Conducting observations with disabled people could result in them being placed under further surveillance (Jenkins, 2021) if they feel the researcher has a hierarchical power over them (Foucault, 1980). Foucauldian theories of power are useful to consider as they intensify a critical lens when conducting research with vulnerable groups (Gubby, 2021). Traditionally, non-disabled people have assumed power over disabled people through various methods and in many educational settings (Foucault, 1980). However, such traditional power relationships can be challenged. As power is fluid by nature, it can therefore be argued that there is always an opportunity for disabled people to embrace the power in the relationship with a non-disabled researcher (Liddiard et al., 2019; Stone and Prestley, 1996). Within my research, it was vital to consider ways that I could alter the visually impaired students' understandings of everyday, subtle power. By being an active participant in the observation method, I could follow the participants' lead in their everyday activities within Crescent College. Thus, shifting the gaze from me researching them to someone that is concerned with learning from them and their expert experiences with partnership further education.

It is the role of qualitative researchers to observe the social world instead of analysing a pre-determined social reality (Khan and MacEachen, 2021). Moreover, participant observation is often linked closely with ethnographic research (Madden, 2017), of which my study adopts an element through the adoption of a reflective research journal. So, in acknowledging and being explicit about my pre-understandings about special education, partnership further education and visual impairment through autoethnography, I used participatory observation to gain a deeper understanding of what exactly the students in this research uncovered through the interviews.

3.6.3 Research journal

Reflexivity and reflection in research are essential and are methods of data collection used by solo researchers, often completed in written forms such as diaries or journals (Boutillier and Mason, 2012; Mortari, 2015). Being a reflexive researcher and utilising a research journal highlights the

researcher's awareness of their presence in the research process, emphasising a commitment to improving the quality of the research (Annink, 2017).

Interpretive research is reflexive (Holloway and Biley, 2011; Malaurent and Avison, 2017), meaning the researcher should always consider how their perceptions and previous assumptions could impact the research process to interpret the complexities of the multiple realities involved. Ultimately, this is 'part of being honest and ethically mature in research practice' (Ruby, 1980: 154). This method was unplanned and emerged authentically in the first year of my doctoral study journey, so I do not claim this to be a planned research method I proposed before beginning the doctorate. However, I began by writing down my general thoughts in a notebook. A research journal emerged before I even recognised it was becoming an integral part of this study that shaped my role as a researcher. The role of the journal has been to generate a reflective running commentary throughout the entirety of the project, from my initial thoughts to how the study changed and developed and my reflexive notes about my role as a researcher (Annink, 2017). McAteer (2012: 191) explains how reflective journaling can be crucial in building upon theoretical approaches to research, as a means to recording researcher observations, and 'a space in which to become initially analytic, spot emergent themes and theoretical insights, and hence continuously review and refine the research approach'. A reflective journal, or diary as some refer to it, is unique, and the format is entirely up to the researcher to keep it, as long as the user is comfortable with it, can utilise it frequently and ensures the format is accessible (McAteer, 2013). In keeping this journal and frequently updating it with new thoughts, feelings and ideas, I was able to regularly remind myself of the research questions and aims, as well as have a space to develop contextualised understandings of biases, specific concerns or issues. An example of this might be showing how my thinking about a specific matter, such as 'giving voice' or 'empowerment', changed throughout the project. The research journal proved insightful early on in this research process, and jottings around the entire approach to this research helped to shape the methodological decisions made.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) detail the key attributes of qualitative methods, of which the following were considered in the choice of methods for this study. The first suggests that research of this kind should focus on providing a holistic approach to explain, not merely describe, the phenomenon. Second, qualitative methods should concentrate on humanistic elements through personal, subjective knowledge and experiences. These two characteristics were considered and are reflected through the use of semi-structured interviews, which supported the goal of uncovering,

understanding and interpreting students' perspectives and therefore went beyond simply describing the views of participants. Third, methods of this nature are generally open-ended, naturalistic and in-depth and aim to study people and phenomena in a natural environment. This can be reflected in the use of participant observation, as this method is generally used when researchers need to become a part of the participant's real-life context and environment. Fourth, researchers should be reflexive about their influence on and role in the research; this attribute was adhered to through the use of a research journal which enabled me to keep track of my role and influence. Being initially unplanned, the reflexive journal organically became a vital tool in the project by allowing me to stay engaged in critical self-awareness. Ultimately this involved examining and consciously acknowledging the assumptions and preconceptions I brought throughout the research process, which have shaped the study's outcome. Finally, qualitative methods must be flexible in collaborating and triangulating with other research methods (Castell et al., 2021; Hays and McKibben, 2021). I had prior experience that semi-structured interviews and participant observations worked successfully with one another, and reflexive journaling enabled me to learn from the research process by keeping track of my position in the research and any critical decisions I made throughout (Thorpe, 2010). Alongside the student interviews, staff interviews occurred and the use of participant observation and a research journal. All data were collected face to face and within the setting.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Researchers are always expected to conduct their research ethically (Denscombe, 2017) and ensure that their study has a robust ethical approach (Tracy, 2010). Additionally, researchers are usually required to have their research proposals approved by an ethics committee before embarking on any data collection activities (Wellington et al., 2005). This project followed necessary ethical clearance procedures prior to collecting any data. I gained clearance to conduct the study from the Faculty of Education ethics committee (see Appendix 3 for a copy of ethical approval). As part of my ethics application, I also devised a research proposal detailing ethical considerations. This section provides an overview of the ethical issues considered for this case study, including; informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, doing research with disabled people, and validity and reliability.

3.7.1 Informed consent

For issues concerning informed consent, there are no basic solutions that can be universally applied to resolve all ethical concerns (Wiles et al., 2005). In addition, given the complexity of vision impairment and that it can often present with additional disabilities, researchers have faced challenges in the implementation of informed consent due to issues in communicating with participants; this has previously led to researchers excluding visually impaired people from participating in research (Paramasivam et al., 2021).

Consent can be defined as an ongoing process in which participants have the understandability and capacity to choose to participate in research that benefits them without coercion (Paramasivam et al., 2021). Moreover, Hays and Singh (2012) explain how participants are in a position to give informed consent when they are aware of the purpose of the study, what is expected from them, how the results will be published, and the limits of confidentiality. As such, the key to informed consent is that the students in this study understood the information being conveyed to them; therefore, I considered the best methods to give them access to the information needed to facilitate their understanding. One approach to this when researching with visually impaired people is to ensure audio aids are available to supplement written documentation; an intervenor was also available to facilitate the interaction of the visually impaired individuals with me (Paramasivam et al., 2021). However, this was not necessary in most cases, with students opting to either give consent on an audio recorder or sign the consent forms (see Appendix 4 for a copy of the student information form and Appendix 5 for a copy of the consent form).

Much of the literature around consent concerning research that involves disabled people is centred around those with significantly impaired decision-making capacity (Shepherd, 2020), such as individuals with intellectual disabilities (Harding, 2021; Ho et al., 2018; Martino and Schormans, 2018). The exclusion of these individuals from research has been linked to the idea that it is better to protect them from potential risks, such as further stigmatisation, even if it means exclusion is the answer (Kitchin, 2010). Therefore, it has been argued that research with individuals with a compromised ability to consent should be undertaken if the research is of direct benefit to the participants or others living with the same disability, or both (Dakic, 2020). This was a consideration for the visually impaired participants, but to minimise risk, I ensured students read their consent forms themselves. I did produce a braille copy of the consent form and information about the study;

however, this was never used as participants chose to use their own assistive technology to read them.

Research suggests the following points as measures of capacity to consent to participation: whether the person understands the information relevant to the decision, including the foreseeable consequences of whichever option they decide; whether they can retain the information long enough; the ability to weigh information up to make the decision; and the ability to communicate their decision to the researcher or facilitator of research (Cascio, Weiss and Racine, 2021; Harding, 2021). However, despite these factors being widely accepted, research participants' rights are not always respected, and disabled people are still left out of research that they can participate in. Person-oriented ethics recognises this and calls for the recognition of disabled people's interest in having control over their own lives, 'including when participating or considering participation in research studies' (Cascio, Weiss and Racine, 2021: 102). Henceforth, it was imperative that I worked with my Gate Keeper at the college to pick an appropriate sample that all had the capacity to consent. The participants in this study were all registered blind, some had additional disabilities, and all had the capacity to decide whether or not they wanted to participate in the study.

It is useful to emphasise that consent is not a one-time event or simply a form; it is a process that should continue from the beginning to the end of the research process (Jupp, 2006). Moreover, the dominant assumption that disabled people need 'special' consideration in the research context might be equally harmful (Carlson, 2013; Rhodes, 2010) as such exclusion could contribute towards different forms of discrimination for people that fall under this category (DuBois, 2008). Furthermore, there have been reports of some errors regarding disabled people's incapacity; as such, people have been wrongly excluded from research when they could give consent all along (Carlson, 2013).

3.7.2 Confidentiality

Research participants are open to sharing their views and experiences with researchers when they do not feel that doing so will put them in danger (Hays and Singh, 2012). Therefore, I assured participants in my research that any information they revealed about their education in the college would not bear their identity. Therefore, recorded data was saved securely, and any original recordings and transcriptions were destroyed following the data analysis. In addition, pseudonyms

were used to protect the participants' identities throughout the data analysis and discussion chapters (King, 2010). Details such as their courses and the uniqueness of the college were also changed to retain confidentiality, including details of their tutors or courses they were studying at the time.

Confidentiality is often discussed in the context of research involving vulnerable groups, and vulnerability can be applied to persons susceptible to risk or harm (Aldridge, 2014). When doing research with disabled people, attention should be paid to the potential that individual impairments or communication methods may make participants identifiable (McNeily, Macdonald and Kelly, 2020). These identifiable characteristics must be carefully considered when writing up the research findings to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

3.7.3 Right to withdraw

When participating in a study, researchers should recognise the right to withdraw, and participants should also be informed of their right to withdraw at any time, including after they have taken part (BERA, 2018; King, 2010). As such, this was clearly stated in the information sheet within the consent form (Appendix 5). If a situation occurs in which a participant wishes to withdraw, it is the responsibility of the researcher to assess and reflect on whether they have contributed to the withdrawal decision (BERA, 2018). Participants in this study were made aware of the voluntariness of their participation and understood they were under no compulsion to take part (Abed, 2015). I ensured this by thoroughly explaining before each interview and during participant observation by reiterating that anything observed could be included in the research. In addition, I asked participants to inform me if they wanted to withdraw at any point. I made sure to emphasise this during participant observation as these were always more informal scenarios than the semi-structured interviews. For observations, I would take on the role of a classroom assistant. Therefore, I wanted students to be fully aware that they were still participating in my research when I accompanied them in their classes. Before the interviews commenced and the consent forms had been signed, this was also verbally explained to the participants.

3.7.4 Doing research with disabled people

Doing research with disabled young people in order to understand their lives has been and continues to be a slow-developing field which has meant this group are more likely to be left out of research

(Jenkin et al., 2020), and this is arguably due to the attitudes of others including those completing research (Babik and Gardner, 2021). However, the research that has been done with this broad group of individuals has some crucial recommendations for fellow researchers embarking on a project of this kind (Jenkin et al., 2020; McNeilly, Macdonald and Kelly, 2022). For example, meeting with the potential participants on several occasions (Underwood et al., 2015) to build up rapport and establish whether they would be interested in becoming part of the study (McNeily, Macdonald and Kelly, 2022). This can be both expensive and time-consuming; however, if the researcher wants to lessen bias and capture the experiences of disabled young people in a valid and reliable way, it is necessary (McNeily, Macdonald and Kelly, 2022).

Disabled participants have been objects of inquiry under a medicalised, pathologising gaze by non-disabled researchers (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2012). Therefore, researchers must continue to challenge such exclusionary research designs through research that attends to power relations that (re)produce non-disabled privilege (Chouinard, 2000). Matthews and Ross (2010) described the aim of research in its purest form - to answer questions, impose knowledge and extend our understanding of the social world. While this study aimed to answer its overarching questions, as Matthews and Ross (2010) suggest, their notion of 'imposing knowledge' is concerning when considering the aforementioned able-bodied debate. My positioning during this study generally was not one of such hierarchy but instead one where I felt I could learn from the students. Therefore, through working closely with the college, its staff members and most crucially, its student population, this project was guided towards the most appropriate design frame.

The hierarchical characteristic of social research has been criticised (Maynard, 1995). Undertaking this research as someone who could have been labelled an 'outsider', presented both advantages and disadvantages, respectively. Disadvantages could have emerged as a result of an inability to understand the realities of participants with visual impairment due to my sightedness. However, as a non-disabled woman, my perspective has been shaped by my previous experiences, including volunteering, my profession, and academic learning. Furthermore, I was dedicated to creating an enabling environment that would allow participants to express themselves (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), and my experience with the college, ability to listen to people's thoughts and put them at ease all contributed towards this aim (King and Horrocks, 2010).

This notion of freedom is something scholars should consider when thinking about the model of empowerment within education. Lawson (2011) detailed how the concept of empowerment emerged as a common shibboleth within education. The empowered researcher could be conceptualised as one who recognises the positives that can emerge from shared control over the process to those (the students) who are engaged in it. This, in turn, facilitates a collaborative effort (Lawson, 2011) rather than a transmission model which imposes knowledge from above. As the researcher, I provided the conditions for students to participate in this research, exploring factors that affect their everyday lives. However, by choosing to participate in the study, they empowered themselves. The question of 'How?' students empower themselves has been addressed through the findings of a study conducted by Love, Traustadottir and Gordon Rice (2018). They found that by being encouraged to participate in a face-to-face research gathering session by the researchers, their teachers, their families and peers – they were motivated to speak their minds – and the disabled participants reported feeling empowered to voice their views (Love, Traustadottir and Gordon Rice, 2018). This positive finding influenced the approach taken for this study and facilitated a shared level of control by giving the participants a clear choice to take part or not. By being self-critical of previous research approaches I have taken, I recognised that the students at Crescent College wanted to be involved in more profound research around matters concerning their own lives. Thus, this influenced my decision to carry out this study. Critical disability studies calls for researchers to be self-critical and to recognise where they sit within their research (Goodley et al., 2019). With that, while I recognise my position presented some limitations, it was my goal to ensure the impact of hierarchy was minimised through the points of the discussion above (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

3.7.5 Validity and Reliability

Generalisability is not the aim or purpose of my research; however, the findings may be of interest to other settings. Therefore, in light of the richness of my data, it is vital that I address validity. Invalid research is worthless, and with that in mind, validity can be defined as a 'demonstration that a particular instrument in fact measures what it intends, purports of claims to measure' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017: 435). For qualitative research, ensuring validity can be challenging because of the nature of it concerning multiple perceptions of reality and these realities being socially constructed (Flick, 2009). My study does not claim its results to apply to other visually impaired students nor other partnership further education settings. Instead, it demonstrates findings that can be credible for the single case it explores (Merriam, 1985), that is, Crescent College.

Case studies are often criticised for validity and reliability (Street and Ward, 2012) and low generalisation (Quintao, Andrade and Almeida, 2020). Moreover, case studies are not usually replicable under the exact same conditions in which they occurred; therefore, their reliability must be demonstrated through data triangulation (Quintao, Andrade and Almeida, 2020), thus influencing my use of three methods of data collection.

Problems concerning generalisability have long been considered an issue, and this is because they can generate less generalisable results than large-sample, quantitative designs and methods (Stake, 1995). One significant limitation to note in taking a case study approach is that the research will be subjective and personal, meaning it cannot simply be replicated (Larrinaga, 2017; McLeod, 2017). Therefore, findings cannot often be generalised to a larger population, as case studies rely on one or a few subjects or a group in a particular context (Mohajan, 2018; Yin, 2013). This project also included staff views to counter the subjective, personal interpretation claim. Moreover, in keeping a research journal, I have considered any possible preconceptions by being a reflexive researcher, which is an essential component of a case study approach (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2009). As well as potential issues around generalisability, researcher bias could have emerged, which has the potential to affect any study drastically, and data could have been incorrect due to how I perceived and interpreted the participants' perceptions. A counterargument for the problems around generalisability in case study designs is that reliability within a study can hold more importance than a study's ability to generalise. Bassey (1981) explains that case studies are valid forms of educational research if they are relatable and aim to improve education.

In selecting the case, I sought depth and the development towards a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the study area. Moreover, this case can indicate but is not solely representative of a particular 'group' or educational setting. Labaree (2011) offers valuable insight by highlighting how no educational research should be able to be regarded as generalisable as there are too many contextual variables which can shape the findings. Given the extent of diversity within education, one visually impaired person's belief(s) cannot be applied to all visually impaired people's beliefs, and it would be problematic to attempt to generalise any experiences and perspectives in any way. Instead, this research aims to learn from students' unique, individual perspectives and experiences in their educational lives. Additionally, to reduce the possibility of my own bias influencing the study,

the interviews were triangulated with observations and a reflective research journal, triangulation of sources improves validity and data collection helps eliminate personal biases (Flick, 2009).

3.8 Data collection

Data collection methods can be categorised in multiple ways, although most can be broadly divided between quantitative and qualitative categories (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Qualitative methods support the research of an interpretive background (Crotty, 1998); therefore, as this research is underpinned by interpretivism, qualitative methods were the obvious choice. Qualitative research takes form in various fields; however, it is particularly popular within education-based research (Prasad, 2005) and occurs through several different methods. For this study, the data-gathering methods deemed most appropriate were observation, interviewing and reflective journaling. Figure 1 shows the three phases of data collection.

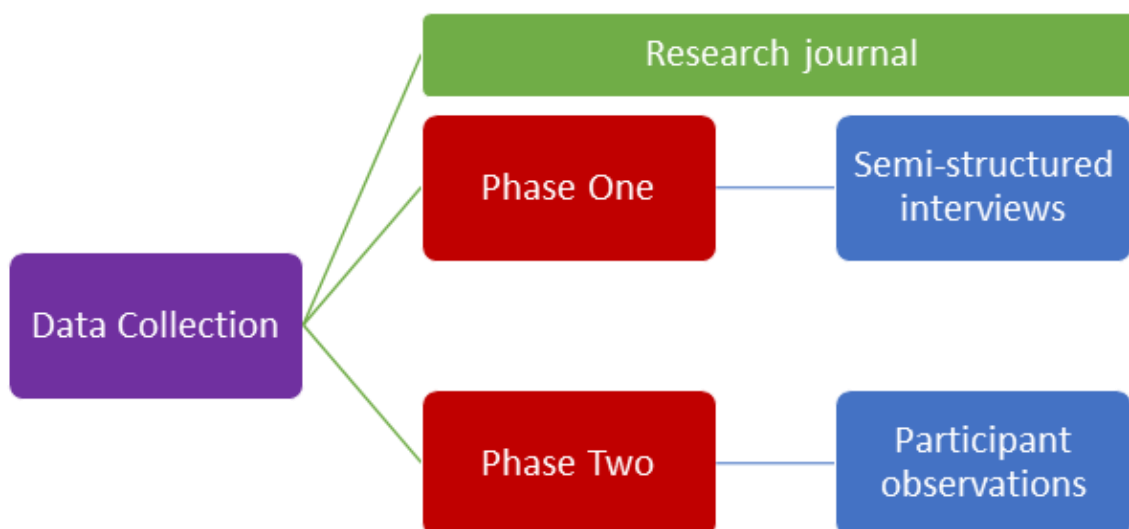


Figure 1: Chart showing the phases of data collection methods

In order to answer the research questions within the case study design frame, two phases of data collection were planned alongside one additional consistent phase, my research journal. The components of these phases are now explained and have been presented to show how they fit within the case study design. Phase one consisted of semi-structured interviews with four students and three staff members, totalling seven altogether. My Gate Keeper at Crescent College purposively selected individuals to be included in the study after sending the request for voluntary participants.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted for this study, and the focus of these was to interpret and understand individuals' perspectives and experiences of their education, both within and outside of their college. Oltmann (2016) highlighted how face-to-face interviews are held as the 'gold-standard' and assumed the best mode to conduct research interviews. During phase two, participant observation was undertaken, involving all students who participated in the interviews. During these observations, I was fortunate to meet and converse with other students who had not been put forward as voluntary participants and ended up meeting a student who expressed interest in being part of this research. This took the total number of student participants to five and the overall total of interviews conducted to eight. Around 25 hours of observation around the college and in different lessons were undertaken.

Across both phases and beyond, I kept my research journal which I describe as phase 3 of the data collection phase. Barrett, Kajamaa and Johnston (2020: 9) state that reflexivity is a 'hallmark of high-quality qualitative research'. In addition, Ortlipp (2008) also suggested that keeping a journal facilitates reflexivity by giving researchers a space to share their thoughts and considerations. I used the journal as a tool for me to observe, question, critique, and synthesise my journey from the beginning of the data collection process right through to now, writing up my thesis. In the earlier phases of my study, I used the journal to reflect through making decisions on how best to carry out the research, which Boutilier and Mason (2012: 200) refer to as 'reflection-in-action'. Moreover, it enabled me a space to rationalise and be open and honest about my emotions (Annink, 2017) and recognise how, when and why certain feelings infiltrated my mind throughout the process of conducting the study. Since unexpected moments are often the time when ideas come to light (Annink, 2017), I decided the best way to collect my reflexive data was to ensure I kept my journal with me at all times throughout every phase of the research.

3.9 Data analysis

Data analysis focused on the perspectives provided by students, which were supported by observation and reflections in field notes as a means to triangulate the findings (Guion, Diehl and McDonald, 2011; Hussein, 2009; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007). While the perspectives placed at the forefront of this research are those from students, my role as the researcher required me to produce a thorough systematic analysis of the data collected throughout the data collection phases whilst remaining reflective (Braun and Clarke, 2014; Peel, 2020; Riger and Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). I

could be viewed as an interpreter in this sense, as themes do not emerge passively from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), working towards developing an interpretive qualitative analysis of the data collected during the fieldwork for this project. This reflects the analysis as an active process through which I needed to highlight interesting patterns within the raw data and report them to the reader accordingly.

In order to identify the meaning that students placed on their experiences, it was essential to identify a qualitative analytic method that would be most suitable to allow the identification of shared perspectives. This method needed to align with my theoretical positioning situated with the social model of disability, my researcher positionality, methodology choice, data collection methods, and be useful in analysing my own reflections during the data collection process. Therefore, as thematic analysis is widely used as an analytical method within qualitative research, it can be applied to any research theory, allows for a rich description of a data set, and therefore offers flexibility for researchers to apply any paradigm to their analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017), it was considered the most appropriate method. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2023) emphasise the importance of researchers adopting a personal reflexive approach to thematic analysis through considering their own values and philosophical assumptions during the development phases. This ensures that the reader is not left to detect the researchers' assumptions.

Thematic analysis is the process of encoding gathered data in themes using codes (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Moreover, the primary goal is not solely to summarise data; rather, it is best utilised to interpret and understand data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Clarke and Braun (2017) argue that it aims to identify and interpret key, but not necessarily all, features of the data and is guided by the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006: 79) stated it involves 'identifying, recording and analysing patterns', and this reflected the decision to analyse thematically through constant active engagement in the process of analysis where themes were identified, revised and refined. Additionally, thematic analysis is arguably instrumental when the focus of a project is under-researched and also suited to research students in the early stages of their careers as it develops critical analytical skills which would be helpful to obtain for future projects (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The audio-recorded data collected from the interviews were transcribed verbatim at the earliest convenience and recorded using a word processor before any coding was applied. This allowed for

familiarisation with the data before commencing the analysis phase (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Once the transcription process had finished, hard copies of the transcripts were produced, as this was the most effective way to read all of the data gathered from the interviews carefully. The first stages of the analysis process involved familiarisation and, therefore, several readings of the transcripts, making notes and ideas as I went to gain an understanding of the broader picture of the data. The transcripts were read to identify general thoughts of the entire text, and after this, further readings started to develop categories or themes to represent patterns of meaning. By remaining open-minded to the changes made to the themes, the likelihood of imposing meaning was reduced (Sundler et al., 2019) and therefore maintained an accurate interpretation of students' perspectives and experiences of education. Having conducted qualitative research previously via focus groups, observation and interviewing techniques and using the manual coding method, I decided it would be useful to research other techniques to support my choice. From this, I debated using the software NVivo because it can be difficult to cope with a vast amount of manual code. On the other hand, using software to generate code has been critiqued as it can steer researchers away from deeply interpreting what is being said (Newby, 2010). My researcher journal highlights this journey by holding my initial thoughts about NVivo, which I became aware of during an analysis session held by my university. Manual coding was hardly mentioned, and most in the session were going to or already were utilising NVivo. I admittedly followed suit and decided this would be the best approach to my analysis. However, after further reading and reflection, I realised that it would not be best suited to my study for the following reasons. Firstly, manual coding has worked effectively in previous research projects, allowing me to familiarise myself with the data fully; therefore, I concluded this was best suited to my research style. Secondly, the manual coding technique is beneficial in allowing researchers to interact with data in concrete ways; thus, obtaining a physical feel for the data in ways that computer analysis software may not afford (Patton, 2002). Thirdly, NVivo is a data analysis software designed for qualitative researchers who work with large amounts of textual data to manage it effectively (NVivo, 2019). Ultimately, being confident in my ability with the manual coding technique and learning that NVivo is mainly used with extensive datasets, of which my data was not, I decided to utilise manual coding. The thematic analysis enabled the data from semi-structured interviews and participant observations to be brought together and themes to

be discovered, which occurred in the following way. Braun and Clarke (2022) introduced a six-phase process for researchers to follow when conducting thematic analysis; these are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Thematic analysis six-phase process.

Phase	Description of what occurs in the phase	What I did?
1	Initial familiarisation with the data	Read and reread the transcriptions, observation templates and research journal.
2	Generation of initial codes	Annotated transcripts/observations and journal to pick out key themes.
3	Searching for themes	Put all annotations in one document to group together. Read all data again to see if anything was missed.
4	Review of themes	Considered themes in relation to my literature review, decided if new literature was needed.
5	Defining and naming of themes	Decided on theme names
6	Production of the report	Wrote the findings chapter

I followed each phase respectively to keep track of the data during analysis. In Chapter 5, I present the phases of my thematic analysis process. See Chapter 5 for a table of themes and sub-themes and Appendix 6 for an example of a transcript.

3.10 Summary

This chapter has considered and justified the design and methods used in this research project whilst reflecting on the use of qualitative research to both give a sense of feel and place of partnership-FE and gain an understanding of the experiences of visually impaired students within this case study. This approach enabled the exploration of a specific case (Thomas, 2011). Through my incorporation of researcher autoethnography, I have justified how I will give context to partnership further education and the use of semi-structured interviews as a method to uncover students' experiences alongside observations to triangulate the responses from the interviews. An ethical approach to conducting research with visually impaired students has been outlined, as well as detailing the data collection and analysis process. The next chapter will introduce the findings sections of this research,

focusing on the specific findings from my research journal surrounding my experiences as a researcher in special education and, later, Crescent College specifically.

Chapter 4: The Findings Part 1

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will set the scene for the case, situating my experiences around special education from as early as young childhood through to my time spent at the college, to create a sense of feel and place for the reader. 'We' are not outside observers of the world (Barad, 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that we problematise our experiences as researchers, including those first visits to a research setting, as personal identities can influence perceptions (Sikes, 2005). Every setting has a story; therefore, including an autoethnographic account of my experiences with special education, my initial visit to the college, and my first meetings with students lays the foundation of this research.

4.2 Context

In the heart of a busy town in the East of England stands Crescent College, the setting where my research was based. The mainstream college in the town shares its campus with Crescent College, which was purpose-built over thirty years ago, and that is where it has called home ever since. A residential street brings you to the college, which was established by a charitable trust. A mixed-sex establishment, divided into three main programmes – Further Education, Preparation for Life which includes daytime activities and social care and Supported Internships. At the time of this research, 60 students were enrolled from across the country, all from differing socio-economic backgrounds. The ability to attend Crescent College depends on a student's local authority and whether they can fund the place. Although the college caters for people aged sixteen to twenty-five, all students must have an education, health and care plan to attend, and these enable students to enrol on education programmes which are individually tailored to students' goals for the future.

The college provides specialist provision for students with a wide range of needs, including but not limited to mild, moderate or severe learning difficulties, communication difficulties, autistic spectrum disorder, sight loss, hearing impairment, and physical disabilities. Only in scarce circumstances would the college not accept an applicant because they feel unable to meet their needs. In instances where this happened, the decision was based on the welfare of the applicant or other vulnerable learners.

4.3 Autoethnographic Account – Story of my Initial Encounter

This section presents an account of my visits to Crescent College, which have been uncovered from the reflective journal I kept from the beginning of this research. Being a reflexive researcher and using the research journal enabled me to stay aware of my presence in the research process, which was something I had struggled with in previous research projects. In offering this reflexive account, I aim to show that I recognise how I, as the researcher, both influence and have been influenced by my research processes and how these can impact my study.

I became aware of special education when I started Primary School in a small village that was also home to a residential specialist school. Hidden behind big steel gates, covered by trees, stood what I believed to be a castle at age five. It was spectacular, and I remember wondering what it would be like to go to school there. These fragmented childhood memories of my only experience of specialist schooling led me to have preconceived notions of the case setting for this research. I pictured Crescent College to be much the same as the school from my childhood; thus, my preconceived notions were that it would be both grand and castle-like from the outside and prison-like inside. Reflecting on this, I see how my intrigue in the field of special education developed as early as a five-year-old just starting school. The idea that special schools were like prisons developed because, growing up, the ‘special educational school’ in the village felt like a taboo subject, one that only adults would discuss and children would occasionally overhear. For example, I once heard some teachers talking about how they found it disturbing that the children were never taken out of the school, they were kept inside at all times, and no one knew who they were or anything about them.

As a curious child, I developed intrigue from hearing the stories about the special education school. I remember wondering if they were all true but never had the opportunity to find out. Stories, like how students were locked in the building and kept away from others, were frightening. Alternatively, how the children would not get to pursue the same dreams and goals as my peers and I was upsetting to hear. It was not until embarking on this doctoral research project and keeping a reflection journal that I realised my desire to pursue research in this field may have stemmed from my early experiences. The preconceived ideas I developed from the stories I heard as a child, how unfair special education and disability were portrayed, contributed to my initial position of intrigue in this area of research.

I set off for my first visit to Crescent College in late 2016, a 21-year-old master's student full of excitement and anticipation for what was to come. The journey took one hour, but it felt as though it were much longer because I was anxious about what I was about to witness. By the time I reached the outskirts of the town, which meant I was less than ten minutes away, I thought I had been through every possible scenario in my head. I imagined turning up and the big gates being locked (gates which I now know were not there); I worried that students would not like me if I did get in and imagined a scenario where my presence caused distress. I also thought about how little I knew about special education then, which influenced feelings of imposter syndrome around doing this research.

The college campus is situated in the middle of town, close to a university. I passed many of what I believed to be university students walking to and from classes. However, the closer I got to where my satnav told me the college was, the less convinced I was that I was following the correct address. No big gates, no trees making the surroundings calm, and certainly nothing that resembled an impressive castle like I had been used to as a child, just house after house for roughly half a mile until, eventually, a school-like building appeared on the horizon. It was a relief but also a shock because I had not expected the college to look that way. I had been subconsciously looking out for the impressive building, or at least something similar to the one I had seen from the back seat of the car every day on my way to and from school. Reflecting on this now, I realise that my awe was so great because I was so young and did not yet understand the world of special education. Built in 1909, the red brick flat-roofed building was simply that; nothing was exciting or noteworthy about the building I was approaching.

I was scheduled to be met by a senior member of staff whom I had been in contact with previously to enquire about conducting research at the college. As I approached the building, I knew I needed to look for the separate building that housed Crescent College. Whilst they shared a campus, the mainstream and specialist colleges were separated by different buildings. Crescent College was easy to spot as the building is almost entirely blue, and a large sign just before the mainstream college directs you into the car park. I was twenty minutes early, so I parked up in the spot with my name printed on a sheet of paper and stuck to a post behind it, and I waited. It was the beginning of the school day; students were arriving in taxis and minibuses, and the car park was in utter chaos, with people hurrying into the building. I sat in my car, waiting for things to quieten before heading in. When only one taxi was left in the car park, and most people had filtered inside, I got out of my car

and walked across the car park to the main entrance. I was apprehensive but also eager to get the ball rolling with my research.

I pressed the buzzer next to the doors, to which I was greeted by a friendly voice *'good morning, who is there?'* I replied, *'hello, I'm Megan. I'm a student here to meet Rosie.'* The woman interrupted and, with a more vibrant tone, said, *'oh yes, yes, of course, Rosie told me to expect you. I will buzz you in now'*. When I enter the building, the reception is directly on my left, and the receptionist, who introduces herself as Dana, is already on her feet to greet me. She is a tall woman with a pixie haircut and glasses and is smiling warmly at me. I sign in for security purposes, and she explains that Rosie will be along to collect me soon and that *'she is just dealing with a student'*. The phrase *'dealing with'* creates a negative picture in my mind and makes me wonder what it means for a second before my thoughts are interrupted by Dana, who wants to know more about me, where am I studying, do I enjoy my course, how long was my journey here? We exchange small talk for about five minutes, all the while I am taking in my new surroundings. It smells like a hospital cafeteria, and I quickly realise that is because there is a café less than ten steps away from me, and people are being served breakfast. The whole time I talked with Dana, she was multitasking by buzzing students and staff into the building. I wondered how long she had worked there because she worked like a well-oiled machine. Some students came in excitedly, wanting to tell Dana about their weekends, and others were shy and more reserved, not the least interested in engaging in conversation. The former types of students wanted to know who I was and asked questions like, *'will you be working in my class?'*. The latter group avoided me at all costs, shuffling past as quickly as possible. Eventually, Dana gestured me to a waiting area, where I found a seat and took a swig of my water; I felt overwhelmed.

I recall sitting in the waiting area surrounded by staff and students getting ready to start their days; there was a constant buzz of conversations around me and sometimes with me. The décor was dated, and everywhere was clean; the walls were covered in various artwork, photos and notices. Many people came over to me to ask me different questions, such as my name, whether I was their new teacher, if they could show me something, and if I would be there all day? Eventually, a woman approached reception, and the receptionist pointed in my direction; this must be whom I was meeting. She smiled as she walked over to me and told me her name was Rosie, and she was extremely apologetic, explaining how one of her students had lashed out at another student and that lots of tears had been shed and parents had to be called. This was the situation Dana had

referred to as needing to be *'dealt with'*. Still, I felt concerned about the language Dana had used. I wanted to probe and ask Rosie more about the situation to understand why a student might have lashed out and also to see what language Rosie would use when discussing the situation. However, this was my first time in Crescent College and meeting this woman; I did not want her to be offended by my questioning.

Before I could introduce myself, another student shouted for her attention, and she dashed off again. This time she is back within a minute and ushers me in the direction of the student, explaining how they wanted to be introduced to me. My apprehension is allayed as I quickly realise many situations require *'dealing with'* in one way or another, whether because of a physical altercation or simply needing to talk something through. Whilst the phrase is not one I would choose to use myself, I came to understand that Dana did not mean it in a derogatory way, and it is a phrase used to explain an array of scenarios, both good and bad. We sat chatting with students for a while; I met many people within the first fifteen minutes of being at the college, then the bell rang, and half of the crowd headed off in different directions to begin the day. Some students stayed hanging around because they did not have lessons straight away, and others worked in the bell bar.

