

'People need to know that we're not just the stereotypes'

A mixed method, multi-informant study to better understand the educational experiences of autistic female students attending mainstream provision at post-primary level in the Republic of Ireland

by

Aoife Munroe

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick.

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ABSTRACT

'People need to know that we're not just the stereotypes'

A mixed method, multi-informant study to better understand the educational experiences of autistic female students attending mainstream provision at post-primary level in the Republic of Ireland

Aoife Munroe

Existing research indicates that the school experiences of autistic young people are often complex and multifaceted. However, these studies are often limited by male-biased samples or have recruited adult stakeholders as proxies, with the voices of autistic girls occupying a significantly less prominent position in the literature. It has been suggested that due to differences in presentation and gender-biased knowledge among teachers, autistic girls often go unrecognised and unsupported in education contexts.

The current study aimed to refute the traditional androcentric bias related to autism and autism research and explore the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream provision at post-primary level in the Republic of Ireland. A multi-informant embedded mixed methods design was adopted. The primary qualitative study, underpinned by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, adopted a multi-perspectival design to elicit insights from six autistic girls and their parents (N=12). Alternative approaches to data collection were incorporated with autistic girls. The secondary study, underpinned by survey methodology, used a mixed method questionnaire to explore mainstream post-primary teachers' (N=262) awareness, knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to autism and girls.

Four core findings emerged from the primary study: *Being Autistic in a Neurotypical School System*; *Being in the School Environment*; *Being with Others* and *Parent Perspectives*. On the surface, many of the girls' experiences within the school context may draw parallels with the experiences of their male counterparts, however, it is apparent that these experiences are distinct in terms of how they are perceived by others, with the girls' challenges often misunderstood, dismissed or missed altogether. These experiences are intricately examined by parents with reference to the broader systemic factors of influence and the demands of navigating these systems highlighted. Moreover, the findings of the secondary study suggest that mainstream post-primary teachers in the Republic of Ireland do not feel adequately equipped to recognise and support autistic girls and may not understand the nuances of the internal presentation of autism more commonly associated with females.

By incorporating the voices of three main stakeholders, autistic girls, their parents and mainstream post-primary teachers, this study contributes to an evolving understanding of autistic girls' experiences of mainstream provision on an international level. This groundbreaking study provides a foundation for future research in the Irish context. Implications of the findings and recommendations arising from the research are presented in terms of policy, practice and research.

Keywords: autism, sex/gender differences, autistic females, educational experiences, mainstream education, parental insight, teacher knowledge

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, by me or any other person, for the purpose of obtaining any other qualification.

Signed: 

Aoife Munroe

Date: 27th May 2025

Dedication

To Dad,
you encouraged this journey from the outset, and I know you would be so proud of its culmination.

In the same way, you began each fly with a hook in the vise, this thesis started with a blank page and a pen. The process of undertaking this PhD mirrors the persistence you showed as you wound thread, wire, dubbing and feathers around a hook, coaxing something delicate and purposeful from disparate parts. Just as fly tying, and indeed fly fishing, demands patience and the humility to undo and try again, so too did this thesis. There were tangles, frayed edges, and moments where the finished vision felt impossibly far, but in time, each step came together and resulted in something remarkable.



Tight Lines, always



Acknowledgements

A PhD is more than the product of its effort; it is a journey. However, it is only one part of the journey that is life, and indeed, life continues to happen when you're undertaking a PhD. Many people walked alongside me as I undertook this journey, while others provided support at critical junctures.

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List of Abbreviations

APA: American Psychiatric Association

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

CBA: Classroom-Based Assessments

CC: Central Coherence

CoP: Communities of Practice

CoS: Continuum of Support

DEP: Double Empathy Problem

DES: Department of Education and Skills

DESc: Department of Education and Science

DoE: Department of Education

DoH: Department of Health

DSM: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

EBP: Evidence-Based Practice

EF: Executive Function

EMM: Embedded Mixed Methods

EPSEN: Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs

ES: Experiential Statements

FAP: Female Autism Phenotype

FPE: Female Protective Effect

GAM: General Allocation Model

GET: Group Experiential Theme

GOI: Government of Ireland

ICD: International Classifications of Disease

IE: Inclusive Education

IF: Intersectional Feminism

IPA: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

ITE: Initial Teacher Education

LEANS: Learning About Neurodiversity at School

MIREC: Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee

MMR: Mixed Methods Research

NCSE: National Council for Special Education

NEPS: National Educational Psychological Service

NEST: Neurodivergent peer Support Toolkit

OT: Occupational Therapist

PET: Personal Experiential Theme

PG: Postgraduate

PLC: Professional Learning Communities

RLC: Research Learning Communities

SDG: Sustainable Development Goal

SEN: Special Educational Needs

SENCos: Special Educational Needs Coordinators

SERC: Special Education Review Committee

SET: Special Education Teacher

SETAM: Special Education Teacher Allocation Model

SNA: Special Needs Assistant

SST: Social Skills Training

TAL: Theoretical Alignment with Literature

TPL: Teacher Professional Learning

ToM: Theory of Mind

UDL: Universal Design for Learning

UN: United Nations

UNCRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNCRPD: United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

WHO: World Health Organisation

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

Autistic females are described as a marginalized and underrepresented group in the autism landscape (Kreiser and White, 2014). Until recently, autism was perceived as a 'male disorder' (Lockwood-Estrin *et al*., 2021), with autism research dominated by male-biased samples (Kirkovski *et al.*, 2013; D'Mello *et al*., 2022). Therefore, it could be argued that the production of knowledge about autism to date could be regarded as the production of knowledge about male autism (Kirkovski *et al.*, 2013; Saxe, 2017; Moore *et al.*, 2022). Research eliciting autistic students' experiences of school is no different, with the voices of autistic girls less prominent than their male counterparts (Lynam *et al.*, 2024). The two intersecting identities of being female (the non-dominant gender) and being autistic may result in autistic girls having different school experiences to autistic boys, warranting exploration in their own right.

1.2 Aims of this Research

The current research aims to establish a greater understanding of autistic girls' experiences in mainstream education settings at post-primary level in Ireland using a multi-informant, mixed method approach. This research aims to gain insight into mainstream education provision from the perspective of autistic girls who live the experience and their parents/guardians who support them as they live the experience. Additionally, the study seeks to examine the perceived knowledge and understanding of teachers across Ireland who are responsible for the provision of an inclusive education for this cohort of students.

The current research responds to the specific call to include autistic females in research (Saxe, 2017) in an effort to gain an enhanced understanding of the female autistic perspective and the diversity of autistic experience (Lounds Taylor and Smith DaWalt, 2020; Pearson and Rose, 2021) and to better understand sex/gender differences in educational research (Delimata and Byrne, 2023). In conducting this research, it is hoped that the researcher can begin to communicate a changing conceptualisation of autism to the public, and, in this case education stakeholders particularly (Crane *et al.*, 2016; Dillon *et al*., 2023).

1.3 Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding the current research is;

- How can the mainstream educational experiences of autistic female students be better understood through examination of student, parent/guardian and teacher perspectives?

In order to attend to the overarching research question, five questions guided the process with the first three pertaining to the primary study and question four and five relating to the secondary study. While the questions below reflect the finalised questions, they have evolved over time and have been refined from their initial conceptualisation (see *Section 1.14* and *Section 2.10* for further discussion).

1 How do autistic girls experience mainstream education provision at post-primary level?
2 How do girls interact with their autistic identity with reference to the school context?
3 What are parents/guardians' perspectives on their daughters' experiences in mainstream settings?
4 How do mainstream class teachers evaluate their knowledge of autism (generally and in girls); their confidence recognising autism in girls and supporting autistic girls in the education context, and their professional development needs?
5 Are teachers aware of gender differences in autism?

1.4 A Note on Language

Debates on language and terminology pertaining to autism extend far beyond semantics, having potentially profound implications in terms of societal perceptions, clinical practice, developments in policy and research, and in turn risks for autistic individuals (Vivanti, 2020; Botha *et al.*, 2023).

Throughout this thesis, I have elected to use identity-first language, *i.e.* 'autistic' individual, for the most part. The use of identity-first versus person-first language is much debated in literature with no outright consensus evident (Kenny *et al.*, 2016; Bury *et al.*, 2020; Vivanti, 2020; Botha *et al.*, 2023). The decision to adopt identity-first language recognises the majority preference for this approach among the autistic community (Kenny *et al*., 2016; Bury *et al*., 2020). However, in recognising variance in language preferences (Flowers *et al*., 2023), I have incorporated person-first language, *i.e.* an individual with autism, at various points in the thesis. Mindful of individual language

preferences, participants in this study were asked to share their preferred terminology. No preferred terms emerged.

Considering the gendered nature of this research, the terms ‘girl’, ‘woman’ and ‘female’ will be used to describe different cohorts. The term ‘female’ represents the overarching cohort of individuals assigned female sex at birth, regardless of age. The term ‘girl’ will be used in relation to females under the age of eighteen, while ‘women’ will be used in the context of adult females.

It is important to note that clinical definitions/terms that may perpetuate the ‘deficit’ narrative are included in some sections of this thesis for consistency with extant literature and clarity in relation to statements pertinent to diagnostic criteria. It is important to note that these do not reflect the language preferences of the researcher.

Furthermore, in the interest of clarity, consistent with the neurodiversity paradigm, those with the most common neurotype are referred to as neurotypical or non-autistic, while individuals who experiences differences in processing, be it relating to diagnostic categories such as autism, ADHD, among others, are referred to as neurodivergent (Fletcher-Watson, 2022).

1.5 Perspectives on Autism

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) DSM-5-TR, autism, diagnostically labelled as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterised by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts as well as restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests and activities (APA, 2022).

Research from the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States reveals an increase in prevalence rates among children from 1 in 68 children in 2010 to approximately 1 in 36 children in 2020 (Maenner *et al*., 2023), further reducing to 1 in 31 in 2022 (Shaw *et al*., 2025). A similar increase in prevalence was observed in Northern Ireland going from 2% in 2013 to 5% in 2023 (Rodgers and McCluney, 2023). The most recent data on prevalence in the Republic of Ireland is presented in research by Boilson *et al*. (2016) who reported an autism prevalence of 1.5%, of which is in line with prevalence estimates across the world (DoH, 2018). However, according to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE; 2024), in their policy advice paper ‘An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society’, analysis of their own data in 2022 reports a prevalence of 3.38% in Ireland. While beneficial, these figures should be interpreted with

care considering the androcentrism of the diagnostic criteria and evolving understandings of the presentation of autism (Kopp and Gillberg, 1992; Kirkovski *et al*., 2013).

1.6 Models of Disability and Autism

Disability is described as a 'constantly changing experience that encompasses a vast intersectional population of individuals that each have their own definitions of what exactly disability is and furthermore, who exactly gets to decide that definition' (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022: 1322). As such, how disability is conceptualised is contested and continually evolving depending on the context in which it is examined. Three primary models of disability are evident in literature and support the mapping of the changing nature of understandings of autism overtime (Chown and Beardon, 2021).

1.6.1 Medical Model

In the past, conceptualisations of autism were primarily grounded in the medical model of disability, situating autism as a medical disorder (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). Defined first in medical literature (Kanner, 1943), a deficit-focused discourse concerned with *within-person* impairments prevailed (Chown and Beardon, 2021; Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). Placement within this model of disability pathologises an autism diagnosis, reducing it to symptoms that need to be 'treated' or 'cured' (Shakespeare, 2017; Anderson-Chavarria, 2022; Whelpley *et al.,* 2023). While the current inclusion of autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder in the DSM-V-TR (APA, 2022), a psychiatric reference text, firmly situates it within medical systems, the importance of 'opening up a respectful discursive space, where autistic development is not framed from the outset as "disordered"' is argued for by Milton (2017: 461).

1.6.2 Social Model

The social model of disability makes a distinction between the *impairment* as described in diagnostic criteria and that of the *disability* caused by societal barriers (Kapp, 2020; Chown and Beardon, 2021), therefore rejecting a deficit-focused understanding and framing disability as a social construction (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). In the context of autism, barriers faced may include inappropriate physical/sensory environments, pressure to conform to neurotypical social expectations, lack of understanding of autism, among others (Woods, 2017; Kapp, 2020). This model distinguishes between disabled people as the oppressed group and the non-disabled people in society as individuals that contribute to that oppression (Shakespeare, 2017). The social model did not intend to replace the medical model but rather complement it by recognising the shared obstacles (Shakespeare, 2017). Current discourse surrounding education inclusion is largely

underpinned by the social model of disability, seeing the difficulties in the environment rather than within the child and requires adaptation of the environment and practices within such (Ravet, 2011).