'Monday morning is always like this', Rosie told me. *'The students returning from being home for the weekend often need some help adjusting to being back at college'*. I thanked her for taking the time to see me during such a busy period. We made our way over to the counter at the Bell Bar, where we were greeted by a student called Sam with Down syndrome. Rosie asked Sam about his weekend, to which he excitedly told us he went to a birthday party and ate chocolate cake. He was distracted by this conversation, so Rosie had to help him refocus his attention because a queue was forming behind us. She asked him for a cup of coffee and turned to me, *'what would you like, Megan?'* and I said tea, please. Sam takes time to work out the amount of coffee and tea together before confirming he is correct with his calculator. Behind him, two other students set to work together making the drinks. Rosie and I stood to one side near the collection point so other people could place their orders. While waiting, she informed me how the bell bar works, and we watch the students working. When our drinks were ready, they pressed a big red button, and another student collected them and served us. We thanked them and sat at a table by the window in a quieter section of the café; I sensed this was a calculated move in the hope that we would not get as many distractions. We then began an hour-long discussion about my research goals, and I was told briefly about the students that had agreed to participate.

My initial conversations with Rosie were conducted in the cafeteria, where I experienced the unique enterprises led by the college for the first time. The Bell Bar (as it is known to the staff and students) is the catering facility within the college and is run by students. They learn skills such as serving customers, how to prepare and cook food, and other things such as handling money, communication, time management, and working as a team. All the while, they are supported by staff who observe from the side-lines and intervene if and when students ask for support. As we sat down to discuss my research goals amongst the hustle and bustle of the Bell Bar café enterprise, students still came over to introduce themselves, wanting to know who the stranger was in their college, while other students kept their distance. I was beginning to pick out the more confident characters, and Rosie gave me some background about each person I met. The confident characters were easy to identify as they presented typical teenage behaviours, such as cheeky backchat with teachers and significantly louder voices and personalities. It was not long before some staff had to intervene with a student who had been dropped off but was hysterical at their parent having to leave. There were a few instances similar to this during our breakfast meeting; after each one, I would be told how it would be a daily occurrence, particularly at the start of an academic year with new students. These situations both surprised me and further alleviated some initial anxiousness I had felt when I first entered the building and heard that a student was being '*dealt with*'. I was surprised because I had not expected to be around all of the students immediately and so seamlessly; I had imagined I would need to be gradually introduced so as not to disrupt their lives. However, students were used to seeing different faces coming in and out of the college, whether that be new learning support assistants or family members. So, most students were either excited or unfazed by my presence.

This first half of my autoethnographic findings have been uncovered through memories of my childhood and masters study. The following section includes passages I wrote in my reflexive journal either as it was happening or immediately after it had happened.

Fast-forward two years to my return to Crescent College for this doctoral research. I had already spent a significant amount of time there during my master's study, so the experience was different, and I knew what I was walking into regarding how the building looked. Whilst everything about the college was the same from the enterprises to most of the staff members except for a few changes, the students were different as those I met during my master's research had moved on. Still, just as

before, we sat in the Bell Bar café outlining the details of the project, including how often I would visit, what my timetable would look like whilst I was there, and how all visitors needed to be chaperoned by members of staff.

As this doctoral research emerged because staff and students brought to my attention how under-researched the area was during my master's study, Rosie was already aware of what I wanted to do this time, so our discussion was more of an informal chat. After about thirty minutes, Rosie asked me, *'Shall we have a walk around?'* As I am guided through the college section by section, I am reminded of the sense of community through the ways staff and students interact. I witness a sense of belonging for each person I come into contact with, everyone matters to one another, and they all share a commitment to inclusive education. This sense of community is represented through the close bonds between students, staff, or both; students help each other out, staff are patient and understanding in all circumstances, and the majority of people I meet have smiles painted on their faces. Next, we head upstairs to the technology suite, where a lesson is taking place with a group of four students. I am introduced to each student individually, one of whom, Paddi, expressed interest in participating in my research.

The students are being taught traditional braille, the lesson is unstructured without strict procedures or heavy guidance from a lesson plan, and it looks pretty student-led at first glance. The lesson's unstructured style is deliberate, allowing each student to work at their own pace. By being student-led, students are encouraged to incorporate their interests and complete tailored tasks based on their individual goals. After we walk past the computer suites and one of the quiet rooms, the latter are located all over the building, so students have a safe space away from others and the busyness of the college. The rooms include different types of seating, chairs, a sofa, and beanbags, and they also have multiple lighting options to cater for any sensory experience students may require. Just before heading downstairs, we walked past a tranquil corridor; I did not spend as much time in the college for my master's research, and I did not recognise this section, *'the deputy and head teacher offices are down here'*, Rosie explained. I met the head teacher and exchanged formalities briefly before being whisked off to finish the tour. On the way downstairs, we came across students delivering letters to the staff offices, and I learned this is a task that students are required to do if they opt to work in the college office enterprise. One of the students was visually impaired and was reading the braille on the signs to navigate the group around the building. As we passed them, we overheard the student complaining because some of the braille was missing, and they could not

know what the sign said. The visually impaired student stomped her feet in frustration that she could not read the sign. Despite another staff member chaperoning the group, Rosie intervened as she clearly knew this student well, *'oh, it is annoying that these keep going missing. I will make sure I get a new braille label stuck on today for you'*. The student was still annoyed but appreciated the gesture and thanked Rosie before asking if there was a way to get them all permanently added. As we departed from the group, Rosie explained that they had a non-visually impaired student who habitually peeled the braille stickers off when they became agitated. Crescent College is no longer solely a specialist establishment for visually impaired students. It began this way but quickly had to adapt to include students with a wide range of disabilities due to the increasing need for specialist further education provision for disabled students other than those with sight loss. Rosie says, *'I wish we could afford to get all of the signs changed to have permanent braille, but our funding just cannot cover it'*. This was no surprise as the college caters for students with other disabilities, and the visually impaired student population were the minority, with just 5 out of 60 students being visually impaired. From my brief time spent within Crescent College, I could see how challenging it was for staff to navigate varying levels of support as it was dependent on the individual level of ability and the disability or disabilities they had.

As briefly mentioned, the college has an enterprise programme where students learn practical skills and can gain work experience in various roles. We walked past the eBay shop where students were busy at each station, taking pictures of items, uploading items onto the eBay account, keeping track of the money made, packaging items to be sent to buyers and posting them off. From the eBay shop, we headed to the college office, a small room attached to the main reception. Some students were working at computers around the edge of the room, and some were working around a desk in the centre; the latter group were sorting through the post. A teacher was working away at her desk in the corner of the room. I was introduced to the group, and the teacher came over to introduce herself and said, *'you are going to be spending a lot of time in here with us as two of our visually impaired students work here regularly'*. My arm was being tugged at by a young girl trying to get me to sit next to her, I went to sit, but Rosie explained that we did not have time as she needed to get to her next meeting. I explained that I would be back soon, and she smiled before returning to her chair. We exited the room; Rosie told me how it could get busy in there because *'the room is small, and everyone wants to work in the college office'*. I asked why it was so popular and was told that many students enjoy the mix of activities they can get involved in. For example, delivering the post, writing emails to the entire student and staff cohort, and generally helping with the college's day-to-day running. Learning this further solidified the sense of community within Crescent College and the

commitment everyone has to make it an excellent place to learn. Other enterprises students can work in include; the conference centre, arts centre, craft studio, the college shop, and the bell bar.

I was not looking into the residential side of Crescent College for my master's project, so it was not until I returned to begin my doctoral research that I discovered more about this specialist service within the college. The Arthur Eric Centre (pseudonym) is attached to the mainstream college and offers accommodation for students who want or need to live away from home. Aside from accommodation, the staff also organised student social events, such as film and game nights. These events are part of the extended curriculum at Crescent College, a programme designed to offer a variety of activities, trips and events for students. Rosie explained, *'we have had quiz nights, bowling trips, and Christmas market days out. We like to get the students' opinions and try to make as much of it happen as we can'*. The social aspect of being a student at Crescent College is essential not only to students but the staff too; as Rosie emphasised, *'it fosters relationships between us and our students and builds up trust'*.

4.4 An introduction to the participants

My research in the college took place with the entire cohort of students with a diagnosed visual impairment which was five students in total, two males and three females. The students all had different learning plans as per the nature of the programmes within the college, and they were also in differing stages of their college careers. Some students were learning formal qualifications in collaboration with the partnered mainstream college. Others were participating in the supported internship programme, which enabled them to build experience and, eventually, move into employment. Students enrolled on this programme were splitting time between learning in the workplace, which could be away from college, and completing a study programme on campus focusing on communication, literacy and numeracy subjects. Several students at the college also completed the daytime activities programme, Preparation for Life. These activities were delivered through the enterprises within the college and out in the community, enabling students similar opportunities such as developing independence and preparation for work and the chance to visit community facilities.

This section details the first time I met the students who would go on to become participants in the research. It felt pertinent that I introduce each student individually to illuminate their personalities and unique characteristics and recognise that although they are a purposively selected group by their vision impairments, they are not the same as one another.

4.4.1 Rosie

As briefly mentioned, my first time meeting Rosie was when I first visited the college in late 2016 to discuss doing my master's research there. Rosie was the member of staff who replied to my initial email stating she and her students might be interested in participating in my study. We had a phone call that same day and arranged for me to visit her at the college to lay out the logistics of conducting my research. I have detailed my initial meeting with Rosie in section 4.3. Rosie was charismatic and made me feel welcome immediately. She could tell me about every student in the college, offering her interpretation of their personalities, whether they were shy or outgoing, their likes and dislikes, and details about their backgrounds. I could see how she held a unique bond with every student. Everyone smiled in her presence, they wanted to talk to her, and she greeted everyone we came in contact with. She was extremely hard-working and had time for everyone, and she was very passionate about raising awareness of Crescent College.

4.4.2 Paddi

I met Bella and Paddi on the same day; it was my first day back at Crescent College since completing my master's research. Again, I met with Rosie, and we walked around the campus. Paddi was in a braille lesson when we popped our heads around the door as Rosie had wanted to introduce me to everyone. It was brief, but he said hello and said he was looking forward to participating in my research; he said it would be a new experience for him.

Paddi was a confident character and one who was eager to talk about everything. He was the type to want to be involved in many things. He was an animal lover and mentioned many times how it was his dream to work with animals someday.

4.4.3 Bella

When Rosie and I did our walk-through, Bella was working in the college office. We exchanged a hello, and I asked her what she was working on. I was conscious in these initial meetings that Rosie and the students were all busy, so I wanted to avoid causing more disruption than necessary to their schedules.

Bella was quiet at first; she did not give much away. However, after spending a morning with her, she became more comfortable around me. She was determined in everything she did, reflected in her work ethic, as she would be highly frustrated if she could not complete everything she had set out to do. She giggled a lot when she was happy, of course, but also when she was unsure what to say. She loved her family but also mentioned many times how they had done too much for her, which was her main reason for attending Crescent College.

4.4.4 Ollie

I was supposed to meet Ollie during my initial visit to Crescent College, but he was a no-show. My first impressions of Ollie were that he seemed a loud, confident and cheeky character who acted as though he was too cool for anything. He had a cocky attitude, and I can best describe him as the kind of character you might imagine if you were to picture the stereotypical, popular teenage boy in a television programme or film. I only met him because he was sauntering down the corridor towards us as I had my refresher tour around the college. He was using a cane to guide him, and as we got closer to him, Rosie spoke, *'Ollie, are you late again?'* He laughed and said, *'nothing changes'*. I introduced myself, and he told me how Rosie had mentioned me before and informed me he was *'keen to take part'*. I caught a glance from Rosie, who gave me a telling look. I knew it was because Ollie was stalling getting to his lesson as we had talked about this already, so I took the hint and wrapped up the conversation, *'I am glad you are on board and look forward to seeing you again soon when I come back in a few weeks'*. He says he promises to go straight to his class as we walk away.

4.4.5 Kylie

I first met Kylie when I observed one of the classes. She was chatty and loud and always had a smile on her face. Rosie had mentioned that Kylie had recently been diagnosed with autism, and the support of Crescent College enabled this diagnosis.

During the observation, Kylie asked me many questions about myself, and she generally showed much intrigue about others in the room. However, she often got distracted and changed the subject to something entirely different. When the lesson ended, she wanted to know precisely when I would be back to work with her because she wanted to show me her new skills on her iPad.

4.4.6 Sammy

Sammy worked primarily over at the mainstream college campus. However, as the disability coordinator, he worked very closely with staff at Crescent College to best support students across both campuses. As Sammy showed me around the college, he talked about how the partnership works from their side.

He was practical and dedicated to supporting his students, and it was clear he was frustrated when he could not support them as best as he hoped, whether that be due to students' restraint or gaps in resources. However, he explained how he was very grateful for the support Crescent College could offer some of his disabled students and was adamant that the partnership was responsible for facilitating previous students' success.

4.4.7 Merlin

I met Merlin during an observation in the college office enterprise. I was working with Bella at the time, but we were sitting next to Merlin. She was very timid and quiet and worked closely with a learning support assistant. Bella would chat with Merlin regularly, and the four of us engaged in general conversation whilst we worked. As we talked, Merlin showed interest in my research, much more than she was paying to the task at hand. She was reserved but evidently analytical as she asked if I would like to interview her too, and that was how I recruited her as the fifth participant.

Despite offering it herself, Merlin seemed cautious during our interview, and her responses were terse and unresponsive. Moreover, some staff later told me how she was trying to work on putting herself out there more socially, and this was one of the first times she had done so with a virtual stranger.

4.4.8 Alfie

I had not met Alfie before our interview together. As a previous student turned staff member of Crescent College, I imagined he would offer an intriguing perspective to the study. I was first to arrive in the interview room, and when Alfie arrived, he shook my hand. He was easy-going, affable and pleased to talk about his experiences.

Alfie lost his vision later in life. He was married, but after losing his sight, he experienced depression leading to the breakdown of his family life. He sought some help and was recommended to apply to attend Crescent College to build new skills and learn to live with his deteriorating sight. He showed optimism and went into great detail about his personal and educational life. He was not afraid to show that Crescent College had enabled him to change his life.

4.5 Arranging and maintaining access

Initial access to the college for this doctoral project was gained through my Gate Keeper, Rosie, the same senior member of staff I had built a relationship with throughout my master's research; at the time, her job title was the braille and sight loss lead. We had previously discussed the possibility of me returning to Crescent College to conduct a more in-depth study which I had hoped would be a doctorate-level project. Once I had secured a position to undertake this research, I sent a letter detailing my research priorities to gain approval to re-enter the college. As highlighted, the college was somewhat expecting the letter as we had discussed pursuing further research, and this was encouraged by the staff and students I had met previously. There was a significant time difference of around three months between initial contact with the college for this study and a formal meeting to discuss the research. This meant I could spend a considerable amount of time deliberating upon the methods I would use as part of the project. By the time I was due to meet Rosie, I was able to outline in detail my plans for the interviews and observations with the students and staff. We organised and modified the plans collaboratively to ensure the research could be carried out and not clash with any holidays or commitments the students might have had. The research design was approved, and staff members expressed how they believed students would appreciate the interest I was taking in their personal views and experiences.

4.6 Summary

This findings chapter has created a sense of feel and place. This research is centred around the call for more partnership-style education settings in response to creating inclusive education for all. Therefore, this autoethnographic account has helped to explain the unique nature of Crescent College and demonstrate why these kinds of settings can contribute to inclusion for visually impaired students. Offering this reflexive account establishes that I recognise how I, as the researcher, both influence and have been influenced by my research processes and how these might have impacted this case study. The next chapter will present the themes that emerged from the interviews and observations. These include: previous education experiences, reasons for accessing further education, why the college, sources of support for visually impaired students, factors affecting accessibility and belonging, and life after college.

Chapter 5: The Findings Part 2

5.1 Introduction

The following chapter presents the main themes and subthemes identified from the data. As detailed in chapter three, the data analysis followed a thematic procedure. As a result, six overarching themes were identified in the analysis phase and were shared by all participants, specifically:

1. Previous education experiences
2. Reasons for accessing further education
3. Why the college?
4. Sources of support for visually impaired students
5. Factors influencing accessibility and belonging
6. Life after college

Further subthemes are explored within the themes. I am conscious that I represent one interpretation of visually impaired students' experiences in one further education environment and that I cannot reflect the entirety of possible interpretations. However, I offer my reflections concerning the analysis and subsequent findings as part of the reflexive process. Table 3 below illustrates the categories and subcategories identified during the analysis of the interviews and observations. The findings will be explored according to the six main themes and the associated subthemes.

Table 3: Themes and subthemes of the experiences of visually impaired students in a further education college.

Num.	Main Theme	Subthemes
1	Previous education experiences	How we got here? Stigmatised experiences Feeling understood
2	Reasons for accessing further education	Transition to adulthood 1. Independence and confidence 2. Employability
3	Why the college?	The Partnership Specialist courses Living away
4	Sources of support for visually impaired students	Academic support Personal support
5	Factors influencing accessibility and belonging	Attitudinal barriers Functionality barriers Awareness
6	Life after college	

5.2 Theme 1: Previous Education Experiences

Theme one explores students' past educational experiences and begins understanding how these experiences shaped their decisions to pursue further education at Crescent College. It was essential to understand each backstory; therefore, all interviews began with a discussion about students' previous schooling to gain insight into how students ended up here. Thus, this theme includes three subthemes:

1. How we got here?
2. Stigmatised experiences
3. Feeling understood

5.2.1 How we got here?

To understand students' experiences, it was first necessary to explore their compulsory education background. A common theme among the students was that their parents or guardians ultimately decided where they would complete their compulsory education. Kylie was the only student participant who had not attended a mainstream school before attending Crescent College. Her secondary school was specifically for students with sensory impairments and other special educational needs. However, like at a mainstream school, she could study the complete National Curriculum there. Furthermore, this was an essential aspect of Kylie's previous experience, as she and her parents shared the goal of ensuring she gained formal qualifications.

Previous attendance in mainstream schooling was a common theme among the remainder of the students. They had experienced either study or staff had worked in them. Students reported having good access to resources in these settings, specifically highlighting how their schools catered for people with visual impairments. For instance, when asked if his previous school was a mainstream one, Ollie explained that it had a department that specifically accommodated students with visual impairments:

O: yeah, it was a mainstream school, but it had like a, what's it called, like a visual impairment department, so they catered for people with visual impairment. They also had a special needs one, an SEN department for SEN. And they basically had materials, so for example, braille, jaws. So, anything I had in my lesson, I could get adapted, but out of 2000 people in the school, there were only like 12 or 13 visually impaired people.

However, while collecting the data, it became apparent that the students felt they were given too much assistance and therefore had developed little to no independence. When discussing the difference between his education experience at Crescent College versus his mainstream school, Paddi explained:

P: I think definitely a good thing about the support difference is that here, the support is not all over me like they were at my previous school.

Paddi was visibly agitated when remembering how the support had been ‘all over’ him, perhaps because it raised doubts about his capability. Similarly, Bella felt that her mainstream school did not enable her the chance ‘to gain independence like her peers’.

The findings illustrate that the support the students received within these mainstream settings differed considerably from what they experienced at Crescent College. For example, when students compared the types of specialist resources they could access. Whilst some students, such as Ollie and Bella, had access to specialist resources such as assistive technology in their previous schools, others only had the chance to use these devices once they began studying at Crescent College. For example, although he had access to a service for visually impaired students, Paddi had never been offered support in the form of assistive technology, and he found learning a challenge with just his laptop and magnifier that he was provided with during his time at school:

P: I did have the visual impairment service there, and they did their best, and I’m not entirely sure whether they had access to anything like this [referring to the OrCam], but I think if they did, they probably would have offered it to me during my years there. But I think it possibly was a funding issue.

Observation 11 – Paddi’s use of the OrCam

Paddi uses the OrCam very persistently, rarely completing a task without it, even if it is easily achieved without specialist support. The tutor addressed this and asked him only to use the device when necessary. Will this impact his abilities post-college life? Is this something staff are already aware of?

For context, Paddi had been using an OrCam provided by Crescent College. An OrCam is a piece of assistive technology that users can attach to their glasses. It will then read typed or handwritten text quietly into the user’s ear without bringing attention to the user and causing disruption to other

classmates. I noticed in my observations that Paddi utilised the OrCam for most of his learning within the college, and he had become very attached to the device.

Observation 12 – Technology lesson

Students are using many different technological devices around the room, including braille tablets, Seeing AI (a phone app whereby the user takes a photo of an object with text on it, and it reads it back to them), iPads, mobile phones, text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, traditional braille.

Rosie tells me that students may have known about these technologies, but most of them had not had the chance to learn how best to use them, so these technology lessons are designed to teach and upskill students.

Thus, I witnessed how having the opportunity to use such a specialist piece of equipment transformed his life, and Paddi went on to express his disappointment at not having had the chance to use it sooner. Other students and staff shared similar experiences, and this demonstrates that students had missed out on all this support in their mainstream schools. Thus, a common theme emerged that students were unaware of the level of support they could receive until they reached Crescent College. By not having access to specialist support at their previous schools' students reported having everything done for them by support workers, and this caused students to experience feelings of frustration:

P: They would be doing a lot for me, I was doing the work, but they were kind of a bit too much involved. They were there all the time.

Paddi's experience could be reflective of the rest of the students in this study in that they all felt they could not do much for themselves at their previous schools. Moreover, being '*too involved*' could have hindered students' ability to understand the work for themselves and make real connections with peers due to not being as present in lessons and, therefore, being unable to contribute fully. Thus, students demonstrated that their reasons for attending Crescent College were cemented in their early schooling days. In turn, this impacted students' abilities to fulfil particular desires, such as creating and maintaining friendships with peers. For example, Ollie offered the phrase '*they wrapped us in cotton wool*' when discussing how his teachers at school treated him. As such, this has continued to affect him in his later education as he explained how he struggled to develop friendships within the college.

When discussing previous school experiences, students explained how they felt it was essential to have the opportunity to choose whether they studied at a specialist or a mainstream school. For instance:

B: I think people should be given the choice to go to mainstream schools, but if they don't want or parents don't feel mainstream is for them, then they should be able to go to a specialist school. So, for me, it was a case of, you know, she's not different from anyone else; she just needs a little extra help. Let's put her in mainstream school, and if there are any problems, we will go from there. And there wasn't really any problems because I had the support of the VI team, and they were pretty awesome at getting things I needed and helping me learn to touch type and getting my braille resources and all that stuff.

Bella chose to explain how her mainstream education was a case of '*she's not different from anyone else... let's put her in mainstream school*'. This notion of difference is further highlighted in the next subtheme, which focuses on students' experiences of stigma, bullying and judgement. Overall, Bella's experience in mainstream schooling seemed positive, and she felt fortunate to have a specialist support team in place. However, this was unfortunately not always the case for some students, and they offered a different recollection of their mainstream schooling journey. For example, when discussing her previous school, Merlin said: '*I didn't like it there; that's why I came here*'. It became apparent that Merlin had negative memories from her experience at her mainstream secondary school for several factors relating to feeling judgement from those around her. The notion of judgement will be explored further in the next subtheme.

5.2.2 Stigmatised experiences

This subtheme explores previous experiences of bullying and judgement and the impact these have had on participants concerning feeling the effects of stigma. Furthermore, it relays student concerns about being judged by those around them, including their teachers and peers. Consequently, students explained that they had difficulty trusting new people and that experiences of bullying and being judged by others led them to worry about how people perceived them and their visual impairment. In addition, students outlined that they often experienced challenging interactions with their peers, primarily if they had previously attended a mainstream school, expressing concern that their visual impairment was misunderstood. For example, Ollie explained how he had experienced bullying from his sighted peers and how he had learnt to cope with it over the years:

O: some people get really upset about it [being treated differently] and lose sleep over that stuff, but for me ... if people laugh at me, I kind of make a joke about it or laugh along with them ... but I've even had people stick their legs out in corridors. I've never tripped up because I can see outlines of stuff, so I can see them; they've got their legs tucked in, and the

moment I walk by, they stick them out, so I just give them a little whack with my cane and that kind of thing [laughs].

Ollie's struggle to make and maintain friendships was briefly mentioned in subtheme one. After spending time with him in his environment, it became clear that his attitude was one of the main contributors to his socialisation issues.

Observation 13 – Ollie, in general

Ollie sits alone in classes, rarely talking to anyone except the teacher or myself. He is very standoffish and hostile with the other students.

It was apparent that Ollie was reluctant to engage in conversation with his disabled peers and frequently made the situation uncomfortable for others in the room. When discussing how he wanted to be viewed by new acquaintances, he gave an example of his ideal scenario:

O: oh, I met this guy today. He was blind, but he was really cool... you know they'll remember that.

He desperately wanted to be seen as 'cool'. Furthermore, his association with being respected was measured by his ability to be seen as 'normal' as possible. This was further cemented by a later comment he made:

O: as I said before, I've never really mixed with people. I'm not being rude or anything, but a lot of the students over here have very severe disabilities, and you can't even hold a conversation with a lot of them. When I'm here, I don't really mix downstairs. I tend to stay up here in the study room; if I do, it's usually to eat in the canteen or have a quick study break. There's not really anyone in a similar position to me as such.

Ollie was the only student who spoke about his peers dissociatively. Moreover, he was aware that he was sensitive to such experiences and recognised his physical reactions as a way of feeling on the same level as his sighted peers.

Observation 14 – Merlin, in general

Merlin isolates herself and will only engage in conversation with other students or staff if they initiate it. She often looks as though she is trying to hide, as though not to be seen.

Merlin talks to me if I speak to her and will let me know when she wants to stop engaging in conversation. She mentioned that her social skills are not very good as she has never had friends.

When discussing previous social experiences, students described being victimised and excluded. Students expressed how these negative past experiences continued to affect them today and how they had led to feelings of worry concerning how others perceived them. As mentioned previously, Merlin's experience during secondary school was largely negative, and this was due to a series of bullying and judgement from those around her during this time. Whilst I wanted to understand her experience further through discussion in the interview, she moved the discussion onwards, and therefore the conversation on this subject stopped there. However, her body language and further comments on the issue in observations suggested an isolating secondary schooling experience with little to no development of friendships during this time.

Moreover, Merlin's reaction to the topic emphasised the traumatic experience that still affected her, and this was demonstrated through her avoidance of talking about it. Therefore, the next subtheme explores students' sense of belonging.

5.2.3 Students feeling understood

Mainstream schooling did not fulfil the needs of the students in this study for various reasons, including its inability to offer visually impaired students the chance to feel understood by others. When discussing previous job positions, Rosie was able to offer a staff perspective on why this might have been the case in the various mainstream settings students had previously attended:

R: I can't say I was particularly aware of people with sight loss. I think my experience of working with other staff working in mainstream is that there is quite a lot of fear because it's an unknown. I think things like autism are more prevalent as sight loss is a low-incident disability, so there are not that many people who might go to mainstream on that course, and there's probably a smaller range of courses they might choose from as a result of their sight loss. So, I think there's quite a lot of fear; there's also concern about how much extra

work there might be to adapt things for a student with sight loss. As a teacher, your role is to ensure that everybody in the class is achieving to the best of their ability, and if you don't provide things in the right format, then they can't achieve to the best of their ability.

Rosie explained how she did not think about sight loss in her previous roles within mainstream schools. However, she and other participants agreed that there was a significantly low awareness surrounding visual impairment. Consequently, this could have been because it is a low-incidence disability, as Rosie highlighted.

I witnessed and heard about ways that students attempted to conceal their impairment, such as avoiding the use of physical aids due to fear of being looked at and seen as different. For example:

Observation 15 – Merlin in general (2)

Merlin uses zoom text and is reluctant to use any other technology. She often resists extra help and becomes frustrated when she cannot complete a task independently.

Therefore, visually impaired students' avoidance of being seen as different might also contribute to the lack of awareness around it. Ollie gave an example of how misunderstood visual impairment was from his own experience of being stigmatised:

***O:** Some people are very ignorant. Some people are like, oh, he's visually impaired, he's disabled as such, so people would even talk about you behind you, and you could hear them, but they would assume that because you're blind, you're deaf as well.*

***Researcher:** You said before people would say you are disabled or 'he's disabled'...*

***O:** They wouldn't actually say it as such, but they would act like that, and they would talk to you like you haven't got a brain cell.*

Ollie's tone of voice and wording [haven't got a brain cell] indicated frustration and anger with others' inability to understand his disability. It could also suggest that he viewed some disabled people as '*not having a brain cell*', which links back to the earlier findings of his attitude towards disability generally.

One main finding was that students associated feeling understood with their ability to make life decisions independently. Students reported frustration with mainstream schooling and were visibly agitated when remembering their parents and teachers making decisions for them. An example of this could be demonstrated in Bella's experience during her final year of mainstream schooling:

***B:** Um, but in my last year of college, they had to employ somebody from a different company, and at first, I was a bit like 'err, I don't know how that's going to go. I don't know*

this person, and they don't know me, but actually, it turned out to be pretty good and because I was doing a performance course in music, umm thankfully they were quite musical, had read music braille, had used the software that we were using so 'logic', so I was quite confident you know that once I found out, she actually has a musical background herself I was like 'yeah we'll be fine'.

Observation 16 – The College Office (2)

I am working with Bella in the college office. We are discussing her relationship with her previous support worker, which she describes as a *'stroke of luck. It could have been a very different story if she didn't have a clue like some others'*.

I asked her why she felt that way, and she explained how some people she had been assigned to struggled to support her as they had no experience working with visually impaired students.

In a subsequent classroom observation, Bella and I discussed her support in mainstream school again. Whilst this specific situation ended on a positive note, it was evident that the scenario where she was unable to choose her new support worker for herself was frustrating and caused her a great deal of anxiety and stress at the time. However, she did not want to experience difficulty at the hands of her support system. Students wanted to be seen as able and needed to be given a chance to make choices for themselves. They recognised that these choices would inevitably come with mistakes but saw these as important life lessons and wanted to make errors so they could learn to overcome them independently. Students showed resilience in their education journeys, which continued to show through their reasons for entering further education.

5.3 Theme 2: Reasons for accessing Further Education

Theme two explores the students' reasons behind opting to further their education within an academic setting. Throughout the interviews and observations, students expressed their desires to gain independence and make the all-important transition into adulthood. Additionally, students emphasised the opportunity to gain independence over their own lives as a factor in choosing to continue their education.

5.3.1 Transition to Adulthood

Transitioning to adulthood was a critical factor in students' decisions to access further education, and transitioning was often discussed with regard to gaining self-confidence and independence and

creating a future for themselves by gaining employability skills. Therefore, this subtheme is separated into two further themes:

1. Independence and confidence
2. Employability

5.3.1.1 Independence and confidence

Students felt strongly about pursuing their further education careers to improve their futures. Furthermore, the strict control they had experienced from being over-supported in their earlier schooling made some feel they were not encouraged to excel in post-compulsory schooling. Rosie offered a staff perspective on this:

***R:** I think as a teacher, I can understand you've got this big workload, and then if they bring in someone with sight loss, it's like 'how am I going to make these PowerPoints that I've been using for however long I've been teaching this course, how am I going to make that accessible for that student'.*

Thus, Rosie recognised that due to the heavy workload put on teachers, visually impaired students in mainstream schools could be overlooked. Students reported being over-supported by their support workers during lessons, frequently resulting in them feeling as though they were unable to reach their full potential. Henceforth, students told how their inability to learn independently in school led them to pursue further education. Ollie explained:

***O:** I could have stayed on at sixth form but I kind of figured that within two years' time, if I'd stayed, I would be in the same position as when I started it. I feel like I wouldn't have gotten very independent.*

Students believed that if they stayed in their previous schools for their further education careers, they would not have been able to develop and learn skills to enable them to become successful adults. The following observation demonstrates how staff facilitate students to transition from children to adults:

Observation 9 – Computer Lesson 2

Students are working through their worksheets independently. Some students constantly ask the teacher or me to help them; however, I have been briefed that I should encourage them to work through issues independently.

Throughout the lesson, we discuss issues that arise and encourage the students to overcome things alone. Mistakes are made, of course, but this appears to be a successful technique with students learning from these.

Students associated their compulsory education with childhood and that moving to a college specifically for students aged sixteen and over enabled them to separate childhood and adulthood from each other.

5.3.1.2 Employability

A second key aspect of students' choice to attend a partnership-FE college centred around their goals of becoming employed in the future. Employability was something students related closely to adulthood, and they shared the sense that a college environment would afford them this opportunity more so than staying on at sixth form in their previous schools. As soon as you step foot into the building, you can see students working in one of the college enterprises, the Bell Bar café.

Observation 2 – Coffee in the café

As Rosie and I sit having a coffee, I can see students serving customers, preparing food and drinks, cleaning tables, and replenishing stock, all the typical activities you might expect to see in a café.

This is one example of how students can prepare to enter the workplace within Crescent College.

Paddi had previously experienced having a lot of his work '*done for him*' and therefore did not feel he had the chance to learn for himself. However, when discussing his future plans, which included working with animals, he explained how his move to a further education college had given him more variety to explore in his chosen career field:

P: I go to Crescent College and also to another college; I do animal care at that college. It's really fun because I get to cover a variety of animals there, including snakes and lizards, tarantulas and stuff.

This partnership meant he could study his field of interest (animal care) in-depth and learn vital skills to help him gain employment in that area in the future, something he believed he would not have achieved at his previous school's sixth form. Other students had similar experiences to Paddi; for example, whilst Alfie was a staff participant in this research, he had also previously been a student at Crescent College and offered some reflections on his experience during this time. Alfie was a tree surgeon prior to having developed his vision impairment, and he explained how the college and its employability programmes saved him:

A: I became unemployed and ended up going into a severe depression. During which, breakup of the family unit and a few other really messy situations suddenly occurred, and the job centre were constantly pushing for me to go and get a job. I ended up having a really nice disability officer at the job centre who asked whether I had thought about re-training and had I considered it? Hence how I ended up here as a student.

As a student who had progressively lost his sight, he described his time at the college as one that allowed him to 'discover that there was life after losing your eyesight'.

After talking to students about their aspirations, I needed to discover whether the college could support students in achieving specific goals. After discussions with staff and time spent within Crescent College, I began to see how students' desires for transitioning into adulthood could be met there:

R: I think the primary aim is to support students, those with sight loss and other students to achieve their goals, achieve their aims, to support them into work, into independent living, to university, to college, you know or to community access, if that's what they want to do, so I think that's our primary aim is to get them there.

Rosie confirmed that the goals discussed in theme two reflect the main aims of Crescent College, suggesting that students' needs would be met while studying there. The selling points for students to choose Crescent College for their further education will be explored in theme three, which focuses on three specific attributes of the college.