1.6.3 Biopsychosocial Model

The World Health Organisation (WHO) define the biopsychosocial model as one that 'synthesizes what is true in the medical and social models, without making the mistake each makes in reducing the whole, complex notion of disability to one of its aspects' (WHO, 2002: 9). In some ways, it can be argued that this model draws from both the medical and social model but also recognises the individual experience of disability by incorporating a psychological domain (Whelpley *et al.*, 2023). The psychological domain affords consideration to an individual's response toward their diagnosis, something which plays a significant role in autistic identity formation and in turn can influence how an individual perceives their differences influence their experiences, particularly during adolescence (Pearson and Rose, 2021; Davies *et al.*, 2024). Whelpley *et al.* (2023: 26) argue that the biopsychosocial model facilitates a more 'holistic' and 'individualised' approach to understanding in that it recognises the diagnosis, the context and the individual. It is within this perspective that the current PhD research will be positioned.

1.7 The Neurodiversity Movement and Autism

The neurodiversity movement initiated the shift from negative terminology such as 'disorder' to the acceptance that neurodivergent people are rather *different, not less* (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019). Fletcher-Watson (2022: 418) states that 'neurodiversity is the fact that humans vary in their neurological make-up and that this variability dictates the ways in which we process information – and therefore our experiences of and responses to the world'. The neurodiversity paradigm, therefore, rejects that divergence from the 'typical' brain is a deficit-based issue that needs to be corrected (Walker, 2021) and accepts autism as an integral part of an autistic individual's identity (Pellicano and den Houting, 2021).

In the context of the current research, adopting the neurodiversity paradigm does not deny autism as a diagnosis or a disability, but rather rejects the medical pathologisation of autism as a disorder and places individual differences to the fore (Fletcher-Watson, 2022). The researcher appreciates that neurodivergent individuals can experience disabling effects in society as a result of the systems that are built by and for neurotypical individuals (Chapman, 2023), while also recognising that individual autistic identity plays a role within autistic experience (Davies *et al.*, 2024). Fletcher-Watson (2022) proposes

that applying the neurodiversity paradigm to research involves engaging in research to identify and accept unmet needs of neurodivergent individuals with the hope of providing appropriate accommodations and supports.

Drawing together the above perspectives on autism and in keeping with the neurodiversity paradigm, the following puts forth the definition that most accurately represents the author's understanding of autism.

> *Autism refers to a neurotype that leads to a cognition that is qualitatively different from that of the predominant neurotype (PNT) in the way that information specific to communication, social interpretation and interaction is processed and understood; and to a perceptual reality of the sensory environment that differs considerably from one individual to the next.*
>
> (Beardon, 2019a: 15)

1.8 Sex/Gender Differences in Autism

There exists a disparity in the prevalence of autism between males and females (Rivet and Matson, 2011). A sex/gender[1] ratio of 4:1, male to female, is most commonly cited, however, a review of epidemiological studies presents ratios ranging from 1.4:1 to 15.7:1 (Fombonne, 2009). A systematic review and meta-analysis of prevalence studies propose that the ratio may be closer to 3:1 (Loomes *et al.*, 2017) while research by Matheis *et al.* (2019) suggests that prevalence may be relatively equal between males and females. The magnitude of the male: female diagnostic ratio is reduced in cases where an intellectual disability is also present with a ratio of 2:1 cited (Yeargin-Allsopp *et al.*, 2003). Meanwhile, research suggests that the diagnostic processes are less likely to identify females without an intellectual disability (Russell *et al*., 2011) and as a result the sex/gender gap among this cohort is understood to be more pronounced with ratios reaching 8:1 and 10:1 (Fombonne *et al.*, 2011; Tierney *et al.*, 2016; Pisula *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, females who obtain a formal diagnosis, often receive it far later than their male-counterparts (Begeer *et al.*, 2013; Rutherford *et al.*, 2016) with recent research suggesting that up to 80% of females remain undiagnosed at 18 years (McCrossin, 2022). A UK population-based cohort study revealed that it takes two-three years longer for girls to obtain a diagnosis than boys on average (Russell *et al.*, 2021) with some research reporting that it can take up to 6 years (Davies and Noble, 2019). However, there appears to be a shift in the diagnosis of females in more recent times (Fombonne, 2009; McLindon and Sedgewick, 2022). Increased recognition of autism in females has been attributed to

[1] As gendered socialisation begins at birth, it can be difficult to separate the effects of sex and gender. Therefore, sex/gender is used to acknowledge the inevitable overlap, unless in the instance that specificity is required.

improved understanding of nuances of varied presentations and an awareness of the potential androcentrism of diagnostic tools (Seeberg and Christensen, 2017). More broadly, Grinker (2008: 6) argues that higher prevalence of autism is good and is 'a sign that we are finally seeing and appreciating a kind of human difference that we once turned away from', something which we can now appreciate across genders.

1.9 Hypothesis to Explain Sex/Gender Disparity

It is proposed that limited conceptualisations of autism have placed some populations at risk of going undiagnosed (Pearson and Rose, 2021), with one such cohort being autistic females. Several hypotheses have been developed to attempt to account for the discrepancies between sex/genders in diagnosis.

1.9.1 Female Protective Effect

The Female Protective Effect (FPE) argues that there is something that 'protects' females from the likelihood of being autistic (Robinson *et al.*, 2013; Hull *et al.*, 2020). Emerging from environmental and genetic research, it is suggested that females require greater environmental and/or genetic risk than their male counterparts to exhibit the same degree of behavioural characteristics (Hull *et al.*, 2020; Pearson and Rose, 2021). Essentially, this theory proposes an innate protective factor in females, however, its limitation is that no specific protective factor has yet been established (Hull *et al.*, 2020).

1.9.2 Female Autism Phenotype

The Female Autism Phenotype (FAP) is another hypothesis put forth as an explanation for the underdiagnosis of autistic females (Kopp and Gillberg, 1992; Hull *et al.*, 2020). It posits that there exists a specific 'female-specific' presentation of autism (Pearson and Rose, 2021: 56), potentially more subtle in nature (Wing, 1981) of which the current diagnostic criteria may not be sensitive to detecting (Kirkovski *et al.*, 2013; Lai *et al.*, 2015; Saxe, 2017; Lockwood-Estrin *et al.*, 2021; Pearson and Rose, 2021).

It is important to note that the labelling of a *female autism phenotype* may disadvantage further those who fall outside the traditional gender binary (Cooper *et al.*, 2018), males who display a presentation of autism more aligned with the 'female' presentation and females who experience a more stereotypical profile (Rose, 2021).

1.9.3 Camouflaging hypothesis

As early as 1981, Wing hypothesised that autistic girls with no intellectual disability may be missed in clinical assessments due to their superior social and communication abilities. This has become known as the camouflaging hypothesis, which posits that the increased

likelihood of female engagement in masking makes it harder for their autistic characteristics to be recognised, in turn placing them at risk of remaining unidentified and so, undiagnosed (Lai *et al.*, 2017; Hull *et al*., 2020).

While each hypothesis presents a potential explanation, no one account is accepted over another, instead these positions should be viewed as complementary together building a more comprehensive understanding of sex/gender differences in autism.

1.10 Research Context

In the past, research on the topic of autism was guided by a medical focus which placed cure and intervention as a priority, with research often carried out on, about and for autistic individuals (Pellicano *et al*., 2014; Chown *et al*., 2017). Adult stakeholders, e.g. parents and teachers, were often recruited as proxies in research concerning the experiences of autistic young people (Pellicano *et al*., 2014). As a result, the voices of autistic individuals, and more specifically autistic children and young people, have been traditionally absent from research and policy (Pellicano *et al.*, 2014; Fayette and Bond, 2018).

Exclusion of the voices of autistic young people in research is problematic as it is a direct infringement of their human rights. Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognise the right to freedom of expression and the right to contribute to decisions that affect them. Children should be granted freedom to express their own views and for these views to be given due weight in accordance with age and maturity (UN, 1989). This right is again enshrined in Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) with specific reference to individuals with disabilities (UN, 2006). Unfortunately, this right has rarely been exercised (Lundy, 2018). Neglecting to provide opportunities for autistic voice in research results in a failure to recognise the diversity of experience and therefore stands to disadvantage policy, practice and the wider society.

Fortunately, there has been a gradual shift in recent times with momentum for inclusive and neurodiversity affirming research growing. It is argued that to be inclusive, research must take place with the members of the relevant community (Milton and Bracher, 2013; Fletcher-Watson *et al*., 2021). Encouraging steps have been made in autism research in terms of establishing research priorities and engaging autistic people and their families in research (Pellicano *et al.*, 2014; 2018). In addition, there are visible efforts being made to elicit the lived experiences of autistic children and young people in research pertaining to matters related to their lives (Scott-Barrett *et al.*, 2023; Simpson *et al.*, 2022;

Hummerstone and Parsons, 2022; Lewis *et al*., 2023), specifically their school experiences (Saggers, 2015; Goodall, 2018; Goodall, 2019), however, there remains room for improvement (Ellis, 2017; Nicholas *et al.*, 2019; Lewis *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, autistic girls remain disadvantaged in knowledge production (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; D'Mello *et al*., 2022). Considering this there is a need for the continual development of more meaningful ways to include autistic young people in respectful and accessible research encounters that allow them to share their experiences in meaningful ways (Scott-Barrett *et al.*, 2023).

1.11 Sex/Gender Bias in Autism Research

There exists a sex/gender bias in autism research (Kirkovski *et al.*, 2013; D'Mello *et al*., 2023). Sampling bias was evident in early seminal works (Kanner, 1943; Asperger, 1944) however, it has persisted across autism research more generally (Kirkovski *et al.*, 2013; D'Mello *et al*., 2023). As a result, it is argued that knowledge of autism has, until recently, been skewed towards male-dominated understandings (Saxe, 2017; Lockwood-Estrin *et al.*, 2021). Autistic women and girls (D'Mello *et al.*, 2023), particularly black autistic women and girls (Lovelace *et al.*, 2022), along with gender diverse populations (Rea *et al.*, 2024) remain underrepresented in research, a fact which has implications for knowledge and understanding. Fortunately, recent developments in autism research have seen an emerging focus on sex/gender differences (Lai *et al.*, 2015; Gould, 2017; Mandy and Lai, 2017). While this research has resulted in increased understanding of autism from a more holistic perspective (Wassell and Burke, 2022), not currently evidenced in the diagnostic criteria (APA, 2013; WHO, 2020), ongoing research is required to uncover more nuanced understandings of the autistic experience for autistic females (Milner *et al.*, 2019; Lounds Taylor and Smith DaWalt, 2020). As with a lot of autism research (D'Mello *et al*., 2023), research exploring the school experiences of autistic young people are often limited by male-biased samples. The current study acknowledges the necessity to include autistic females in research more generally, as emphasised by Saxe (2017), but also responds to Delimata and Byrne (2023) who emphasise the need to consider sex/gender differences in educational experiences.

1.12 Policy Context

This research combines and addresses three important societal issues, that of Inclusive Education, autism understanding and gender equality. The policy landscape pertinent to these three areas are somewhat disconnected. As inclusive education policy directs education provision for autistic students, this section will examine the international and national policies which have influenced current legislation while also drawing in other significant policy developments pertinent to autism and gender where relevant to underpin the current research.

1.12.1 International Perspectives on Inclusive Education

The past three decades have seen a global movement towards Inclusive Education (IE; Appendix A). The United Nation's World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990), endorsed internationally by UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) were foundational in paving the way for change (Farrell and Ainscow, 2002). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) is viewed as particularly influential in IE discourse (Hick *et al.*, 2019), being described as the 'most significant international document that ever appeared in the field of special education' (Ainscow *et al.*, 2019: 671). The Salamanca Statement endorsed and defined inclusive education, placing it on a global stage by requesting governments to 'give the highest priority to making education systems inclusive, and to adopt the principle of inclusive education as a matter of law or policy' (Westwood, 2013: 3).

The UNCRC and the UNCRPD provided further legislative underpinning for IE around the world. Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC pertain to education in terms of the right to education and that the education will enable the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (UN, 1989). While the UNCRC outlines the fundamental rights of every child, the UNCRPD further legislates the rights of individuals with disabilities with the right to an inclusive education, responsive to individual needs, enshrined in Article 24 (UN, 2006). In ratifying the UNCRPD in 2018, the Irish Government committed to providing 'an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning' (UN, 2006).