5.4 Theme 3: Why the College?

Students had mixed reasons for choosing to study at Crescent College. However, the overarching themes were either to pursue a specific course or because it was explicitly designed for visually impaired students and offered a unique partnership so they could tailor their experiences, or because it enabled them to live away from home. Therefore, this theme is separated into three subthemes:

1. The Partnership
2. Specialist courses
3. Living away

5.4.1 The Partnership

The partnership between Crescent College and its neighbouring mainstream college was one of the main drivers behind the students' decisions to study there. The opportunity to study mainstream further education courses whilst accessing specialist support afforded students an education they had not believed possible. In addition, independence was highlighted as one of the goals students wanted to achieve from further education. They all offered success stories of how Crescent College enabled them to achieve that. For example:

P: I think I do get to be independent a bit more here.

Researcher: *why do you think that is?*

P: I think it's because they and I realise I'm growing up, and actually, it's my birthday a week tomorrow.

The staff at Crescent College placed great importance on affording students the opportunity to, as Paddi put it, 'grow up' and develop confidence in learning new skills and having the chance to make decisions for themselves. So, for example, Kylie explained how she studied formal qualifications over at the mainstream college and when asked what she enjoyed most about being there, she offered this answer:

K: I study English, maths and creative arts, and I love my friends and the new things I've been able to do and being very involved.

By learning new things and becoming more involved, Kylie felt that she was becoming much more confident in herself and therefore reaching the goal of not having to rely on others to achieve tasks.

Moreover, the friendship aspect of being part of the partnership was felt by all students, and not one participant expressed accounts of bullying or judgement during their time there, which they had all experienced previously (as detailed in theme one). Observation 6 exhibits this further:

Observation 6 – Discussion with Ollie in the corridor

Ollie explains he is playing football later that evening with his friends from the mainstream college.

When asked about his friends, he tells me *'they get me. They don't care that I am visually impaired they still include me in everything'*.

When discussing what students enjoyed about being part of Crescent College, the responses tended to centre around the sense of belonging they felt when visiting the college. For example, Merlin was a timid student, so our discussions were often brief and less descriptive than others. However, when discussing her decision to come to Crescent College, her frustration at her previous [mainstream] school was visible. She rolled her eyes whilst explaining that she *'needed a change'* and *'liked the feel of the college on the open day'*. One of the explanations Merlin offered was that she was attracted to the various activities and lessons Crescent College had to offer. However, I later discovered from staff members that Merlin was an avoidant character and took encouragement to participate in these activities. She alluded to experiencing previous hurtful encounters with peers, which contributed to her resistance to participation. However, over time it was clear that she was able to build up her confidence, and this was shown through her partaking in more and more activities as time went on.

The range of activities at the college was highly regarded between staff and students as they facilitated building a sense of community between the staff and students, which was evident during my time there. Some of the activities included but were not limited to, cooking, arts and crafts, off-campus trips, and performances.

Observation 3 – eBay shop

Students manage money, sort items, use computers to upload items, and work in a team.

I could see how Bella manoeuvred working in the shop with her visual impairment; notably, she used magnification software provided by Crescent College to post items on eBay for the shop to sell.

The students clearly separated the two colleges from one another, usually explaining how they would complete more academic-style work at the mainstream college. Whereas Crescent College would be emphasised as a more relaxed atmosphere than the mainstream college, enabling them to learn crucial life skills.

By having what students described as an encouraging and relaxing experience at Crescent College, they accomplished goals that were not achievable in mainstream education. For example, Bella expressed her desire to become independent and move out, and when asked if she saw that being possible:

B: I can now; since coming here, I can... So, I think I would be able to do it eventually.

Without Crescent College, Bella felt she would not have reached her aspiration to move out of her family home. However, students could see their progression since starting at the college and, thus, were able to see themselves achieving their goals in the future. This finding further supports these unique settings and emphasises how they can contribute to changing students' lives.

Two staff participants in this study were based at Crescent College, and one (Sammy) was also the disability advisor at the mainstream college. Although much of his work was at Crescent College, he also supported students that solely attended the mainstream college. An unexpected finding during our interviews was that he had recently begun supporting twins with Wolfram Syndrome, both of whom were enrolled at the mainstream college only. He explained:

S: wolfram syndrome is a genetic syndrome that affects the brain, and it sends you blind, sends you deaf, gives you type 2 diabetes, it affects your brain in such a way that it actually affects your thought processes, rather cruelly, it makes the recipient of the condition depressed. Not just environmentally depressed, but your brain makes you depressed as well, and you don't live very long.

Whilst these students are not participants in this research, the case portrayed how Crescent College's partnership with the mainstream college worked both ways. Samuel explained how the twins' eyesight deteriorated rapidly over the summer before they were due to start college, and once they arrived, they were registered blind. As a result, he had to think of ways to support the twins academically whilst treading carefully as they did not want to 'be seen as different':

S: they are actually quite prickly towards support, and we were coming up with different strategies and getting nowhere with them.

Sammy identified an apprehension from the students towards specialist support. Furthermore, this finding shows a different element to the specialist-mainstream partnership, where Sammy called in the expertise from Crescent College to enable the students the opportunity to test different equipment tailored explicitly to supporting students with sight loss. It meant they could try, and even if they rejected the specialist support, money was not wasted, and they had given the twins the option to access it. Moreover, this showed how the partnership between these two colleges benefitted the students at Crescent College and could change the lives of unexpected students with visual impairments at the mainstream college.

5.4.2 Specialist courses

When choosing where to study, it was a common theme that students opted for Crescent College as it made them feel comfortable. One student [Paddi] was particularly unique because he was on a dual placement with a mainstream college in a different town. In contrast, all the other students in this study were enrolled at the partnered mainstream college. Paddi had specific study goals and wanted to venture into animal care studies. However, after attending an open day at Crescent College, he explained it just '*felt right*' to be there. A partnership with a different mainstream college had not previously been attempted; however, he knew he '*also wanted to go to the other college to study animal care*'. His request for a dual partnership with the animal care college was initially declined as it '*had never happened before and it never will because it costs too much*'. However, the Principal of Crescent College pushed for it, and the request was eventually granted.

Paddi's experience showed Crescent College's significant commitment towards its students' happiness and success. The specialist courses offered at Crescent College meant his choice to study here was non-negotiable for him, as was his passion for learning animal care. It was, therefore, evident from the findings that students' unique interests, goals and passions were taken into significant consideration by the staff at Crescent College. Furthermore, this had a lasting impact on student and staff satisfaction within the college. For example, when asked what it was like to work at Crescent College, Rosie replied:

R: it's a lot of fun. I think it can be very challenging, some people say you know, I don't know how you can work with people with special needs, but to me, that's not an issue. I don't find that part of it challenging its ... no, I do find that part of it challenging because sometimes you can see the potential that a person has, but their disability ends up preventing them from

doing what they could be doing, and that is quite frustrating, not so much for myself but it is frustrating for that student.

Rosie explained how it could be frustrating to see a student's disability affecting their potential, and this was a key motivator in her decision to work at the college. Students had also experienced this frustration for themselves in terms of having had their visual impairments impact their success. However, the overall feeling was that Crescent College gave students a wide range of options, more than they had ever experienced before, and Rosie gave a helpful overview of how the specialist courses worked:

R: I think we have a relationship with the mainstream college so the students who are of higher ability can go to a mainstream college but have our support so have that safety net that they wouldn't have if they just went to mainstream college. We've also got people going to work placements, so if their goal is to work, they can develop work-based skills by going to work placements. We operate on an enterprise basis which is where we have enterprises; we don't actually have any classes as such; we just have areas where people work. We've got an eBay business, a college office, a new media hub, an arts centre and crafts centre, a college shop, and the bell bar, of course. So, students can then choose which ones they go to and develop whatever skills they want within those enterprises.

Rosie's explanation emphasises independence in that some students required more support than others and were all at different phases of the learning journey. This idea of having a 'safety net' appealed to the students as they all expressed gratitude for having the support system at Crescent College whilst they studied formal qualifications. As detailed at the end of the quote, students were able to 'choose' what felt best for them. Additionally, students highlighted their previous experience of having much of their work completed for them as it was 'easier' for support workers and teachers in mainstream education to do so rather than make reasonable adjustments so they could accomplish tasks themselves.

Many students at the mainstream college studied sport-related courses as sports had a significant focus within the town surrounding the college. Ollie was very interested in sports, and that had a significant influence on his decision to move to Crescent College:

O: So, like here, I stay in supported living here, but a lot of the time I get to do whatever I want, so I learnt to cook. I learnt to do washing and do everything independently, really, so I feel a lot more grown-up. It wasn't really for the education; I could have gotten a-levels if I stayed, I could have gotten maybe a better education at sixth form, but it was more for growing up, and obviously, this town is renowned for sports, and I'm really into sport, and I just felt like it was the right place for me. You know, over here, I've got all the support if I

need it, and I can do my work over here and over there, I've got the whole sports side of it (mainstream college).

Students were able to make decisions based on their unique interests and ambitions. Ollie was studying a level three course at the mainstream college in sport, and whilst he was confident in his ability to achieve A-Level qualifications, they were not going to fulfil his dreams. Ultimately, he wanted to continue his education through a further education route. Nevertheless, he equally wanted to be able to tailor his course to his specific needs regarding his interests and support for his visual impairment, and the Crescent College partnership provided him that opportunity. The freedom that Crescent College afforded students regarding their specialist courses was also discussed. Students could choose to live on campus if their local authority funding allowed it, and these experiences will be explored in the following subtheme.

5.4.3 Living away

As briefly mentioned, one main reason students chose further education was to gain independence. A significant benefit of choosing Crescent College specifically was their ability to live away from home and learn vital skills, such as cooking and cleaning. In addition, the students living on campus shared the experience of having previously had everything '*done for them*' by their parents, and this had become a frustration that they wanted to eliminate:

B: *My mum used to really struggle with teaching me how to cook, how to iron because she was worried I was going to hurt myself, you know, the motherly instinct kicked in. whereas staff here also probably have that fear, but they don't step in unless something really is wrong and you are going to hurt yourself so they kind of let you learn how to do it, you haven't got mum saying oh 'I'll do it because it's easier' like for washing up, for example, she would say that whereas here they're like 'no you can do it, so you are going to do it, so I like that because I've been using the oven a lot more and learning how to cook things. So, I think even when I can do it independently, mums going to still want to do it.*

Parental support was something the students valued greatly. However, since moving to assisted living, they recognised how this could have hindered their progress in areas such as learning to complete daily household tasks. Students believed that if they could learn to master skills such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and generally maintaining their living space, they would be confident in living alone eventually. Bella could understand why her mother completed these tasks for her when she lived at home. However, students ultimately wanted to move to assisted living as another step in moving toward adulthood:

O: So, like here, I stay in supported living here, but a lot of the time I get to do whatever I want, so I learnt to cook. I learnt to do washing and do everything independently, really, so I feel a lot more grown-up.

The idea of being more ‘grown-up’ was something most of the students strived for and wanted for themselves as adults. Some explained that it was a non-negotiable aspect of moving to further education and that they measured their future success post-college on being able to live alone without assistance. The assisted living programme enabled them to develop these crucial skills and gave them confidence in their ability to continue this once they left college. For example:

Observation 5 - Braille Lesson

Students are learning braille and braille technology. Ollie begins to tell me what he is planning to cook for himself for his dinner that evening. He tells me he will use his Seeing AI app to ensure he does not mess it up.

Then he proceeds to show me his Seeing AI app. Ollie pulls out a bar of chocolate and scans its barcode to show me how the app can identify what the product is and other details, such as the ingredients it contains.

One fundamental part of the assisted living aspect of the programme is that it teaches students how to complete tasks that would enable them to live alone eventually, such as shopping for food and household essentials. In addition, being able to move freely around the local area was something students greatly valued. During my time at the college, I saw students completing these types of excursions, and whenever they came back from completing them, I witnessed their sense of achievement.

Observation 17 – Kylie, in general (1)

A group of students have just returned from an excursion into town. Kylie is overjoyed and telling everyone she sees all about it. She tells me she cannot wait to go again next week.

As the town the college is situated in has a large visually impaired community, reasonable adjustments have been made to ensure they can live as independently as possible. For example, talking buses allow students to manoeuvre themselves around the town without having to use extra support:

B: In town, I was amazed the buses talk; I was like, that's great. I don't need to use an app for this. I do have an app that I haven't really used much because I haven't needed to.

Conversely, the findings show that this is not implemented everywhere and might limit students' choices for the future. For example, the students had goals for life after Crescent College, such as experiencing a new area. However, they had become reliant on adjustments made in their local area, such as the talking buses, and therefore, may struggle to settle in an area that does not have this facility. When discussing the adjustments and whether he had experienced them elsewhere, Ollie explained:

O: no, I think it's because there is such a large visually impaired community here because of this college; they've made it a necessity, but it's not everywhere. It's not in my hometown anyway.

Students explained how they had been introduced to many visual impairment aids they had not previously known of since moving into the assisted living home. For example, Bella offered:

B: Even in the home, there are a lot of assistive devices you can use, like talking scales and talking this and that.

Students also made use of their assistive technology within the home. For example, Ollie detailed how he used the app 'Seeing AI' for daily household tasks:

O: I can see temperatures and times how long things need to be cooked for. Before, when I didn't use it, they were pushing me to get it for maybe two months, maybe longer, to be honest (laughs), but sometimes I'm lazy, and I'll say I'll do something and not actually do it and now I've actually used it I realise how helpful it is because I used to go to the office (supported living) and ask for details of packets, but now I can do it myself cause it's allowed me to do that.

This reluctance to use assistive technology tailored to visually impaired people was a common occurrence explored in theme five. However, it can also be applied to living away. Whilst some students seemed to thrive in assisted living, others were less enthusiastic about the living away aspect of the college. Kylie was especially vocal about finding this transition difficult. When I first met Kylie, she expressed feelings of homesickness and whilst she still found that part a struggle occasionally, she

had eventually settled into living away from home. When asked about the types of activities she has learned to complete independently, she stated:

K: you know, putting the clothes in the laundry, in the washing machine. I often do my hair, or if I want something posh, someone does it for me. I cook and can use the oven. I have support. You can't be afraid to ask.

Prior to attending Crescent College, students identified how they would have never imagined being able to live independently. However, one of the key findings from this research was that students had developed confidence and could now see their aspirations of moving out as an achievable goal. Ultimately, the findings show that the participants advocated passionately for the assisted living option at Crescent College and emphasised how important these partnership settings are for students like them.

Having access to appropriate support is vital for visually impaired students, and it plays a crucial role in shaping them into the people they are. Without the support system at Crescent College, the students believed they would not have made the progress they did, which would have affected their ability to achieve their long-term goals. Theme four draws on the sources of support the students could access during their time in such a unique college.

5.5 Theme 4: Sources of support for Visually Impaired students

This theme considers these factors and sources of support at Crescent College in two further subthemes:

1. Academic Support
2. Personal Support

5.5.1 Academic Support

One of the main reasons for students' lack of access to support was found to be due to the nature of their educational establishment. However, since studying at Crescent College, access to specialist resources, including assistive technology, was significantly improved, and students had an array of options if they chose to utilise them. However, it is imperative to note that specialist support often negatively impacts students. For example, Ollie had previously had a negative experience with academic support in his mainstream school:

O: When I was writing in school, I had a BrailleNote, so I was making notes all lesson; I wasn't listening to the teacher. My LA was whispering write this, write this and I'd read my notes back, and it was all gibberish. I wasn't picking up the lesson. I think what's great over here is that they have said that, however, I learn best and what works for me, I can do. So, in lessons, I listen, and my LA takes notes; I can tell the LA where to be, I can tell them to sit at the back of the class, and they will do that.

Students were thankful for their freedom over their academic support and appreciated being able to tailor their academic experience through their support systems. For example, Ollie had been able to develop mutual understanding with his Learning Assistant 'LA', which had allowed him to be fully present within his lessons. Therefore, he could understand what the teacher was saying, something he had not been able to experience at his previous school. Furthermore, he felt confident to ask his support worker not to sit near him so as not to draw attention to his difference.

In an interview with Sammy, he explained how his two students with Wolfram Syndrome expressed concern with being seen as different:

S:...the sort of mental side of things, the ways it's affecting them, they are actually quite prickly towards support, and we were coming up with different strategies and getting nowhere with them. They didn't want to be seen to be different despite the fact they've got dogs and stuff, just didn't want to be different, didn't want electronic devices, didn't want any of that, "don't want somebody sitting next to me", etc.

These students were offered academic support from Crescent College in the form of a specialist Learning Assistant, yet they refused to accept it. They '*didn't want to be different*' and did not '*want somebody sitting next to me*'; Sammy stated this was the avoidance of their deteriorating vision. In contrast, Ollie had had a visual impairment his entire life. Furthermore, in choosing to attend Crescent College, which only caters for disabled students, Ollie was not bothered by having the Learning Assistant in general; he just wanted to experience the class itself without the person being sat next to him.

In terms of academic support through assistive technology use, students presented a variety of feelings about the functionality of webpages or their devices. For example:

Observation 18 – Bella in general (1)

Bella often makes comments about how technology does not work for her, and she finds it aggravating that she makes mistakes because of this. For example, she is trying to access a website on her phone, but the website is not accessible. She tells me the buttons have no alternative text, so they just read 'button' to her. This means she has to abandon the task or sift through every button on the page to find the one she needs.

Website accessibility is an issue, and staff are quick to report any issues to website owners or raise awareness among developers about how to create technology in an accessible format. However, they explained how awareness still needs to be improved; therefore, these issues often go unresolved.

Issues with accessibility during lessons were highly frustrating for students. For example, whilst Paddi expressed his love for technology, he also had some problems with it hindering his academic progress:

P: I love technology. When it works, that is... my laptop cannot connect to the internet at the animal care college, and I think they are trying to sort it out, but when my tutor tells the class to go onto Moodle (VLE), a website where our PowerPoints and assignments are uploaded for us to access. When she asks us to do that, my laptop won't do it; usually, it's like word documents we have to print off, and my tablet hasn't got word, so I have to have my support do it for me on a normal computer.

Students' reasons for using assistive technology within their lessons stemmed from wanting to learn independently, so when problems arose, students would experience feelings of frustration and sometimes anger. These feelings seemed to come from a place of disappointment, as students felt that by having sudden access to new and expensive assistive technology, some of the former barriers to their education they had faced could have been removed or avoided.

Observation 1 – An introductory walk around the college

This is my first walk around the college and first time being back since I was last here for my master's research.

Rosie shows me around, room by room. On the first-floor students are learning traditional braille, there are lots of braille tablets in the room. She explains that the two students had not learned any braille prior to starting at Crescent College. I ask why, she says it is quite common and usually because teachers are not trained to use it.

Academic support was something students expected from their time at Crescent College. Having not always had the best experience in their previous school, students felt they could rely on the college to relieve some of the pressure they had experienced academically. Furthermore, personal support was something students had hoped they would experience during their time at the college, but the extent to which was not expected.

5.5.2 Personal Support

Students emphasised the importance of receiving personal support from those around them and particularly mentioned their families as having played a key role in their lives before attending Crescent College. However, the peer community within Crescent College was something most participants discussed with me during interviews or in passing conversations; usually, these discussions centred around how peers had positively impacted their lives. For example, when talking about where specialist-mainstream partnership settings fit within society, Alfie explained:

A: yes, so the peer community built up confidence. If you are isolated because you are slightly different than those around you, yes, they can give you certain peer support but the very intimate knowledge of your struggle they may struggle with because they don't know how to handle them. So, yes, schools like this there is definitely a place for them. Things are changing, but within changing society, we will be getting more integrated.

Students experienced increased personal support from their peers within the college, which significantly positively contributed to their journeys. In addition, I was able to experience a sense of community within the college during my time there, including seeing how the environment facilitated building and maintaining solid relationships. For example, students would often challenge one another to complete tasks:

A: One of the things I used to do here as a student was set challenges for my housemates who were all VI, and some of the staff here would dread it because they knew that I successfully on my first week here got lost in town and spent the better half of four and a half hours trying to find my way around town and discovered so many different shops and things in the town.

Alfie had learnt from his earlier mistake, and whilst getting lost was not his main goal, it enabled him to work with his peers at Crescent College to enable them to complete personal challenges.

As mentioned in subtheme 5.2.2, stigmatised experiences, some students had struggled to make and maintain friendships. However, during my time at Crescent College, I witnessed more confident

characters, such as Kylie, encouraging socialisation and friendships with more timid characters like Merlin.

Observation 7 – Craft Studio

When interacting with peers in class, Kylie frequently discusses hanging out with them after college in the residential home.

Today she suggested to Merlin, *‘do you want to watch a film later?’* to which Merlin agreed.

Ollie, however, focused on developing relationships with those at the mainstream college alongside his visually impaired friend, whom he deemed relatively *‘able-bodied’*. Whilst his experience of personal support did not come as often from his peers at Crescent College, the partnership enabled him to develop other personal support mechanisms:

O: Yeah, it was. I had one other visually impaired friend who came from the same town as me, and he was pretty able-bodied as well – he had more vision than me, and he was pretty mainstream as well, so us two together we used to mix with the rest of them [students without disabilities].

The emphasis on being *‘mainstream’* showed Ollie’s resistance to being viewed as something other than *‘normal’*. His focus on developing friendships at the mainstream college could be viewed as a method of gaining security from sighted peers.

Observation 6 – Discussion with Ollie in the corridor

Ollie explains he is playing football later that evening with his friends from the mainstream college.

When asked about his friends, he tells me *‘they get me. They don’t care that I am visually impaired they still include me in everything’*.

Moreover, being around peers at the mainstream college, he had not experienced feelings of social isolation that he had previously felt at his secondary school.

Students also gained personal support through guided sessions outside of the college. Students highly regarded these as they were taught personal skills to equip them for the future, Paddi explained:

P: On a Monday every other Monday in the afternoon, there's this lady who takes us into town, and she is trained to make sure that visually impaired students are equipped for the future. Teaching us how to cross roads safely etc.

The students may not have received this aspect of personal support at home from their families out of fear that they would not be successful, relating to Bella's experience of her mum doing household chores for her because she felt it was 'easier'. Paddi explained that after practising going out alone during the week at college, he had wanted to attempt a bus trip at the weekend when he was back home with his parents. However, he emphasised his mum's resistance to allowing him to go. By living away at the college during the week, students had the freedom to develop skills to perform tasks like independent trips without added pressure they may get from their families. Ultimately, being in an environment such as Crescent College was essential for students' academic attainment and emotional well-being. Alfie confirmed:

A: the thing is, there are times when we do need that little bit of extra help. Yes, it's great you can go off to the mainstream college and do courses, learn skills, but on top of that, you also need that tiny bit extra support. it might be that you need to speak to fellow visually impaired people so you can learn about more apps, skills etc.

Support was crucial to students' success at Crescent College and impacted their futures. However, certain factors affected the extent to which students experienced support, and the findings showed this often related to accessibility and students feeling a sense of belonging, which will be explored further in theme five.

5.6 Theme 5: Factors influencing accessibility and belonging

Theme five explores the contributing factors that affected accessibility and, in turn, students' sense of belonging within the educational environment. Although the students reported experiencing positive attitudes, particularly from sighted people during their time at Crescent College, they nevertheless faced various challenges. The challenges included attitudes towards them (stigmatisation and discrimination), accessibility of assistive technology, and awareness of visual impairment.

Therefore, this theme is broken down into three subthemes:

1. Attitudinal barriers,
2. Functionality barriers of assistive technology, and
3. Awareness.

5.6.1 Attitudinal barriers influencing accessibility and belonging

The findings indicated that the students had experienced some positive attitudes towards their visual impairment, which encouraged a sense of accessibility and belonging. Moreover, participants highlighted one key factor influencing positive attitudes towards visual impairment: sighted people's knowledge of the condition and the issues it can bring. According to the participants, positive attitudes are linked with individual experiences; therefore, those who have known or still know a person with a visual impairment are more likely to elicit positive attitudes. It was emphasised that individuals who know about visual impairment could associate with them (visually impaired students).

Students and staff explained that individuals who had insight into disability issues generally, but more specifically, those related to visual impairment, were more supportive, caring, tolerant and willing to interact with the students compared to those without any knowledge or understanding of visual impairment. However, students also illustrated that some sighted peers who did not have lessons or direct contact with them still displayed positive attitudes. Students suggested that the attitudes from the latter group of people might have come from a personal experience, for example, having a person with a disability or perhaps visual impairment specifically in their home or immediate family. Additionally, these could have been individuals who had encountered disability or visual impairment outside their home life. Interestingly though, Ollie showed resistance to mixing with students who had what he classed as 'more severe' disabilities than his, and he was not shy to disclose this information:

O: oh no, they were allowed in, but to be honest, it would just be a bit embarrassing to have people in there because there were some visually impaired students with more complex needs. I don't like to say I would be embarrassed to be around them, but it's just because of their needs. There would be teachers in there, and being kids, you wouldn't be able to say what you wanna say or mess about.

The finding from Ollie was surprising as students had previously explained their upset over being stigmatised for their visual impairment.

Observation 6 (continued) – Discussion with Ollie in corridor

Ollie explains how he had friends outside of school that he had grown up with but that it took him a long time to gain friendships at his secondary school because it took a long time to change people's negative perceptions of him.

Evidently, knowledge of visual impairment played a major contributing factor in students' experiences with their peers at school and continued to shape their experiences in further education.

Observation 10 – With Ollie at lunch

I have been in Crescent College for 12 days thus far, and it is only now that I have seen Ollie sitting amongst his peers.

Ollie says he only sometimes stays at Crescent College during social hours such as mealtimes. I ask why and he explains that he does not feel he can relate to many of the other students here because they are more 'disabled' than he is [referring to those with cognitive impairments]. He prefers to socialise with other visually impaired students or his peers at the mainstream college.

It was clear that Ollie, unlike the other students in this study, was reluctant to mix with other students with disabilities at his previous school as he found it difficult to relate to them. In addition, this had stayed with him, and he had brought very similar views to Crescent College. For example, in an interview, Ollie elucidated this outlook:

O: As I said before, I've never really mixed with people, I'm not being rude or anything, but a lot of the students over here have very severe disabilities, and you can't even hold a conversation with a lot of them. When I'm here, I don't really mix downstairs. I tend to stay up here in the study room; if I do, it's usually to eat in the canteen or have a quick study break. There's not really anyone in a similar position to me as such.

Attitudes toward visual impairment were varied, depending on the participant's previous experiences. Participants felt that society attached labels to visually impaired people, and these would be reflective of the encounters people had with them, for example:

A: One of the things my colleagues will tell you is that I am a great one for talking about being an ambassador because, at the end of the day, I am an ambassador for the VI community. If people see a grumpy, miserable, blind person, that's their opinion of the whole of the community. Whereas actually, if you are getting out there and having a go and you suddenly get to the point where you have to ask for help, but you've made a reasonable attempt to do it yourself, they are more willing to see what they can do. We don't want that poor you; you are disabled go and sit over there; we will do it for you. It is basic humanity.

Alfie understood that society sometimes attached a particular label to the visually impaired community depending on how they experienced visual impairment in one scenario. Students and staff wanted to alter this narrative and change people's preconceived notions about the visually impaired community. Attitudes to visual impairment were a crucial factor in students' journeys. If they had experienced positive attitudes, they generally portrayed a more positive outlook on their visual impairment. In contrast, if they had experienced negative attitudes from others, it was found that they might present more negative views about themselves.

Students opened up about their struggles with not wanting to look different in public or draw attention to themselves. For example, Ollie explained:

O: I mean, I hated using a cane, you know. I went through a stage where I didn't want to use a cane, and I didn't want to do anything. I went through a stage where I felt quite depressed, I felt quite insecure, and I went through the stage a lot of people do where I didn't want to be in public.

These types of experiences were a common theme for the students where visual impairment was their only and main disability. In addition, students detailed specific points in their lives where they used avoidance as a mechanism, suggestive of the fact that students were fearful of what others might think about them if they disclosed or somehow discovered that they had a visual impairment. However, this was something students could not avoid as most of the assistive technology they used made it evident that they had a visual impairment.

5.6.2 Functionality barriers influencing accessibility and belonging

The findings showed that assistive technology's functionality significantly impacted the student's ability to feel a sense of belonging. Assistive technology was found to be highly beneficial for students, and they reported success stories through the interviews, some of which I witnessed through the observations. For example, Kylie successfully used a BrailleNote to complete a task during a lesson. She had previously presented an avoidance of learning braille and getting to grips with new technology was a daunting task for her; therefore, this was a particular breakthrough for her as an individual.

Others reported a reluctance to use some assistive technology as it could take time to become familiar with, and students would prefer to continue using methods they were accustomed to even if they

were no longer working efficiently. Merlin was a student whose eyesight had deteriorated over time, and her tutors explained that it was *'difficult to get her enthusiasm for new technology'*. For example, during observations, I noticed how Merlin was struggling to read the computer screen using enlarged font, and we discussed why she chose not to use more specialist software to help her read the text:

M: *I use an adapted keyboard which is larger keys, and they are yellow with black text. I am a bit reluctant to use zoom text which magnifies, so I just enlarge the font because that works for me.*

Researcher: *what don't you like about zoom text?*

M: *it is hard to move around, and it can jump around quite a lot, can make you feel woozy.*

Their willingness and openness significantly impacted the extent to which students used assistive technology provided by the college to learn something new. However, some students also suggested they were reluctant to use traditional braille:

K: *yes, I get a bit frightened at first because it is a new thing. Technology can be complicated, and I like to enjoy what is going on in life first before trying new things.*

Being *'frightened'* or nervous about using something they had not used previously was common among students. Whilst some were more enthusiastic about what new technology could do for them, others resisted for fear of not understanding it.

Another contributing factor to students' frustration with using assistive technology provided by the college was that there was a limited amount of it to go around:

P: *I borrow my glasses cam on a Tuesday morning until Thursday so that I can have it for Wednesday at Hayside [pseudonym]. There have been times where the person who needed the cam on a Thursday wasn't in, so I was lucky enough to have it for the whole week, which was amazing because my friends somehow had heard about me having this, and they rang me and said we need to come and see it.*

Paddi and Ollie shared the use of the OrCam, a specialist device that visually impaired people can attach to their glasses, and it will read whatever they point at quietly into their ear without disturbing others in the class or bringing unwanted attention to the user. Unfortunately, there was no method around this situation due to the cost of the OrCam itself, which retailed for around four thousand

pounds at the time of collecting this data. Despite being a specialist college which had allocated funding for assistive technology, Crescent College, needed more money to buy a second device.

Resources were identified as having either positive or negative effects on student experiences. For example, having timely access to resources, such as assistive technology, enabled learning; however, the lack of accessibility within webpages or applications was a primary contributing factor identified as a barrier to independent learning. In addition, participants reported high levels of frustration and sometimes anger:

A: the cynic in me would say money, and they've seen a marketing opportunity [technology companies]. There might be a bit of consciousness there by some of these multinational companies and suddenly think, well, actually, we could do some good here, relatively cheaply. And they're just trying to make everything accessible to everyone.

The participants shared similar views about the level of competence in many accessibility features within technology. The cost of assistive technology was also found to play a significant role in accessibility, and participants expressed their upset at how expensive assistive technology could be. This finding relates to theme six, and the worries students felt about reaching the end of their college careers.

However, one of the main benefits of studying at Crescent College was accessing many of the expensive technologies and specialist knowledge from the staff. Staff knowledge helped students get to grips with free resources they had not previously heard of nor had the chance to utilise:

O: yeah, so I was supplied with this phone that has an app on it called seeing AI, and I basically point it at a piece of paper, and it reads what's on the paper, and then I can screen record it and save it into my camera roll, so I've got notes stored in my camera roll that I can listen to.

Many students used this piece of software not surprisingly because it was free but also because it had excellent functionality, which participants expressed as a key frustration when discussing issues with other specialist technology and resources.

Another factor that contributed to students' struggles in the classroom was preparation from mainstream tutors. Paddi explained how his learning at his mainstream college was sometimes challenging:

P: I think my tutor there has 14 of us in the class to deal with, and it is sometimes hard for her to get things ready for me in the right font size etc., so I think having the reader on my glasses and having my tablet and magnifier is a lot more helpful in that way in that I can access more stuff if it's not prepared, and it stays in my head more.

Despite him having to navigate his own ways of reading the class material, Paddi explained that he understood staff at mainstream settings were not always well prepared to manage students with disabilities generally and visual impairments more specifically. Paddi also used a wheelchair which could sometimes mean his vision impairment was overlooked.

During my time at the college, I noticed that students often reported difficulty with the accessibility of technology. Students would use software and hardware specifically aimed at visually impaired people, yet they would frequently encounter problems when the functionality needed to be improved. For example, when talking about using voiceover software on specific applications, Bella identified her difficulties:

B: For some apps, it can be quite frustrating, umm definitely logic on the mac some things I had to get my support worker to tell me what some buttons said or 'can you press this button for me?' or 'does this button do this?' err sometimes I couldn't even get to all of the buttons, so there would be like menus and stuff, and I couldn't access them with the keyboard because on a mac voiceover is mainly keyboard based. But it is really annoying when a button just says it's a 'button' or it says some like gibberish. Yeah, some apps are pretty inaccessible.

For voiceover to work effectively, it should describe what is on the screen to the user. Therefore, if applications were not made in an accessible format, students would either have to ask for physical help or figure it out for themselves. If students asked for help, they would often present visible irritation and helplessness, whereas if they attempted to figure it out alone, they would sometimes encounter a lot of extra work. Many applications and software the students used presented similar issues to the one Bella described. As such, this made learning difficult for students and often meant they needed to get support staff to intervene, resulting in students feeling like they had failed.

Observation 8 – The College Office (1)

The task is to send an email that will be received by all staff, students, parents and guardians. Bella is visibly agitated, biting her nails and when asked if she was OK, expressed in an exasperated voice that she did not want to send the email she had written out because she was concerned she had misspelled it and was unconfident in knowing for herself, despite having listened to it back several times. Bella reluctantly asks me to check over her work to make sure it is correct.

Later, the teacher tells me that the text-to-speech software can be temperamental, and this affects students' confidence and that this is why they try to teach students alternative methods such as different software, apps inbuilt into mainstream technology devices or to learn braille. So that when problems occur, they can find a way around.

Although, at previous schools, students explained they would not have had the opportunity to work with their support worker to manoeuvre around the difficulties and, instead, would have had the task completed for them. At Crescent College, students were taught methods to overcome the barriers assistive technology can bring to learning which could arguably be seen as a better outcome for the students overall.

5.6.3 Awareness

Awareness was a common discussion point during my time at Crescent College, and this subtheme will detail the experiences of some participants. Students identified several issues they experienced because of the lack of awareness surrounding visual impairment. Moreover, it was a common goal between students and staff to contribute to closing the gap in knowledge within society. Alfie offered an example of the type of work he did towards raising awareness:

A: We do a guiding session in which we will teach their staff how to guide people around because one of my bug bearers/real wind-ups is when you ask somebody for directions, and they say, "well, it's over there" and I think well which 'over there is it there's 360 degrees here at the moment that I can go down. So, it's just making them aware you know "turn right, turn left – the doors open in and out or there's a step up or step down" which would fulfil an awful lot more of guiding. What really blows their minds is we blindfold them, and it's then the visually impaired people who take them for a walk around their premises to see how they cope.