In terms of international policy on autism, the European Charter of Rights for Persons with Autism (Autism Europe, 1996), ratified by the European Parliament, states that autistic individual should have the same rights as all EU citizens and that these rights should be enhanced and enforced by legislation in each member state. Within this Charter, the right to accessible and appropriate education is reiterated.

Finally, it is noteworthy to consider 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and SDG 5 pertain to inclusive education and gender equality, respectively. The ambitions for education are captured in SDG 4 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (UN, 2015; UN Women, 2016). Furthermore, SDG 5 seeks to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls and ensure an education inclusive of gender is provided (UN Women, 2022a). SDG 5 sets out to end discrimination and promote the effective participation of girls in areas relevant to their lives, highlighting the importance of providing autistic girls with opportunities to have their voices heard, in education, and beyond (UN Women, 2022a). SDG 5 is extremely relevant to autistic females who are perceived as a doubly marginalised cohort, both for their gender and their diagnosis, and may experience barriers in education (Lajčák, 2018).

1.12.2 National Legislation underpinning Inclusive Education

Inclusive education in Ireland has evolved significantly in the past two decades (Appendix B; Griffin and Shevlin, 2011; Day and Prunty, 2015; Rose and Shevlin, 2021), resulting in a more holistic education for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), now increasingly educated in mainstream education settings (Rose *et al.*, 2017; Kenny *et al.*, 2020). It is important to note however, despite being at odds with the ratification of the UNCRPD (UN, 2016; NCSE, 2019; 2024), Ireland's provision for inclusive education is still grounded within a Continuum of Provision Model with almost 2% of students enrolled in special schools or special classes in the 2020/2021 academic year (NCSE, 2019; 2024).

Momentum for change in Ireland emerged from the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (Government of Ireland (GOI), 1993). The SERC report was significant for special education policy and practice in that it provided a national definition of SEN, recommended seven principles for future development of policy and advocated to advance inclusive school provision (Rose and Shevlin, 2021). However, the idea of a Continuum of Provision was promoted (McCoy *et al.*, 2014). The sentiments of the SERC Report were further supported by the White Paper on Education (DESc, 1995) which endorsed inclusion in mainstream facilitated by additional support. The Education Act (GOI, 1998) provided the legislative mandate, specifying that all schools and teachers have a legal responsibility for educating children with SEN (GOI, 1998; Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). It reinforced the idea of education for all, highlighting the right of every

child, including children with SEN to an appropriate education. Equality of access for all was subsequently reiterated in Equal Status Act (GOI, 2000).

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN Act; GOI, 2004) marked a significant milestone in the history of the state in relation to the education of children with SEN (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011; Kenney *et al.*, 2020; Rose and Shevlin, 2021), by setting out the right of all children to an inclusive education (GOI, 2004). Underpinned by the concept of inclusion, the EPSEN Act mandates that students should be educated in mainstream schools alongside their peers unless doing so would not be in the best interests of the child with SEN or of the other children with whom the child is to be educated. The EPSEN Act, together with the Disability Act (GOI, 2005) provide a framework to plan for and deliver specialist support for students with SEN. While the EPSEN Act is the most current legislation pertaining education provision for children with SEN, it has not yet been fully enacted (Rose and Shevlin, 2021). Despite this, a number of guidance documents, underpinned by the EPSEN Act, have been published to support implementation of inclusive education for students with SEN in practice (Appendix C; NCSE, 2006; NEPS, 2007a; 2007b; NCSE, 2013; DES, 2017; DoE, 2021; DoE, 2024[2]). Review of the EPSEN Act commenced in 2022 with the completion of the review of EPSEN identified as a goal in the Department of Education's Annual Statement of Priorities (DoE, 2023).

1.12.3 Inclusive Education Policy and Autism in Ireland

The provision of education for children and young people with autism has evolved largely in tandem with the trajectory of education provision for students with SEN more generally (Appendix B). Autism was first specifically addressed in Irish education policy in 2001 with the Report of the Task Force on Autism, a landmark report which made recommendations on policy and practice in relation to the education provision of autistic students and outlined the use of the Continuum of Provision model for meeting the needs of autistic students across educational contexts. It also recognised the importance of adequate staff training, collaboration with parents and multi-disciplinary cooperation (DESc, 2001). The recommendations of the Task Force on Autism along with the EPSEN Act (GOI, 2004) have informed how the needs of autistic children are assessed, supported

[2] The Department of Education and Science (DESc) was renamed the Department of Education and Skills (DES) on 2nd May 2010 (Irish Statute Book 2010). Therefore, all documents published after this date up until 21st October 2020 will be cited as DES. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) was renamed the Department of Education (DoE) on 22nd October 2020 (Irish Statute Book 2020). Therefore, all documents published after this date will be cited as DoE.

and monitored throughout their education. Over the years, there has remained a commitment to reviewing education provision for autistic students with several evaluations carried out across the continuum of provision (Appendix D; DESc Inspectorate, 2006; McCoy *et al.*, 2014; Daly *et al.*, 2016; DoE Inspectorate, 2022; DoE Inspectorate, 2024). While there have been mixed findings in these evaluations, it is apparent that there remains an ongoing commitment to education provision for autistic learners. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the evaluations are largely performative reviews providing recommendations without perhaps the required supports to make improvements. However, the publication of two important policies pertinent to autism in recent years has indicated a renewed sense of commitment to supporting autistic individuals in a more proactive approach. The publication of the 'Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools – Supporting Children and Young People' and the accompanying 'Indicators of Effective Practice' (GOI, 2022) provided a practical, structured resource for schools to better support their autistic students. Lastly, on a broader perspective, the Autism Innovation Strategy (GOI, 2024) marks the first ever autism specific strategy in Ireland. It recognises that significant work is required to meet the needs of autistic individuals, however, it indicates a national commitment to improving the experiences of autistic individuals in Irish society, with Pillar 2 'Equality of access to public services' delineating specific actions pertinent to primary and post-primary education for autistic individuals (GOI, 2024). In summation, it is apparent that while specific focus on the provision of education for autistic students has been long acknowledged, more recent policy documents recognise the need for more practical support.

1.12.4 Inclusive Education Provision and Autism in Ireland

Currently, autistic students continue to be supported in a range of learning environments (Daly *et al.*, 2016) with the Continuum of Provision model providing for education within the mainstream school context, special class within a mainstream context or the special school context (NCSE, 2024). A prevalence rate of 1.55% is used for planning purposes, with approximately one in every 65 school-aged students having a diagnosis of autism (NCSE, 2016a). In recent years, Ireland has witnessed the exponential growth of special classes (autism) from 65 in 2010 to 653 in 2022 at post-primary level, a 905% increase over 12 years (NCSE, 2024). This trajectory is at odds with international discourse surrounding inclusive education (NCSE, 2024). However, release of the 'Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society' policy report from the NCSE (2024) implies a move towards full inclusion at a gradual pace in Ireland. Nonetheless, in line with the focus of

the current study, most autistic students in Ireland are being educated in mainstream settings with the most recent records indicating a figure of 86% (NCSE, 2016b).

As the current research is grounded in the mainstream context, it is imperative that the models of support dictating the allocation of resources to schools to support students with SEN in the Republic of Ireland are interrogated. The following discussion will consider the General Allocation Model (GAM) (Circular 02/05 - DESc 2005) and the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) (Circular 0014/2017 - DES, 2017b; Circular 0064/2024 – DoE, 2024b) with specific reference to autism and gender.

Gender bias has been evident in the allocation of resources to schools to support students with SEN in the past (DESc, 2005; DES 2017b). The GAM (DESc, 2005) allocated a level of resourcing to school based on a number of factors, including socio-economic disadvantage, school size and gender. In the case of gender, this meant that boys' schools were allocated additional teaching posts at a lower enrolment figure than mixed schools, and mixed schools allocated additional teaching posts at a lower enrolment figure than all girls' schools. Circular 02/05 also categorised disabilities into two discrete groups; High Incidence disabilities and Low Incidence disabilities, assigning specific allocations depending on disabilities. Identified as a Low Incidence disability, autism was granted five hours of resource teaching support per week (DESc, 2005). Despite generally positive findings from the Review of the Primary Schools' GAM (DESc, 2010), Circular 0014/2017 introduced SETAM as its replacement (DES, 2017b). SETAM sought to provide a 'unified allocation' based on individual school profiles (DES, 2017b: 1). SETAM is grounded in the Continuum of Support Framework (CoS; DES, 2017a), a framework which enables schools to 'identify students' educational needs' which can include 'academic, social and emotional needs, as well as needs associated with physical, sensory, language and communication difficulties' (DES, 2017a: 7). This model no longer required students with disabilities to have a formal diagnosis before being granted support, marking a tidal shift from a diagnosis-oriented model to a needs-based model (NCSE, 2013; DES, 2017b).

The specific consideration afforded to gender in the allocation of resources was reflective of international evidence supporting that incidence of SEN is higher among boys than girls (Banks and McCoy, 2011; NCSE, 2015). However, it could be argued that it placed girls at an unfair disadvantage. While the GAM allocated specific resource hours to autism, based on research highlighting gender differences in diagnosis of autism (Daniel and Wang, 2023), girls may still have been disenfranchised. Moreover, while SETAM

initiated a shift towards greater school autonomy in the distribution of resources, gender remained a criterion that was considered in determining a school's overarching educational profile (DES, 2017b), meaning that girls may not have received sufficient support.

The SETAM was reviewed in 2023 (DoE, 2024c) which resulted in changes to the process for calculating the educational profile for schools and the special education teaching allocation arising from this (DoE, 2024b; 2024c). Gender was removed as a criterion for allocation, acknowledging current research evidence that 'female students have a similar level of need and, in addition, it is apparent that this need is manifesting itself at later stages in their growth and development' (DoE, 2024c: 2). However, alongside the removal of gender was the removal of the complex needs as a factor influencing allocation, meaning that the educational profile of a school is now solely derived from the literacy and numeracy profile of the schools as demonstrated by the junior cycle scores for English and Maths which are reported by the school (DoE, 2024c). The narrowing of data collected to inform the development of a school profile to literacy and numeracy scores has potential implications for the cohort at the heart of this study, autistic girls. Autistic students included in mainstream settings may not experience difficulties with literacy and numeracy but rather in various hidden domains including social, sensory, and emotional regulation, among others. While the overall allocation of hours is to support all students in the school, it could be argued that by providing the allocation based solely on literacy and numeracy scores, schools and more specifically students, may be disadvantaged as the allocation of hours may not be a true reflection of the scope and breadth of the needs within the school. In the context of autistic girls, who may already be perceived by schools as low priority for receiving additional support, the changes to SETAM (DoE, 2024c) may place them at further risk of going unsupported in school contexts.

1.13 Practice Context

As indicated in the discussion on policy context, in Ireland like other countries such as the United Kingdom, most autistic individuals are educated in mainstream classes (NCSE, 2016b; Goodall, 2018). While inclusion in mainstream education can be a positive experience for some autistic individuals, there is a body of evidence that suggests that the experiences of those enrolled in mainstream provision are multifaceted and complex (Horgan *et al.*, 2022; Lynam *et al*., 2024; McKinlay *et al*., 2024).

A systematic review of the experiences of autistic young people enrolled in mainstream post-primary school emphasised the demanding nature of mainstream provision with particular focus on academic, sensory and social demands and their impact on wellbeing (Horgan *et al.*, 2022). A scoping review conducted by Lynam *et al.* (2024) focusing on both primary and post-primary level experiences was largely consistent with the former, revealing concerns in relation to students' sense of belonging, experiences of anxiety, sensory and regulation needs. This two-stage study also involved consultation with a Child and Youth Advisory Group which revealed that autistic pupils in Ireland felt the main themes of the review were largely reflective of their experiences in Ireland. These findings have been replicated in a recent national survey commissioned by AsIAm, Ireland's national autism charity, exploring the school experiences of 342 Autistic young people (Delimata and Byrne, 2023).