When asked how these sessions are received, Alfie said he received very positive feedback and appreciation. He also offered the information that the National Health Service had requested that he and his team provide this experience for their staff.

By building up student awareness of inbuilt specialist support within affordable mainstream technology, as emphasised in observation 8, Crescent College was able to lessen some of the accessibility barriers students experienced. However, inbuilt support was not seen as a solution to the problem; instead, it was a step in the right direction. One that had the potential to save visually impaired people a lot of money and pressure:

A: A lot of people have said to me "I have got my smartphone; all I use it for is dialling friends and family", and they say I can't afford to buy a newspaper, I can't afford a talking book player, I can't afford to get magnifiers and all that and I will just say you've got a smartphone, its already all built-in to your smartphone, can we just show you how to use that and show you the bits that are there to make life easier.

Students were largely unaware of what mainstream technology could do for them before they reached Crescent College. Therefore, a key aim within the college was to ensure students understood expensive technology designed for people experiencing sight loss and inbuilt affordable assistive technology in mainstream devices. Thus, preparing them if they were not to have access to expensive technology post-college.

Students also shared their goals of wanting to change societal perceptions about people with visual impairments:

O: It just changed. I just accepted it and thought stuff this, it is what it is, but maybe I can contribute to the change of societal perceptions and now I've got a completely different attitude. I don't care; I'll still ride a motorbike just to say I have done it.

Changing perceptions was a shared goal between most people I interacted with at Crescent College, which was apparent immediately upon stepping foot in the building. Staff and students worked tirelessly on projects that involved getting them out into the local community. For example, Paddi, the student attending the mainstream animal care college, believed his enrolment and consequent involvement in lessons there had enabled his sighted peers to gain critical insight into what visual impairment is 'I think my class there definitely understand visual impairment now'. Moreover, he was

confident that his friends at the animal care college were much more understanding and, as a result, more helpful when working with him:

P: For example, one of my friends – a week into Hayside, I was working with him, and he was straight on it as soon as I told him I was VI, he understood it, and he was extremely patient with me helping me to set up my equipment.

Whilst his peers at Hayside College had been very understanding, it had been a struggle in other ways, such as getting the college to make reasonable adjustments so that he could participate the same way as other students. The general feeling was that mainstream settings were often inaccessible for visually impaired people and getting adjustments to make them accessible proved challenging. Over at his mainstream college, Paddi explained how stressful it could be because he only had five minutes to move between lessons, which often involved getting from one side of the campus to another. He indicated his mum's concern over this:

P: My mum's worry was that I couldn't see the edges of the path, and there was a big drop either side (demonstrated a foot length). Obviously, she thought that was dangerous. So, she got the college to email to get people to paint yellow along the edges of the path, and she did say fencing would be even better on either side. But after about four weeks, the college hadn't got a reply, so my mum took action into her own hands, and the paint got done the next day. So that was really good; it's amazing what mums can do.

This new partnership had allowed Hayside College and Paddi to bring new knowledge and, therefore, awareness of visual impairment to teachers and peers that might have previously never received the chance to gain. Thus, contributing to achieving one of the main goals of the college and its people, to raise awareness of visual impairment.

Students did see significant differences between Crescent College and mainstream settings, often eliciting anxiety about moving around in the latter environment:

O: people actually move out of the way here. Over there, kids are kids, and they are always on their phones. It's busy; I hate going over there and walking over and walking around down the corridor. They all sit in the corridor, sticking their legs out; it's a nightmare.

However, by being around their peers within the mainstream environment, they would begin to see changes in attitudes and, therefore, facilitate a more relaxing and safer environment.

5.7 Theme 6: Life after college

The findings of this research presented a variety of emotions regarding life after Crescent College. Students were excited, nervous, apprehensive, and anxious. Everyone had unique goals for their future. However, there was a shared fear among students that they were nervous about leaving the college and how leaving would impact their futures. Having had such specialist support during their time at Crescent College, students felt they would be equipped to move on in whichever direction they desired. However, there was still anxiety felt not only by the students themselves but also by the staff too.

As a previous student, Alfie was able to offer a unique perspective in that he could share how his life had progressed post-college. After leaving, he concluded that he wanted to contribute to raising awareness of visual impairment and decided to return and work at the college. Part of his role involved external visits to different schools, companies, and even the NHS, and he demonstrated some of the work he had been involved in:

A: We go in with a whole load of tech and bits of kit, some that demonstrated what I can see – others showing how we use technology to read, how we use it for talking books. Recently, we got two teachers up. We blindfolded them, gave them a cane each and said all we wanted them to do was let us guide you across the room. We had set up a mini obstacle course with cones, cardboard boxes, a carpet just so they could get a feeling of how a cane actually works because everyone sees a cane and sees it going left to right, thinking it's just there to hit against obstacles and I'm talking about actually feeling the vibration coming up the handles and noticing the difference on different textures hence why we put a carpet on top of a wooden floor. So, you get the really smooth glide on the wooden floor but as soon as you hit carpet, the texture changes. I also said, listen to the sound it makes so automatically they were using two other senses to get an idea of what was around them.

He found that this work significantly impacted societal perceptions of visual impairment. By placing people in the shoes of visually impaired individuals, they can gain a deeper understanding and go on to consider this in their day-to-day lives. Students also expressed goals to go on to change societal perceptions around visual impairment after their time at the college:

O: I just see myself as a normal person, but my eyes don't work very well, you know? I've kind of got this life mission that I want to change people's perceptions of blind people. I think movies give that perception that blind people can't see anything; they use the white stick; they think that when you're blind, you're completely blind, they don't realise there's people

that are partially sighted, which is quite a deluded way to think but a lot of people do think that but I think if people meet me, they will think oh I met this guy today he was blind, but he was really cool... you know they'll remember that. So, when they meet or see another blind person, they might change their perception and think not all blind people are the same.

In the previous theme, I highlighted some students' reluctance toward using new resources, including assistive technology. One of the main worries for students post-college was their ability to access certain types of technology that they had become reliant on during their time at Crescent College. Students' previous experiences of accessing assistive technology tailored to supporting visually impaired people were varied but often came down to whether insufficient funds constrained them. Rosie explained how *'assistive technologies are usually considerably more expensive than mainstream technologies and therefore inaccessible to many'*. Bella offered an example of this from a student perspective:

B: *So I've had a BrailleNote since about the age of 9 or 10, umm and then once I finished my last year of compulsory education, my county were like, okay, we need to take your stuff back, so my iPad, laptop, BrailleNote. I was like, 'o...k.' I'm okay without the iPad and the laptop because I have personal ones, but I was for a couple of months lost because I didn't have a BrailleNote.*

Having used a BrailleNote device for over ten years, the adjustment to no longer having one was extremely difficult for Bella. She emphasised how *'lost'* she felt without one and that her mainstream technology did not have the functionality to support her in the same way the BrailleNote technology could. However, once arriving at Crescent College, Bella was allowed to use a BrailleNote again, and she was overjoyed:

B: *I can type documents on a laptop but reading them, I prefer reading in braille to listening to speech tell me what the document is... So, I was quite lost, and then Rosie gave me a BrailleNote, and I was like, 'YES, THANK YOU!'.*

However, this could raise concern for her progress once she leaves the college and again, she no longer has access to the BrailleNote. Staff shared similar concerns about how students would manage their independent lives after leaving:

A: *if you start looking at the price of some software. I spoke about fusion; I'm fortunate that I get it through access to work. If I had to go and buy it, I couldn't afford it. It costs a third of a*

price of a reasonable first-time car; you're looking at around £2500 – 3000 for it. For a piece of software on a computer. You can start looking at specialised pieces of equipment, you can buy a video magnifier that's no bigger than my iPad here, and it's 1500-1600.

There was a high level of worry from both staff and students about the struggles students could face in accessing support after college—moreover, this heightened anxieties for students regarding finding and maintaining long-term employment, education, or training. As the findings of this study suggest, many students relied on their expensive assistive technologies, and there was a concern that having a heavy reliance on these could potentially hinder their ability to succeed in their future aspirations.

Paddi mentioned at the beginning of our interview that he felt his previous school ‘*wrapped him up in cotton wool*’ and that since coming to Crescent College, he had developed a significant amount of independence. Moreover, this was common for all students, and often one of the main reasons behind this was their access to assistive technology such as the OrCam and BrailleNote devices. A key concern for the students regarding their future is continuing to have the same level of independence and even wanting to build on it even further. The students suggested they could not afford assistive technology and would not have been able to experience them had it not been for Crescent College.

Ollie felt strongly that partnership-FE and partnerships across all levels should be expanded as they had allowed him to develop friendships with students who did not have visual impairments or other disabilities. It was apparent that he wanted to continue these relationships post-college and still have the opportunity to develop new relationships:

O: Specialist colleges with partnerships are good. I think they need to work with that more, I know they've got specialist colleges over the UK, but they're just purely for VI people and what I've noticed.... I've gone on trips with charities like action for blind, and the students from those colleges their only friends are other VI students. So, they're in their own communities. They've got groups on Facebook; I'm a member, I'm cool with them, and a lot of them I'm friends with too, but my friendship group, a lot of them are just normal lads... I don't want to say normal because what's normal, but what society would call mainstream people. Not to say that's the right term, but you get what I'm saying, but I feel they need to not force but promote integration more. I really believe in these partnerships.

The beliefs felt by the participants in this study centred around advocating for these types of educational partnerships. Their successes during their time at Crescent College outweighed the majority of drawbacks. Therefore, a consensus for continuing and expanding these partnerships was shared among the participants in this study.

5.8 Summary

Six themes, which drew on the experiences of visually impaired students in one specialist/mainstream partnership further education college, were presented in this chapter. The first theme illustrated students' experiences before embarking on their further education journeys. Theme two built on those previous experiences and explored how they shaped students' reasons for accessing further education. Reasons for choosing Crescent College were investigated in theme three, which led the way to highlighting the unique sources of support students received in theme four. Throughout the data collection, it became apparent that students faced many barriers and therefore, factors influencing accessibility and sense of belonging were revealed in theme five. Finally, theme six explored participants' feelings about life after leaving Crescent College and uncovered some shared concerns and anxieties. In chapter six, I consider the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical lenses as considered in chapter two of this thesis.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter combines the evidence I have collected and interpreted through my research journey to form a conclusion that offers the most appropriate explanation for the facts I have gathered. I begin by exploring and considering the significance of my findings in relation to the research questions:

Q1: What is the context of this partnership further education setting?

First, I demonstrate how the autoethnographic element, detailed in Chapter Four – The Findings Part 1, answers research question one.

Q2: What are the experiences of visually impaired students in one partnership further education setting?

To answer research question two, I bring together the literature, staff perspectives and the student's experiences in Chapter Five – The Findings Part 2.

Before discussing how the final research question has been answered, I address the theoretical lenses that underpin my study, as outlined in chapter two of the thesis.

Q3: Within the context of this study, what are the aspects of partnership which support the inclusion of visually impaired students?

Finally, to close the discussion, I propose a new model of partnership further education based on the unique nature of this research setting. The model serves as a method to inform current and future further education stakeholders about the importance of special-mainstream partnerships and how they can facilitate the inclusion of visually impaired students.

6.2 Autoethnographic reflections

Chapter four presented the findings from my reflective journal, which held my personal experiences and perspectives as a researcher from the beginning of the research journey. As a researcher, it was critical that I problematised my experiences because, as Sikes (2005) highlighted, personal identities can influence perceptions. Therefore, in bringing my preconceptions as the researcher to the forefront, I can contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of disability in general (Svendby, Romsland and Moen, 2018) and visual impairment and partnership further education more specifically.

Beattie (2022) states that keeping notes about our emotions and feelings supports memory accounts in later stages of research and therefore, is a critical practice for researchers. Autoethnography as an approach embraces the fact that research is never separated from the researchers that carry it out; because of this, it addresses the potential issues that I outlined in chapter four by making cultural characteristics of the phenomena being examined familiar for all (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). For example, I wanted to understand how and when I first became aware of the concept of ‘special education’ and the impression I drew from this experience. Therefore, I drew on my memories of my time in primary school, which unearthed some significant moments, for instance:

Researcher: *Hidden behind big steel gates, covered by trees, stood what I believed to be a castle at age five.*

Memory is a critical element of autoethnography and Beattie (2022: 111) emphasises that ‘memories elicited from our past in the moment of writing ‘present past’ allows alternative histories and marginal accounts to be uncovered and reconstructed in specific social and cultural contexts’. As such, the memory of the school ‘*behind steel gates*’ negatively affected my preconceptions of special education in that I believed special education to keep disabled students hidden. Thus, I imagined Crescent College might also reflect this method, whereby students would be ‘hidden’ away. As such, my ideas reinforced stereotypes and encouraged cultural myths about disabled people being powerless and degraded (Charlton, 2010). My only knowledge of special education was segregation, which perpetuates devaluation, stigmatisation, stereotyping, isolation and prejudice through categorising disabled students as different from the socially constructed norm (Demetriou, 2022; Junoven et al., 2019). Furthermore, with this being my preconception, I was concerned that Crescent

College could be an environment that encouraged disability oppression for visually impaired students.

Researcher: *The idea that special schools were like prisons developed because growing up, the 'special educational school' felt like a taboo subject, one that only adults would discuss, and children would occasionally overhear. For example, I once heard some teachers talking about how they found it disturbing that the children were never taken out of the school, they were kept inside at all times, and no one knew who they were or anything about them.*

Looking back at this now, I can begin to understand why those teachers were so disturbed to not know anything about the individuals at the school despite being in such proximity to them and this reflects the discussion in the literature, which depicts special schools as exclusionary and segregated places (Barton, 2005; Demetriou, 2022; Hornby, 2014; Norwich, 2006; Whittaker and Kenworthy, 2012). In addition, not knowing anything about the special school was paramount as one effect of the compelling special education paradigm is the silencing of the students, making them mere recipients of provision (Allan, 2008). Furthermore, this is a significant experience from my childhood because those around me held a negative view of special education, which impacted my ideas about it and, consequently, my thoughts about the areas I explored in this study. Autoethnography enabled me to recognise how my early experiences profoundly influenced my research and my position as a researcher studying visually impaired students' experiences of further education.

As someone who experienced a level of concern for disabled students from an early age because of the negative aspects of segregation and the language I heard from adults when talking about the special school, such as 'disturbing'; this paved the way for researcher bias within the study. Additionally, I had spent time at Crescent College before this doctoral research. My master's research, which looked at students' use of assistive technology, meant I had prior knowledge of the setting. However, the students I worked with during my master's project had all graduated from Crescent College by the time research took place for this doctoral project. Therefore, the impact of my prior knowledge about the case meant that the research was not unbiased in terms of how my preconceived understandings of visual impairment and special education changed after spending time at Crescent College. I realised my pre-understandings did not apply to everything and everyone that falls under the categories of special education and visually impaired persons. However, as Fleming (2018) notes, a key advantage of insider research is the knowledge of the '*present situation*', which allowed me to develop the research questions based on my rich understanding of the issues

that needed further investigation, as outlined in my master's research. Still, I needed to consider researcher bias and ensure I took steps to minimise potential bias, which Fleming (2018) suggested is achievable through a rigorous and transparent research design. Therefore, incorporating an autoethnographic aspect into my study serves to acknowledge and incorporate my bias and personal opinion into my research and uncover how my view relates to the views of those who experience visual impairment.

Keeping an autoethnographic account allowed me to contextualise the college for the readers of this thesis to create a sense of feel and place. Also, it enabled me to recognise that my presumptions reflected a negative view of special education. For example, in my autoethnographic account where I detail some of the things I remembered from childhood:

Researcher: *Stories that were frightening such as how students were essentially locked in the building and kept away from others. Or upsetting ones such as how the children would not get to pursue the same dreams and goals as my peers and I.*

Thus, my childhood experience demonstrates a potential pre-understanding of the students in Crescent College, being that they would be segregated from non-disabled peers and broader society. I did, however, recognise these were extreme, and I had hoped that this would not be the case due to Crescent College being a partnership by nature. Therefore, I had purposely not conducted too much research around the case, only what was necessary to gain contact to not further contribute to any preconceived ideas. Instead, my ideas of what I might expect were reflective of what I had visually and audibly witnessed from an early age:

Researcher: *I imagined turning up and the big gates being locked (which I now know were not there); I worried that students would not like me if I did get in and imagined a scenario where my presence caused distress; I also thought about how little I knew about special education at the time and this influenced feelings of imposter syndrome.*

I had never been in a setting like Crescent College. I questioned as to why someone who was non-disabled and, at the time, lacked in-depth knowledge about special education would be afforded this privileged position to conduct the research. With those feelings, I felt that I had not earned the right to undertake such pertinent research and thus, this fostered my feelings of imposter syndrome.

However, as I walked into the building and started talking to students and staff, I realised I had much to learn from them. In turn, this meant my research was necessary but also that I needed to be in a position to do it justice despite not knowing much about partnership-FE, visual impairment or special education. I had a negative view of special education when I entered Crescent College. Despite having learned about inclusion during my undergraduate degree and conducting research into the notion, I had not experienced inclusionary special education first-hand and therefore, I still needed to learn what to expect when first entering the setting of this study. Likewise, I had not experienced exclusionary special education first-hand. However, I had more preconceived ideas due to the impressions I received from adults around me as a young child in primary school. Reflecting on this then, I believe my early preconceived impressions were deep-rooted. Thus, reflexivity was crucial for unpicking these. My early views are well-documented in the literature, as many scholars have explored the stigmatising effects of special education (Algraigay and Boyle, 2017; Allan, 2008; Barton, 2005; Norwich, 2006).

One critical element of my autoethnographic account is the following activity that I witnessed during my walk around the college:

Researcher: *One of the students was visually impaired and was reading the braille on the signs to navigate the group around the building.*

This is evidence of the social model in practice as Crescent College evidently makes adjustments to the environment to ensure visually impaired students can navigate around independently.

Furthermore, this has been found to be crucial for inclusive education across all levels (Collins, AAzmat and Rentschler, 2018; Karellou, 2019; Oliver and Barnes, 2012; Shuayb, 2020).

Autoethnographic writing is both a product and a process (Chao, 2019). In terms of the former, I have this final product in the form of my thesis, which has answered my proposed research question three. As for the latter, I have gained much more profound and richer insights into how I view visual impairment, special education and disability. Furthermore, by reflecting on my position in this research concerning other people (the disabled people I have encountered along the way), I have made characteristics of partnership education and visual impairment familiar by creating a sense of feel and place (Sikes, 2005). Therefore, I situate this thesis's reader within Crescent College and

among the students who participated in the research. I hope to demonstrate the significance of autoethnography in shifting my pre-understandings of special education, visual impairment and the students' lives in this research. In turn, I encourage others, both insiders and outsiders, to do the same in their research outputs to help foster greater awareness of the areas of concern in my study.

A large proportion of disability literature is written from a medicalised 'expert vantage point' (Polczyk, 2012: 177), meaning non-disabled researchers distribute their judgements and conclusions about disabled people (Stone and Priestly, 1996). However, there has been a significant increase in the number of inclusive studies carried out (Hewett and Douglas, 2015; Nind, 2014; Tuffrey-Wijne and Butler, 2010; Walmsley and Central England People First, 2014). As such, the growing body of literature shows the challenges facing inclusive disability research in terms of the design and implementation of research. The inclusive research model (Walmsley 2001, 2004; Walmsley and Johnson 2003) argues that people with the relevant experience about the studied topic should be included in the research. Whilst this literature paved the way for more inclusive disability studies, I did not feel it appropriate to position myself within the remit of 'expert', neither ethically nor knowledgeably, as I did not know enough about partnership-FE or vision impairment to be considered 'an expert', nor did I want to knowingly contribute to further marginalisation of visually impaired students through my interpretation of their lives alone. Therefore, in considering the inclusive research model with appropriate experience of the phenomenon being explored (Walmsley 2001, 2004; Walmsley and Johnson 2003), I chose to include visually impaired students and staff working within Crescent College, as the study aims to understand the experiences of visually impaired students within one partnership further education setting. I did, however, as Ostrove and Rinaldi (2013) suggest, reflect on my perspective and privilege as this ensures researchers are aware of and account for any power disparities. For my study, such power disparities could have emerged through my being a non-disabled researcher and the disabled participants. Thus, I aim to avoid normative interpretations of my research findings by recognising this and using autoethnography to reflect on my views. Henceforth, I used autoethnography in this study to challenge the largely uncontested ways of doing disability research as a non-disabled researcher and provide an example of why non-disabled people know so little about disability (Svendby, Romsland and Moen, 2018).

At the end of my masters study, after conversations with staff and students in Crescent College, I asked for feedback on my methods of data collection. Participants shared that through the semi-structured interviews they felt they could engage in open conversation with someone who listened and valued their voices. Moreover, through this previous study I was exposed to some of the

problems visually impaired students faced due to not having their opinions heard or acted upon on matters that concern them. Thereby, in returning to conduct a more profound doctoral study specifically concerned with the nature of partnership further education concerning how it supports visually impaired students, I have listened to their opinions and acted upon bringing awareness to their experiences. Members of Crescent College, both past and present, were involved because they influenced my decision to go back to their college to conduct more in-depth research.

6.3 Students' experiences

I designed research question two to address the gap in the literature relating to the limited understanding of visually impaired students' voices on their educational experiences in further education. Much of the literature that focuses on individuals' experiences or perceptions of visually impaired students in education has either focused on parents' views (Cane, Fanshawe and Goodwin, 2021; Goodenough, Pease and Williams, 2021; Poggrund, Darst and Boland, 2013), teachers' views (Morris and Sharma, 2011; Miyauchi, 2020; Pease et al., 2021), compulsory school-aged children's views (Hewett et al., 2010; Khadka et al., 2012; Plaskett, 2015; Tadic et al., 2015; Roberston, Tadic and Rahi, 2021), or the views of those in higher education (Bishop and Rhind, 2011; Croft, 2020; Croft, 2021; Frank, 2017; Frank, McLinden and Douglas, 2020; Hewett et al., 2017; Lourens and Swartz, 2016; Southcott and Opie, 2016). Therefore, previous research leaves out the views of those in further education. However, Morris (2014) conducted a project concerned with the effectiveness of inclusive education for visually impaired students in further education. Still, they focused on the views of six Welsh students in various further education settings. However, my research differed in that I undertook a case study conducted in one English college with its entire visually impaired cohort as the participants. Williams (2015) completed a doctoral project looking at the experiences of visually impaired individuals in terms of their transitions from compulsory education, levels of independence and sense of identity during the transition process. Williams (2015) included participants who had moved to further education colleges and others who had moved into employment or unemployment and recommended that there is much to learn from listening to the voices of visually impaired students. Therefore, my study contributes to their findings and explores the under-researched area of experiences of visually impaired students in partnership- further education specifically.

6.3.1 Students' experiences of independence

The literature review demonstrated that young people usually significantly develop their independence once they reach further education (McGuckin, Shevlin, Bell and Devecchi, 2013; Scanlon, Shevli and McGuckin, 2014). Additionally, for many young people, further education signifies a key move into adulthood (Packer and Thomas, 2021). Therefore, moving from secondary school to a separate further education institution can be a momentous occasion (Pitt and Curtin, 2004). Crescent College reflects this finding from Pitt and Curtin (2004) and emphasises that one of its main aims is to 'maximise independence' because they maintain the view that independence contributes to a fulfilled adult life. For example, Crescent College allows students to reach their level of complete independence by helping them to progress to an occupation through paid employment or voluntary work, giving them a choice to study within the mainstream further education curriculum, or encouraging their active involvement in community activities and supporting them to live as independent a lifestyle as possible alone or in the family home.

During data collection, students compared their experiences within Crescent College to those in previous educational establishments (some mainstream and some specialist). I discovered that Crescent College had offered them more independence than they had ever imagined was possible. However, it is imperative to note that the previous education experiences students referred to were all at the secondary level and, therefore, cannot be directly compared to their experiences in Crescent College. In addition, it is a further education setting, and the literature already shows that young people are likely to develop their level of independence at the further education stage (McGuckin, Shevlin, Bell and Devecchi, 2013). Despite this, secondary education has also been noted as a phase in young people's lives whereby they are expected to gain a certain level of independence. Nevertheless, there is a notable plateau regarding the status of independence learned by disabled students during this time (Douglas and Hewett, 2014; Hume, Boyd, Hamm and Kucharczyk, 2014; Ingram, Dorsett and Macfarlane, 2019; Ravenscroft, 2013). With that, my analysis of the secondary school experiences of the students in this research is relevant in emphasising that the skills they learn at Crescent College concerning independence are vital to their development, or lack of, due to their secondary experiences.

For the students in this research, the move to Crescent College was long-awaited; they had reached a pivotal point in their lives where they realised they had outgrown having everything done for

them. For example, Ollie highlighted how he felt he would not *'have gotten very independent'* if he had stayed studying at his secondary school. Such monumental moments in young people's lives shape them into the adults they become later (Packer and Thomas, 2021). For visually impaired students, this transition can be pivotal as it opens them up to the world of adulthood and is often the first glimpse of being treated as an adult they have had. The findings showed how students had felt *'babied'*, as Merlin described it, in their previous schools, having tasks completed on their behalf constantly and never feeling as though they had the chance to make mistakes for themselves.

Infantilism is a dominant theme in disability literature which scholars believe emerged because non-disabled people often assume physical disability 'spreads' also to include an impaired cognitive function (Agmon, Sa'ar and Araten-Bergman, 2016; Nario-Redmond, Kemerling and Silverman, 2019). Thus, some disabled people present an unwillingness to associate with disabled identities (Barnes, 2007; Riddell and Weedon, 2014), and the experiences of the students in this research correlate with this. Furthermore, whilst the students valued their disabled identity, they experienced issues due to ableism through infantilism in how they were treated. For example, Ollie mentioned he felt people spoke to him as though he did not *'have a brain cell'*. Moreover, when asked to elaborate on what he meant by this phrase, it became clear he had been the subject of ableism at his secondary school, whereby his peers and some staff viewed him as disabled before a human being. In turn, this had previously led to Ollie becoming *'depressed'*; like other students, he tried to disassociate himself from vision impairment. Therefore, students' experiences reflect the literature surrounding disability and mental health. Discrimination and negative societal views have been found to have lasting effects on disabled people's mental health, such as an increased risk of depression. In addition, poor mental health can encourage disabled people to dissociate from their identities (Botha and Frost, 2020; Logeswaran et al., 2019; van Veelen et al., 2020). Beauchamp-Pryor (2012) discovered how the opposing views of disabled people in society often lead to an unwillingness from individuals to identify themselves as disabled students in educational environments. Although Ollie had come to terms with his vision impairment before coming to Crescent College, explaining that he had *'accepted'* the fact that he could not see. It was, however, clear he was unable to feel comfortable amongst some of his peers at Crescent College.

Observation 10 – With Ollie at lunch

I have been in Crescent College for 12 days thus far, and it is only now that I have seen Ollie sitting amongst his peers.

Ollie says he only sometimes stays at Crescent College during social hours such as mealtimes. I ask why and he explains that he does not feel he can relate to many of the other students here because they are more 'disabled' than he is [referring to those with cognitive impairments]. He prefers to socialise with other visually impaired students or his peers at the mainstream college.

Ollie's experience of infantilism at his mainstream secondary school had therefore infiltrated his life at Crescent College. Moreover, Ollie's resistance was linked to his earlier experiences, whereby his vision impairment was equated with infantilism and led to significant limitations of his potential. As a result, Ollie did not engage socially at Crescent College for fear of being stigmatised as he was in secondary school. However, the partnership environment meant he could participate socially with his mainstream peers with whom he had developed stronger relationships. Therefore, there may be a concern for other students in Ollie's position that also come to terms with their vision impairment but continually use transgression to conceal it from others.

Chapter 5, the interview and observation findings, begins with theme one, which covers the participants' previous education experiences, and it was here that I introduced students' frustrations with their secondary schooling. Again, Paddi and Ollie were the most explicit regarding their experiences in secondary school, using phrases such as *'they wrapped us in cotton wool'* and *'they [support staff] were there all the time'*.

Observation 9 – Computer Lesson 2

Students are working through their worksheets independently. Some students constantly ask the teacher or me to help them; however, I have been briefed that I should encourage them to work through issues independently.

Throughout the lesson, we discuss issues that arise and encourage the students to overcome things alone. Mistakes are made, of course, but this appears to be a successful technique with students learning from these.

Observation 9 presents a common theme within the literature which results in disabled students leaving compulsory education without the necessary skills in place to live independent lifestyles (Douglas and Hewett, 2014). A crucial aspect of navigating transitions through education is the ability to make mistakes, as they help young people to develop coping strategies (Bagnall, 2020; Bonnie and Backes, 2019; Evans, Borriello and Field, 2018; Winn and Hay, 2009); thus, enabling them to deal with any consequences they may encounter. However, the students involved in this study disclosed that they still needed to be allowed to learn from their mistakes, as they typically had had tasks completed for them whether they were struggling or not. Therefore, Crescent College staff have developed techniques encouraging students to overcome obstacles independently by learning from their mistakes. As Hattie (2012) concurs, achievement can be heightened if opportunities for students to learn from their mistakes are obtainable.

Crescent College had allocated funding, facilities, staff knowledge and commitment, and resources to help improve visually impaired students' abilities to undertake instrumental activities of daily living, which are fundamental to learning and maintaining independence. Instrumental activities of daily living are the skills a person must have to independently care for oneself (Edemekong et al., 2022). Instrumental activities of daily living are usually learnt during the teenage years and are developed as individuals move into early adulthood (Guo and Sapra, 2022). In addition, they are considered survival skills and activities that are essential for individuals to perform specific day-to-day tasks associated with an independent lifestyle (Guo and Sapra, 2022).

The Lawton Instrumental Activities of Daily Living scale was developed by Lawton and Brody (1969) to assess the more complex activities that are crucial for living in the community. The Lawton scale is mainly linked to assessing those experiencing acute illness, regular ageing changes, declining chronic illness and those who have been hospitalised (Graf, 2008). However, some of the students in my research only had the opportunity to develop instrumental activities of daily living skills partially during their adolescent years. Moreover, students were only learning them when this research took place; therefore, the scale can also be applied to visually impaired students in further education. Instrumental Activities of Daily Living include, but are not limited to, survival skills such as cooking, housekeeping, managing money, self—care, and community living (Guo, 2020; Lawton and Brody, 1969). A person's inability to perform some or all instrumental activities of daily living can result in poor quality of life and unsafe conditions (Edemekong et al., 2022). Furthermore, Edemekong et al.

(2022) also indicate that an inability to complete instrumental activities of daily living can lead to a person's subsequent dependence on other people, such as family or caregivers.

Researchers have reported that sight loss affects people's abilities to carry out instrumental activities of daily living (Li et al., 2021; Pardhan et al., 2015; Teutsch et al., 2016). Furthermore, this is demonstrated through the fact that participants all highlighted how they found cooking difficult. Jones, Bartlett and Cooke (2019) discovered that cooking was a difficulty shared amongst their visually impaired participants and is also considered an Instrumental Activity of Daily Living. Therefore, individuals with vision impairments often opt for more accessible options, such as buying pre-prepared food and generally making unhealthy food choices which, in turn, has been found to contribute to a poor quality of life (Jones, Bartlett and Cooke, 2010). Moreover, it was found that a lack of inclusion in society for visually impaired people is a primary contributing factor affecting their quality of life. As such, skills training in shopping and cooking could significantly improve this. Crescent College is an example of how this finding from Jones, Bartlett and Cooke (2019) is working in practice; students cooking skills are either developed through working in the café enterprise or through one-to-one support in the kitchen in the residential halls.

Furthermore, for visually impaired people, there is a shift in that assistive technologies can enable them to have a more independent life away from having to rely on other people (Lee, Reddie and Carroll, 2021). Although, this is only successful if people are afforded the opportunities to use and learn such technology. Such occasions are limited as parents are often overprotective, ultimately preventing these students from learning essential independence skills (McConnell, 1999). Indeed, Salminen and Karhula (2014) discovered through their study that looked into challenges of participation for young people with visual impairments that parents felt they catered too much for their children and left them doubting their abilities to be independent. For instance, Bella stated how her mother could not teach her how to iron her clothing and prepare her meals out of worry that she would injure herself. With that, Bella's mother would complete these activities herself, which meant Bella had limited opportunity to practice these vital skills for herself.

Similarly, Ollie emphasised how he had previously not been able to fully develop his skills in certain instrumental activities of daily living, and this was his main reason for choosing to study at Crescent College. As a result, Ollie can now cook, wash his clothing and *'do everything independently'*. Bella

explained how her mum would complete tasks on her behalf at home, such as using the hob to prepare food, because it was '*easier*'. Whereas at Crescent College, students are introduced to assistive technologies and are taught how to use them properly, enabling them to complete these tasks alone. For instance, Ollie told me how students are taught to use technologies such as the OrCam device or the 'Seeing AI' mobile application. Both technologies help students read instructions like food labels, enabling them to cook with the right ingredients and know how long things need to be cooked. Observation 5 validated his claim:

Observation 5 - Braille Lesson

Students are learning braille and braille technology. Ollie begins to tell me what he is planning to cook for himself for his dinner that evening. He tells me he will use his Seeing AI app to ensure he does not mess it up.

Then he proceeds to show me his Seeing AI app. Ollie pulls out a bar of chocolate and scans its barcode to show me how the app can identify what the product is and other details, such as the ingredients it contains.

Knowing how to use apps such as Seeing AI is life-changing for students to make life healthier and more manageable (Chuckun, Coonjan and Nagowah, 2019) by learning to complete instrumental activities of daily living. Instrumental activities of daily living are synchronous with moving into adult life for the participants in this research, and therefore, the ability to develop these skills should be a focal point of any current or future partnership further education institution. To summarise, instrumental activities of daily living deal with the more complex but still vital aspects of independence such as preparing and making the food to eat. They are not considered essential for basic functioning, however, they are regarded as essential for assessing relative independence and quality of life.

Students' experiences of independence were linked to a level of over-supportiveness of parents and teachers in their earlier compulsory schooling days, which ultimately impacted their ability to learn vital skills they attributed to becoming independent young adults. Thus, students, along with parents, sought a further education college that they knew would allow them to develop skills such as cooking, managing finances and living alone. Due to the nature of partnership further education,

the shared goal of becoming less dependent on others, such as parents and teachers, is achievable for the students in this research.

6.3.2 Students' experiences of support

The previous section explored students' experiences of independence which can be linked with their experiences of support. Research has shown that transitions can be challenging, and many visually impaired students have reported feeling anxious about moving to a different education setting (McCarthy and Shevlin, 2017). One of the findings from my study was that students' feelings of stress, worry and anxiety were alleviated during their transitions to and from Crescent College due to the tailored support available to them. Therefore, support is critical for students' participation in further education and beyond.