While these findings are important and relevant, the present study embodies a more specific focus in its endeavour to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream provision in Ireland. There is currently no research known to the researcher that explores this in Ireland; however, insight can be drawn from other contexts with findings suggesting mixed mainstream experiences (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2019; Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024). While girls share some similar experiences to their male peers, they also have unique experiences (Tomlinson *et al*., 2020; Munroe, 2023) due to differences in presentation (Young *et al*., 2018; Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023) and the potential gendered-biased knowledge of professionals they encounter (Gray *et al.*, 2021; Whitlock *et al.*, 2020; Ward *et al.*, 2022). In addition to this, stark findings in the UK context report high levels of school exclusion and non-attendance among autistic girls (Sproston *et al.*, 2017; Moyse, 2021). These findings point towards the need for increased awareness of varied presentations among school stakeholders and better support for girls to prevent them continuing to fly under the radar and enable them to flourish in their educational journeys. Furthermore, they emphasise the critical importance of the current

study in providing insight into educational experiences of autistic girls in the Irish Education Context.

1.14 Personal Investment

I am deeply passionate about improving the educational experiences and outcomes of autistic students, particularly autistic girls. As a teacher educator, delivering input across Initial Teacher Education and Postgraduate Programmes in the area of special and inclusive education, I have the opportunity to actively address this with both pre- and in-service teachers. My engagement with students and teachers across these programmes has re-iterated a lack of knowledge of the diversity of autism and further emphasised the importance of this project in terms of adding to this field of research and disseminating the findings with those who are supporting autistic students, specifically autistic female students, on the ground.

However, I was not in this position at the time of commencing my PhD research and my initial interest in this area of research was initially prompted following data collection for my Master of Education dissertation exploring the role of assistance dogs for autistic children. A significant gender disparity was evident in recruitment for the study with parents of only one female child recruited compared to parents of five male children. This played on my mind following the submission of my dissertation and later arose in my professional practice as a teacher. Informal conversations with teacher colleagues highlighted a significant lack of awareness of the presentation of autism beyond the stereotype which may have resulted in many autistic girls going unidentified in classrooms and not receiving the support they needed. And so, in the evenings after a day at school, the initial research proposal was drafted and accepted for the current PhD programme of study.

Consequentially, the development of this research was initially informed and shaped by my professional experience as a teacher and my previous research experience. While the research questions presented in *Section 1.3* reflect the finalised questions, the ‘a priori’ questions were originally centred around establishing the positive and challenging aspects of school for autistic girls as well as exploring support provision for this cohort. Driven by a practice lens, the questions, presented as ‘what’ questions, sought to isolate the ‘issues’, ‘preferences’ and ‘support needs’ relating to autistic girls' school experiences. This answer-driven lens can be understood with reference to my position as teacher at the time of initial conceptualisation. However, as I developed as a researcher and transitioned between roles (teacher to teacher educator), my paradigmatic stance also evolved. I

started to see my project within the broader research landscape rather than within the context of an individual classroom. I began to challenge the notion of presupposed challenges or positive aspects of school and instead recognise that experiences are relational and situated and exist within the social and cultural spaces of individual schools. Within this frame of reference, I appreciated that my research was not going to be representative of all autistic girls. Thus, my world view shifted from being solution-driven to more exploratory in nature with the aim of unveiling the diversity of experience to enhance understanding more broadly (see *Section 2.10* for further reflections on the evolution of this research).

1.15 Conclusion and Summary of Chapters

This chapter introduced the current research, its overarching aim and its underpinning research questions. Grounded in the broader realm of sex/gender differences, perspectives on autism, models of disability and the neurodiversity model were also addressed to contextualise the research. A trifold rationale for the project was presented, considering the research, policy and practice contexts along with the researcher's personal investment in the study. The next chapter provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature in two core domains; sex/gender differences in autism and autism and education. Chapter Three details the methodological underpinnings of this PhD research which comprises of two discrete but related studies. Chapter Four presents the findings from the secondary study conducted with mainstream post-primary teachers. Chapter Five presents the findings from the primary study, a multiperspectival, dyadic design IPA study carried out with autistic girls and their parents. A combined discussion drawing together findings from both the primary and secondary study with extant literature is presented in Chapter Six. Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by highlighting its contribution, acknowledging its limitations and making recommendations.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This study endeavours to better understand the educational experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream post-primary settings. Given the emergent nature of research into sex/gender differences in autism and complexity of school experiences, various different elements of the literature require examination. The review is divided into two parts as illustrated in *Figure 1*. The first part focuses on autism as a diagnostic construct and an identity while the second part contextualises this discussion in the context of education. Prior to commencing the empirical review, the approach to this literature review is presented below.

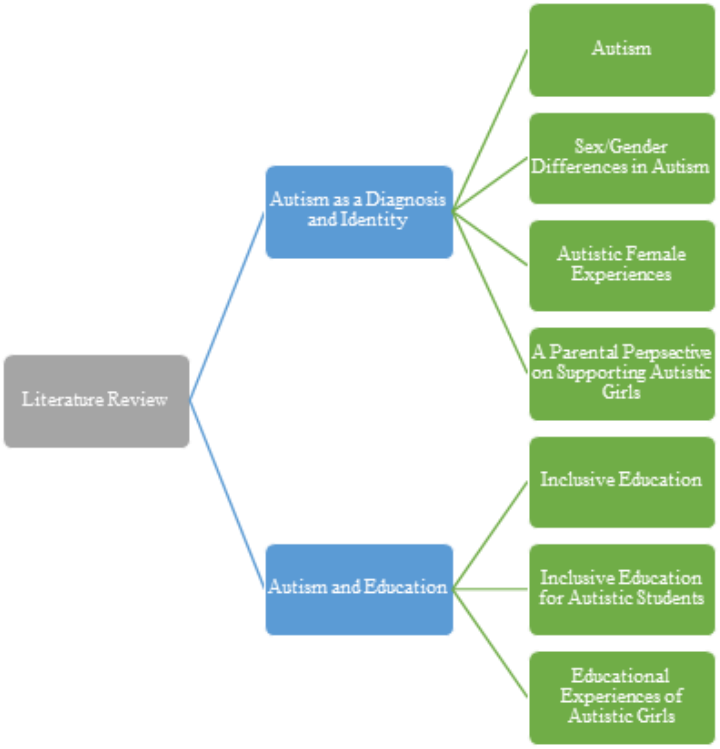


Figure 1: Thematic Map of the Literature Review

2.2 Literature Review Approach

This literature review sought to identify and map the breadth of research relating to autism as a diagnosis and identity and the intersection of autism and education with reference to girls. A traditional, thematic approach was adopted for *Section 2.3* through to *Section 2.8* inclusive, while a critical literature review approach was used to examine literature relating to autistic girls' educational experiences (*Section 2.9*). The following details the approach undertaken for the thematic review while *Section 2.2.1* details the more systematic search and review procedures adopted for the critical literature review.

Recognising the broad nature of this review, initial searches were focused on establishing what was known about autism, autism in girls and autism and education. The initial search and review process was conducted between September 2021 and January 2022, however, new papers were read throughout the research period. Various databases (e.g. PsychInfo, SpringerLINK, Taylor and Fracis Online, WILEY, ERIC, PUBMED) were used to identify key literature. Further searches were conducted using Google Scholar. Search terms were identified and Boolean operators were employed to tailor the search process at different points in the review (*tab.1*)

Table 1: Search Terms for Databases

Focus	Search Term Combinations
What is known about autism , gender differences in autism and more specifically autism in girls?	(‘Autism’ OR ‘Autistic’ OR ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ OR ‘Asperger*) and (‘sex’ OR ‘gender differences’) OR (‘females’ OR ‘girls’ OR ‘women’) AND (‘diagnosis’ OR ‘identification’)
What is known about the autistic experiences of autistic females?	(‘Autism’ OR ‘Autistic’ OR ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ OR ‘Asperger*) AND (‘females’ OR ‘girls’ OR ‘women’) AND (‘identity’ OR ‘experience’) AND (‘diagnosis’ OR ‘identification’)
What is known about inclusive education for autistic students attending mainstream education?	(‘Autism’ OR ‘Autistic’ OR ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ OR ‘Asperger*) AND (‘inclusion’ OR ‘inclusive education’ OR ‘inclusive practice’) AND (‘education’ OR ‘school’ AND ‘mainstream’)
What is known about autism in girls from a parent perspective?	(‘Autism’ OR ‘Autistic’ OR ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ OR ‘Asperger*) AND (‘sex’ OR ‘gender differences’) OR (‘females’ OR ‘girls’ OR ‘women’) AND (‘parent’ OR ‘guardian’ OR ‘mothers’ OR ‘fathers’).
What is known about autism in girls from a teacher perspective?	(‘Autism’ OR ‘Autistic’ OR ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ OR ‘Asperger*) AND (‘females’ OR ‘girls’ OR ‘women’) AND (‘education’ OR ‘school’ AND ‘mainstream’) AND (‘teacher’ OR ‘educator’ OR) AND ('knowledge' OR 'understanding' OR 'awareness')

While an emphasis was placed on drawing from a contemporary, up-to-date evidence base, some older, seminal material was included to support the exploration of foundational understandings of autism and to track the trajectory of developments in the field of inclusive education. Empirical studies foregrounded all components of the review, however, books, book chapters, policy documents and published/unpublished reports from governments and government agencies were also drawn on to comprehensively

develop the broader aspects of the literature review. Given the emergent nature of the research field, theoretical and conceptual literature were used to add context to the phenomenon of sex/gender differences in autism.

Recognising the embodied nature of autism, studies eliciting autistic voices were prioritised. Biographical accounts from autistic authors supplemented the discussion to ensure the inclusion of first-person lived-experience insights into the autistic experience. Furthermore, although not the focus of the current study, studies involving autistic adults, particularly autistic women were cited at various points in this review. It is important to note that late diagnosis and misdiagnosis are often reported in autistic females (Kanfiszer *et al.*, 2017). This can have a profound effect on educational experiences and in turn, life outcomes. Therefore, the contributions of this cohort are significantly valuable and their reflections on their experiences may help to identify areas for change to ensure better outcomes for autistic girls going forward.

The author also engaged with literature that was included in reading lists from previous academic programmes completed. Forward citation and 'snowballing' (Wohlin, 2014) contributed to the sourcing of further relevant papers.

2.2.1 Critical Literature Review Approach

A more refined process was undertaken in order to conduct a critical literature review on the educational experiences of autistic girls. Search terms were identified and searches were conducted across databases using Boolean operators *e.g.* ('Autism' OR 'Autistic' OR 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' OR 'Asperger*) AND ('females' OR 'girls') AND ('education' OR 'school' AND 'mainstream') AND ('experiences'). *Table 2* outlines the inclusion and exclusion criteria which were used to identify articles for this component of the literature review. See *Section 2.9* for further information on the articles included.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Critical Literature Review

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Type of Publication	Peer-reviewed journal articles & autobiographical accounts in book chapters.	Non-peer reviewed journal articles.	Peer-reviewed journals articles have undergone a rigorous review process prior to publication, therefore likely to be of a high standard. Autobiographical accounts were included due to the nature of the research area. Given the embodied nature of autism and the focus of the study on autistic experience of a phenomenon, autobiographical accounts provide a first-hand narrative of an experience.
Years of Publication	2014-2024.	2013 and prior.	Drawing from a contemporary evidence base within a ten-year period.
Language	Published in English.	Published in a language other than English.	English is the first language of the researcher.
Study Design	Qualitative (including multi-modal approaches) or Mixed Methods.	Quantitative.	Review sought to synthesise in-depth lived-experience data on school experiences garnered through qualitative data.
Perspectives Elicited on School Experiences	Autistic girls' first-hand accounts. Autistic students' first-hand accounts. Studies that incorporate multiple perspectives (autistic girls and their parents and/or teachers).	Studies that do not include the voices of autistic students. Studies that elicit parent/guardian or teacher voices as proxies.	The voices of autistic girls are paramount for this study as autistic students and autistic females have been excluded from research in the past. However, the voices of autistic students more generally are also important for broader understanding.
Education Setting Focus	Post-primary school.	Pre-school or early years settings	Focus is on experiences of autistic girls attending post-

	Primary school.	Third level education institutions.	primary settings. However, recognising the emergent nature of this research area, studies eliciting the voices of autistic girls attending primary contexts will be considered. Early years settings and initial primary school years limit the availability of established diagnoses of autism.
Focus	Mainstream education settings or joint attendance of mainstream and special class settings. Mainstream experiences can be discussed with reference to exclusion from mainstream	Experiences of special school or special class context without co-attendance in a mainstream setting. Experiences of education provision outside of the typical continuum of educational provision (e.g. residential school, home tuition). Experiences outside of the school context.	Research is focused on exploring the lived experiences of autistic girls who attend mainstream provision.

2.3 Autism

AsIAm, Ireland's National Autism Charity, defines autism as 'a developmental condition which means that the way a person communicates, interacts and understands other people, and the world, is different to those who do not have the condition' (AsIAm, 2023).

2.3.1 The Evolution of our Understanding of Autism

In order to understand the current classification of autism, it is necessary to first examine the term in the light of the historical context from which it emerged. Autism, as a diagnostic construct, was first proposed by Leo Kanner in 1943. His construct of 'childhood autism' was based on eleven children (eight boys and three girls). Kanner's observations distinguished autism from 'childhood schizophrenia' as he explained how the individuals in his study demonstrated impairment in socialisation and cognitive skills beginning at birth and the amount of social reciprocity in their communications with other

people was impaired. These atypical behaviours were pathologised based on behavioural observations rather than how life was experienced by the individual.

The following year Hans Asperger, an Austrian medical student, published a paper (Asperger, 1944) describing four boys who presented with impairments in the social domain with interaction and communication alongside having intense interests and were identified as being in the borderline to superior intelligence range (Wing, 1996). Although the early interpretations of Wing (1981) into Asperger's (1944) work led to the development of Asperger Syndrome, Asperger's original work 'Die Autistischen Psychopathen im Kindesalter (Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood)' was not recognised internationally until it was translated by Uta Frith in 1991. While the presentation of the individuals discussed by Kanner (1943) and Asperger (1944) varied from each other, there were some overlaps of traits (Boucher, 2017). It is noteworthy to highlight at this point that the children observed by both Kanner (1943), and Asperger (1944) were predominantly male.

Later, Wing and Gould (1979) classified the term 'triad of impairment'. The 'triad of impairment' detailed three core areas of difference, namely differences in social interaction, social communication and social imagination. These criteria were further expanded by Wing (1981) who drew on the work of Asperger to highlight that the presentation of the triad of impairments can vary among individuals, with some demonstrating good verbal abilities and socially aloof behaviour. This work led Wing (1981) to coin her observations as the condition 'autistic spectrum disorder'. Combined, the work of Wing and Gould (1979) and Wing (1981; 1996) positioned autism as a spectrum and formed the basis of the revised version of the DSM III-R (APA, 1987) and the following edition, DSM-IV (APA, 1994), which included the diagnosis of Asperger syndrome.

Rather than the unified concept of autism currently utilised today, previous editions of the diagnostic and statistical manual (DSM-IV & DSM-IV-TR) identified a set of pervasive developmental disorders consisting of several sub-categories including autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PPD-NOS), childhood disintegrative disorder and Rett syndrome (APA, 1994; 2000). Of significance for this study is the former recognition of Asperger Syndrome as a 'related disorder' (Westphal and Volkmar, 2008). Individuals who met the criteria for Asperger Syndrome were required to demonstrate differences in the social domain and in terms of restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interest and activities,

however, distinguished from autistic disorder, language abilities appeared preserved and an average IQ or above was expected (APA, 2000; Volkmar and Klin, 2005; Westphal and Volkmar, 2008; Wing *et al.*, 2011).

Currently, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is the diagnostic label related to the specific criteria set out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition, Test Revision (APA, 2013; APA, 2022), and the International Classifications of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11; WHO, 2022). The DSM-5-TR will be the main point of reference for this study. The DSM-5 represented a substantial change in the diagnostic criteria with the former triad of impairments reduced to two overarching criteria, namely the Dyad of Impairment (Tanguay, 2011; APA, 2013). According to the DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022), ASD is characterised by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts as well as restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests and activities (*fig.2*). Furthermore, these difficulties must be present in the early development period, cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational or other important areas and not be better explained by the presence of an intellectual disability or global developmental delay (APA, 2022).

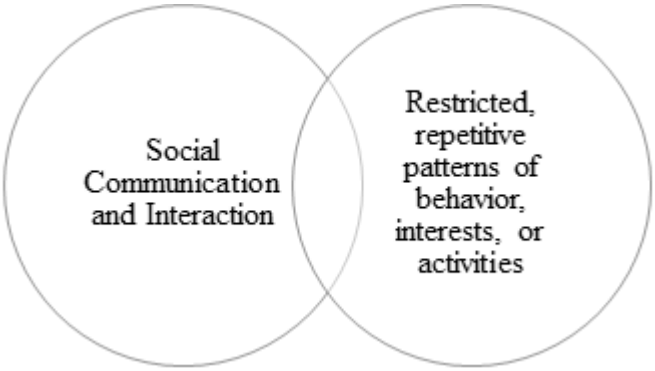


Figure 2: Dyad of Difference (APA, 2013; 2022)

The DSM-5 was significant in its unitary concept of autism, subsuming the former related disorders under a single overarching label of ASD (Tanguay, 2011; APA, 2013). The removal of Asperger's disorder from DSM-5 was criticised and it was questioned whether the overarching diagnosis of ASD adequately acknowledged the unique clinical features of an Asperger disorder diagnosis (Wing *et al.*, 2011; Lord and Jones, 2012; Barahona-Corrêa and Filipe, 2016). Instead, the broader category of ASD identified three levels of severity ranging from 'requiring support' to 'requiring very substantial support' (*tab.3*) (APA, 2013; APA, 2022; Waizbard-Bartov *et al.*, 2024).

Table 3: Severity Levels for ASD (APA, 2013; 2022)

Severity Level	Social communication and interaction	Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviours, interests of activities
Level 3 *'Requiring very substantial support'*	Severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills causes severe impairments in functioning, very limited initiation of social interactions, and minimal response to social overtures from others. For example, a person with few words of intelligible speech who rarely initiates interaction and, when he or she does, makes unusual approaches to meet needs only and responds to only very direct social approaches.	Inflexibility of behavior, extreme difficulty coping with change, or other repetitive behaviors markedly interfere with functioning in all spheres. Great distress / difficulty changing focus or action.
Level 2 *'Requiring substantial support'*	Marked differences in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills; social impairments apparent even with supports in place; limited initiation of social interactions; and reduced or abnormal responses to social overtures from others. For example, a person who speaks simple sentences, whose interaction is limited to narrow special interests, and who has markedly odd nonverbal communication.	Inflexibility of behavior, difficulty coping with change, or other repetitive behaviors appear frequently enough to be obvious to the casual observer and interfere with functioning in a variety of contexts. Distress and / or difficulty changing focus or action.
Level 1 *'Requiring support'*	Without supports in place, deficits in social communication can cause noticeable impairments. Difficulty initiating social interactions, and clear examples of atypical or unsuccessful responses to social overtures of others. May appear to have decreased interest in social interactions. For example, a person who is able to speak in full sentences and engages in communication but whose to-and-fro conversation with others fails, and whose attempts to make friends are odd and typically unsuccessful.	Inflexibility of behavior causes significant interference with functioning in one or more contexts. Difficulty switching between activities. Problems of organisation and planning hamper independence.

Research suggests the former category of Asperger disorder may be most accurately classified at Level 1, 'requiring support', of the severity framework in the DSM-5 (de Giambattista *et al.*, 2019). In the past, individuals who received a diagnosis of Asperger disorder would have primarily been educated in the mainstream context (Wing, 1996). The current research is focused on the experiences of autistic girls (with preserved language abilities and IQ within or above the average range) attending mainstream post-primary settings, reflecting a diagnosis at Level 1 or formerly Asperger disorder. While it is argued that these levels of severity do not provide an adequate or complete picture of the extent to which a diagnosis of autism influences quality of life, nor do they adequately capture interactions with co-occurring conditions (Waizbard-Bartov *et al.*, 2024), they can provide some useful information (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019) and in the case of this research facilitate clarity on the focus sample of participants.

2.3.2 Core Domains of Difference

The DSM-5-TR specifies a dyad of difference[3] for autism diagnosis. As mentioned above, individuals must exhibit differences in the domains of social communication and interaction and restrictive, repetitive behaviours, interests, or activities (APA, 2022). Further, within these domains, an individual must meet a number of criteria to receive a diagnosis. In the domain of social communication and interaction, all three criteria must be met, whereas in the domain of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities, an individual must exhibit at least two of the four criteria, outlined below (*tab.4*).

[3] formally referred to as dyad of impairment

Table 4: ASD Diagnostic Criteria (Adapted from DSM-5 - APA, 2013; 2022)

Domain	Criteria Guidance	Criterion
Social Communication and Interaction	Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts, not accounted for by general developmental delays, and manifested by 3 of 3 symptoms.	Difficulties reciprocating social and/or emotional interactions
		Difficulties developing and maintaining relationships
		Difficulties with non-verbal communication
Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities	Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities as manifested by at least 2 of 4 symptoms	Repetitive or unusual speech, motor movements or use of objects
		Inflexibility • Adherence to routine • Ritualised patterns of verbal and non-verbal behaviour • Resistance to change • Rigid thinking
		Interests: Unusual in intensity or focus
		Sensory Differences

Given that one characteristic of the target sample for this research is that they are diagnosed at Level 1, it is noteworthy to highlight that concerns were raised in relation to the decreased sensitivity of the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) compared to DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000), particularly in the identification of individuals with a higher cognitive ability or an Asperger-like presentation (McPartland *et al.*, 2012). However, informed by existing measurement tools and research (Diagnostic Interview for Social Communication Disorders - DISCO; Leekam *et al.*, 2002; Wing *et al.*, 2002), diagnostic descriptors with high levels of both sensitivity and specificity were developed and 'essential' behaviours were identified to inform diagnosis under DSM-5 (Kent *et al.*, 2013; Carrington *et al.,* 2014). Further research extended this work and identified a number of descriptors as being significantly more frequent among those in higher ability groups (Carrington *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, to set the context for forthcoming sections and to contextualise the literature review with reference to the sample at the heart of the current study, the following section provides examples of observable behaviours that reflect a diagnosis of autism at Level 1.

The first domain pertaining to social communication and interaction outlines three criteria relating to social/emotional reciprocity, social relationships and non-verbal communication (APA, 2013; 2022). In this domain, diagnostic descriptors acknowledge behaviours such as a varied social approach, difficulties understanding and using verbal and non-verbal communication, difficulties adjusting behaviour according to context, and challenges in the area of friendship (APA, 2022). Other literature has emphasised that individuals in this cohort may exhibit particular difficulties with the pragmatics of language (Landa, 2000; Tager-Flusberg *et al*., 2005; Attwood, 2022). However, it has been noted that less overt differences and/or an ability to compensate for difficulties in this area may be more common at Level 1 (Grandin, 2006). It is noteworthy that the diagnostic descriptors do not recognise the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012a) and fail to acknowledge the success of Autistic-Autistic social interaction (Crompton *et al.,* 2020; Foster *et al.*, 2025).

The second domain, restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities, consists of four criteria, namely, stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects or speech, preference for sameness and predictability, passionate interests and differences in sensory processing (APA, 2013; 2022). Examples provided in the diagnostic descriptors include lining up toys, repeated speech patterns, distress at change, difficulty with transitions, attachment or preoccupation with interests unique in intensity or focus, and indifference to, distress at or seeking out sensory stimuli (APA, 2022). Furthermore, a preference for routines and perfectionistic traits were strongly associated with those in the higher ability group (Carrington *et al.*, 2014). Again, acknowledging the deficit-oriented nature of descriptions used in the diagnostic process, it is important to emphasise that these descriptors situate the differences as within person challenges with little to no recognition that the world is unpredictable and not designed for neurodivergent individuals (Chapman, 2023; Hartman *et al.*, 2023)

2.3.3 Sensory Processing in Autism

Sensory processing differences were first included as a diagnostic criterion for autism in DSM-5 (APA, 2013) and have since been suggested as a key determining characteristic in identifying autism and distinguishing it from other conditions in the diagnostic process (Carrington *et al.*, 2014; Bogdashina, 2016). Research indicates that a large proportion of autistic individuals experience sensory differences with figures of between 70% and 96% reported (Leekam *et al.,* 2007; Crane, 2009; MacLennan *et al.*, 2022), however, these differences can vary by individual and context (Wing *et al.*, 2011; Robledo *et al.*, 2012;

Feeney, 2018; McCann, 2019). Many autobiographical accounts, largely from autistic women, detail these experiences from the insider experience.

In a recent memoir, Cook O'Toole (2018) provides insight into the implications of sensory processing differences in general and how it can influence all aspects of functioning.