Students expected to see a drastic change in how they were treated once they moved into post-compulsory education and how they felt Crescent College not only facilitated this but exceeded their expectations. Paddi felt that previous teachers had been '*too involved*', and Ollie suggested his secondary school had '*wrapped us in cotton wool*'. This over-supportiveness contributed to a dependence on others and students missing out on the support to which they were entitled. Social support was not something the students had always experienced. They reported specific incidents in their previous non-partnership or specialist settings whereby they were subjected to bullying, leading to isolation from their sighted peers. For example, Ollie emphasised how he did not receive much social support from his mainstream peers:

Observation 6 (continued) – Discussion with Ollie in corridor

Ollie explains how he had friends outside of school that he had grown up with but that it took him a long time to gain friendships at his secondary school because it took a long time to change people's negative perceptions of him.

Observation 6 reflected what Ollie explained in his interview, 'some people are very ignorant, some people are like oh he's visually impaired, he's disabled as such so people would even talk about you behind you, and you could hear'. This experience also led Ollie to remove himself from the

environment. It meant he would spend significant time in the safety of the disability hub at his mainstream school, where only students with disabilities could congregate.

Being subjected to bullying is a more common theme in the literature that looks at visually impaired students' experiences in mainstream education. For example, a report by Blind Children UK found that 43% of children with a visual impairment have experienced bullying due to their sight loss, and 86% of the children involved in that statistic found themselves excluded from activities by their peers (McCormick, 2015). Roseblum (2000) also found that visually impaired adolescents are likelier to be bullied by their sighted peers in educational environments. In turn, this could contribute to the high loneliness among visually impaired students in mainstream schools (Jessup et al., 2018). The students in this study either explicitly reported feeling '*left out*' in their previous settings, or their reactions to talking on the topic suggested it, whether that be due to social isolation or not having the facilities necessary to participate. For example, Merlin was a particularly timid character. When discussing her secondary school, she was very standoffish and wanted to change the subject quickly after informing me that she did not have many friends during her time there. Thus, suggesting she had a negative social support experience during this period of her academic life. The extended curriculum at Crescent College included various social activities for all students to get involved in if they desired. Students being unable to participate in social activities simply because the setting is not appropriately equipped, or their peers purposely leave them out is unacceptable. Therefore, this aspect of the partnership further education is vital to contribute to changing attitudes towards visual impairment.

Moreover, social support has been found to offer disabled students an outlet to manage and process any stress they encounter and can be viewed as a coping mechanism for these individuals (Cairney, Rigoli and Piek, 2013). The visually impaired students in this research emphasised feelings of stress for many reasons. For example, Bella was frustrated that her mother would complete tasks on her behalf instead of supporting her in learning to overcome them. In addition, Alfie pushed his family and friends away because he felt like a burden at the beginning of his sight loss journey. Therefore, social support is essential for visually impaired students in light of the findings of this study. Alfie further explained how he and his peers would support one another by setting tasks for each other to complete. '*One of the things I used to do here as a student was set challenges for my housemates who were all V*', and this further demonstrates how social support can transform these individuals' lives.

Manitsa and Doikou (2022) found that social support from teachers and peers is, for visually impaired students, fundamental in their socioemotional development and academic learning. Thus, social or personal support and academic support go hand in hand. The negative social support was something students reported during their younger years, and their development into young adults post the age of sixteen might also enhance their ability to develop social relationships during their time at Crescent College. Although the presence of visually impaired students within this partnership college and the surrounding community is the most significant contributing factor to these students' abilities to create strong social relationships. Furthermore, this can be demonstrated through the non-stigmatising attitudes of peers, staff, and the community within and around Crescent College.

It should be noted that other students alluded to having more positive experiences, such as Bella, who was grateful for the specialist support she received in secondary school. However, as Paddi and Ollie had confident personalities, it could be argued that Bella required over-supportiveness from her school due to her natural shyness and introversion.

Observation 8 – The College Office (1)

The task is to send an email that will be received by all staff, students, parents and guardians. Bella is visibly agitated, biting her nails and when asked if she was OK, expressed in an exasperated voice that she did not want to send the email she had written out because she was concerned she had misspelled it and was unconfident in knowing for herself, despite having listened to it back several times. Bella reluctantly asks me to check over her work to make sure it is correct.

Later, the teacher tells me that the text-to-speech software can be temperamental, and this affects students' confidence and that this is why they try to teach students alternative methods such as different software, apps inbuilt into mainstream technology devices or to learn braille. So that when problems occur, they can find a way around.

Observation 8 presents an example of where Crescent College creates opportunities for independence, as Bella later explained that she hoped to eventually learn to be confident in her work without asking for help. A finding from Latif (2022) substantiates Bella's situation as they found that visually impaired students are often unable to access written material independently due to schools often over-supporting students, for example, by providing assistance from a teacher instead

of offering large print. This could raise concerns for later life when such constant extra support, such as in the workplace or university, may be unavailable.

Even though the students all attended different schools, mainstream secondary schooling supported the students in this study similarly, not considering the differing levels of need. For example, Bella requires more support than others, thus suggesting mainstream settings are ill-equipped to adapt their support depending on the specific students' needs. Regardless of research emphasising that there is no one size fits all solution for supporting visually impaired students (Russell-Minda et al., 2007; Bishop and Rhind, 2011), it appears that for the students in this study, their secondary school experience involved just that. I argue this as a form of 'blanket' support which assumes that the same support style can be applied to every visually impaired student. This 'blanket' style of support has affected the participants in different ways, some feeling it was necessary (Bella, Kylie) and others desperate to achieve more independence in their subsequent education setting (Paddi, Ollie). Regardless, the over-supportiveness the participants received from teachers and specialist staff at their previous schools contributed to their decision to attend Crescent College for their further education journeys. All participants in this study chose to attend Crescent College, mainly or partly, because it promised them the chance to become more in control over their own lives, which was something they had never experienced before, whether they had desired it or not. Ultimately, the young people in this study are either concerned with receiving tailored academic or personal support. Due to the nature of partnership further education, this goal is achievable for them with Crescent College as their stepping-stone.

When discussing the types of academic support available at Crescent College, it became apparent that some students needed help to tailor their support at their previous schools. For example, Ollie explained how his mainstream secondary school had received funding to provide him with a BrailleNote, and in turn, his school expected him to take his notes. Ollie felt this hindered his ability to listen to the teacher properly and highlighted how he *'wasn't picking up the lesson'*. As such, his learning support assistant told him what to write as Ollie would often fall behind the discussion, and this meant that he would read all his notes back after the lesson and, in his words, *'it was all gibberish'*. Therefore, Ollie being given the BrailleNote negatively impacted his ability to fully listen and retain information, suggesting that his secondary school was ill-equipped to tailor academic support based on the student's individual needs. Whilst, this experience occurred in a secondary school, the approach to support that Ollie experienced, whereby staff did too much for them, is a

common theme across the different levels of education environments (Haakma, Janssen and Minnaert, 2016; McLinden et al., 2020; Morris and Sharma, 2011). Therefore, this finding is relevant to unpack in my study. In mainstream further education, students often have the same experience as one another, learning through the exact same methods, taking the exact same assessments, and sometimes even moving on to complete the same higher education course or job role. Ollie praised the partnership, stating that they told him he could do whatever he wished so long as it worked for him and his learning style. Therefore, in lessons, Ollie listens whilst his learning support assistant takes word-for-word notes. As well as this, Ollie can ask them to sit at the back of the class as they do not need to engage with him in the lesson. As such, they allow Ollie to interact with his peers and experience the lessons the same way as his non-disabled peers. Tailored and differentiated academic support for visually impaired students in mainstream schools is problematic (Mafa and Chaminuka, 2012), and this could be due to attitudes and lack of knowledge. Teachers can fail to recognise how vital inclusive education is to the experiences of visually impaired students (Asamoah, 2018; Morris, 2014). Furthermore, mainstream teachers typically do not have skills or understanding of reading and translating braille (Tobin and Hill, 2015), how to best implement individualised education programmes, the most effective specialist teaching resources, or the best methods to adapt and modify lessons (Datta and Skrebneva, 2021).

In contrast to Ollie's experience, Sammy detailed how he had difficulty reaching a mutual agreement with two students enrolled solely at the mainstream college. The students were sisters with Wolfram syndrome, a genetic condition that deteriorates over time and affects sight. Sammy reached out to his colleagues at Crescent College to find out how he could best support these students academically, as he was concerned about their progress. As a result, staff at Crescent College were able to offer learning support assistants, who are specially trained to support students with sight loss and assistive technology should the students want to learn how to use it. At the time of my interview with Sammy, he was still struggling to get the students to accept the tailored academic support in collaboration with Crescent College, which I viewed almost as a flipped partnership whereby Crescent College took on the role of supporting the mainstream college. However, the students were studying formal qualifications. So, rather than attending lessons at Crescent College, the suggestion was that students would continue to learn solely at the mainstream college and would have specially trained learning support assistants from Crescent College come over to assist them in lessons. However, the students were still acting '*prickly towards support*' and did not want somebody sitting next to them during classes because they were reluctant to be seen as different from their peers. The literature shows that those who have experienced sight loss from birth or a young age present

various reasons for their acceptance or non-acceptance of specialised support. Examples of support include the form of adapted technology or a learning support assistant, with the younger generation being more concerned about the stigma attached to using such devices (Söderström and Ytterhus, 2010) and the older generation feeling anxious at having to learn to use something new (Okonji, 2018).

The findings correlate with the literature around mainstream settings not being equipped to provide personalised support for disabled students, often opting for a 'one size fits all' method of support for these students. Students in this study demonstrated that they could only guarantee tailored academic support through their enrolment at Crescent College. Even so, they could not guarantee until they started studying there. The stress and anxiety this could cause students is profound; if more education establishments took on board the style of support offered at Crescent College, students' positive experiences in academic support could occur much earlier in their schooling career.

Personal support was another important finding within this research, with students indicating how this dramatically affected their experiences. However, personal support and the levels at which students required this largely depended on the individuals' character, with some students seeking it out more than others. Alfie, Ollie, Kylie and Paddi all expressed how their social support from peers at Crescent College had dramatically and positively impacted their experiences. For example:

Observation 7 – Craft Studio

When interacting with peers in class, Kylie frequently discusses hanging out with them after college in the residential home.

Today she suggested to Merlin, *'do you want to watch a film later?'* to which Merlin agreed.

Thus, observation 7 suggests that the social aspect of Crescent College was essential for Kylie to develop relationships with others her age. At the same time, Ollie was more resistant to spending time with his peers at Crescent College and would often text his friends from the mainstream side of

the college to hang out. The literature has shown that in sole mainstream establishments, visually impaired students often experience difficulty making and maintaining relationships (Jessup, 2021). Therefore, the findings of this study can demonstrate how other settings and teachers can facilitate social skill building for other visually impaired individuals.

6.3.3 Students' experiences of technology

Students' experiences with assistive technology were the next critical component of Crescent College that significantly impacted their lives. The literature review substantiated this finding as disabled students are often unable to access the technology and information their non-disabled peers can access without difficulty. In addition, assistive technology use has been proven to afford disabled students the same benefits as their peers by providing easy access to information they would have otherwise missed (Hasselbring and Bausch, 2005; Söderström and Ytterhus, 2010). For example, Carvalho, Fernandes and Montilha (2020) mentioned how visually impaired students often have trouble reading and writing, which is sometimes combatted with magnifying glasses; however, these optical aids frequently fail to help the user adequately. When these students have the aid of assistive technologies, for example, speech synthesisers and screen readers, they are more likely to overcome the barriers they experience to learning (Alves et al., 2009).

Braille is an essential aspect of visually impaired students' educational lives because it is of critical importance to academic achievement (Farrow, 2015; Ryles, 1996) and independence (Schroeder, 1996; Stanfa and Johnson, 2015), both of which my study discovered were important outcomes for the students that participated. Moreover, Hoskin et al. (2022) emphasise its importance, stating that to become literate, people must engage with a text, and for visually impaired people, this means using braille. However, many visually impaired students never learn Braille (Gadiraju, Muehlbradt and Kane, 2020), often because they fear standing out and *'looking different'*, as Sammy relayed, was a worry for his two students with Wolfram Syndrome, as braille can carry a stigma for some people with sight loss (Farrow, 2015; National Federation of the Blind, 2009). According to Farrow (2015), once an individual learns braille, they can accept their vision impairment and confront some of the negative stereotypes about both braille and vision impairment. Rosie explained that other reasons for the non-use of braille or braille technology could be that they have never had the opportunity to learn because their previous teachers have not been braille-literate. Alternatively, teachers may be braille-literate but do not possess the confidence to teach their students to use

braille technology, or as a result of lack of funding, all of which she had witnessed as the Braille lead tutor at Crescent College. A key finding from this research surrounds the importance of visually impaired students having the opportunity to use Braille or Braille technology. Hoskin et al. (2022) confirmed that braille literacy is decreasing despite its well-documented importance. The National Federation of the Blind declared a crisis for braille literacy, confirming Rosie's observations that there is a lack of qualified braille teachers (Bishop and Rhind, 2011; National Federation of the Blind, 2009). This finding is problematic because visual impairment is often misunderstood by classroom teachers (Opie, 2018), and often, those who are qualified and teach visually impaired students regularly are unconfident in teaching their students to use assistive technology (Zhou, Parker and Smith, 2011). Hoskin et al. (2022) elaborated on this, stating that since many visually impaired braille readers use refreshable braille displays, it is concerning that some teachers do not feel confident in teaching their students to use them. Additionally, the literature showed that technology tailored to students with visual impairments is often costly and, therefore, inaccessible to many (Ahmed, 2018; Al-Tayar et al., 2019; Grehan, 2008; MacDonald and Clayton, 2013).

My initial visit to Crescent College was quick. However, in that short walk around, I saw at least four students using assistive technology in some way, either independently or with the support of a teacher. This case study revealed that partnership further education settings could offer access to these technologies because they have specifically trained teachers and receive dedicated funding, which as a result, means students have the chance to explore the world through means tailored to their needs, such as braille technology.

Observation 1 – An introductory walk around the college

This is my first walk around the college and first time being back since I was last here for my master's research.

Rosie shows me around, room by room. On the first-floor students are learning traditional braille, there are lots of braille tablets in the room. She explains that the two students had not learned any braille prior to starting at Crescent College. I ask why, she says it is quite common and usually because teachers are not trained to use it.

The data discovered how Crescent College receives specific funding, which allows them to buy specialist assistive technologies such as the OrCam – a wearable artificial intelligence device for visually impaired people and refreshable braille displays such as BrailleNote tablets. It is helpful to explain the difference between a mainstream tablet, such as an iPad, and a braille tablet. They are essentially specialist computers that allow the user to input or command in Braille, and then the BrailleNote will output the results in braille and speech. They are portable, rechargeable, operate with customisable software, and include a Braille keyboard and a Braille display. Both of the devices mentioned above are specifically designed to support users with visual impairments and, as a result, are incredibly costly. BrailleNote-takers were very popular before tablets and smartphones were invented, and their software was made more accessible. The OrCam was Paddi's most frequently used technology, he stated; *'it is brilliant, it will read both handwritten and printed text'*. He then went on to demonstrate how the OrCam could be used around the classroom, first reading a handwritten piece of paper with instructions, and then moving to a printed poster on the wall. Finally, Paddi aimed his sight at what he wanted the OrCam to read, and it would quietly speak the text into his ear.

Nowadays, many visually impaired people choose to utilise adapted mainstream devices such as smartphones. A key reason for this is that mainstream technologies are so advanced and can be adapted to suit their sight loss needs (Bhowmick and Hazarika, 2017) that many people do not see a considerable benefit in paying for an assistive device. The OrCam, for instance, costs two thousand pounds. My study substantiated this finding from Bhowmick and Hazarika (2017) because although students reported gratitude for being able to use assistive devices during the time they spent at Crescent College, frequently, they would opt to use a generic piece of technology such as an iPhone or iPad. After all, they felt they made them appear more *'normal'* to people who did not understand sight loss. Henceforth, I discovered that students' reasons for the non-use of specially designed technology for sight loss were twofold, first, wanting to appear as *'normal'* as possible in public spaces. Second, due to the expense of assistive devices, most participants discussed these reasons. For example, Bella highlighted how she had been fortunate to have the funding for a laptop, an iPad, and a BrailleNote-taker during her mainstream education. However, upon leaving this level of schooling and waiting to move to Crescent College, it took months for her to regain funding to reaccess a BrailleNote, making her feel *'lost'*. On the other hand, Bella was *'ok'* without the iPad and laptop, as she owned personal ones; therefore, she could use those.

BrailleNote-takers cost upwards of three thousand pounds, with the most advanced reaching eight thousand pounds. Consequently, this is a significant jump from a typical iPad or laptop, which can be picked up for around five to seven hundred pounds each, and thus, makes braille technology inaccessible to a large proportion of the visually impaired community unless they receive allocated funding for them. Bella explained how she knew this same problem would occur once she moved on from Crescent College and hoped her local authority back in her hometown would be willing to fund a BrailleNote-taker once she returned. The funding issue causes great stress and anxiety for visually impaired students (Hill, Shepherd and Hirsch, 2018; Leigh et al., 2004; Okonji et al., 2015). Additionally, it can contribute to isolation, such as Bella's inability to participate fully at Crescent College until she received her BrailleNote-taker. However, had she chosen to attend a mainstream college with a different local authority, there was a chance that she could have never received the funding for one of these devices again. Some charities support those who have been refused funding from their local authorities (RNIB, 2022g), but these have strict criteria, such as the receiver must not have had a separate grant from them in the last three years. In addition, they can only provide up to a certain amount; the RNIB, for instance, can only offer up to five hundred pounds per grant, so the grant holder would need to find the remaining funds themselves. Alfie also drew attention to how fortunate he felt to receive access to fusion technology through work because it costs *'a third of the price of a reasonable first-time car'*. However, visually impaired students should not have to feel *'lucky'* that they get access to these technologies. In addition, with the significant funding cuts, councils in England have been forced to take (44 per cent in 2019), specialist education provision is often under immense pressure (Weale, 2019). As a result of this drastic cut in funding in 2019, the RNIB charity urged the government to act fast to correct the funding gap before 2023.

Regular use of adapted mainstream technologies, such as smartphones with voiceover, and learning to use assistive technologies explicitly designed for visually impaired people was a common theme among the participants of this study. Whether they chose to utilise specifically designed technology for their vision impairment, they were all using technology in one way or another. Rather than using specific technology designed for people with vision impairments, Ollie made the most use of an application on his iPhone, which did the same job as Paddi's OrCam. Ollie explained,

O: so I was supplied with this phone that has an app on it called seeing AI, and I basically point it at a piece of paper, and it reads what's on the paper, and then I can screen record it and save it into my camera roll, so I've got notes stored in my camera roll that I can listen to.

Both examples mentioned earlier from the research findings demonstrate the social model in practice. However, there is still an issue with accessibility, whereby some people do not have access due to funding, lack of training or insufficient assessment (Ahmed, 2018). Furthermore, even those with access experience stigma and are often socially marginalised (Owuor et al., 2018). Stigma and assistive technology often go hand in hand with users feeling the adverse effects of stigma due to how it looks and how it is accepted or, instead, not accepted socially (Shinohara and Wobbrock, 2011). Another reason for students' non-use of specialist technologies centred around their wanting to be perceived as '*normal*', and they felt these technologies drew unwanted attention to them. These views from visually impaired students suggest that whilst partnerships contribute towards breaking down social barriers, it can be challenging to eliminate feelings of normalisation after a person has already experienced them. Therefore, partnerships like Crescent College should continue to grow and raise awareness of what inclusive practice should be so that one day visually impaired students will not be subjected to normalising practices and opinions.

6.3.4 Students' experiences of the curriculum

Having choice and control over their education was a critical factor in students' decisions to attend Crescent College, including choice over which lessons to take, qualifications to aim toward, if any, and whether they wanted to take any enterprise courses. Kylie felt that having the ability to make these choices for herself allowed her to feel very '*involved*' and learn new skills that she had never thought possible before. The literature confirms that choice and control have been a topic in disability studies, with scholars noting these as crucial in the lives of disabled students (Berghs et al., 2019; Oliver, Sapey and Thomas, 2012). In addition, it has been noted that when students learn in an environment that involves challenges and allows them to control these along with choices to make for themselves, student autonomy can be fostered (Butler, Schnellert and Perry, 2017).

In the UK, 'additional' curricula support visually impaired students to access the standard academic curriculum and learn various independent social, mobility, learning and living skills (Keil and Cobb, 2019). Similarly, the United States has 'expanded' curricula which afford students the same opportunities as the UK. Both additional and expanded curricula have been found to facilitate the successful transition into independent adulthood for visually impaired young people (McDonnall, 2011; McLinden et al., 2016; Sapp and Hatlen, 2010; Wolffe and Kelly, 2011), which my study found was a goal shared between the students. In the United States, an 'expanded' core curriculum is

known formally but is not statutory and means that visually impaired students are usually taught: access skills, sensory efficiency skills (tactile, listening skills), use of assistive technology, self-determination skills, social interaction skills, recreational and leisure skills, orientation and mobility skills and concepts, independent living skills, and careers education (Sapp and Hatlen, 2010). Nevertheless, in the UK, the 'additional' curriculum, which covers the same aspects as listed for the US, is simply descriptive and has no formal status (Keil and Cobb, 2019). Although in addition, the UK has several specialist curricula and outcome frameworks that are similar to the 'additional' curriculum, and none of these is formal, nor is there a consensus on which frameworks to use, when and how to use them (Keil and Cobb, 2019), it is a highly complex area of education. It could be suggested then that secondary and primary schools implement aspects of the partnership further education model, such as giving students more choice and control over what and how they learn.

Ultimately, more partnerships could facilitate independence from an early age and, in turn, make it less of a daunting task for visually impaired students to achieve once reaching further education. One suggestion to schools might be to engage in more awareness training on how best to support visually impaired children in their earlier schooling years. As such, to stop the cycle of students reaching further education and starting from scratch to learn the instrumental activities of daily living.

6.3.4.1 Formal Qualifications

One of the key findings from the literature on special education surrounds students' frustration with not having the chance to study and achieve formal further education qualifications (Farmakopoulou and Watson, 2003; McMurray, 2019). When discussing students' reasons for choosing Crescent College, it was generally reported that being able to study at the mainstream college was a deciding factor in their decision to enrol. For instance, Ollie stated that he dreamed of attending university as he felt he was '*clever enough*'. However, whilst he could have stayed on at sixth form to study A-Levels which would have given him the qualifications he needed, he did not feel his mainstream school would have helped him to attend higher education. Thus, Ollie's long-term goals could have been hindered had he decided to stay at his school.

Educational and employment outcomes determine young people's life courses (Bonnie, Stroud and Breiner (2015). Moreover, the findings of this study further emphasise how visually impaired young people recognise the significance of them having the opportunity to study specific qualifications. For example, Paddi had always wanted to work with animals and was aware that to work in a veterinary hospital, he needed to gain a formal qualification. This influenced his decision to choose Crescent College because their partnership nature meant they could make this dream a reality. Therefore, the findings of this research clarify the need for visually impaired students to have the freedom and flexibility to choose any path that may suit their unique needs. Unfortunately, as Bhalalusesa (2018) discovered, visually impaired students' freedom of choice around their education is often minimal. Furthermore, this should be ingrained into every education setting, whether visually impaired students are enrolled or not, to ensure that settings are equipped and prepared to cater for the requirements of visually impaired students.

Students raised concerns over being viewed as less able than their sighted peers and told how they had missed the chance to learn the same formal qualifications as others. During the interviews for this study, students expressed their future goals, some of which involved moving into higher education or skilled work. For example, Paddi expressed how he wanted to work with animals. He was evidently passionate about his career goals and could see himself achieving them since starting at Crescent College. However, Paddi recognised that he needed formal qualifications to achieve his dream of working with animals. In addition, choosing both the mainstream college dedicated to animal care and Crescent College to learn independence skills related to sight loss reveals how having a choice and control over decisions concerning their education has a positive effect on students' lives. For example, in observation 4, I witnessed Paddi talking about his plans:

Observation 4 – Computer lesson 1

Sitting next to Paddi during the lesson. We end up in discussion about his future:

'I am planning on going to university so that I am more employable as animal care is competitive'.

Additionally, although Paddi was less certain on what he wanted to do career-wise, he was adamant on his goal of achieving A-Levels and felt that he needed them

'if I want to make something of myself'.

Gaining formal qualifications was of the utmost importance for some of the participants in this study as they had specific aspirations which, in order to be met, required them to obtain formal further education qualifications. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) maintains that disabled people must not be excluded from the mainstream education system (at any level) due to their disability. Furthermore, the education system at every level must be geared towards supporting disabled people to achieve their full potential and participate equally in society. For some of the students in this research, that meant having the opportunity to study formal qualifications the same way their non-disabled peers would. Thus, having the chance to study in a mainstream setting amongst non-disabled students for the qualifications of their choice supports Article 24 of The Convention.

6.3.3.2 Vocational Curriculum

Students stressed how a significant contributing factor that made them want to study at Crescent College was the work experience prospects. Rosie explained how the college operates '*on an enterprise basis*', meaning they do not have traditional classes and instead they have different areas where students work, '*we've got an eBay business, a college office, a new media hub, an arts and crafts centre, a college shop, and the bell bar café*'. These enterprises are open to all students, including those in this study; the students often know which areas they want to develop. So, they work with their tutors to find appropriate enterprises to work in based on the skillset they wish to expand. For example:

Observation 2 – Coffee in the café

As Rosie and I sit having a coffee, I can see students serving customers, preparing food and drinks, cleaning tables, and replenishing stock, all the typical activities you might expect to see in a café.

The Royal National Institute of Blind People found that people who experience sight loss are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population or other disabled people (Slade, Edwards and White, 2017). Specifically, 'between July and September 2021, 53.5% of disabled people aged 16 to 64 years in the UK were employed compared with 81.6% of non-disabled people' (The Office for National Statistics, 2022). The statistical gap is often a result of the limited opportunities that disabled people have to gain work experience (Martin, Barnham and Krupa,

2019). Furthermore, they are less likely to achieve formal qualifications because the higher a person's qualification, the more likely they are to be in employment (Department for Work and Pensions, 2022). In a survey that sought to discover the outcomes for disabled people in the UK, The Office for National Statistics (2022) found:

A quarter (24.9%) of disabled people aged 21 to 64 years had a degree or equivalent as their highest qualification, compared with 42.7% of non-disabled people. In addition, disabled people were almost three times as likely to have no qualifications (13.3%) than non-disabled people (4.6%). Disabled people were also more likely to have GCSE grades C and higher or equivalent as their highest form of qualification (23.3%), in comparison with non-disabled people (17.4%).

Thus, further substantiating that disabled people do not experience a level playing field with non-disabled people when it comes to gaining formal qualifications. However, vocational skills and work experience have gained more credit, and there is a greater need to teach these skills to visually impaired young people (Giesen and Cavanaugh, 2012; Lund and Cmar, 2020). In addition, paid work experience has been proven to be a significant positive predictor of employment for visually impaired people (Lund and Cmar, 2019; Lund and Cmar, 2020; McDonall and O'Mally, 2012). Observation 3 highlights the eBay shop, which is one of the enterprises students can choose to work in:

Observation 3 – eBay shop

Students are managing money, sorting items, using the computers to upload items, and work in a team.

I was able to see how Bella manoeuvred working in the shop with her visual impairment, notably, she used a magnification software provided by Crescent College to post items on eBay

Thus, this observation demonstrates how Crescent College and its enterprise programmes present an innovative and practical solution to the historical lack of work experience that visually impaired students have had.

Transitioning into adulthood can be particularly disjointed and complicated for visually impaired students (Hewett, Douglas and Keil, 2014). In recognising this, Crescent College tailor their approach to support depending on the specific needs of the students. An example of this can be reflected in the findings from the study whereby students indicated their freedom in making decisions and how this was something they had not experienced before. For example, regarding the different enterprises students could do to gain experience in a natural working environment, Rosie explained they *'can choose which ones [enterprises] they go to and develop whatever skills they want'*. When they reach Crescent College, students no longer have their decisions made for them or their work done for them because the staff do not see their vision impairment as a barrier to their success, academically or vocationally. Therefore, the students could detach from previous labels they had been subjected to. Students demonstrated through their involvement in the enterprises how they shed specific labels, such as being thought of as a *'child'*, which was crucial in becoming adults. However, being treated like an adult was a common theme in the literature surrounding further education, with studies reporting that students value being treated as adults (Gibson, 2012; McGuckin et al., 2013). As a result, further education in the UK has been found to treat young people in more grown-up ways compared to if they stayed on at school for sixth form (Harkin, 2006). Therefore, it is essential to note that this freedom felt by the students in this study could also be a result of their ageing from childhood to young adulthood, perhaps not solely because they decided to move to Crescent College. Nevertheless, there is no way to know that if the students in this study had chosen to attend a different further education college or stay on at sixth form, they would not have experienced similar transitions into adulthood.

The work experience opportunities were not solely within Crescent College, with visually impaired students having the opportunity to gain skills outside of the education setting once they felt ready. In addition to the education partnership, Crescent College has established a strong Partnership for Employment network with many employers offering students work placements and other support, such as mock interviews. The Partnership for Employment works on a supported internship basis whereby students learn primarily in the workplace rather than in college, meaning they have ample opportunity to boost their experience and move into employment post-college. Whilst none of the students in this study had reached an appropriate stage to work outside of the college setting at the time this data collection took place, it was anticipated that they would find themselves in this position before the end of their career at Crescent College.

6.3.5 Students' experiences of inclusion

Students explained how they had previously tried extreme measures to hide their disability due to fear of being bullied. For example, Ollie reported that he had been subjected to bullying at his secondary school, such as having his peers attempt to trip him up in corridors. These experiences encouraged him to attempt to hide his vision impairment for a while. Merlin demonstrated other examples of how students can attempt to hide their visual impairment. She both isolated herself to avoid being exposed to questions from her sighted peers and pretended to be able to see more than she could. This reflects previous research that has shown how visually impaired people often report feeling ableist pressures to conceal their sight loss (Cohen and Avanzino, 2010; Cureton and Hill, 2018; Hansen, Wilton and Newbold, 2017; Rosenblum, 2000). Plaskett (2015) discovered through her study with visually impaired children and young people in mainstream settings that they make numerous attempts to conceal and hide their sight loss, linked to their desire to be seen as 'normal'. Whilst this was a similar finding that caused the students in my study to hide during their adolescent years, it became apparent they had all developed a form of resistance to such experiences by the time they had reached further education. The extremities of their resistance most certainly depended on the individual's confidence and the bullying levels they had previously experienced. Jessup et al. (2018) discovered that by not focusing too intently on their impairments nor hiding them, some visually impaired students challenge the desire to conceal that many disabled people attempt. Crescent College and its core values are a facilitator of this type of attitude as it encourages students to embrace their individualities by ensuring they provide reasonable environmental adjustments and tailor further education experiences based on each student's unique goals.

The bullying the students in this research had been subjected to, combined with previous literature, demonstrates that many schools have a significant amount of work to do to educate all young people about disability as a means of combatting discrimination that can lead to bullying (Griffiths, 2007; Mepham, 2010; Runswick-Cole, 2011; Shaw, 2017). Therefore, it could be argued that disability is largely invisible in the National Curriculum despite its drive towards inclusion. Mainstream schooling disempowers disabled students through its exclusionary practices and procedures (Shah, 2007). Imray and Hinchcliffe (2014) suggest this is because the UK National Curriculum is designed from a normalising perspective for non-disabled students, which reproduces non-disabled students as the norm. As such, it contributes to the disabling environment and disabled students' limited access to the curriculum in mainstream schools and creates dangerous learning environments for disabled students in mainstream settings. Ollie emphasised how he wanted to

alter societal perceptions about himself as a visually impaired man. He was passionate about being viewed as visually impaired but ‘cool’, which, upon further analysis through observing him in the college, shaped how he behaved daily. Ollie felt pressure to be as ‘normal’ as he possibly could. For instance, he chose not to engage or socialise with his disabled peers; he wanted to spend as much time as possible alone or in the mainstream building; his attitude, which could be both cheeky and rude, and he avoided visible assistive technology. Ollie always preferred to use his adapted mainstream technology, such as his iPhone, and he circumvented specialist devices wherever possible. The pressures Ollie felt as a visually impaired person amongst his sighted peers at his mainstream secondary school have contributed to an apparent avoidance of his impairment.

These pressures stem from the foundations of stigma which have been ingrained into society to view sighted people as ‘normal’ and visually impaired people as the opposite (Gerber, 2003; Shinohara and Tenenberg, 2009), often resulting in the former group bullying the latter as explored earlier. However, this study has explored the participants’ experiences at a partnership-FE college and found that when sighted peers have increased awareness of visual impairment through partnering special and mainstream education, bullying is significantly reduced or non-existent.

Observation 6 – Discussion with Ollie in the corridor

Ollie explains he is playing football later that evening with his friends from the mainstream college.

When asked about his friends, he tells me *‘they get me. They don’t care that I am visually impaired they still include me in everything’*.

Social relationships and experiences influence human action and thought (Mead, 1962). It has been found that only close relationships with visually impaired people can positively influence the perception of stigma and visual impairment (dos Santos et al., 2022). Consequently, a stronger awareness of visual impairment contributes to less stigmatisation from society. It, therefore, is a strong advocate for establishing more partnership settings like Crescent College, as they can act as a catalyst for introducing more non-disabled students to disability.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) states that disabled people should have access to inclusive education in the communities in which they live. However, the participants

in this study detailed how this was certainly not always the case. Most did not have a partnership-FE setting in their local area, meaning they had to move away to Crescent College from their hometowns, family and friends. My research discovered that the visually impaired students shared the desire to be fully included in society and that previous experiences in mainstream schooling failed to enable this, forcing them to move away to a further education provision that would. One reason behind this failure emerged after students told how they felt misunderstood regarding how vision impairment affects their lives and what it means in terms of their specific needs. This lack of understanding from those around them contributed to a shared sense of un-belonging for the students. For example, Ollie explained how he had been subject to ignorance at his previous school: *'people would even talk about you, and you could hear them, but they would assume that because you're blind, you're deaf as well'* this ended up spiralling, whereby more and more people assumed he could not hear. Rather than listening to Ollie share his experience with his vision impairment, his peers jumped to a conclusion, which resulted in him being the subject of ableism. Furthermore, this is an example of how ableism can manifest; it is something learned from others and affects people differently depending on how others perceive their disability (Nario-Redmond, Kemerling and Silverman, 2019).

An interesting perspective from the teachers at Crescent College who had previously worked in mainstream schools was that they were unaware of sight loss and what teaching visually impaired students entailed. However, research from the UK's leading sight loss charity shows that 64% of visually impaired students are educated in mainstream schools (RNIB, 2022h). Rosie suggested that mainstream educators and support staff fear sight loss *'because it's an unknown'* and other disabilities *'are more prevalent as sight loss is a low incident disability'*. Meaning the amount of visually impaired students attending mainstream school will be lower than those with high-incidence disabilities. The low incidence of visually impaired students attending mainstream school could be linked to the negative experiences participants in this study have encountered. Suppose teachers never, or rarely, have the opportunity to teach visually impaired students. In that case, they are equally not going to learn how best to develop their relationships with this group of students. As such, this is problematic because visual impairment is low incidence and also high needs (Miyauchi, 2020). Teachers need specialised skills in visual impairment to adequately support students to access the National Curriculum (Ahsan and Sharma, 2018). Each student is different regardless of whether they have a disability or not. However, suppose teachers have the chance to teach visually impaired students. In that case, they have the opportunity to develop unique strategies for supporting

students with sight loss, which is vital for educating students with high needs (Castro, Kelly and Shih, 2010).

Social relationships with peers and teachers play a vital role in the individual experiences of visually impaired students (Giese et al., 2022). Therefore, Crescent College could act as a catalyst for educating about how best to support these students in other non-partnership settings. This could raise societal awareness around visual impairment, which encourages greater inclusion of visually impaired people into schools, universities, the workplace, social activities and general society (Bowen, 2010). Students highlighted how their move to Crescent College had afforded them the privilege of personal choice, which this study found to link closely to students' sense of involvement and inclusion both in and out of the college setting. As the literature pointed out, disability has historically been associated with a lack of power for disabled people (Oliver, 1990), leading to the intervention of family and non-disabled people. In addition, due to a limited understanding of what it means to be disabled, problems with inclusion and inequality emerged (Drake, 1999). Therefore, the finding that Crescent College allows visually impaired students to choose their paths, asserts a level of power and space for their voices to be heard around matters where their voices have previously been silenced (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2007).

The social model of disability demonstrates how the challenges disabled people face are caused by how the environment around them is designed rather than by a person's impairments or health conditions (Goering, 2015; Oliver, 2004). Educational settings and procedures are often designed implicitly for non-disabled people; these ableist experiences can lead to disabled people experiencing disablism (Fenney et al., 2022). This finding from the literature further substantiates the importance of partnerships such as Crescent College, designed with the needs of disabled people at the core. This research has proven how partnership settings transform the educational experiences of visually impaired people specifically. Students reported how the options offered at wholly mainstream establishments were far inferior to those offered by Crescent College. Ollie, for example, knew he wanted to achieve formal A-Level qualifications, as this is what he would have done had he stayed on for the sixth form at his mainstream secondary school. Though he felt he could gain a more rewarding experience at a partnership setting such as Crescent College;

O: I could have stayed on at sixth form, but I kind of figured that within two years' time, if I'd stayed, I would be in the same position as when I started it. I feel like I wouldn't have gotten very independent.

Crescent College and its partnership recognise barriers that make life harder for the visually impaired students involved in this research. A vital issue with separating disabled students by mainstream and specialist settings is that they are not part of the setting, they are apart from it, and there is little evidence that supports the complete segregation of disabled students from mainstream education (Riitaoja, Helakorpi and Holm, 2019; Shevlin and Banks, 2021). By working together in partnership, visually impaired students have a presence across Crescent College and its partnering mainstream college. Showing a working example of how students can be a part of the settings they learn in rather than apart. The partnership at Crescent College contributes to breaking down negative categorisations of disabled people that the social model is concerned with; labelling and categorising have had negative implications, yet they are unavoidable for ensuring disabled people receive the support they are entitled to (Kauffman and Hornby, 2020). Therefore, as Kauffman and Hornby (2020) suggested, education providers must find ways to categorise better. Crescent college, rather than looking at disability as the outcome of these students' vision impairments, recognises how when we categorise disabled students, we burden them with socially constructed judgements that can be loaded with inferred meaning (Cureton and Wasserman, 2020). Moreover, this can be linked to how Ollie believed his peers in his mainstream secondary school talked to him as though he did not have one 'brain cell'. Whereas his peers at the mainstream side of Crescent College had never reacted to his sight loss in this manner, he explained how they included him, which enabled him to feel equal.

Crescent College shares the view that emerged from the social model in that it assumes disability is not something people have; instead, disability is something that is done to people, and it is done through the ways people are unnecessarily excluded and isolated from society (UPIAS, 1976). An example of how Crescent College shares this view can be shown through how they made adjustments to allow Paddi to reach his goals. As mentioned, Paddi explained how he had a goal of working with animals in the future. However, he equally wanted to develop his independence in order for him to move to university or live alone eventually, or both. However, when touring further education settings, Paddi quickly realised that no such option would enable him to achieve both goals synchronously. The assisted living programme is an option for students enrolled at Crescent College. Like Paddi, most of the students involved in this study saw this as a critical factor in their

desire to attend college here. For example, Ollie felt assisted living enabled him to make more decisions and *'learn to do everything independently, so I feel a lot more grown-up'*. In further education, students do not usually have the option to live away from home. However, one of the central features of many specialist settings is the residential opportunity available to students, as demonstrated in a report commissioned by the Officer of the Children's Commissioner to understand the views and experiences of children and young people with special educational needs in residential schools (Pellicano et al., 2014). Being a partnership further education setting, Crescent College incorporates features of specialist education, such as the option to move into assisted living during term time whilst maintaining features of mainstream further education.

If he chose to attend Crescent College, he would have the option to study mainstream subjects and courses, none of which include animal care. On the other hand, if he opted for the solely mainstream animal care college, he would miss out on the specialist support Crescent College could offer him. This scenario demonstrates how Paddi could have been disabled by society; he could have been excluded from reaching either of his goals. Paddi decided on Crescent College simply because he believed the support he could access at the animal care college would have been inadequate. Additionally, he worried about making it to the end of the course without appropriate specialist support. However, once his mother made the staff at the college aware of his passion for animal care, they worked together to develop a completely individualised programme for Paddi. They found a college in the local area that could offer Paddi a place on an animal care course and scheduled his timetable at Crescent College to ensure no clashes would occur. He was, therefore, able to access specialist support such as using the OrCam, which he could take with him on the days he travelled to the animal care college. Access to the OrCam was fundamental in his progress as he explained how his tutors at the animal care college were not always prepared:

P: I think my tutor there has 14 of us in the class to deal with, and it is sometimes hard for her to get things ready for me in the right font size etc., so I think having the reader on my glasses [OrCam] and having my tablet and magnifier is a lot more helpful in that way in that I can access more stuff if it's not prepared and it stays in my head more.

Further demonstrating how mainstream settings are often not sufficiently equipped to support visually impaired students. Consequently, Crescent College could act as a catalyst for other

educational institutions to learn how and why the social model must be at the heart of education for visually impaired students.

To feel and be fully included in society is a fundamental human right that demonstrates disabled people are equal to non-disabled people. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) was developed because often disabled people's human rights are not respected, which, in turn, creates barriers to inclusion in society. The Convention recognises that disabled people have equal rights to respect, dignity, equality and freedom. The findings of this study uncovered how the student participants felt fully included in their local society (the college and its surrounding area), which can be attributed to the awareness Crescent College has brought to vision impairments. Alfie explained how his work specifically focuses on raising awareness:

A: We go in with a whole load of tech and bits of kit, some that demonstrated what I could see – others showing how we use technology to read, how we use it for talking books.

However, the participants in this research explained how this had not always been the case; therefore, other local areas have work to do to ensure that visually impaired people are fully included. A society where visually impaired students and non-visually impaired individuals live side by side and are afforded an integrated lifestyle can be considered inclusive. Furthermore, Brown (2021) explained on behalf of the House of Lords:

Social inclusion is the process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities—that everyone, regardless of their background, can achieve their full potential in life. Such efforts include policies and actions that promote equal access to (public) services as well as enable citizens' participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives (Brown, 2021).

Additionally, according to The World Bank (2022), barriers to full economic and social inclusion of disabled people include discriminatory stigma and prejudice in society, inaccessible transportation and physical environments, non-adapted means of communication, inaccessibility of assistive technologies and devices, and gaps in service delivery. Consequently, through its plethora of opportunities, including access to assistive technologies, specialised practice in supporting visually impaired students, and inclusive policies and practices, Crescent College breaks down barriers to inclusion for the students involved in this study. However, since the data shows that students in this

research only experienced such inclusion once they moved to Crescent College, there is still work to be done to develop other settings in England to be fully inclusive.

6.4 Theoretical Lenses

I consider all of the discussion above in relation to the theoretical lenses that underpin my study, as outlined in chapter two of the thesis. This case study revealed that the social, medical and affirmative models of disability influence partnership further education. Additionally, I outline how some aspects of Critical Disability Studies theory provided insights into the experiences of visually impaired students before discussing the influence of Multiple and Multi-Dimensional Transitions theory on the data.

6.4.1 Models of disability

The adoption of several theoretical underpinnings of my research aligns with the data and echoes the phenomenon of interest. First, the influence of the social model of disability indicated that most of the visually impaired students' negative experiences of education before attending Crescent College resulted from negative societal perceptions. As such, they substantiated a vital attribute of the social model, which identifies society as the main contributor to the exclusion of visually impaired students in society (Oliver, 2004; UPIAS, 1976). Ultimately, negative societal attitudes and systematic barriers create obstacles and determine the treatment visually impaired students receive. However, the medical model also played its part through the labelling practices in the college. For example, the mainstream college was referred to as 'mainstream' and Crescent College as 'special' or labelling some technology as 'assistive'. Furthermore, the affirmative model came through in students' views on their bodies and lives, such as when Ollie explained how he had '*accepted*' that he could not see and that was who he was; Ollie was proud to be who he was. Another example can be presented in the way Alfie used phrases such as '*I don't suffer [from his visual impairment]*' and '*this is who I am*'.

At times, for the visually impaired students involved, the individual and their level of ability was the centre of the 'problem' (Titchkosky, 2011). When students recalled their previous education experiences, they detailed how they would try to conceal their sight loss or become depressed due to bullying from their peers or fear of being stigmatised. As such, staff would be over-supportive,

which ultimately caused the students to fall behind their sighted peers and hindered their chances to become independent. This notion of over-supportiveness is well-reported in the literature (Griffin and Blatchford, 2021; Haakma, Janssen and Minnaert, 2016; Mclinden et al., 2020; Morris and Sharma, 2011). Furthermore, this was also a dominant finding for students in regards to their over-supportive families and is also widely recognised in the literature (Munro et al., 2016; Salminen and Karhula, 2014). Thus, reflecting how they had found previous non-partnership education unsettling, these settings became the most unsupportive environment students had experienced through such over-supportiveness. In such circumstances, the impact of the medical model of disability can be seen at work.

At other times, the overall education system was identified as the problem, whether that be the pressure on teachers to know how best to educate visually impaired students despite having had no training to do so or an inflexible curriculum that was unable to adapt to students' needs. Lack of adequate training is a significant finding in the literature surrounding visually impaired students' education (Bishop and Rhind, 2011; Jessup et al., 2018; Opie, Deppeler and Southcott, 2017; Opie, 2018; de Verdier, 2016; Whitburn, 2014). Barriers to access were located beyond the individual and, instead, were within the system, reflecting the social model of disability. From the perspectives of staff at Crescent College, who were working in a way that demonstrated the social model in practice, there must be fundamental changes to the education system for inclusive practice to occur long before students enter further education. It needs to be the efforts of not just schools and educators. As Qu (2020) suggests, this level of change can only happen if cultural, political and economic adaptations are made within broader society. Therefore, if Crescent College is an example of inclusive practice, lessons could be learned from its principles to aid in such change.

6.4.1.1 The influence of the social model of disability

Analysis of the data from this case study identified several factors that led students to encounter a social-model-based environment when they moved to Crescent College. For example, the staff revealed how they worked within an education system permeated with the rhetoric of the social model of disability, where they were constantly asked to identify and remove barriers to inclusion and to celebrate diversity. In agreement with the principles of the social model, staff frequently identified the 'problem' as the system of mainstream and special education due to the attitudes of some educators towards working with visually impaired students. In addition, factors including limited or no flexibility in the curriculum, the workload, the class sizes, fear of getting it wrong, and

the lack of timely and appropriate professional development reflected the absence of the social model in their mainstream schools. In this study, staff identified these barriers and suggested ways in which the partnership nature of Crescent College enabled them to overcome at least some of them.

The staff took their time to understand the unique needs of each student, and learning was tailored; accordingly, the staff learned best from the students themselves. As Hehir (2002) argues, educators need to be able to learn to understand how students might learn in different ways, and as Shakespeare (2006) argues, teachers must recognise the possible impact of impairment on students to better develop inclusive pedagogies. Staff detailed how they previously had limited access to this kind of learning and limited experience with vision impairment in the classroom. Nind (2005) argues that the experience of working with diverse learning styles and levels of ability brings with it a level of confidence and more positive attitudes from educators towards inclusive practice.

Participation in this case study aligns with the social model of disability because involving disabled people in the research process has been found to lead to better outcomes and reduce or remove barriers for marginalised individuals (Farmer and Macleod, 2011). This is a significant finding as the social model underpins the foundation for the agenda of inclusive educational practice. Suppose students' voices are a catalyst for promoting inclusive education and a critical factor in leading changes in thinking and practice (Messiou, 2019). In addition, educators' perspectives are imperative to educational change as they mould the 'inclusion experience of the community in which they work' (Sikes, Lawson and Parker, 2007: 358). In that case, it is vital to understand the theoretical foundations of such change. Discussions with staff and students at Crescent College during my master's research were the driving force for this doctoral research. They revealed a need for greater awareness of provisions like theirs in the hope that practice could continue and expand to all levels of education in an ideal world. Messiou (2019) commented that dialogues between students and educators are essential in promoting inclusive education.

The negative and stigmatising consequences of attaching labels to people (Armstrong 2002) were recognised by students. They argued that exclusionary attitudes, based on discrimination towards them, individuals with the label of vision impairment, could arise from peer groups and education professionals. For the students, these exclusionary attitudes were a barrier to inclusion. They argued

that everyone, regardless of whether they experience sight loss, should have equitable access to learning in the same way. In this way, it could be argued that their understanding of exclusionary forces reflected their commitment to the principles of the social model of disability. As a result of the awareness Crescent College had brought to its neighbouring and partnered mainstream college and the surrounding local area, the attitudes of staff, peers, families and members of the public were non-discriminatory. Thus, the label of vision impaired did not add to the harmful effects students had previously experienced.

The findings aligned with the social model of disability in that Crescent College goes some way towards challenging the physical and structural barriers that visually impaired students may face. However, there were also elements of the medical model present in practice, which will be outlined next.

6.4.1.2 The influence of the medical model of disability

Crescent College and the participants in the research also used language aligned with the medical model of disability; indeed, their words revealed that this model influenced both their thinking and practice. For example, they remarked on the need for a student to be labelled as vision impaired to access appropriate funding and support, such as attending Crescent College or receiving funds to help purchase expensive assistive technologies. Even then, both were still inaccessible to many. Furthermore, this reflects Goodley's (2011) point that funding for adequate education provision is problematic. Although participants did not comment on whether they felt this to be acceptable, they commented that it is understood to be part of the process of gaining funding and support. In the student's views, their learning styles were sometimes the 'problem' (Titchkosky, 2011), which required additional support and resources that non-partnership provision could not fully provide. Thus, 'labelling', one aspect of the medical model of disability, is a part of the education system, a process which continues to influence how education settings and educators practice, even in partnership-FE, which this research has revealed facilitates an inclusive education environment.

The vocabulary of the students and staff was the vocabulary both suggested in the inclusive language guidance and that is used in government guidance around education for disabled students, including 'visually impaired students', 'disabled person' and 'students with SEN' (Department for Education, 2015; Disability Unit and Cabinet Office, 2021). However, although these are politically

correct terms, research has shown that just as earlier terms such as 'handicapped' were used to draw importance towards disability terminology, such terms are now considered oppressive and demeaning (Armstrong, 2002; Vehmas, 2004). Eventually, so could the currently appropriate disability terminology used in 2023 when this thesis was submitted. Furthermore, this vocabulary reflects the medical model of disability, reducing a group of students to 'other' than the 'norm'. Nevertheless, the terminology used by students, staff and myself reflects the present vocabulary deemed appropriate.

6.4.1.3 The influence of the affirmative model of disability

In contrast, the participants also used the language of the affirmative model of disability; indeed, their words revealed that this model influenced their thinking and practice. Students could dismiss the predominant views of normality through the affirmation of a positive identity of being visually impaired. Students revealed their battles in accepting their sight loss and recognising it as a positive thing over the years. As such, this finding is reflective of previous literature that has shown how disabled people do accept and acknowledge their disability (Bogart and Dunn, 2019; Kohli and Atencio, 2021; Liddiard et al., 2019). Crescent College provided students with a space to focus on the value of their lives and actively dismiss previous experiences in non-partnership provisions that reflected the common misconception that disabled people cannot be proud of the person they are (Swain and French, 2000). Through attempts to conceal their impairments, students had previously not aligned themselves with an affirmative model of disability. However, the move to Crescent College eased a transformation in which students no longer felt the need to hide or conceal. Thus, visual impairment was not seen as a tragedy; instead, students were unapologetically themselves, which Swain and French (2000: 569) describe as a 'positive personal and collective identity'. Students recognised that altering their own beliefs about their sight loss might also contribute to altering others' beliefs.

6.4.1.4 Finding a middle ground

The use of particular vocabulary and labels, for example, 'visually impaired', serves to 'other' groups of students (Armstrong, 2002) yet is a central part of the education system where groups of students who require reasonable adjustments are identified and supported (Goodley, 2011). In addition, this is within a system of education today where the social model, in contrast, requires identification and subsequent removal of barriers to access and identify these barriers as being in the system beyond the individual.

As the staff members involved in my research identified the tensions that they believed impacted inclusive practice, a fundamental tension underpinning many others relates to the different conceptual models of disability. Likewise, this is part of what McDonnell (2003) terms the 'deep structures' of our education system, the belief systems, and the social and political interpretations which affect policy in the system today. As Cochran Smith and Dudley-Marling (2012: 241) argue, 'the curriculum and the structures of schooling need to be interrogated as political texts' for inclusive practice to become the dominant culture in the education system. As critical stakeholders in the education system, educators, students, and significant others should be able to contribute to the development of educational policy in a real and meaningful sense if an inclusive change is to be sustainable (Fullan 2006; Hargreaves 2002). In this way, sustainable educational change will be possible with those experiencing visual impairment themselves and those working alongside them contributing to policy development.

In the context of this study, the way that disability is conceptualised within society informs how inclusive practice itself is developed and implemented. Staff at Crescent College demonstrated how their practice was affected by the affirmative, medical and social models of disability, as did the students themselves. As the literature and the findings of this study have shown, educators often are ill-equipped to support visually impaired students; therefore, they should have access to timely professional development that enables this process. Furthermore, as Broderick and Lavani (2017) argue, educators should have access to understanding the historical and social context of discriminatory practice. Goodley (2011: 154) comments, '... the school culture's willingness to embrace diverse learners can only be encouraged through conscientisation around the politics of disability'. In this way, perhaps, those deeply held beliefs that disability scholars have identified in the medicalised literature around disability (Barnes, 2014; Berghs et al., 2016; Lawson and Beckett, 2021) will develop with an inclusive rather than discriminatory perspective.

This study has discovered that Crescent College does reflect aspects of the medical model of disability, such as the labelling of visually impaired students, so they receive adequate support. However, it was evident that the college and the partnership nature aligns most with the social model of disability, enabling visually impaired students to embrace the principles of the affirmative model by recognising their value as individuals. Furthermore, the study has revealed how the

partnership system employed at Crescent College can transform students' lives. Therefore, whilst it is impossible to comment on what other education provisions are doing, I know that students had yet to experience the social model in practice to this extreme prior to starting at Crescent College. Therefore, as students' experiences were transformed through partnership-FE, this study indicates a need for other education provisions to adopt methods similar to those used at Crescent College.

6.4.2 Critical Disability Studies

The 'critical' aspect of Critical Disability Studies signifies a sense of 'self-appraisal' to facilitate a reconsideration of where thoughts, ideas, and beliefs began, where they currently are, and where they could end up (Goodley, 2013: 632). Thus, suggesting an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon allows researchers like myself to explore the complex interplay of issues, which in the case of my research, includes the inclusion of visually impaired students in the further education environment. In this case study, Critical Disability Studies provided insights into the experiences of visually impaired students in one partnership further education college. Critical Disability Studies are concerned with rethinking conventional assumptions on a specific phenomenon (Shildrick, 2012) which, in turn, means it presents as a mechanism to challenge the structures that have previously debilitated the educations of visually impaired students. As such, the transformation of the environment to Crescent College, where there is a change in stakeholders' ideological perspectives about visual impairment that have historically portrayed visually impaired students as incapable of accessing full participation in education, contributes to the enablement of inclusive further education for these students.

The student's experiences in the study present a unique insight into how the structures of control and exclusion are influenced by sociocultural beliefs that affect knowledge and meaning to maintain the status quo. The students and staff were concerned about the labels and stigmas that resulted in the discrimination of visually impaired students in educational provision. Disabled people are conventionally described in a negative light as victims who should be pitied at best and ignored and shunned at worst due to the belief system which describes disabled people as tragic (Reaume, 2014). Insights from Critical Disability Studies assisted in revealing the challenges visually impaired students can experience and the transformation required to best support them [Crescent College/Partnership provision]. The necessary change in perception and ideology that depict visually impaired students as those to be pitied and ignored could, I argue, be done through awareness training alongside Crescent College. As such, this would encourage others to value visual impairment

as diversity rather than an individual abnormality to be cured. Thus, there is a need for effective nationwide community education campaigns to reject prejudice, stereotyping, myths and misconceptions and their resultant discrimination, stigmatisation and marginalisation of visually impaired students. Recognising resource constraints, the awareness of partnership education environments could begin by distributing informative online material to other further education providers.

One of the principles of Critical Disability Studies surrounds giving voice to disabled people and honouring their stories because, historically, they have been ignored (Barnes, 2003b). Thus, this study does not only honour the students by sharing their stories but also challenges the stereotypical beliefs that have subjected visually impaired young people to constant dependency. This study revealed through the students' recounts of their educations before attending Crescent College that the voices of visually impaired students are often silenced and ignored as they are not considered essential stakeholders on issues concerning their education. Moreover, by giving students a safe learning environment, they can detach from being dependent on professionals and significant others. The notion of silence exposes the domination of non-disabled people on decisions that concern disabled people, and this is influenced by the belief system that considers the latter inferior. However, understanding visually impaired students and meeting their unique needs requires listening to their views to realise that living with sight loss does not prevent full participation in further education. The participants' experiences in this study show that visually impaired people have values, aspirations, dreams and hopes that could be realised when adequately supported. Therefore, providing opportunities and support as given to their non-disabled counterparts could help them realise their educational dreams and live an independent life, which Barnes and Mercer (2005) emphasised as highly valuable.

This study has discovered how Crescent College aligns with elements of crip theory and demonstrates what a 'cripping campus culture' can achieve. The visually impaired students are valued for the contributions they make to the Crescent College campus because of their sight loss rather than in spite of it. In embracing a cripistemological perspective Crescent College provides accommodations and has fostered an accessible environment shaped around disabled student's realities. For example, the college offers courses and co-curricular opportunities from a crip time perspective whereby learning is flexibly designed. Furthermore, by encouraging students to openly show their visual impairment, they are less inclined to hide away and in turn, conform to normalising

discourses. Therefore, Crescent College could be seen as facilitating a 'cripping campus culture' (Abes and Darkow, 2020).

The influence of crip theory in my research can further be reflected in both how students demonstrated how they resisted the tragic, broken identities that have been applied to vision impairment (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013). Through being involved in this research and openly discussing their experiences of prejudice and stigma with me, they problematised ableism and what constitutes an able-body, openly showing their stigma. Students stated how they had previously made attempts to conceal themselves and would allow people to do things for them because that was all they had ever known and believed about what being visually impaired meant. However, the students demonstrated how they no longer feared the prospect of being seen as visually impaired in society because the principles embedded within Crescent College were that students could achieve anything they set their minds to, regardless of their sight loss. Thus, demonstrating their changed perceptions about visual impairment.

This study revealed that environmental accessibility is viewed from the principles of ableism and normalcy, thus, setting 'normality' as a standard for accessing education. Subsequently, this makes it difficult for visually impaired students to function, leading them to depend on others for their participation in education settings. These ideas of inequality are passed on as acceptable norms by social institutions such as mainstream schools and colleges. Therefore, suggesting that in mainstream provision, normality is used as a measure for functioning in the environment. However, social constructionism shows these ideological assumptions emanate from sociocultural norms, which consider disabled people incapable, and assumptions discriminatory; not founded on objective truth (Manias and Street, 2000). In addition, the inability of the setting to transform the learning environment reflects an expression of unspoken assumptions and ideologies about ableist requirements for accessing formal education, thereby subjecting the students in this research to dependency and feelings of inadequacy. From the Critical Disability Studies perspective, setting ability as a condition for participation in further education restricts visually impaired students from participating fully and from realising their educational dreams. Therefore, this suggests that the environment should be transformed to enable marginalised, stigmatised and discriminated against students to participate in education (Hamraie, 2016; Hosking, 2008). With that, my study revealed the methods Crescent College uses to work towards flipping ableism on its head. By providing visually impaired students with individualised support, access to assistive technologies designed to

support sight loss and opportunities to make choices regarding curricula, Crescent College demonstrates a transformed environment whereby students do not have to compete with conditions of participation. As such, Crescent College reflects the notion of the rhizome in that it allows everyone inside and outside to grow differently depending on their needs. By enabling students to choose the aspects of the college they wish to engage in, students can move through the system in a non-linear manner without following a regimented system.

UK Government policy maintains that it is committed to supporting all students under Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). However, the reality differs according to students' recollections of their experiences before attending Crescent College. In addition, the findings of this study showed that previous teaching and learning practices by staff before they began working at Crescent College did not meet the basic equality principles of reasonable accommodations and providing for specific impairments (Unicef, 2017). Therefore, all students would have benefitted from something other than the learning environment. Furthermore, inadequate knowledge about teaching visually impaired students made it difficult for staff to diversify their teaching methods to meet the needs of all students. As such, this, according to understanding from Critical Disability Studies, infringes on the educational rights of disabled students. Failure to diversify teaching methods to meet the needs of all students suggests that the learning context requires students to adapt. Therefore, in-service training is needed for staff in other education provisions to acquaint them with the basic knowledge of teaching and supporting visually impaired students per partnership principles. Furthermore, this will ensure that all students will meet the minimum condition of equality in the future.

6.4.3 Multiple and Multi-Dimensional Transitions Theory

This study emphasises the significance of the psycho-emotional aspects of moving to partnership-FE with a visual impairment. Students experienced many different transitions, including; moving away from home, higher academic study, socialising with new peers, and entering workplace environments. In addition, students identified Crescent College as a transition into their futures.

The transition to any level of education is not just educational; for the students in this research, the transition to Crescent College was also psychological, social, and geographical. It signified a leap into independent adulthood, which can be portrayed using MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2012). MMT

theory sheds light on students' educational experiences. It recognises that students can experience multiple transitions simultaneously, for example, higher academic study and moving to a new location. Furthermore, Glazzard, Jindal-Snape and Stones (2020) point out the multi-dimensional nature of transitions, as they can initiate transitions for students' most significant others. As the students in this research mentioned they had chosen Crescent College to become less dependent on their significant others, such as parents and over-supportive teachers, my research demonstrates the multi-dimensional, non-linear and non-sequential nature of MMT theory.

6.4.4 Summary of theoretical lenses

Visually impaired students have been viewed as victims needing rehabilitation in line with the medical model of disability (Barnes, 2014; Berghs et al., 2016; Lawson and Beckett, 2021). Moreover, the literature has shown that this has a significant impact on academic achievement (Chanfreau and Cebulla, 2009; Haegele, Zhu and Holland, 2019; Opie and Southcott, 2018), the ability to live a fulfilled, independent life (Hewett, Douglas and Keil, 2015), socioemotional development (Manitsa and Doikou, 2022; Roseblum, 2000) and their overall self-esteem and well-being (Halder and Datta, 2012; Kapinga and Aloni, 2021). This research has demonstrated that during their time in partnership-FE, visually impaired students can experience empowering, accomplishing and gratifying experiences which have broken down some of these medicalised outcomes. The counter-narrative portrayed in the findings of this research, therefore, challenges the dominant discourses of visual impairment as a tragedy that has been well documented in the literature (Barnes, 2014; Loftis, 2020; Swain and French, 2000). Choosing a partnership college enabled students to build alternate identities in an environment they believed would offer adequate support and a deeper understanding. Students radiated confidence when discussing their decision-making process during the transition to further education. Regardless of each individual's specific requirements, they were confident that Crescent College could offer them the support they needed to overcome some of the challenges they had faced previously.

None of the students knew one another before starting at Crescent College; most of the group had moved away from their hometowns. The students found this initially challenging as many of their friends from secondary school stayed on at sixth form together or moved to the mainstream college nearby. On the contrary, some students were unfazed as they had struggled to make friends previously. One implication of this research for theory is that it provides an understanding of how visually impaired students construct their transition to partnership further education. By following

the principles of the interpretivist paradigm, this study has gained significant insights into the students' perceptions and how they individually and collectively made sense of their transition to Crescent College. Furthermore, by considering the voices of visually impaired students, the study has unveiled how complex and challenging transitioning can be for this group of students. Finally, it has also uncovered the evolving views of these students about entering a more independent life and how they dealt with their multiple transitions during this time.

Staff expressed their concerns for students' transitions out of Crescent College and into a world where such individualised support would be more difficult to reach. Therefore, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach in following the life of one student making several transitions to discover how these are fluid and differ as the student moves through life.

6.5 Proposed partnership model

Inclusion in mainstream education was long thought of as the most effective and appropriate approach to educating students with special educational needs (Norwich, 2008). However, once special-mainstream partnerships emerged, they became a vital opportunity for special schools to mitigate many of the reported segregating aspects of disabled students in entirely specialist provision (Norwich, 2008; Rose, 2012). Rose (2012) explored ways special and mainstream schools worked in partnership with one another and other organisations. It was found that whilst mainstream schools are well placed to offer a more comprehensive curriculum for students with special educational needs, specialist schools can offer better opportunities to work with other agencies. Thus, specialist schools are in a position to enable disabled students to receive better, individually tailored learning (Rose, 2012), which my research found was a non-negotiable aspect for visually impaired students when choosing their place of further education study. My study discovered that partnership further education has the potential to afford visually impaired students: greater levels of independence, individually tailored support, access to a broad academic and vocational curriculum, the opportunity to learn to use technologies designed to support sight loss and demonstrate the inclusionary benefits of the social model in practice.

Chapter two of this thesis showed that there will always be a need for specialist education settings as there will always be disabled students whose specific learning needs cannot be met adequately in

a mainstream environment (Avissar, 2018; Day and Prunty, 2010; Forbes, 2007). Furthermore, studies have identified the need to develop links between special and mainstream settings as an area for growth and improvement in the form of a continuum of provision whereby mainstream education settings and special education settings work in collaboration to fully meet the needs of disabled students (Avissar, 2018; Baker, 2007; Feiler, 2013; Gasson et al., 2015; Norwich, 2007; 2014; Skovlund, 2014; Shaw, 2017). However, these studies focus on the needs of children in pre-16 education (primary and secondary). Nevertheless, it was found that providing for a greater diversity of disabled students is more challenging in the later years of schooling, with a noticeably steady increase year by year in the proportion of students moving to special schools through the school-aged years (Black, 2014; Norwich, 2014). With that, I question why partnerships are not discussed in the context of further education in the same way, at length, in the literature.

Consequently, the findings of this research demonstrate a need for such partnerships between special and mainstream education environments to continue into further education provision. In addition, Shaw (2017) developed a set of recommendations for special and mainstream education policy and practice, specifically aimed at ensuring the needs of disabled children are met in the current climate of inclusion. One recommendation centred on developing special-mainstream partnerships involving sharing expertise and stronger links. With the notion of strengthened links in mind, this research offers a proposed new model of special-mainstream partnership in the context of further education.

6.5.1 How the model emerged from the findings

Figures 2 and 3 below outline how I came to propose the Crescent College Partnership Model to inform future policy and practice. First, figure 2 explores the data from this research concerning the experiences of visually impaired students that led them to seek partnership further education, combined with findings from my autoethnography, both of which can be mapped to the literature in chapter two of my thesis. It shows my fundamental discoveries about special and mainstream provision separately, where their individual failings for visually impaired students lie, and how Crescent College and potentially other partnership provisions could be a solution.

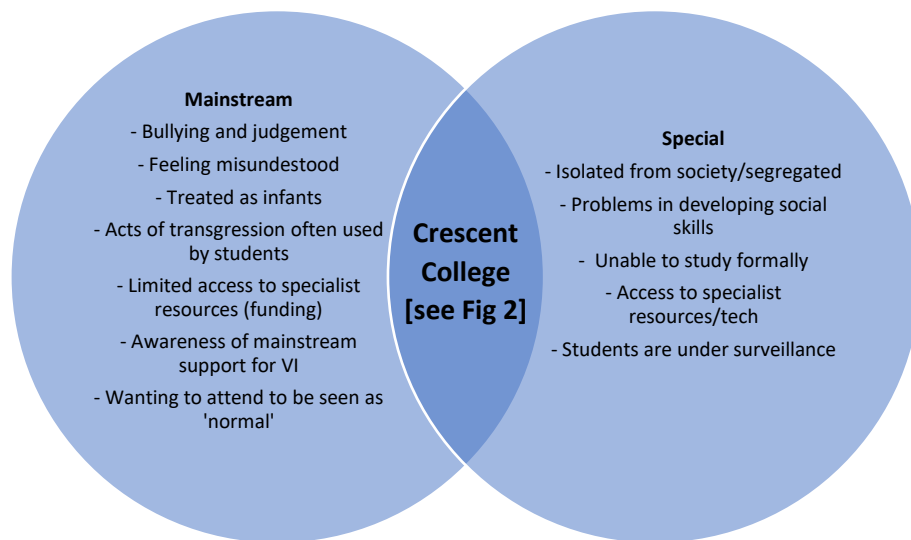


Figure 2: Differences between mainstream and special education.

Figure 2 brings together the data from students and staff regarding the aspects of their lives that influenced their decisions to choose further education at Crescent College. The left-hand side of the Venn diagram presents experiences in mainstream settings, and the right-hand side lays out experiences of special schooling; both of which exist on two ends of a continuum. Crescent College, then, in incorporating mainstream and special education aspects, fits in the middle. The experiences detailed by the students are further substantiated by the literature found in chapter two of this thesis.

To show how figure 2 maps to my study, table 4 presents critical themes from the data surrounding visually impaired students' experiences before Crescent College; these reflect special and mainstream schools. However, I would like to emphasise that only one of my student participants attended an entirely specialist school; the other participants were in mainstream schools. Column one represents some key themes I uncovered through listening to my participants in interviews and observations. Column two presents the raw data from chapter five [the findings: part 1] that maps to the themes.

Table 4: Experiences and perceptions of mainstream and special education.