> *When we feel either understimulated or overstimulated, we physically cannot reason, listen or think about anything else. We can't just ignore it. We can't learn. We can't be spontaneous or fun. We can't rationalize well. And we can't hear others' needs, let alone be certain we understand our own. It's like trying to see your own reflection in a pot of boiling water. Nothing is clear.*
>
> (Cook O'Toole, 2018: 69)

However, differences cannot always be neatly refined into categories of under- or over-stimulated (Bogdashina, 2016) with cooccurring sensory seeking and hyperreactivity reported among autistic individuals (MacLennan *et al.*, 2022). Grandin (2006) discussed the paradoxical nature of her sensory processing differences in terms of wanting to be hugged but feeling overwhelmed by the stimulation.

> *I always hated to be hugged. I wanted to experience the good feeling of being hugged but it was just too overwhelming. It was like a great, all-engulfing tidal wave of stimulation, and I reacted like a wild animal. Being touched triggered flight; it flipped my circuit breaker. I was over-loaded and would have to escape, often by jerking away suddenly.*
>
> (Grandin, 2006: 58)

Holliday Willey (2014) described the sensations she experienced as a result of sensory overload in relation to visual and auditory stimuli.

> *Together, the sharp sounds and the bright lights were more than enough to overload my senses. My head would feel tight, my stomach would churn, and my pulse would run my heart ragged until I found a safety zone.*
>
> (Holliday Willey, 2014: 28)

These accounts reinforce the writing of Attwood (2022) who describes the anxiety that can be experienced as a result of differences in sensory processing. Sensory overload can result in meltdowns or shutdowns for autistic individuals, and in turn a loss of control over one's outward presentation of behaviour (Robledo *et al.*, 2012; Bogdashina, 2016; MacLennan *et al.*, 2022). The experiential perspective of this phenomenon is further emphasised by Williams (1999) as she details her negative experiences of the perceptions and responses of neurotypical individuals.

> *As people began to explain how other people experience my behaviour, I came to learn that all behaviour had two definitions: theirs and mine. These 'helpful' people were trying to help me to 'overcome my ignorance' yet they never tried to understand the way how I saw the world.*
>
> (Williams, 1999: 76)

In an effort to cope with these differences and avoid overwhelm, autistic individuals have reported the use of adaptive tools and strategies or avoidance of overwhelm-inducing environments (MacLennan *et al.*, 2022; 2023). Therefore, although autistic and non-autistic individuals live in the same physical world, it is apparent that the way in which autistic individuals experience this world is distinctly different to non-autistic individuals as a result of their sensory and perceptual differences (Bogdashina, 2016).

This standpoint can be a useful lens through which repetitive behaviours can be better understood. In the past, repetitive behaviours were often perceived as serving no function to the non-autistic observer (Collis *et al.*, 2022) and have been the source of stigmatisation for some autistic individuals (Jaswal and Akhtar, 2019). Of late, it has been suggested that these repetitive behaviours may instead be mechanisms that support autistic individuals to regulate their sensory systems and cope with sensory overload (Bogdashina, 2016). Research has indicated that being hypersensitive to sensory input is significantly predictive of repetitive behaviours (Schulz and Stevenson, 2019) while findings from MacLennan (2022) suggest that autistic individuals engage with sensory seeking behaviours to regulate sensory input associated with hyperreactivity. In acknowledgement of their role in self-regulation, recent discourse often utilises the term self-stimulatory behaviours in place of repetitive behaviours (Kapp *et al.*, 2019). From an autistic perspective, engagement in self-stimulatory behaviours or 'stimming' is often deemed to be positive and supports self-regulation (Morris *et al.*, 2025).

In recognising the formal diagnostic definitions and criteria, it is important to acknowledge that the DSM is a diagnostic manual of pathologies, therefore firmly based within a medical model of disability (Hartman *et al.*, 2023). The language used is deficit-based with characteristics defined negatively. Furthermore, the DSM-5-TR does not present any information on potential strengths among autistic individuals. The current research is underpinned by the biopsychosocial model and therefore rejects a deficit-oriented perspective. However, acknowledging the confines of the current system of identification, reference to the criteria as stated in the DSM-5-TR remains important in an effort to progress understanding, as will be demonstrated in *Section 2.4.1*.

2.3.4 Beyond Diagnostic Criteria

'Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colours every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence' (Sinclair, 2012: 1). This quotation by Jim Sinclair, American autistic activist, exemplifies the need to consider autism beyond the diagnostic criteria.

Recently, the historical conceptualisations of autism as a series of observable behaviours objectively detailed through a pathological lens have been challenged (Milton, 2017; Pellicano *et al*., 2022; McGreevey *et al.*, 2024; Pritchard-Rowe and Gibson, 2024). Furthermore, Fletcher-Watson and Happé (2019) argue that the concepts of linearity and severity, often discussed in tandem with the autistic spectrum, risk oversimplifying and misrepresenting the complexity of autism. Recognising this, various mechanisms of visualising or delineating autism beyond the diagnostic criteria have started to emerge. Some autistic individuals have visualised the autism spectrum as a wheel upon which individual strengths and needs can be mapped, with recognition afforded to the context dependent and transient nature of the autistic experience (Burgess, 2022; McGuiness @littlepuddins, 2025). Similarly, Fletcher-Watson and Happé (2019), inspired by Hearst (2015), present autism as a 'constellation' as they attempt to visualise the complexity of autism presentations by plotting specific features of autism, intellectual ability and language profile. Both conceptualisations endeavour to capture the idea that autistic individuals experience a unique profile of characteristics which has implications for the autistic experience across contexts and the lifespan. The concept of a constellation of autistic traits (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019) will be adopted in this research alongside McGuiness @littlepuddins' (2025) visualisation of autism as presented below (*fig*.*3*).

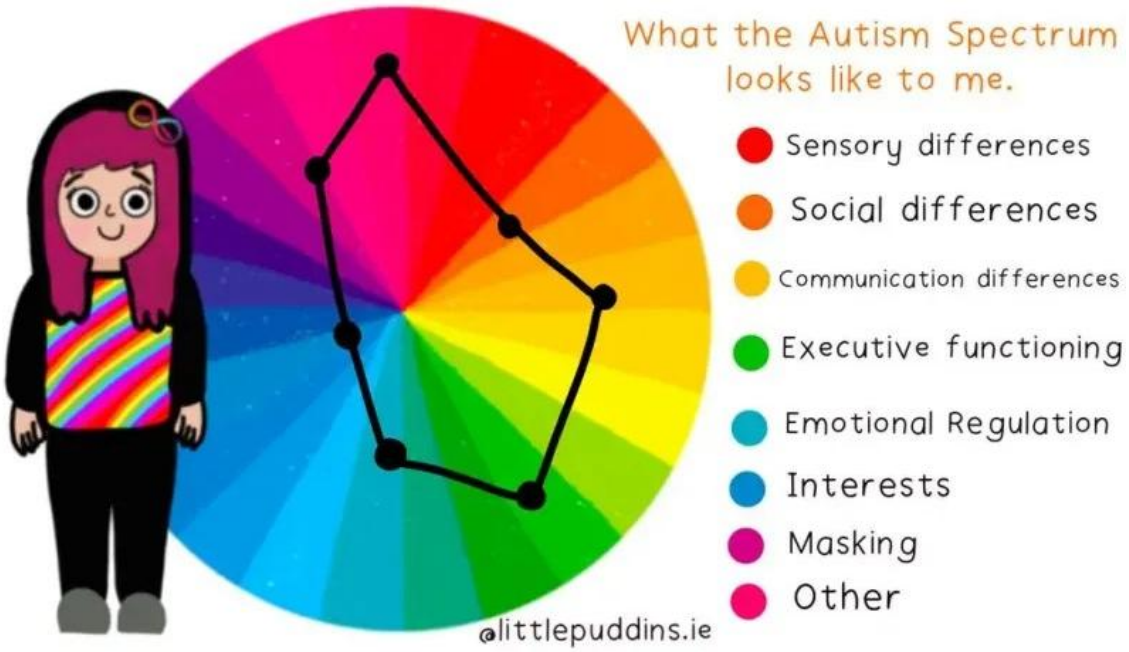


Figure 3: Visualising Autism (Adopted from McGuiness @ littlepuddins.ie, 2025)

Moreover, a capabilities approach to understanding autism has been promoted in research (Pellicano *et al.*, 2022) while Milton (2017) urges the need to approach autism from 'the inside-out' and prioritise subjective accounts to better understand the autistic experience from a lived perspective. These developments promote a shift towards adopting a strengths-based approach to diagnosis and support that recognises the individual for who they are, adopts a person-centred approach to needs and capitalises on strengths for wellbeing promotion (Cherewick and Matergia, 2024; McGreevey *et al.*, 2024; Pritchard-Rowe and Gibson, 2024)

2.3.5 Autism and Co-Occurrence

Irrespective of gender, it is not uncommon for autistic individuals to have co-occurring medical, neurodevelopmental and/or psychiatric condition with 70% of autistic children having one co-occurring condition and 40% meeting the criteria for two or more co-occurring conditions (Simonoff *et al.*, 2009; Lai *et al.*, 2014; Boucher, 2017; Bougeard *et al.*, 2021). Common co-occurring psychiatric conditions include anxiety (including Selective Mutism; Steffenburg *et al*., 2018), depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, oppositional defiant disorder among others (Lai *et al.*, 2014; Lai *et al.*, 2019). Approximately 40% of autistic individuals have a co-occurring intellectual disability (Lai *et al.*, 2014; Maenner *et al.*, 2023). Co-occurrence of other developmental disabilities e.g. attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is relatively common (Lai *et al.*, 2014; Bougeard

et al., 2021; Rong *et al.*, 2021), however, the potential of dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dyslexia co-occurring should not be ignored (Hartman *et al.*, 2023). It is important to acknowledge that the existence of a co-occurring condition can alter or obscure the presentation of autism, change developmentally and potentially delay diagnosis (Wing *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, it is common that an initial diagnosis of another psychiatric condition may lead to primary identification of autism (Dudova *et al.*, 2015). In terms of functional outcomes and well-being, these co-occurring conditions may greatly impact the way the core features of autism present and are experienced by an autistic individual (Waizbard-Bartov *et al.*, 2024)

2.4 Gender Differences in Autism

As discussed in Chapter 1, there exists a disparity in the prevalence of autism between males and females (*Section 1.8*). This sex/gender disparity has been evident since the initial conceptualisations of autism with the pioneering research of Kanner (1943) and Asperger (1944) largely based on boys and while, various hypothesis have been put forth in an effort to account for these discrepancies (*Section 1.9*), no one hypothesis has been proven.

Arising from this literature review, the current author, alongside her supervisor Dr Michele Dunleavy, published an article entitled 'Recognising autism in girls within the education context: reflecting on the internal presentation and the diagnostic criteria' (Appendix E). *This paper provides an overview of sex/gender differences in autism and uses the diagnostic criteria outlined in the DSM-5 as a framework to review extant literature pertinent to sex/gender differences in autism. The process of undertaking this review also informed the mapping task which supported the development of one component of the teacher questionnaire which will be discussed in Chapter 3 and 4 respectively.*

The following section will make reference to the published article to synopsise the key sex/gender differences pertaining to the diagnostic criteria before progressing with the remainder of the review.

Munroe, A. and Dunleavy, M. (2023) 'Recognising autism in girls within the education context: reflecting on the internal presentation and the diagnostic criteria', *Irish Educational Studies,* 42(4), 561-581, available: https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2023.2260371

2.4.1 The Diagnostic Criteria and Females

The DSM-5 acknowledges the potential disparity in autism diagnoses between genders stating that 'girls without accompanying intellectual impairments or language delays may go unrecognised, perhaps because of subtler manifestations of social and communication difficulties' (APA, 2013: 57), however no consideration is afforded to how these potential differences may present with reference to the diagnostic criteria (Giarelli *et al.*, 2010;

Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011). Using the DSM-5 criteria as a grounding framework, the following section will consider how autistic females may meet the different criterion within the two core domains of difference. To go beyond the narrow descriptors presented in the diagnostic criteria, along with empirical research, insights on the qualitative differences observed by clinicians and reported through autobiographical accounts will be incorporated into the discussion.

2.4.1.1 *Social and Emotional Reciprocity*

Research suggests that autistic females are more socially motivated compared to their male-counterparts (Attwood, 2007; Lai *et al.*, 2015; Hiller *et al*., 2015). They demonstrate an increased ability to engage in reciprocal conversation (Hiller *et al.*, 2014). They may experience greater success in conversation as they appear to demonstrate good verbal communication, make eye contact, use body language and engage with interest sharing (Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Lawson, 2017; Parish-Morris *et al.*, 2017; Attwood and Garnett, 2019).

The perceived competency of autistic girls in this area has been attributed to their better language skills, ability to observe and copy others, along with their engagement in masking (Andersson *et al.*, 2012; Lai *et al.*, 2015; Mandy and Lai, 2017; Dean *et al.*, 2017; Hull *et al.*, 2020; Wassell and Burke, 2022). Research suggests that these components combined result in the potential challenges experienced by autistic girls being missed by onlookers (Hiller *et al*., 2014; Dean *et al*., 2017). This can be conceptualised with reference to camouflaging research by Lai *et al.* (2017) which highlights the discrepancy between the 'external' behavioural presentation and an individual's 'internal' experience.

While research suggests that the external presentation is often missed (Dean *et al*., 2017), the internal experience has been consistently highlighted in the accounts of many autistic female adults as they reflect on their experience pre- and post-diagnosis (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Baldwin and Costley, 2016). A first-hand account from Buckingham (2019: 21) who was diagnosed at 16 years old details just how this worked for her.

> *I copied facial expressions, gestures and behaviours from other students to become more socially accepted. One example was when people would say, "Hi, are you alright?", and I would reply "Yes" and then walk off. What I noticed was that other students would reply "Yes thanks, are you?" and this would get a better reaction. I started doing that instead.*

A similar experience is described by Salter (2019: 37) who noted that following her diagnosis she began to notice and understand why people reacted differently to her in social situations and this allowed her to 'begin to teach [her]self the social and

communication skills that I did not naturally develop'. Both accounts indicate a conscious effort to attend to neurotypical social norms (Hull *et al.*, 2020).

Emphasised by Munroe and Dunleavy (2023) it is, therefore, necessary to move past surface level observation of social communication and interaction, afford due consideration to the prevalence of masking and individual social preferences, and elicit autistic girls' inner experiences in order to gain a more holistic understanding of differences in social and emotional reciprocity.

2.4.1.2 *Developing and Maintaining Friendships*

Friendship appears to be a particular area of challenge for autistic girls (Rivet and Matson, 2011; Kirkovski *et al.*, 2013), however, research suggests that girls experience a different manifestation of friendship challenges (Hiller *et al.*, 2014). Similar to boys, having one or a small group of friends is characteristic of friendships among autistic girls (Sutherland *et al.*, 2017). However, in contrast to boys who may experience overt exclusion, the nature of female friendship groups may suggest that autistic girls are a part of a larger social group. Furthermore, the protective nature of such groups may conceal their challenges (Kreiser and White, 2014; Dean *et al.*, 2017; Wassell and Burke, 2022).

Research has indicated that autistic girls desire friendship (Sedgewick *et al.*, 2016; 2019a; 2019b), and positive experiences of friendship among autistic adolescent girls have been reported (Vine Foggo and Webster, 2017; Sedgewick *et al.*, 2019b; Ryan *et al.*, 2021). However, maintenance of friendships is identified as a significant barrier for autistic girls (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Morewood *et al.*, 2019) potentially due to their challenges recognising and interpreting social cues (Dean *et al*., 2017). Maintenance of friendship appears to be particularly pertinent during adolescence (Attwood and Garnett, 2019) with complex interactions (e.g. gossiping, exclusion, betrayal of trust) and conflict providing additional challenges for autistic girls as they attempt to navigate these interactions (Sedgewick *et al.*, 2016; 2019a; 2019b). Insight into the lived experience of adolescent friendship is expertly articulated by Buckingham (2019: 22) who stated; 'I felt different, isolated and alone. The other girls decided that because I was different, and therefore "weird", they did not want me to hand around with them anymore'. These experiences are not isolated to adolescents and are also evidenced in accounts with autistic women who emphasise the complexity of social rules and how they influence friendships (Baldwin and Costley, 2016; Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Sedgewick, 2019c). Contextualising these challenges with reference to the education context, Munroe and Dunleavy (2023) highlight the importance of teachers being alert to the different manifestation of

friendship challenges in autistic girls to be able to provide appropriate and sensitive support.

2.4.1.3 *Non-verbal Communication*

Autistic females exhibit a varied profile of non-verbal communication (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023). Autistic girls may demonstrate strengths in the integration and use of non-verbal communication; however, they may experience similar difficulties to their male counterparts in understanding and interpreting non-verbal communication (Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Kreiser and White, 2014; Lawson, 2017; Attwood, and Garnett, 2019). The perceived strength in integrating and using non-verbal communication has been attributed to autistic girls' capacity and tendency to copy and imitate the behaviour of people around them (Attwood and Garnett, 2019; Wassell and Burke, 2022). Despite this, autistic girls may experience challenges understanding the nuances of facial expressions and reading body language (Kreiser and White, 2014), which may have particular implications for navigating adolescent female friendships where eye-rolls, shared glances and giggling are inherent (Dean *et al.*, 2017).

The complexity of this profile of strengths and challenges is expertly conceptualised by Holliday Willey (1999) who juxtaposes her strengths in public speaking with her dislike of more intimate social situations.

> *I enjoy speaking in front of a group because it is a one-way communication experience and, as such, something that is not affected by the complications of other people's body language and non-verbal styles. Given a chance, I would much rather speak to a large group than I would to an individual or two. Small group conversations make my nerves feel like they are wearing stilts on an icy pavement.*
>
> (Holliday Willey, 1999: 37).

The stark contrast in the skillset, and the impact of such, in this criterion is noteworthy, particularly for teachers in the education context. The ability to recognise this profile of strengths and challenges is imperative in terms of initial recognition and referral for diagnosis but also in supporting autistic girls with the social demands of the school context (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023).

2.4.1.4 *Repetitive Behaviours*

While some research suggests reduced repetitive behaviours among autistic females (Rivet and Matson, 2011; Kreiser and White, 2014; Van Wijngaarden-Cremers *et al*., 2014) and may not meet this criterion (Hiller *et al.*, 2014), other research and clinician perspectives indicate that the profile of behaviours may be qualitatively different (Attwood, 2007; Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Wassell and Burke,

2022) and present as more passive, non-problematic behaviours (Kreiser and White, 2014; Jamison *et al.*, 2017).

Where repetitive behaviours associated with stereotyped motor movements and movement of objects are largely predictive of autism in boys (Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Antezana *et al.*, 2019), in the case of autistic girls, repetitive behaviours may be evidenced in routines, organisation and play (Knutsen *et al.*, 2018). These behaviours may be more inconspicuous in nature, *e.g.* re-reading the same book, re-watching the same film or re-doing homework; however, they may serve the role of predictability and comfort often associated with repetitive behaviours (Bond and Hebron, 2019). A first-hand perspective captures the essence of engagement with repetitive behaviours from a female perspective.

> *If I enjoy a book, I will become obsessed by it and read it multiple times back to back... I have read each Harry Potter book at least eight times so far. I think I became obsessed with Harry Potter as I related to Hermione; she loved books, just had a small group of friends, and was very logical, just like me.*
>
> (Salter, 2019: 34-35).

The varied presentation of repetitive behaviours among autistic girls necessitates the importance of challenging stereotyped perceptions of autism, recognising first the function of the repetitive behaviour and later the actions that are fulfilling the function (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023).

2.4.1.5 *Inflexibility*

Inflexibility is often understood through the demonstration of a preference for predictability and a dislike of change (Boucher, 2017). The presentation differences of autistic girls in demonstrating these preferences can be contextualised through the lens of an internal presentation of autism (Bond and Hebron, 2019; Wassel and Burke, 2022; Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023). Where autistic boys often externalise these preferences through aggressive or domineering behaviours (Kopp and Gillberg, 1992), an obvious outward demonstration may not be as explicit among girls (Attwood and Garnett, 2019; Bond and Hebron, 2019). Instead, inflexibility may be observed through controlling behaviours and perfectionistic tendencies (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Lai *et al.*, 2015; Bond and Hebron, 2019).

Cook O'Toole reflected on the challenges she experienced in terms of trying to see herself in the diagnostic criteria and offers a unique and powerful insight in terms of thinking about how girls/women may meet this specific criterion by appreciating the underpinning function it serves; 'I had it instantly. Intuitively. The beauty of order. The reliability of

fact. People are changeable. Unpredictable... I'd naturally fulfilled the same need for security and predictability as the boys. Restyled, with a modern-girl makeover' (2018: 8).

Although autistic girls may meet this criterion in a more subtle way, they may still require support and therefore in the education context it is imperative that teachers recognise the diversity of autism presentations to ensure the needs of all students are met (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023). Furthermore, considering the tendency to internalise these difficulties, the value of communicating with parents should not be underestimated (Tutt, 2019).

2.4.1.6 *Interests*

The manifestation of restricted interests appears to be characteristically different among autistic girls compared to autistic boys (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023). It has been suggested that while the intensity of interests may be similar (Attwood, 2007), the content is largely different (Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Lai *et al.*, 2015; McFayden *et al.*, 2020). Contrasting with more stereotypical, object-based interests in autistic males (Rivet and Matson, 2011; Solomon *et al.*, 2012; Antezana *et al.*, 2019), the interests of autistic girls appear to be more gender- and developmentally normative (Winter-Messiers, 2007; Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Antezana *et al.*, 2019). Autistic girls may have interests that are more social in nature, potentially centred around people, animals, books (Winter-Messiers, 2007; Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Lai *et al.*, 2015) challenging the stereotypical male-based interests (Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Antezana *et al.*, 2019) often associated with autism.

The varied but enduring nature of interests is reinforced in an account by Salter (2019). Reflecting on her early years, she recalls; 'I was given a toy tape player…I would carry this tape player everywhere, playing the song over and over again... Music is an obsession that developed as I got older and is a fundamental part of my adult life' (Salter, 2019; 33). This same interest is again mentioned in relation to her secondary school experience when she says*;* 'I knew I could talk to the other members of the group about something I was interested in (music) without seeming like someone with a slightly weird obsession' (Salter, 2019: 41). These insights acknowledge to potential subtlety of interests but emphasise their significance from the lived experience perspective.

Interest differences have been suggested as a reason for the under identification of autistic girls (Attwood, 2007), therefore alerting teachers to the differences in presentation in this criterion may support their professional observations and in turn their recognition of autism in girls in the education context (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023). Furthermore, given

the potential of leveraging the interests of autistic children in the education setting (Wood, 2021), awareness of a different manifestation of interests among autistic girls is critical knowledge for teachers.

2.4.1.7 *Sensory Differences*

Distinctions in the area of sensory differences appear to be largely inconclusive, however, research suggests some emerging areas of difference and tentative areas of alignment. In an age- and IQ- matched sample of autistic adults, females appeared to experience more lifetime sensory challenges (Lai *et al.*, 2011). Increased sensory difficulties among females has also been evidenced in research with autistic children and young people (Osório *et al.*, 2021; Lane *et al.*, 2022). In research conducted by Lane *et al.* (2022) sensory modulation scores between males and females followed a similar trajectory with no qualitative differences apparent, however, autistic females appeared to demonstrate heightened response to sensory stimuli indicating more frequent engagement with sensory modulation. Autistic females showed greater differences in the hyper-reactivity domain (sensory sensitive or avoidant) along with difficulties in emotional regulation (Lane *et al.*, 2022). Increased hyper-reactivity was also reported by Osório *et al.* (2021) with auditory sensitivity specifically highlighted. Similar to Lane *et al.* (2022) avoidance and distress were highlighted as hypersensitive responses, with Osório *et al.* (2021) also drawing attention to autistic females being distracted by sounds that others do not notice. Furthermore, both studies align in their indication that autistic females may exhibit greater sensory differences compared to boys, particularly in the audition, vestibular and kinaesthetic senses (Osório *et al.*, 2021; Lane *et al.*, 2022).

In contrast, other research has reported no sex/gender differences in the area of sensory processing. No significant differences for sensory sensitivities or features were found among autistic boys and girls (Frazier and Hardman, 2017; Bitsika *et al.*, 2018) Furthermore, Duvekot *et al.* (2017) found no differences in the prediction of an autism diagnosis by sensory symptoms between boys and girls, acknowledging that sensory symptoms were positively associated with an autism diagnosis in both cohorts. Taken together, while some sensory differences in autistic females have been identified, the above research suggests that differences in this criterion have not yet been comprehensively determined. Nonetheless, highlighting the potentially challenging sensory environments within schools, the significance of sensory processing for autistic individuals and the internalising tendencies of autistic girls, Munroe and Dunleavy (2023)

necessitate the need to elicit the voices of autistic girls in relation to their sensory experiences and requirements.