Experiences and perceptions	How these are shown through the data
Bullying and judgement	<p>"I've even had people stick their legs out in corridors." – Ollie</p> <p>"Some people are very ignorant, some people are like oh he's visually impaired, he's disabled as such so people would even talk about you behind you, and you could hear them, but they would assume that because you're blind, you're deaf as well." – Ollie</p> <p>"I didn't like it there that's why I came here". – Merlin on feeling judged for having a vision impairment at her previous school</p>
Feeling misunderstood	<p>"I've never tripped up because I can see outlines of stuff so I can see them they've got their legs tucked in and the moment I walk by they stick them out." – Ollie</p> <p>"Um but my last year of college they had to employ somebody from a different company and at first I was a bit like 'err I don't know how that's going to go, I don't know this person and they don't know me' – Bella</p> <p>"I just see myself as a normal person, but my eyes don't work very well you know? I've kind of got this life mission that I want to change people's perceptions of blind people. I think movies give that perception that blind people can't see anything, they use the white stick, they think that when you're blind, you're completely blind, they don't realise there's people that are partially sighted which is quite a deluded way to think" – Ollie</p>
Treated as infants	<p>"They wrapped us in cotton wool" – Paddi</p> <p>"They would talk to you like you haven't got a brain cell." – Ollie</p> <p>"My mum used to really struggle with teaching me how to cook, how to iron because she was worried I was going to hurt myself you know the motherly instinct kicked in." – Bella</p> <p>"They would be doing a lot for me, I was doing the work, but they were kind of a bit too much involved, they were there all the time." – Paddi</p>
Acts of transgression often used by students	<p>"So, I just give them a little whack with my cane and that kind of thing [laughs]." – Ollie</p> <p>"They are actually quite prickly towards support, and we were coming up with different strategies and getting nowhere with them..." – Sammy</p>
Limited access to specialist resources (funding)	<p>"It costs a third of a price of a reasonable first-time car, you're looking at around £2500 – 3000 for it. For a piece of software on a computer." – Alfie</p> <p>"I did have the visual impairment service there and they did their best and I'm not entirely sure whether they had access to anything like this [referring to the OrCam] But I think it was a funding issue." – Paddi</p> <p>"Once I finished my last year of compulsory education my county were like okay, we need to take your stuff back, so my iPad, laptop, braille note." – Bella</p>
Awareness of VI	<p>"I can't say I was particularly aware of people with sight loss. I think my experience of working with other staff working in mainstream is that there is quite a lot of fear because it's an unknown." – Rosie on previous role in mainstream</p> <p>"I think there's quite a lot of fear, there's also concern around how much extra work there might be to adapt things for a student with sight loss." – Rosie</p> <p>"I think as a teacher I can understand you've got this big workload and then if they bring in someone with sight loss it's like 'how am I going to make these PowerPoints that I've been using for however long I've been teaching this course, how am I going to make that accessible for that student'" – Rosie</p>
Wanting to attend to be seen as "normal"	<p>"Oh, I met this guy today he was blind, but he was really cool... you know they'll remember that." – Ollie</p> <p>"So, for me, it was a case of you know she's not different from anyone else she just needs a little extra help let's put her in mainstream school" – Bella</p> <p>"I'm not being rude or anything, but a lot of the students over here have very severe disabilities, and you can't even hold a conversation with a lot of them." – Ollie on his peers at Crescent College</p> <p>"Yeah, it was. I had one other visually impaired friend who came from the same town as me and he was pretty able-bodied as well – he had more vision than me and he was pretty mainstream as well so us two together we used to mix with the rest of them [students without disabilities]." – Ollie</p>
Isolated from society/segregated	<p>"I mean I hated using a cane you know. I went through a stage where I didn't want to use a cane, I didn't want to do anything. I went through a stage where I felt quite depressed, I felt quite insecure, and I went through the stage a lot of people do where I didn't want to be in public." – Ollie</p> <p>"We don't want that poor you; you are disabled go and sit over there we will do it for you. It is basic humanity." – Alfie</p> <p>"Specialist colleges with partnerships are good. I think they need to work with that more, I know they've got specialist colleges over the UK but they're just purely for VI people and what I've noticed.... I've gone on trips with charities like action for blind and the students from those colleges their only friends are other VI students. So, they're in their own communities they've got groups on Facebook, I'm members, I'm cool with them and a lot of them I'm friends with too but my friendship group a lot of them are just normal lads..." – Ollie</p>

Mainstream provision left students:

- the subjects of bullying and judgement,
- feeling misunderstood,
- being treated as infants,
- feeling the need to use acts of transgression,
- having limited access to specialist resources,
- experiencing a lack of awareness from staff on how best to support them,
- moreover, desiring to be seen as 'normal' in front of their peers and teachers.

These experiences detailed by the students contributed to their desire to experience further education in an environment dedicated to supporting their individual needs rather than another setting that took a 'one size fits all' approach to educating disabled students regardless of their impairment. Whereas specialist provision facilitated:

- feelings of isolation and segregation from society,
- problems in developing social skills,
- no choice to study formal qualifications,
- access to specialist resources and technologies,
- reports of feeling under constant surveillance by their teachers, contributing to a lack of independence.

Only one of my student participants had previously attended an entirely specialist school. However, the findings outlined above also emerged from other students' fears about special schools; my autoethnographic account demonstrated how, societal perceptions around visual impairment can influence such a stigmatised view about special schools, and the literature in chapter two of the thesis.

The findings and discussion have demonstrated some key overarching elements of Crescent College that are essential for facilitating inclusive practice for the visually impaired students included in this research:

1. Autoethnography demonstrated a need for greater awareness of visual impairment, and the experiences of those who experience sight loss provided the best opportunity to facilitate this. As such;
2. students' experiences of independence demonstrated how partnership-FE has the resources to develop this;
3. through personally tailored academic and personal support;
4. access to innovative assistive technologies;
5. partnership-FE affords students the ability to learn formal or vocational or both types of qualifications and skills;
6. which can lead to an array of opportunities such as employment, higher education, and living alone;
7. and to ultimately enable visually impaired students to feel included in society.

As such, figure 3 outlines my proposed model of partnership-FE based on what the visually impaired students viewed as crucial to their own lives.

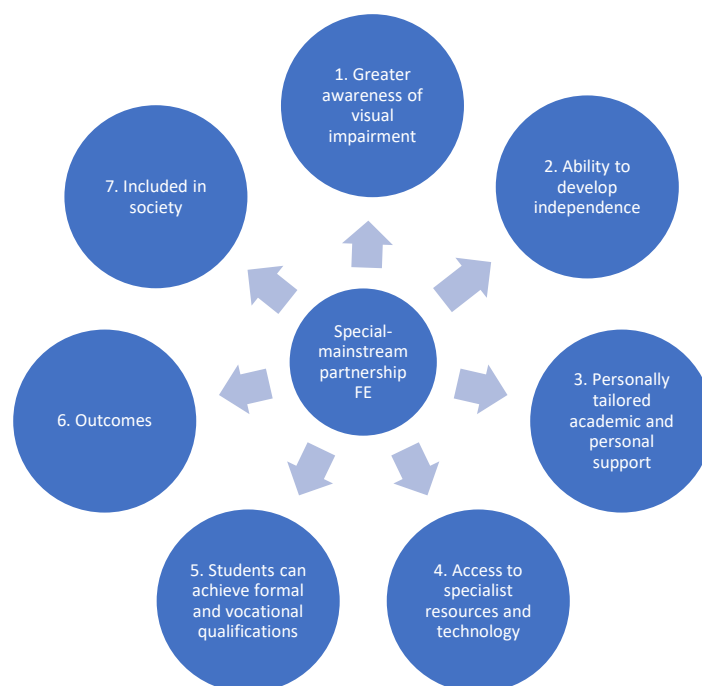


Figure 3: Proposed model of Partnership-FE.

The model outlines the critical elements of Crescent College that my study has revealed, as detailed in the earlier sections of this chapter, to encourage other educational establishments to implement these aspects into their curriculums and ensure that future practice is based upon the proven strengths in partnership-FE

Table 5 presents key elements outlined in figure 3 and demonstrates how these elements emerged through my data. Column one represents the key elements participants discussed regarding Crescent College, and column two presents the raw data from chapter five [The Findings Part 2] that maps to each essential element of the college.

Table 5: Data that shows how Crescent College demonstrates an inclusive environment.

Elements of Crescent College	How these are shown through the data
Greater awareness of visual impairment	<p>"We go in with a whole load of tech and bits of kit, some that demonstrated what I could see – others showing how we use technology to read, how we use it for talking books." – Alfie</p> <p>"I've kind of got this life mission that I want to change people's perceptions of blind people. I think movies give that perception that blind people can't see anything, they use the white stick, they think that when you're blind you're completely blind, they don't realise there's people that are partially sighted which is quite a deluded way to think but a lot of people do think that but I think if people meet me they will think oh I met this guy today he was blind but he was really cool... you know they'll remember that. So, when they meet or see another blind person, they might change their perception and think not all blind people are the same." – Ollie</p> <p>"I think my class there definitely understand visual impairment now." – Paddi</p> <p>"For example, one of my friends – a week into Hayside I was working with him, and he was straight on it as soon as I told him I was VI he understood it and he was extremely patient with me helping me to set up my equipment." – Paddi</p>
Ability to develop independence	<p>"Whereas staff here also probably have that fear, but they don't step in unless something really is wrong, and you are going to hurt yourself so they kind of let you learn how to do it" – Bella</p> <p>"On a Monday every other Monday in the afternoon there's this lady who takes us into town and she is trained to make sure that visually impaired students are equipped for the future. Teaching us how to cross roads safely etc." – Paddi</p> <p>"I could have stayed on at sixth form but I kind of figured that within two years' time if I'd stayed, I would be in the same position as when I started it. I feel like I wouldn't have gotten very independent." – Ollie</p> <p>"So like here, I stay in supported living here but a lot of the time I get to do whatever I want, so I learnt to cook I learnt to do washing do everything independently really, so I feel a lot more grown-up...I get to be more independent here. I think it's because they and I realise I'm growing up" – Ollie</p>
Personally tailored academic and personal support	<p>"I use an adapted keyboard which is larger keys, and they are yellow with black text. A bit reluctant to use zoom text which magnifies so I just enlarge the font because that works for me." – Merlin</p> <p>"I think my tutor there has 14 of us in the class to deal with and it is sometimes hard for her to get things ready for me in the right font size etc. so I think having the reader on my glasses and having my tablet and magnifier is a lot more helpful in that way in that I can access more stuff if it's not prepared, and it stays in my head more." – Paddi</p> <p>"The thing is, there are times where we do need that little bit of extra help. Yes, it's great you can go off to the mainstream college and do courses, learn skills but on top of that you also need that tiny bit extra support. It might be that you need to speak to fellow visually impaired people so you can learn about more apps, skills etc." – Alfie</p>
Access to specialist resources and technology	<p>"If you start looking at the price of some software. I spoke about fusion, I'm fortunate that I get it through access to work. If I had to go and buy it, I couldn't afford it." – Alfie</p> <p>I was for a couple of months lost because I didn't have a braille note. I can type documents on a laptop but reading them I prefer reading in braille to listening to speech tell me what the document is... So, I was quite lost and then Rosie gave me a braille note and I was like 'YES THANK YOU!'. – Bella</p> <p>"Yeah, so I was supplied with this phone that has an app on it called seeing AI" – Ollie</p> <p>"A lot of people have said to me "I've got my smartphone, all I use it for is dialling friends and family" and they say I can't afford to buy a newspaper, I can't afford a talking book player, I can't afford to get magnifiers and all that and I will just say you've got a smartphone, its already all built-in to your smartphone, can we just show you how to use that and show you the bits that are there to make life easier." – Alfie</p> <p>"I think my tutor there has 14 of us in the class to deal with and it is sometimes hard for her to get things ready for me in the right font size etc. so I think having the reader on my glasses and having my tablet and magnifier is a lot more helpful in that way in that I can access more stuff if it's not prepared, and it stays in my head more." – Paddi</p>
Students can achieve formal and vocational qualifications	<p>"You know over here I've got all the support if I need it and I can do my work over here and over there I've got the whole sports side of it (mainstream college)." – Ollie</p> <p>"We've also got people going to work placements so if their goal is to work, they can develop work-based skills by going to work placements. We operate on an enterprise basis which is where we have enterprises, we don't actually have any classes as such, we just have areas where people work. We've got an eBay business, a college office, a new media hub, an arts centre and crafts centre, a college shop, and the bell bar of course. So, students can then choose which ones they go to and develop whatever skills they want within those enterprises." – Rosie</p> <p>"I study English, maths and creative arts and I love my friends and the new things I've been able to do and being very involved." – Kylie</p>

	"I go to Crescent College and also to another college, I do animal care at that college. It's really fun because I get to cover a variety of animals there including snakes and lizards, tarantulas, and stuff." - Paddi
Outcomes	<p>"The primary aim is to support students, those with sight loss and other students to achieve their goals, achieve their aims, to support them into work, into independent living, to university, to college, you know or to community access, if that's what they want to do, so I think that's our primary aim is to get them there." - Rosie</p> <p>"Many of our students move onto higher education, or employment" - Sammy</p> <p>Bella expressed her desire to become independent and move out and when asked if she saw that being possible:</p> <p>"I can now, since coming here I can... So, I think I would be able to do it eventually." - Bella</p>
Included in society	<p>"People actually move out the way here [Crescent College]." - Ollie</p> <p>"I don't want to say normal because what's normal, but what society would call mainstream people. Not to say that's the right term but you get what I'm saying, but I feel they need to not force but promote integration more. I really believe in these partnerships." - Merlin</p> <p>"Needed a change" and "liked the feel of the college on the open day". - Merlin</p>

6.6 Summary

This chapter explored and considered the significance of my findings concerning my three research questions. First, I looked at my autoethnographic findings to create a sense of feel and place and discussed why the context of partnership-FE is crucial to this study. Second, I placed the participants' experiences in the context of the existing literature concerning partnership-FE and visual impairment. Third, I combined the discussion in relation to the theoretical lenses that underpin my study, as outlined in chapter two of the thesis. Fourth, this chapter presented, together with the findings and literature, a proposed, tentative new partnership-FE model. The proposed model [Figure 3] illuminates the significance of the study and brings together how the findings, combined with what we currently know about the educational experiences of visually impaired students, can contribute to future theory, policy and practice. The next chapter will draw conclusions from the study and outline the original contributions to knowledge. The conclusion will also incorporate details of the limitations of my research before finishing with a series of recommendations to facilitate the contribution my research may have in the field of further education for visually impaired students specifically.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the findings in relation to the research questions. Following this, I will explicitly state my original contributions to knowledge, theory, policy and practice. Next, I summarise the implications of the proposed model I developed and how this model could be used in practice. After this, I acknowledge the limitations of the research before outlining the opportunities for further research that have emerged from the study. Finally, to close the chapter, I share my reflections on the research process.

7.1 Addressing the research questions

This section will summarise how I answered each research question and the main conclusions that emerged from doing so.

Q1: What is the context of this partnership further education setting?

Having never been to Crescent College might have resulted in difficulty in understanding the real effects of partnership-FE, and therefore, I adopted an aspect of researcher reflexivity by autoethnography to create a sense of feel and place for the reader. With that, I stress that this does not enable any of us to truly know what it feels like to be a visually impaired student in the world. Instead, the autoethnographic account outlined how I came to pursue this research, why it was a pertinent topic to explore, and, therefore, provides the reader with rich insight into the college. Through autoethnography I witnessed the critical success factors as outlined in the report by The Education and Training Foundation (2022). Crescent College is the epitome of how an education setting should share values, a vision and an ethos; there was an absence of rivalry between Crescent College and its partnered mainstream college. Furthermore, the college shed light on what openness, honesty, generosity and trust, equal commitment, and putting in time should look like in practice.

Q2: What are the experiences of visually impaired students in one partnership further education setting?

The original driving force for this research, capturing visually impaired students' views, was fundamental in understanding their experiences around a matter that directly affected their lives. I illustrate this through the emphasis placed on listening to the students voices, which motivated me

to engage their individual views and those of their teachers to interrogate inclusive further education practice. Experiences can be summarised as follows:

- Students felt they had much more independence due to the way staff at Crescent College treated them like young adults.
- Students felt understood and well-supported through the two-fold type of support: personal and academic.
- Students felt they could access and learn to use assistive technology effectively.
- Students felt appreciative that they could learn both formal qualifications and vocational activities that could help them navigate their visual impairments.
- Students ultimately felt that Crescent College enabled their choice over the above experiences, and as a result, the college fostered a greater sense of inclusion than they had ever experienced before.

Q3: Within the context of this study, what are the aspects of partnership which support the inclusion of visually impaired students?

Finally, as the experiences of the students themselves demonstrated an overall positive effect of partnership-FE on their lives, I proposed the model [Figure 3], which is grounded in the unique elements that make Crescent College the successful learning environment that this study has uncovered it to be. The aspects of effective partnership include:

1. Greater awareness of visual impairment.
2. Ability to develop independence.
3. Personally tailored academic and personal support.
4. Access to specialist resources and technology.
5. Students can achieve formal and vocational qualifications.
6. Leads to better outcomes.
7. Inclusion in society.

7.3 Original contribution to knowledge

This section will summarise my original contributions to theory and knowledge, policy and practice based on the findings from this case study.

7.3.1 Original contribution to theory

Section 6.2 [Students Experiences] of chapter six presents an original contribution to knowledge and existing disability theory which is centred around adding to understanding about the experiences of visually impaired students in partnership further education and how these reflect or do not reflect the existing literature.

Previous studies have called for critical reflexivity on current inclusive education policies and practices to consider how to close the theory-practice gap (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2015; Hodgkinson, 2012; Reeves et al., 2020; Slee, 2013; Whitburn, 2017). Therefore, in seeking out the experiences of visually impaired students in partnership further education, my study adds to the limited awareness and understanding of these individuals' lives in Crescent College specifically. Through analysis of my autoethnographic account, I demonstrated my reflexivity around special education generally, visual impairment and partnership-FE. Consequently, this autoethnography demonstrated a need for greater awareness of visual impairment because my previous experiences had generated false preconceptions about Crescent College. Therefore, the experiences of visually impaired students provided the best opportunity to facilitate more awareness of the phenomenon I explored. The factors that led the students to choose to attend a partnership-FE setting became important indicators regarding their experiences and how the constructions of visual impairment and inclusive education exist in tension. Indeed, it can be argued that mainstream and specialist education work to expel visually impaired students through disabling practices, leading them to seek out an inclusive environment for their further education journeys.

In contribution to disability studies theory, the knowledge provided by the retelling of students' experiences illuminates how disability as deficit and as difference is reinforced within interactions in education and society. However, in addition, and far more positively in terms of moving forwards and offering unique insights, this research provides substance to existing theoretical positions. The purpose of theory is to explain phenomena. The theoretical lenses draw connections and predictions about visual impairment, partnership-FE and inclusion. So, by considering my research findings under theoretical lenses such as models of disability, critical disability studies and MMT theory, I have proposed a new model [Figure 3].

First, there is a contribution to MMT theory in that it has not yet been applied to partnership-FE. In using MMT theory to explain the relationship between visually impaired students and their experiences in partnership-FE, I have demonstrated how their psycho-emotional experiences play a critical role in their experiences at Crescent College. Second, my proposal of the model for further education [Figure 3] draws on a number of theoretical approaches and in doing so, it addresses a theory-practice gap. The models of disability, elements of critical disability studies and MMT theory all play critical parts in the students' experiences at Crescent College. The medicalised and stigmatised experiences students previously had contributed to their decision to attend a college with a partnership nature. Negative societal attitudes and systematic barriers ultimately determined the treatment students received until they reached Crescent College. Partnership-FE challenges the physical and structural barriers that visually impaired students may face by removing negative attitudes and barriers in alignment with the social model of disability. Furthermore, Crescent College provided students with a space to focus on the value of their lives and actively dismiss previous experiences in non-partnership provisions that reflected the common misconception that disabled people cannot be proud of the person they are (Swain and French, 2000). As such, demonstrating a contribution to the affirmative model of disability through the proposal. Nevertheless, the labelling aspect, which aligns with the medical model of disability, is also present in how students need to be defined as visually impaired to access inclusive partnership-FE. Thus, the medical model of disability is a part of the education system and is a process which continues to influence policy and practice, even in partnership-FE, which this research has revealed embodies an inclusive education environment.

Furthermore, the study has revealed how the partnership system employed at Crescent College can transform students' lives. From the critical disability studies perspective, setting ability as a condition for participation in further education restricts visually impaired students from participating fully and from realising their educational dreams. Therefore, this suggests that the environment should be transformed to enable marginalised, stigmatised and discriminated against students to participate in education (Hamraie, 2016; Hosking, 2008). The original contribution to theory can be demonstrated through the proposed model [Figure 3], which is based on the critical elements that make Crescent College inclusive and, as demonstrated above, aligns with elements of the models of disability, critical disability studies and MMT theory.

This study has discovered that Crescent College does reflect aspects of the medical model of disability, such as the labelling of visually impaired students, so they receive adequate support. However, it was evident that the college and the partnership nature aligns most with the social model of disability, enabling visually impaired students to embrace the principles of the affirmative model by recognising their value as individuals. In addition, it strengthens further the argument for additional research. It also indicates the need for theoretical underpinnings that take at their core a commitment to intersectional approaches that examine not only partnership education systems but also visual impairment, a concept that is under-explored in this context. This study adds to theory by using existing theories as lenses to understand why Crescent College works and adopts the unique elements as outlined in the proposed model [Figure 3]. Furthermore, it demonstrates the use of theory in practice, for example, in the ways the models of disability are apparent in the college.

Therefore, in a bid to add to existing knowledge and disability theory, my proposal of a new model [Figure 3] of education, specifically partnership-FE, reflects an original contribution in the form of an education model that is based on a system that has been proven, through the findings of this study, to work within the context of Crescent College. I developed the model [Figure 3] by first listing all of the experiences students had in non-partnership education that led them to seek a more inclusive further education environment [Figure 2] and second, noting all of the elements that made Crescent College be exactly that as told by the students and staff themselves [Figure 3]. As such, the proposed model is essentially a list of the processes and practices that Crescent College implements, which the findings of my research discovered were pertinent to students' success.

7.3.2 Original contribution to practice

The findings of this research ultimately found the special-mainstream partnership in a further education environment to influence the lives of visually impaired students positively. Accordingly, this led to my proposal of a model [Figure 3] to inform future stakeholders of best practices when integrating specialist and mainstream further education for students with visual impairment. The model is based on the experiences of the visually impaired students themselves, including the barriers they have faced, societal stigma and ableist views of others about their disability, how the partnership nature affords them opportunities they had not previously grasped, and how staff have witnessed a significant change in students over time spent at Crescent College. So, the model is a contribution to both research and practice. As the study concerns partnership-FE, and there is not much research in this field at present, it, therefore, adds to the limited research. Furthermore, the

model contributes to practice by presenting a set of measures that have worked for this group of students and therefore, it may be helpful for other further education practice.

The development of the proposed model [Figure 3] also has the potential to act as a catalyst for mainstream settings to take some, if not all, of the fundamentals on board which could, in turn, improve inclusivity for disabled students in solely mainstream settings. It is likely that mainstream settings will not have the funding to adapt their environments to cover the needs of all disabilities as identified in the model hence the drive to keep partnership-FE settings afloat. However, they can learn from and take on board aspects of the model in a bid to raise awareness of visual impairment and, hopefully, reduce the levels of bullying and stigmatisation students have reported experiencing.

It is important to emphasise that whilst this model offers a structure for future policy and practice makers to follow, there is no one size fits all approach, and therefore, the suggestions made in this model are to be considered carefully for each student.

7.3.3 Original contribution to policy

Inclusion is a key focus of government policies globally (Mouroutsou, 2017), and legislation in England prohibits discrimination in education and supports inclusive education. However, the research found that the students involved had been exposed to discrimination in the form of bullying due to stigmatised attitudes from peers and educators. Therefore, my study intends to illuminate partnership-FE to show how the current system could positively influence the future development of disability and educational policies pertaining to the education of visually impaired students.

An inclusive pedagogy would provide an effective learning environment not only for visually impaired students but for all students with different abilities. Inclusive education, according to Unicef (2017: 3), is when:

education environments adapt the design and physical structures, teaching methods, and curriculum as well as the culture, policy and practice of education environments so that they

are accessible to all students without discrimination. Placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without these adaptations does not constitute inclusion.

Despite this, the students in this study experienced high levels of discrimination in the form of bullying and segregation during their time in mainstream schools. Moreover, accessible materials are essential for visually impaired students to gain relevant skills and knowledge. Technology can help provide learning materials in an alternate and accessible format for learners with visual impairment. This demonstrates how my study presents some implications for teacher training and education. Assistive technologies such as the OrCam and BrailleNote tablets enhance the learning experience of learners with visual impairment. Visually impaired students should be given a choice in selecting the appropriate learning tools to facilitate meaningful learning and greater participation in the curriculum. This, in turn, creates implications for government investment in technology to support students fully. An inclusive and accessible educational system would equip students with the skills and knowledge required to foster social inclusion. The role of teachers in an inclusive education setting is becoming very challenging. It is the requirement of the teacher in an inclusive environment to facilitate the learning of a visually impaired student alongside the students they are used to teaching (McLinden et al., 2016). Therefore, policy should concentrate more on creating a more effective support system in all mainstream schools to provide support in terms of pedagogy, teaching materials, and technology to create and provide accessible educational materials through qualified special educators. This case study has demonstrated one approach to this as the adoption of more partnership education.

Teachers who teach and manage the classroom must be sensitised and made aware of the philosophy of inclusive education and oriented to the different kinds of adjustments that schools have to make regarding awareness, infrastructure, curriculum, and teaching methods. Although it may not be possible to immediately train all teachers to teach visually impaired students due to time and funding constraints, they can be informed through workshops and awareness training. Currently, there is a postcode lottery of specialist support in the UK, as special educational provision has been drastically undermined (Hewett, Douglas and Keil, 2017), which means students are not always able to attend colleges like Crescent College, which are tailored towards supporting their needs. Additionally, students should not have to wait until further education to receive such support as vision impairment is a lifelong disability, and those who experience it should receive proactive support from specially trained teachers throughout childhood and early adulthood (Latif, 2022). Therefore, my research recommends that policy concentrates on training for non-partnership

settings to recognise how partnership can transform visually impaired students' lives and appoint more trained visual impairment educators in all mainstream schools to facilitate inclusion of students both before further education, during, and beyond into higher education. Furthermore, the study emphasises an implication for initial teacher education to have a higher focus on best practices for teaching visually impaired students.

7.3.4 Summary of contributions

The original contributions of this study are centred around adding to knowledge and understanding about the experiences of visually impaired students in one partnership further education college [Crescent College] and providing a solution for future policy and practice in the form of a proposed model of education for visually impaired students.

7.4 Implications of the new model

Reflecting on the proposed model of partnership-FE, I have identified five implications. These are as follows:

- This study revealed how partnership-FE presents a deep commitment of all stakeholders to advance inclusion education. Therefore, change will have to occur if other education provisions are to use or take on board elements of the proposed model. Change that directly impacts students' experiences usually involves teachers acquiring new knowledge, adopting new practices and modifying beliefs and values (Fullan and Hargreaves, 2016). Addressing the needs of an individual pupil will inevitably place demands on a teacher's time, practice and knowledge. The previous experiences of students showed that in non-partnership provisions especially, teachers may have limited input into how they can support visually impaired students, and this was reflected in the negative experiences students had before attending Crescent College. Furthermore, teachers themselves highlighted a level of fear with teaching visually impaired students due to not knowing how best to support them. Findings have resonated with the argument that teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion are more likely to adapt how they work to benefit all their pupils and are more likely to influence their colleagues to support inclusion, encouraging collaboration and sharing classroom management skills (Sharma, Forlin and Loreman, 2008). Therefore, if teachers can see how the principles of partnership-FE create positive experiences for visually impaired students, they may be more inclined to adapt their practice and overcome their

concerns, as teachers ultimately want to create meaningful and fulfilling spaces for every student in their class.

- Inclusive education can promote social justice, the formation of a welcoming society, hold back discrimination (Salamanca Statement, UNESCO, 1994; United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006) and can have a positive impact on young people's social and academic development (Odom et al., 2004; Thomas and Vaughan, 2004). The next implication of the proposed model, therefore, is to carefully consider the transformation of non-partnership provisions, such as segregated programmes, into settings that adopt integrated activities or into partially inclusive settings. The aim is to ensure at least some meetings and connections between non-visually impaired and visually impaired students and, thus, contribute to the inclusive education initiative (Mortier, 2020).
- The findings from students' own experiences demonstrated how Crescent College enabled them to become less dependent on their significant others, teachers and other support systems. Whether that was through staff teaching students how to use assistive technology to enable them to be able to complete instrumental activities of daily living, or through giving them the choice over what to study academically. Wong (2004) emphasised that there is frequently a disconnection between what disabled students do and what they are capable of doing due to the limited opportunities available to them. Henceforth, another implication of the partnership-FE model is better, more fulfilling transitions that consider what matters to visually impaired students, as argued by Wong (2004).
- The next implication is a direct result of the latter implication in that there are many visually impaired students that never gain employment or struggle to do so (Hewett and Ellis, 2021), it has been found this is largely because visually impaired people do not possess the skills to work independently, which ultimately, help them to succeed in the workplace (Coffey, Coufopoulos and Kinghorn, 2014). Moreover, visually impaired people often experience prejudice and stigma when applying for roles (Chhabra, 2021). Therefore, the following implication of the proposed model is reflective of the ways it could contribute to addressing unemployment rates. Through the in-house enterprise schemes, partnership-FE provides students with work experience, which, in turn, enhances their employability skills. Additionally, employment rates for visually impaired people may increase by focusing on teaching students all-important literacy skills, including reading braille and using braille technology.
- The final implication of my proposed model surrounds the ability of partnership-FE to facilitate more collaborative transitions and, therefore, supports the notion that visually

impaired students experience multiple and multi-dimensional transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2012). Through working together with students, families, staff and other professionals, partnership-FE recognises the complexity of transitions for visually impaired students during their time in further education, prior and beyond. The findings illustrated how Crescent College teaches coping mechanisms so students and their significant others can manage the transitions, including by introducing them to assistive technology, which can allow students to communicate with their significant others during their time away from them or to read labels to help them cook safely and independently. The proposed model takes into account all stakeholders to ensure the most appropriate method of learning for each student. Thus, the model appreciates the multitude of transitions these students may go through and puts strategies in place to support them and their significant others through these.

These implications are not an exhaustive list; they are the implications I have identified at the time of submitting this thesis, and other implications may arise upon the implementation of the model into practice that will require careful consideration. As partnership provision identified a deep commitment of all stakeholders to advance inclusive education, it warrants more longitudinal research to discover the effects of my proposed model on different stakeholders over time.

7.5 Limitations

I followed an interpretive, qualitative approach to this work with a small group of visually impaired students and their teachers in one partnership-FE setting in England. The purpose was to gain a deep understanding rather than reach generalised findings. Therefore, this study lacked generalisable results, though I strove to ensure and achieve trustworthiness in reporting the findings, as explained in detail in Chapter 3, section 3.7. Notably, the interpretations and analysis of this study's results are specific to this setting, participants' particular situations and the number of participants. However, the findings of this research might be useful in understanding the intersecting and intertwining barriers within similar cultures and educational systems.

One of the main limitations of this study is its highly contextual nature, for which case study design has been critiqued (Gerring, 2007; Hammersly and Gomm, 2000; Merriam, 2009). Although the findings are based on a rich set of data collected via different techniques and sources such as observations, a research journal, participant observation and individual interviews, they have to be

taken with caution regarding transferability. The study represents an East of England population, which has hindered the development of a cross-cultural perspective. This is a fundamental limitation in the body of work, and more work needs to be done to assess the culturally specific experiences of visually impaired students of other ethnic groups within England and beyond. As an interpretive researcher, I am aware that it can be difficult to transfer the findings and conclusions of this inquiry to the context of other further education provisions in England or other countries. I should also stress that my study has been primarily concerned with the experiences of visually impaired students aged between 16 and 25 years old. Thus, the results of this research may neither apply to older or younger visually impaired students nor students from other disability groups. However, they may be used as a lens when these particular contexts are researched.

As a qualitative and interpretive researcher, it was difficult not to be influenced by my subjectivity and potential bias; therefore, I recognise this could be a limitation. The motivation for the research topic was based on my personal interest in supporting visually impaired students by providing a platform for their voices to be heard. In addition, because I was in charge of data analysis and reporting, the results not only reflect the students' view but also my perception of partnership-FE. As mentioned in Chapter 3 sub-section 3.7.4, I adopted specific measures to find a balance as a non-disabled researcher researching disability.

7.6 Recommendations

In this section, I consider the implications of this study for visually impaired students. The study drew on particular theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and methods. These specificities were discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, but four key areas are worthy of note. Firstly, the interpretive epistemological framework focuses on the participants' opinions and narratives. While these were triangulated with participant observation and the researcher's journal, these cannot be seen to represent a complete picture of the landscape of partnership-FE in England. The study illuminates the 'multiple realities' of the sector, enabling a rich appreciation of the complex psychological, social and interpersonal worlds of each person from their individual perspective (Geertz, 1993). The qualitative design and case study approach were selected as the particular lens through which to investigate the phenomenon. In Chapter 4, I discussed the need for a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973: 10) of the individual experiences of visually impaired students. This necessitated the small-scale nature of the project, leading to many exclusions and restrictions regarding the generalisability

of the findings. The intrinsic nature of the case selection enabled an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of visually impaired students in partnership-FE to enable a 'better understanding of this particular case' (Stake, 2005: 445), but obviously, there are a large number of unheard voices. Future research could address these voices, for example, those of students in other partnership settings or those of people in other settings also in other countries. In addition, further work could explore the views of significant others and of those who had rejected post-compulsory education. However, as Donmoyer (2000) suggests, this study expands the range of interpretations available, providing a richer schema of understanding, and develops a series of interrelated analytical conceptualisations of the practices and opinions of individuals in the field of visually impaired further education.

Second, future research and practical projects could build on the suggestions made in this thesis to change how further education provision understands visual impairment and supports visually impaired students. To further build on this thesis, it would be possible to engage with Participatory Action Research led by students themselves investigating and exploring aspects of their lives that they feel are of interest in understanding the student experience. Additionally, it could form part of research projects involving these students in developing new and innovative ways of ensuring further education policy is inclusive of their voices and experiences.

Third, there is scope for exploring visually impaired students' experiences as they transition from further education into employment, higher education, or other arenas, as this research suggests there is a concern for these students once they transition from Crescent College. This could be beneficial in several ways. Firstly, it could support change in terms of practices within workplaces and further education. Second, it would simply expand the data available on the differences between their experiences after leaving Crescent College and how this differs from their experiences in further education. As this current research has highlighted, there is a range of expectations and practices within non-partnership education, which, whilst unsurprising, is nonetheless a key theme that students themselves brought up to explain why they sought out provision in the form of Crescent College.

My final recommendation for future research would be to follow one of the student participants in this study over time, examining the educational experiences and eventual outcomes as they exit the

compulsory education system. This could present an opportunity to explore the long-term effects of how the education system prepared the visually impaired student to transition to adulthood.

7.7 Researcher Reflexivity

This thesis has presented a case study of one partnership-FE college, shown through the experiences of visually impaired students and staff. Furthermore, reflexivity has been proven as a technique of interpretive research (Malaurent and Avison, 2017) and therefore, I offer my reflections on my study in this sub-section.

7.7.1 The Topic

The focus of this project emerged because of discussions and recommendations from stakeholders at Crescent College itself, including teachers, support staff and students. It is necessary then for me to reflect on my decision to conduct research at Crescent College for my final master's degree project, as this was the first time I had even heard about partnership-FE and perhaps because of this, I developed a great interest in the field. My master's research was concerned with assistive technology use by visually impaired students, and as it was a small-scale project, I had to keep to the focus of the research. However, as I spent more time at Crescent College, I became very aware of the need for more research to be conducted around partnership-FE in particular. When I sought to look for previous literature on partnership-FE, I was surprised to find very little, and even the research that did look at visually impaired students' experiences of further education (Morris, 2014; Williams, 2015) did not specifically focus on the partnership aspect of further education. Thus, with the support and encouragement from teachers and students at Crescent College, I proposed the topic of this doctoral project.

7.7.2 Qualitative Research

I was one of the fortunate people who came to my doctorate with a fairly set idea of what I wanted to explore for my research. I had read, and been informed, many times that it is important to choose a topic in which you have genuine interest, one that can hold your attention for the full length of your study, an area driven by curiosity rather than method (Callejo Perez, 2006; Polit and Tatano Beck, 2004; Ross and Morrison, 1992). I knew this topic could arise from many sources: curiosity, personal experience, relevance to work, and gaps in the literature (Roberts, 2007). I was initially

concerned that personal interest and experience may be an inappropriate starting point for the research. However, the more I read, the more I realised that this was not the case and that, in addition to personal experience and interest, there was also limited literature on the phenomenon, and thus, I believed it was an acceptable place to begin (Etherington, 2005; Gilbert, 2001; Lowe, 2007; Roberts, 2007).

Dickson-Smith et al. (2009) point out the embodied experience that doing qualitative research brings with it and warn that researchers can become emotionally affected by their work. As I had some preconceived ideas about special education from early childhood experiences, and these had already been challenged through being in Crescent College for my master's project, I developed some emotions regarding the topic. I had built a rapport with the setting of the research and the staff and students that were there at the time based on the theoretical underpinnings of the study and my choice of methods. I feel strongly that a range of benefits to both the participants and the study as a whole arose as a result of choosing not to eliminate my experiences and emotions; in fact, I did not feel it would have been possible to eliminate my past experiences or emotional ties to this topic even if I had attempted to do so. I feel that it is important to understand how these benefits came about and, as such, have provided an overview of my experiences and the use of emotions throughout my research journey, as recalled in chapter four – the findings from autoethnography.

Researchers' emotions and experiences are invaluable tools when exploring sensitive research (Hordge-Freeman, 2018). They have played a large role in the way that this research project was undertaken including, the interactions with participants and the understanding and analysis of the data. Although it may have been possible to undertake this research from a more distanced standpoint, I feel that there would be minimal gain, and in fact, I believe it would have reduced the depth of the findings. Although at times, it has been difficult, and there have been many challenges along the way, I feel that utilising my experiences and emotions was ultimately beneficial to this research project, the participants, and me. By grounding research within the qualitative, interpretive perspectives, it is possible to explore these emotionally-laden experiences and gain an in-depth understanding of the lives of those who experience visual impairment in one partnership college. Furthermore, it is possible to make the experience one of becoming immersed in the worlds of those involved and such involvement allows a depth of understanding and comprehension that would not be possible from a more detached standpoint. Through this immersion, a voice can be given to the

experiences of these visually impaired students and the importance and emotional nature of their stories to be told.

In Chapter 3, I highlighted the tensions that can arise with being a non-disabled researcher researching disability, and as such, I ensured reflexivity throughout the research process to recognise where I sat within the study (Liddiard et al., 2019). As a researcher, I believe my position can provide some insight into what it is like to do research in a sensitive area, especially one to which the researcher has an emotional or experiential connection. It was something I was very cautious of from the outset because I was aware that it could be both beneficial and detrimental if I was not prepared. It has and continues to be, an emotional journey, but one that I feel has been important not only for myself and the completion of this thesis but also for the participants who had the opportunity to tell their stories. As the researcher, I provided the conditions for students to participate in research which explored factors that affected their personal, individual journeys in further education. I ensured I followed suggested recommendations, such as building a rapport with the college and participants to lessen bias and capture the true nature of the college and the experiences of visually impaired students (McNeily, MacDonald and Kelly, 2022).

7.7.3 Recruitment

I found recruiting for the study a smooth process because the cohort of visually impaired students at Crescent College was only five at the time. As mentioned in chapter three, the students worked closely with a Gate Keeper; therefore, we agreed that recruitment would be most successful if she approached the students first in an informal manner. This enabled me to establish students' views on participating before formally coming to them. I believe this gave students more time to process whether participating in the study would benefit them. At this time and because the entire cohort of visually impaired students was so small, I did have some concerns about the validity of the case if any of the students chose not to participate. However, they all chose to partake in the research and therefore, the findings reflect the experiences of all visually impaired students in Crescent College at the time this study took place.

7.7.4 Final reflections

This thesis has presented a case study of one partnership further education college in England, illustrated by the individual experiences of visually impaired students and validated, in part, by staff.

It has shown that their experiences are uniquely different regardless of being educated in the same environment, and this is crucial in fostering inclusion for this group of students. The participants identified previous barriers to learning created by a range of social and environmental factors that limited inclusive activity and participation in both their education and wider society. However, their experiences were considerably more positive in partnership-FE because it addressed the aforementioned barriers to learning through individualised, supportive, practical and collaborative methods. The factors of partnership further education, as identified from the students' and staff perspectives, will improve teaching and learning in further education, optimising experiences that visually impaired students have in such provision, provided that there is a partnership model to further education that embodies inclusion.

My recommendations are attainable and realistic, and I will, as an educator and researcher, act on my findings as to how I talk about and teach inclusive education. I am committed to disseminating these findings in the academic and professional literature. I presented the proposed study at the British Education Research Association (BERA) conference (Loveys, 2019) and have prepared presentations to disseminate my findings throughout 2023 and beyond. I have also prepared a draft paper at the time of this submission. Awareness, through research and practice, and acceptance that barriers to learning exist and practice should act upon these [proposed model – Figure 3] will ensure that learning and participation for future visually impaired students in further education settings can be enabled, supporting inclusive provision from both the call from the literature (Avisar, 2018) and the stakeholders from the setting of this research who brought the need for this study to my attention.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview themes and questions

Table detailing semi-structured interview questions and topics.

Questions/ Topics	Student Participants	Staff Participants
1	Tell me about yourself (background, family, interests, hobbies)	Tell me about yourself (background, interests, hobbies)
2	Can you tell me about your schooling history? (timeline, learning experience, favourite lessons/learning techniques)	Can you tell me about this college and your role? (what brought you here, what are the challenges/benefits, what is different between the specialist and mainstream sides?)
3	How do you feel about this college you are enrolled in now? (what brought you here, feelings about the unique partnership, what do you do differently at the mainstream part compared to the specialist?)	Can you tell me about your use of assistive technology? Have you been trained in using it?
4	Did you find any specific aspects of your learning experience challenging?	How do you feel about access to resources including technology for visually impaired people/your students specifically?
5	Feelings about AT, how do you feel when using it?	How do you understand students' feelings towards AT?

Appendix 2: Observation Template

Students participating in observation:

Lesson:

Tutor:

Lesson being taught, specific topic(s) <i>Hopefully have the opportunity to ask the tutor beforehand</i>	
Task(s) set for student(s) (is everyone given the same task, same timescale to complete tasks)	
Task(s) accomplished by students	
Students willingness to use specialist support/resources (how does the student react to the these)	
Strengths of using specialist support/resources (what helps the student(s))	
Weaknesses of using specialist support/resources (what hinders the student(s))	
Interaction between students and students <i>Do certain students instigate interaction – do students ask for help/guidance from one another)</i>	
Student(s) ability to stay on track with the task	
Interaction between student and tutor (does the student interact when using specialist support/resources)	
Any specific adaptations to the lesson through the use of specialist support/resources?	

Extra notes...

Appendix 3: Ethical Approval

DREC/FREC Decision

The DREC/FREC responsible for scrutinising this application should ensure the applicant's Head of Department (or Research Degree Supervisor) is made aware of the application and its progress.

Comments from DREC/FREC Chair

I can confirm that this application has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee; you may now proceed with the research.

The approval will remain in force for 24 months, during which you should alert us to any changes in the proposal which might have ethical implications. If you need to continue collecting data after the 24 month period, you should re-apply for ethical approval.

Chair name: Dr Francis Farrell

DREC/FREC Chair signature

Please insert or type your signature in the box below

Dr Francis Farrell

Date: 17/10/2018

DREC/FREC decision

Is the following decision that of **DREC** or **FREC**? FREC

Approved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Application reference:	FOE18-ML01
Re-submit to this DREC/FREC	<input type="checkbox"/>	Minute reference:	Click here to enter text.
Re-submit for chair's action	<input type="checkbox"/>	DREC/FREC date:	Click here to enter a date.
Refer to FREC	<input type="checkbox"/>	Decision date:	Click here to enter a date.
Refer to URESC	<input type="checkbox"/>	Further action where needed:	Click here to enter text.
Rejected	<input type="checkbox"/>		

Please note: if rejected, the applicant has the right to lodge an appeal with URESC as per the [Framework for Research Ethics \(RO-GOV-03\)](#)

Appendix 4: Student Information Form

Title of Project: A case study of one partnership further education college in England and the experiences of visually impaired students.

Researcher: Megan Loveys

Email contacts:

loveysm@edgehill.ac.uk

Date: 09/07/2018

Dear _____

I would like to invite you to take part in a research project led by a researcher in the Faculty of Education at Edge Hill University.

Before you decide if you wish to take part you need to understand why the research is being conducted and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

This document includes:

- Information about the purpose of the study (what I hope to find out).
- Information about what participation means (what you will be doing) and how to withdraw if you wish to do so
- Details of what notes, recordings and other sources of information may be used as 'data' in the study - for the group and with you as an individual.

- Information about how this data will be secured and stored.
- Information about how any quotations will be used and how you can be involved in checking, agreeing and consenting to their use.
- How the information will be used in the research project and for other purposes such as conference presentations or publication.

The purpose of the study

This innovative project seeks to investigate teaching staff and young peoples' perceptions and experiences of education in a partnership setting.

It appears there is little research from a student perspective, into their experiences of education within partnership settings. In turn, creating a negative stigma surrounding visual impairment and the concept of integration. This study will increase knowledge and understanding of how this visually impaired population perceive and experience inclusion in their educational setting and beyond; as well as contributing to the debate around integration considering the unique partnership setting where this research will take place.

What participation involves and how to withdraw if you no longer wish to participate

Why have you been invited?

You have been invited to participate because you volunteered and you have expressed personal reasons for participating in the project. As the participant, you occupy a key role in the observations and interviews, to discuss with the researcher your experiences and perceptions. Your knowledge of the subject will make a significant contribution to the effective running of the study. Your involvement in the study is timely and relevant and will lead to the production of new knowledge about partnership further education settings.

There be eight audio-recorded interviews, with students and staff throughout the duration of the programme. There will also be participant observations which I will take notes for. These recordings and notes will only be used by me during the writing up process and will be deleted once it is finished. I will also make notes throughout the sessions which will be used during the writing up process.

Do you have to take part?

No, your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, then please let us know. Portable devices will be encrypted where they are used for identifiable data. All data will be anonymised and no third person will be able to identify your individual contribution to the research project.

You can withdraw at any time before the data collection has started and up to two weeks after your interview has taken place. If you choose to withdraw your related data (recordings, notes) will be destroyed and all references removed.

What would taking part involve for you?

The needs of visually impaired young people are multifaceted and best practice for inclusive education is critical. The aim of this study is to explore experiences of education in one partnership setting and explore best practice for meeting student needs. These experiences and perceptions will be drawn from the visually impaired students primarily and their teachers. The research team is committed to capturing student and staff narratives as a method of making sense of the experience and social reality of further education for this specific group and how it is perceived to impact on their independent lives.

What will you have to do?

Firstly, you need to read this information sheet and consent form. I will be available for questions via email or telephone. Once you are fully happy with giving your consent to taking part in the research project you will need to sign the consent form. We would then confirm a date for a semi-structured interview to take place and subsequently the

observation. Each of the interviews will last up to one hour and each of the observations will last the length of the lesson being observed. Semi-structured individual interviews provide participants with some guidance on what to talk about. This is important for this study as the topic is narrowly focused. Semi-structured interviews are flexible in terms of allowing for discovery of data which is fundamentally important to the participants but may not have been considered when devising the questions. The interview will be recorded and subsequently transcribed. If at any point in the interview process you feel uncomfortable with the questions or wish to end the interview, recording will be stopped and the interview will be terminated.

Protecting your data and identity

What will happen to the data?

‘Data’ here means the researcher’s notes and audio recordings and any email exchanges we may have had. Audio recordings will be transferred and stored on my password protected laptop and deleted from portable media.

Identifiable data (including recordings of your voice) on my laptop will be encrypted. With devices such as portable recorders where this is not possible identifiable data will be deleted as quickly as possible. In the meantime, I will ensure the portable device will be kept in a locked drawer until the data is deleted.

You can request to view the field notes or listen to the audio recording at the end of the semi-structured interview and any parts you are unhappy with will be deleted, or disregarded from the data. Data may be used in the reporting of the research in any papers or conference presentations. Please note that if your data is used, it will not identify you in any way or means.

You have the right to request your data is destroyed if withdrawing. You also have the full protection via the UK Data Protection Act. The completion of this first phase of study is estimated to be by September 2020.

How will your identity be protected?

Yourself as the participant will be assigned a number to protect your identity in the research report and any identifying information about you will be removed from the report.

Who to contact for further information or with any concerns

If you have any concerns about the research ethics of this study and would like to register these concerns with an independent person, please consult the Secretary to the University Research Ethics Committee (email address: Research@edgehill.ac.uk)

If you would like further information on this project or have any concerns about the project, participation please contact the research team.

Thank you for reading this information sheet,

Megan Loveys

Title of Project: A case study of one partnership further education college in England and the experiences of visually impaired students.

Name of Researcher: Megan Loveys

Please read:	Please Tick
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 9 th July 2018 for the above study.	
2. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
3. I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary. If for any reason, I wish to withdraw during the period of this	

study, I am free to do so without providing any reason and the data will be destroyed.	
4. I understand that my comments in the interview process will be part of the data collected for this study and my anonymity will be ensured. I give consent for all my contributions to be included and/or quoted in this study.	
5. I consent to the interviews being recorded on a digital voice recording device.	
6. I understand that the information I provide will be used for a research project and will be published. I understand that I have the right to review and comment on an executive summary of the draft paper before the final submission.	
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	
Name of Participant:	
Signature	
Date	

Appendix 5: Consent Form

Edge Hill University

DATA SUBJECT CONSENT FORM

Reference: SPPU V 2.2
Page: 1 of 1

GDPR consent statement

- 1.1 I, *[data subject name]*, hereby grant Edge Hill University authority to process my personal data for the purpose of *[specify in explicit terms, the legitimate reason for processing the personal data]*.
- 1.2 I am aware that I may withdraw my consent at any time using the Data Subject Consent Withdrawal Form accompanying this form.

Signed by data subject:

Date:

The University is the owner of this document and is responsible for ensuring that this procedure is reviewed in line with the review requirements of the GDPR.

This document was approved by the Data Protection Officer on 22 December 2017 and is issued on a version-controlled basis under their signature.

Signature:

Version	Description of Change	Approval	Date of Issue
2.2	GDPR Compliance Update	Lisa Cobain	December 17

Appendix 6: Example Transcript Analysis

Example transcript	Researcher codes
<p>M – Do you want to tell me about yourself, name, interests, things you enjoy/maybe things you don't enjoy.. that kind of thing?</p> <p>O – my name's Ollie, I'm 17 years old going to be 18 in two weeks. Things I enjoy, I don't know mostly sport.</p> <p>M – what kind of sport?</p> <p>O - I like martial arts, jujitsu, going to the gym. I like just socialising with friends stuff like that.</p> <p>M – standard stuff then.</p> <p>O – yeah, just general stuff.</p> <p>M – Okay, so in terms of your education then. Would you mind telling me about your school, the first experience you can remember about your education.</p> <p>O – like my secondary school and that?</p> <p>M – yeah, what you can remember back to.</p> <p>O – So I started secondary school in what (sigh) 2012 I think yeah, year 7. I went right through to year 11, got nine GCSE's I think.</p> <p>M – yeah and was it a good experience?</p> <p>O – uhhh yeah, kind of. I mean, schools school isn't it. It wasn't too bad but I went into a school that was out of my area so I didn't know anyone before I started.</p> <p>M – was it a mainstream school?</p> <p>O – yeah it was a mainstream school but it had like a, what's it called, like a VI</p>	

department so they catered for people with VI. They also had a special needs one, a SEN department for SEN. And they basically had materials, so for example braille, jaws. So anything I had in my lesson I could get adapted but out of 2000 people in the school there was only like 12 or 13 VI people.

M – oh okay so you were quite a small group. Do you think the support system at that school helped you or not?

O – yes and no. when I started I think they kind of wrapped us in cotton wool a bit too much, they weren't promoting us to make friends. We had a VI base where all the VI kids could chill in there but I didn't really want to be part of that because I've always mixed with mainstream people and they didn't really promote that sort of getting yourself out there and trying to make friends do you know what I mean?

M – so are you saying you felt kind of segregated from the rest of the school?

O – well yeah, at the start anyway. Like me being me I'm quite outgoing and confident so I made friends really quickly but there was a couple people started the same year as me that didn't and I felt like I wouldn't of as well if I wasn't so outgoing because they kind of just... promoted staying in the VI base you know what I mean they would give you activities to do in there rather than venturing out.

*had to pause to move car in car park

Interview resumed

M – where were we – oh so we were talking about when you started your secondary school and they had a specialist VI unit there. Do you wanna call it that? (yeah) and you felt as though they tried to

Wants to be independent.

keep you in there. So how did you venture out? How did that change?

O – ummm. So, like within lessons I used that as an opportunity to talk to people and just leave for break with other people.

M – so it was a personal thing? A personal choice?

O- yeah, it was. I had one other VI friend who came from the same town as me and he was pretty able bodied as well – he had more vision than me and he was pretty mainstream as well so us two together we used to mix with the rest of them but everybody else used to be a bit isolated they used to chill in the VI base. We did used to go there sometimes especially when it was cold because it was indoors and the rest of the school wasn't allowed to chill indoors so when it was cold it was the place to be so we would chill there then.

M – ah okay, so was everyone else in the school not allowed into the VI base?

O – oh no they were allowed in but to be honest it would just be a bit embarrassing to have people in there because there were some VI students with more complex needs, I don't like to say I would be embarrassed to be around them but its just because of their needs their would be teachers in there and being kids you wouldn't be able to say what you wanna say or mess about. It was good thought because aside from that, everything was there I needed if I wanted to work in a quiet place I could work in there during work times. All the support was there, if I needed LA's I could go there if I needed materials I would go there so it was very good and offered a lot more than other schools.

Stigma/being different.

Stigma around being visually impaired.

M – yeah. So you used the base to your advantage – when you wanted to use the facilities you would but as a choice you chose to integrate yourself with the others students who weren't within the VI base?

O – yeah. But it was hard and it wasn't really until the later years of school that I really started mixing because these kids knew each other from primary schools so they went together and I was coming from out of town plus some people are very ignorant, some people are like oh he's VI he's disabled as such so people would even talk about you behind you and you could hear them but they would assume that because you're blind you're deaf as well.

M – did that frustrate you or did you ignore it?

O – to be honest I've always had that attitude that I don't really take any.. I don't really know how to stay it without swearing...

M – notice?

O – nah I do take notice but I let them know that I don't care what they think you know.

M – ah okay so you're if someone was talking about you as if they thought you couldn't hear them you would say

O – yeah I'd just turn around and say I'm not deaf you know, I can hear what you're saying

M – so you are confident to speak your mind

O – yeah and some people used to try it with me, I never went through bullying in school but people would try it and they would not try it again after trying it once

Stigma.

Stigmatising terminology.

<p>M – you said before people would say you are disabled or ‘he’s disabled’...</p> <p>O – they wouldn’t actually say it as such but they’d act like that and they would talk to you like you haven’t got a brain cell.</p> <p>M – okay, so how do you perceive yourself then?</p> <p>O - I just see myself as a normal person but my eyes don’t work very well you know? I’ve kind of got this life mission that I want to change peoples perceptions of blind people. I think movies give that perception that blind people can’t see anything, they use the white stick, they think that when you’re blind you’re completely blind, they don’t realise there’s people that are partially sighted which is quite a deluded way to think but a lot of people do think that but I think if people meet me they will think oh I met this guy today he was blind but he was really cool... you know they’ll remember that. So when they meet or see another blind person they might change their perception and think not all blind people are the same.</p> <p>M – so you’re talking a bit about the stigma attached to blindness.</p> <p>O – yeah definitely, and whats portrayed in the media and a lot of blind people do fit the stereotype you know, which is sad because a lot of them become very withdrawn within themselves and very isolated and they are very ummm insecure about the position they’re in</p> <p>M – do you feel that’s because of society?</p> <p>O – yeah because you do meet idiots when you go out. The other day I was getting the bus and I got on and I usually sit in those seats at the front reserved for disabled people and wheelchairs, and I went to the</p>	<p>Wanting to change societal views.</p>
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seats and two girls were sitting in them and I've got some vision so I could see they were sat there and I have my cane with me so it was obvious and they did not move and when I walked right up to their seats to see I walked right up to them they didn't say anything, they didn't move, they didn't even speak to say they were sitting there. And you'll get the people that laugh if you trip up or anything.

M – oh really, so they just thought oh he can't see us but you could so that's what you're saying earlier about them being ignorant.

O – that's what I'm saying, it happens but I don't lose sleep about it. I'm a member of a group on Facebook called VI talk and people have had experiences that make them not want to go out in public anymore like people laughing at them when they can't find a button on a lift. Some people get really upset about it and lose sleep over that stuff but for me I kind of calm myself about it, so if people laugh at me I kind of make a joke about it or laugh along with them or I'll say something but I've even had people stick their legs out in corridors. I've never tripped up because I can see outlines of stuff so I can see them they've got their legs tucked in and the moment I walk by they stick them out so I just give them a little whack with my cane and that kind of thing (laughs).

M – okay so you mentioned about people not wanting to go out so lets talk about AT, do you think that has changed some people's perceptions or their anxiety of not wanting to go out, do you think it can help them or not?

O – I think so, I know that for travel or being in public theres not much but within education theres a lot of AT available but I think there needs to be more in terms of

Independent living.

Technology is not always reliable.

<p>going out in public independently. Its really good around here because they've got talking buses, the other day I went on a bus which was different and it didn't talk so I had to ask the driver to tell me when I was at my stop.</p> <p>M – that's interesting. So they're now doing that as a general thing on very bus?</p> <p>O – all the normal buses have it but I think they were borrowing another companies bus that day which doesn't have the talking feature and it really threw me.</p> <p>M – so that's not available everywhere?</p> <p>O – no I think its because there such a large Vi community here because if this college they've made it a necessity but its not everywhere. Its not in my hometown anyway.</p> <p>M – right. So what brought you here to this college?</p> <p>O – mostly just something different. I could have stayed on at sixth form but I kind of figured that within two years time if id stayed I would be in the same position as when I started it. I feel like I wouldn't have gotten very independent. So like here, I stay in supported living here but a lot of the time I get to do whatever I want, so I learnt to cook I learnt to do washing do everything independently really, so I feel a lot more grown up. It wasn't really for the education, I could have gotten a-levels if I stayed I could have gotten maybe a better education at sixth form but it was more for growing up and obviously this town is renowned for sport and I'm really into sport and I just felt like it was the right place for me. You know over here I've got all the support if I need it and I can do my work over here and over there I've got the whole sports side of it (mainstream college).</p>	<p>Reason for choosing the college. Independence.</p> <p>Good collaboration between colleges.</p>
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M – so you go over to the mainstream college then, how does that work? It's such an interesting partnership.

O – I'm not really sure how its set up but they've got a very good relationship. They are very intertwined and have a good line of communication, they talk across. My tutor from here, Alice she talks to my tutors over at the college so all my work they always know what I've got to do and what I'm doing at both colleges.

M – do you use AT over there?

O – yeah so I was supplied with this phone that has an app on it called seeing AI and I basically point it at a piece of paper and it reads what's on the paper and then I can screen record it and save it into my camera roll so I've got notes stored in my camera roll that I can listen to. I'm one of those learners that even though I can read braille it doesn't really sink in, once I read it I'll forget it. I need to listen to things to get it. I feel that's quite common in VI people, I feel they mostly prefer to listen to things to learn them because obviously our hearing is enhanced and our memory is as well so once you listen to.

M – do you feel the seeing AI app does enough for you, is there anything thing it could do more?

O – yeah, I mean it's free. The fact it is free and it does what it does its really good. I feel like there should be a feature on it where you can save the pictures on the app. We didn't first know how to save it until I had a brainwave and thought I could screen record it...but if screen recording wasn't a thing it would have been very difficult. So you take a picture and press a button and it reads what's on the paper but once I back out of it, it disappears/gets

Funding issues.

<p>deleted, I cant save it on the app, it would be good if I could save it on the app itself so I can go back over it rather than having them all in my camera roll.</p> <p>M – so that app, is it made specifically for people with VI?</p> <p>O – mm yeah and it does other stuff too. I use it in the kitchen to read labels. It's got a document mode which reads big pieces of paper and short mode reads packaging. That's really good because I buy lots of things in packets and it will read the flavours for me so its become really handy like that.</p> <p>M – do you use it outside of the college?</p> <p>O – yeah just in the kitchen. I can see temperatures and times how long things need to be cooked for. Before when I didn't use it, they were pushing me to get it for maybe two months maybe longer to be honest (laughs), but sometimes I'm lazy and I'll say I'll do something and not actually do it and now I've actually used it I realise how helpful it is because I used to go to the office (supported living) and ask for details of packets but now I can do it myself cause its allowed me to do that</p> <p>M – that's great, like you were saying before you chose to come here to gain independence, do you think that's something you would have got if you stayed at the secondary school?</p> <p>O – no I had never heard of this type of education before I came here.</p> <p>M – okay, so if you are out in public. Are the any types of AT you will choose to use?</p> <p>O – I just don't know what I can use. I guess you could use seeing AI for bus boards and seeing times etc.</p>	<p>Uniqueness of the college.</p>
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<p>M – Would you?</p> <p>O – yeah I would but I would be more likely to research it first to cover myself. I’ve seen these devices people use which are things you wear and it tells you where you are but I don’t know what they are.</p> <p>M – like a GPS?</p> <p>O – yeah kinda thing but apart from that I don’t really know of anything I can really use in public as such</p> <p>M – if there were options available, and you knew about them. Would you give them a go?</p> <p>O – yeah I probably would but I choose to rely on myself more than technology. I’d rather do that, that’s me personally I’m not saying everyone with VI does but for me rather than trusting something like a GPS where to go I’d rather learn the route myself cause then AT fails then I know I’ve got myself. I’d give it a go but as I say I’ve not tried much.</p> <p>M – but because you say you don’t feel the stigmas other people with VI might feel you would be open to using it in a public place?</p> <p>O – yeah I would.</p> <p>M – so do you enjoy going to the mainstream part of this college?</p> <p>O – yeah</p> <p>M – do you prefer either?</p> <p>O – yeah I prefer the mainstream college.</p> <p>M – why do you think you prefer it there?</p>	<p>Functionality issues of technology.</p> <p>Not wanting to appear the same as peers with more complex needs.</p> <p>Stigma.</p> <p>Specialist-mainstream divide.</p>
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O – as I said before I’ve never really mixed with people, I’m not being rude or anything but a lot of the students over here have very severe disabilities and you can’t even hold a conversation with a lot of them. When I’m here I don’t really mix downstairs I tend to stay up here in the study room, if I do its usually to eat in the canteen or have a quick study break. There’s not really anyone in a similar position to me as such.

M – so do you feel you relate more to the students in the mainstream college?

O – yeah I do.

M – okay, so what are the main differences between here and the mainstream college? In terms of your education.

O – people actually move out the way here. Over there, kids are kids, they are always on their phones, its busy, I hate going over there and walking over and walking around, down the corridor. They all sit in the corridor sticking their legs out it’s a nightmare.

M – anything you would like to chat about from here?

O – you know we were talking about AT in public, I think the biggest issue is with it is we need something concealable. You don’t want something in your face, because some blind people me included we don’t want to be perceived as blind people. We don’t want, I want people to say I saw this guy today I don’t want them to say oh I saw this blind guy O you when people see you on the street they might say “oh he’s blind” they instantly portray that image. And I think when you use AT in public it gives the idea that you need a lot more help. Like I said when I’m in public, its just me and my cane and my memory, I learn routes and

Stigma with using devices for visual impairment in public.

stuff. When its something in your face I feel it forces that image more.

M – so you were saying about the stigma with the cane, if there was a way around that would you use it?

O – I mean I hated using a cane you know. I went through a stage where I didn't want to use a cane I didn't want to do anything. I went through a stage where I felt quite depressed I felt quite insecure and I went through the stage a lot of people do where I didn't want to be in public, it was only a few months.

M – was it before you came here?

O – it was mid-school when I was about 13/14. All my mates were out riding motorbikes and doing things I wanted to do and it got to the point where everyone started doing things and it was getting to me and I was researching surgeries. I was mad obsessed with trying to sort things out and I went to the doctors one time and my old eye surgeon who dealt with me when I lost my vision he told me straight and said there was nothing we can do. I went through a stage where I was mad depressed about it and my attitude just instantly changed, excuse the pun but “in the blink of any eye” (laughs). It just changed I just accepted it and thought stuff this, it is what it is but maybe I can contribute to the change of societal perceptions and now ive got a completely different attitude. I don't care, ill still ride a motorbike just to say I have done it.

M – its very interesting you saying you want to change perceptions. Because there's a stigma attached to everything, all words can bring stigmas with them. For example, using the term impairment to talk about sightloss. What is your take?

Stigma against labels and terms.

O – why do we even have to call it impairment?

M – what do you think?

O – I don't care, I know some people get sensitive about it, for example call me visually impaired not blind. No ones ever going to be happy, everyone has different opinions. For me I get it, I get why they say that but I think you've got to accept everyone's entitled to their own opinion and everyone's going to call things what they call it. You can't make a law saying you have to call disabled people 'impaired' because people will still use the word 'disabled' and people say worse thing like 'retard' 'spastic'. Its going to happen regardless. Assistive technology sounds pretty light to be honest, it doesn't sound like 'disabled people technology' or anything, it doesn't attach much to it. AT could be anything from assisted driving to anything, I don't see it attached to disabled people specifically.

M – okay lets talk about tech. so we've discussed the app, is there anything else you use?

O – so I've got a BrailleNote, I used to use that more in school.

M – so you had a BrailleNote in secondary school?

O – I was using it heavy back then. I don't work well with the writing and reading things. I work better with talking and listening so I'd rather use something to dictate to me, so I talk to it. There's a program called dragon dictate that you speak and have to tell it punctuation and everything, I find I have all the ideas but when it comes to writing it I lose myself. For example, in my exams GCSE's I did my mocks on my BrailleNote and got bad

results and I didn't the real thing scribed and I got good grades. Once I say it and someone or something writes it how I say it, it makes sense. When I write it, a lot of blind people have problems with spelling because it's a lot to do with seeing the words and perceptions of it. So if you're not seeing words and letters all the time, when you haven't got a VI you're able-bodied you are always around writing like you now you can see the writing on these pages. For us, nothings always in braille, when we're reading text on our phone we're listening to it. We're not seeing signs and were not writing all the time, its like learning a language in school and then not using it after – you forget it. So when I was learning braille more I was so focused on how I was spelling things io was forgetting about what I was actually writing. it was hard it use it as a form of getting down my ideas.

M – so you say you secondary school had a specialist base for VI people but you also say you struggled during your exams using a BrailleNote. Do you feel since you've been at this setting you've been able to learnt eh way you prefer to learn?

O – I think what's great over here is that they have said that however I learn best and what works for me I can do. So in lessons, I listen and my LA takes notes, I can tell the LA where to be I can tell them to sit at the back of the class and they will do that.

M – do you often ask them to do that?

O – not really, I don't care if I have an LA sitting next to me. Some people see it as an image thing, some blind people don't want to associate with that, but I still communicate with the rest of the class if there's an LA next to me. It doesn't affect me much. It's not school, you can talk in class in college so it doesn't really bother

Expressing how the college is helping him to learn more independently.

me. When I was writing in school I had a BrailleNote so I was making notes all lesson, I wasn't listening to the teacher. My LA was whispering write this, write this and I'd read my notes back and it was all jibberish. I wasn't picking up the lesson.

M – was that a universal feeling for all the VI students there or were you able to tell I them?

O - I think the way they saw it was that well the blind students cant write on a piece of paper but we've got BrailleNotes so they can write like that, and they thought that everyone else learns like that so we learn like that which is not true. I used to tell them I preferred to have a scribe and the eventually listened for my final exams but up until then they pushed the BrailleNote. They had the mind-set that if we didn't use it we wouldn't learn it but it never really worked for me.

M – but here you are allowed to learn however you want?

O – yeah whatever works best for me.

M – that must have been so frustrating at school. Do you enjoy learning more now?

O – yeah definitely when I was in lessons typing I was picking up what was actually going on

M - that must have been difficult to collaborate with the rest of the class

K – yeah I had two voices going on, the main teacher saying write this and the LA next to me telling me what to write and it got to a point where it was so stressful and my notes made no sense. Even though I had put so much effort in. I was spelling things how they sounded and teachers would say my spelling was so bad and then

Funding.

Normalisation.

I would worry about my spelling and so id start asking how to spell everything which made me fall behind.

O – so are you trying to develop something, like a certain product?

M – I would like to recommend these are the things students are saying and I will tlak to teachers and these are the things that aren't available for them. Or it might just be a case of getting the information to you, the things might be out there but they might not be readily available they're too expensive.

O – that's the issue, the prices of these things. I think the big thing is money. People don't want to develop things if its not going to sell to a big market. So that's why the process are so high to make up for the number.

M – I'm interested in the whole inclusion concept because under inclusive terms a specialist setting like this could be viewed as not inclusive. What is your take on it?

O – definitely yeah. Specialist colleges with partnerships are good. I think they need to work with that more, I know they've got specialist colleges over the UK but they're just purely for VI people and what I've noticed.... I've gone on trips with charities like action for blind and the students from those colleges their only friends are other VI students. So they're in their own communities they've got groups on Facebook, I'm members, I'm cool with them and a lot of them I'm friends with too but my friendship group a lot of them are just normal lads... I don't want to say normal because what's normal, but what society would calk mainstream people. Not to say that's the right term but you get what I'm saying, but I feel they need to not force but

<p>promote integration more. I really believe in these partnerships.</p> <p>M – that’s good to hear.</p>	
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