2.4.2 Masking

Masking represents the third core area of difference between the genders. Masking is defined as the 'conscious or unconscious suppression of natural responses and adoption of alternatives across a range of domains including social interaction, sensory experience, cognition, movement, and behavior' (Pearson and Rose, 2021: 53). Due to the emerging nature of research in this area, a variety of terms such as camouflaging (Hull *et al*., 2017), compensation (Livingstone and Happé, 2017), and adaptive morphing (Lawson, 2020) exist in the literature, however, masking has been used by the autistic community (Holliday Willey, 2014; Milton and Sims, 2016) and will be used here to represent all of the above terms.

Research into masking has gained momentum in recent years following developments in sex- and gender-informed research (Loomes *et al*., 2017; Wood-Downie *et al*., 2020; Cook *et al*., 2021). It is important to highlight that masking is not solely used by autistic females nor do all autistic females camouflage (Hull *et al*., 2020). It can be seen in the general population (Hull *et al.*, 2017), as well as in autistic males and non-binary autistic individuals (Milner *et al*., 2019; Hull *et al*., 2020). Yet, research does suggest that engagement in masking is more common among autistic females (Lai *et al*., 2017; Hull *et al*., 2020; Milner *et al*., 2022) and can be more extreme and detrimental to autistic females than autistic males, somewhat because they are so successful at it (Bargiela *et al*., 2016; Hull *et al*., 2017; Milner *et al*., 2019; Tierney *et al*., 2016).

Insights garnered from autistic female adults provide immense insight into masking from the lived-experience perspective. Qualitative research conducted by Bargiela *et al.* (2016) and Leedham *et al.* (2020) with late-diagnosed autistic women provide unique insights into the experiences of women who were undiagnosed in childhood but upon reflection recognised their engagement in masking as a protective strategy. The participants acknowledged that it was their desire to 'fit in' and not be seen as different that prompted their conscious engagement in masking. These findings impress the significance of feelings of difference, highlighting that despite being unaware of their autistic identity at the time, participants employed techniques to hide their autistic characteristics from others. Similar findings presented in research carried out by Milner *et al.* (2019). From a sample of eighteen autistic females, all but three reported that they camouflaged their autistic characteristics. They felt that masking allowed them to disguise their difficulties

with social interaction while the three participants who did not report masking believed that their characteristics were too obvious, and they were unable to hide them. On a larger scale, open-ended comments from a self-report survey conducted by Baldwin and Costley (2016) with 82 autistic females suggested that the women actively sought to adapt their communication and interaction style to meet the expectations of others.

It is clear from the literature that autistic adults viewed masking as wilful and conscious, commenting on their use of learned behaviours to disguise their inherent struggles with social communication. They shared examples such as having a bank of stock phrases, recording normatively appropriate responses to particular social scenarios, actively monitoring eye contact (Baldwin and Costley, 2016; Bargiela *et al*., 2016; Leedham *et al*., 2020). Hull *et al.*, (2017) identified these strategies as compensatory camouflaging, however, in addition to active masking, participants in this study also reported use of social mimicry. Differentiated from masking, it was described as an automatic coping strategy where they would copy body language and speech patterns of others without realising (Bargiela *et al*., 2016). It could be argued that the automaticity of this strategy is a result of continued engagement rather than a natural response. This idea is also supported by participants in other studies who report that the level of automaticity in their social mimicry (Baldwin and Costley, 2016; Milner *et al.,* 2019). The literature highlights the range of masking techniques employed by autistic females with engagement appearing to occur across a continuum from subconscious engagement to more active camouflaging.

An alternative perspective on masking evident in literature draws attention to deeper societal underpinnings whereby there is an inherent pressure on women to fulfil traditional gender stereotypes (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Tierney *et al*., 2016; Dean *et al*., 2017; Milner *et al.*, 2019; Hull *et al*., 2020), something that can have a profoundly negative impact on autistic women who prioritise conformity. Some autistic women commented that they tried to fulfil these gender expectations while others strongly rejected them (Bargiela *et al.,* 2016; Milner *et al*., 2019). This theme is explored to a greater extent in research conducted by Seers and Hogg (2021) with most participants expressing an aversion to gendered expectations and in turn rejecting pressures to conform. Gender expectations caused challenges for these women when their behaviours did not reflect these gender norms; they noted that parents and teachers appeared to be less accepting of certain behaviours from girls, resulting in strained relationships and inappropriate sanctioning (Seers and Hogg, 2021). While these views come from autistic

adults reflecting on their experiences, participants in this study acknowledged their attempts to fit predetermined social constructs of femininity as adolescents but later rejecting this requirement to conform. In light of this, this insight is valuable in furthering our understanding of why autistic girls may engage in camouflaging in mainstream settings to avoid confrontation.

While camouflaging may be identified as a protective technique, helping autistic females 'fit-in' by masking their autistic differences, it can have profoundly negative consequences. The ability of autistic females to successfully engage in camouflaging has been identified in research as one of the potential reasons for misdiagnosis and missed diagnosis (Attwood, 2007; Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Kreiser and White, 2014). This hypothesis was also reoccurring theme in many of the studies with autistic female adults with participants believing that if they had not engaged in masking, they may have been noticed sooner allowing them to have received appropriate and targeted supports (Baldwin and Costley, 2016; Bargiela *et al.,* 2016; Milner *et al*., 2019). Research also highlighted exhaustion as an unpleasant, negative consequence of camouflaging (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Hull *et al.*, 2017), highlighting the emotional and mental effort involved in masking and the repression of autistic characteristics. Autistic adults also noted how maintaining the pretence in terms of pretending to be someone else has also had a negative impact on their own self-identity (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Hull *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, masking has also been linked with the internalisation of problems, resulting in increased anxiety and stress, which could potentially exacerbate rather than ameliorate the social isolation that the strategy intends to address (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Lai *et al.*, 2011).

2.4.3 Internalising

The concept of an 'internal' presentation of autism is becoming more widely recognised and is viewed as a presentation commonly associated with autistic girls with no co-occurring intellectual disability (Wassell and Burke, 2022). It is postulated that the internal presentation may have implications for identification and support in the education context (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023). Furthermore, the tendency to internalise challenges arising from their autistic identity may impact well-being (Wassell and Burke, 2022). Research suggests that autistic females are at risk of increased mental health difficulties (Lai *et al.,* 2017) and may be more likely to experience internalising difficulties such as anxiety and depression rather than the externalising behaviours commonly seen among autistic boys (Mandy *et al.*, 2012; Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Lai *et al.*,

2015), however, this is not a given (Hiller *et al.,* 2015). Wassell and Burke (2022) advise professionals to specifically look out for selective mutism, extended absence from school, eating disorders, self-harm and the manifestation of anxiety in physical symptoms in the context of the internal presentation.

A review conducted by Rivet and Matson (2011) reported a greater prevalence of emotional 'disorders' in autistic females compared to males with onset in adolescence. Similar findings were reported in a controlled study by Solomon *et al.* (2012) whose findings revealed that autistic girls were at greater risk for internalising difficulties than boys with autism and their typically developing female peers in adolescence but not childhood (Solomon *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, in a one-year follow-up study of autistic and typically developing children between seven and twelve years old, May *et al.* (2012) that autistic girls and boys had similar parent-reported anxiety, however, examination of means scores for anxiety revealed that the girls had higher levels after one year with males having similar or fewer symptoms. Research is not however definitive. Some research reviews (Kirkovski *et al.*, 2013), clinician reports (Jamison *et al.*, 2017) and empirical research (Lai *et al.*, 2011) found no significant differences between males and females in relation to co-occurring internalising difficulties or conditions. These findings raise the question of whether internalising difficulties are experienced to a greater extent in adolescence with their intensity reducing again in adulthood, potentially reflecting a typical trajectory of internalising symptoms (APA, 2000).

Bringing the internalising differences of autistic girls to the fore, Kreiser and White (2014) claim that the repeated adverse consequences experienced by autistic females due to their differences can result in reduced self-efficacy, and increased vulnerability may add to stress and anxiety, while Jamison *et al.* (2017) emphasise that elevated risk factors such as reduced peer support and low self-concept may also account for increased internalising differences. Meanwhile, Lawson (2017) suggests that the complexity and challenges associated with being an autistic girl alongside the contending with the societal demands and expectations placed on teenage girls may be the reason why they experience emotional and mental health difficulties.

As the above difficulties are internal behaviours and may be harder to situate within the diagnostic criteria of autism, the extent of their impact may be missed if professionals are do not have an awareness and understanding of the internal presentation of autism (Hull *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the internalising difficulties combined with engagement in masking may result in autistic characteristics being overshadowed (McLinden and

Sedgewick, 2022; Cook *et al*., 2024). Gould and Ashtown-Smith (2011) report that autistic female adults and adolescents are often referred for autism diagnosis through mental health services. Research has highlighted that it is often a case where the primary condition for which a girl has been referred for mental health support is actually symptomatic of autism which has been missed as a result of a gender-biased knowledge base of autism along with the androcentrism of the mechanisms used in the diagnostic processes relating to autism (Lai *et al.*, 2011; Gould, 2017; O'Hagan and Bond, 2019; Wassell and Burke, 2022). It is therefore important to recognise that not only a can co-occurring condition create additional difficulties for the autistic individual in terms of daily functioning, but it can also have a profound impact on the diagnostic and support process available to this individual in the first instance. When considered together, the above research highlights the significance of understanding the internal presentation of autism, impresses the need to value individual experience and accentuates the importance of considering intersectionality in autism research.

2.5 The Female Autistic Experience

Early diagnosis of autism has been deemed critical in improving quality of life (Atherton *et al*., 2022) and is associated with positively affecting identity development (Corden *et al.*, 2021). However, autistic females experience various barriers in the diagnostic process including parental concerns, perceptions of others, gender-biased knowledge and lack of information/resources (Lockwood-Estrin *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, as acknowledged in Chapter 1, are often diagnosed later than their male counterparts (Begeer *et al.*, 2013; Rutherford *et al.*, 2016; Russell *et al.*, 2021; Davies and Noble, 2019). Furthermore, as alluded to above, it is not uncommon that an autism diagnosis is preceded by the diagnosis of a mental health condition due to misunderstandings of the characteristics of autism in girls (Belcher *et al*., 2022; Fusar-Poli *et al*., 2022; Freeman and Paradis, 2023; Tien *et al*., 2025).

Difficulties obtaining a diagnosis and late diagnosis can have major implications in terms of understanding the self and accessing support (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Kock *et al.*, 2019; Milner *et al*, 2019). Reports from late-diagnosed autistic individuals highlight that their social communication differences caused them significant difficulties and their engagement in masking compounded anxiety, resulted in immense exhaustion and led to a fragmented sense of self (Atherton *et al.*, 2022; Tien *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, late diagnosis is associated with poorer mental health, decreased well-being and low self-

esteem, with self-harm, addiction, and increased vulnerability specifically isolated (Stagg and Belcher, 2019; Atherton *et al.*, 2022)

Exploring the autistic female experience more broadly holds merit in terms of better understanding school experiences and the interplay between diagnosis, autistic identity and experiences in context.

2.5.1 Implications of the Intersection: Being Female and Autistic

A systematic review conducted by Kelly *et al.* (2024) revealed that the perceptions and perhaps, misconceptions of others have significant implications for autistic females both in terms of seeking diagnosis and in accessing support. Many autistic females, and those identifying as non-binary, attribute the narrow and stereotyped views of professionals as a prohibitive factor in their diagnostic journey in terms of accessing diagnosis or being mislabelled in the diagnostic process (Jones *et al.,* 2014; Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Tien *et al.*, 2025). More specifically, autistic females in research carried out by Milner *et al.* (2019) reported feeling acutely marginalised in the diagnostic process and drew specific attention to the tools and design of the process. However, not only were people missed due to bias in the diagnostic process but the intersection of being autistic and female had implications in terms of how others perceived autistic females post-diagnosis.

Autistic females report feeling misrepresented and frustrated by the perceptions of others, something which they attribute to a lack of knowledge around diverse presentations of autism. Failure to appreciate the intersection of autism and gender places has implications for identity development, access to support and overall quality of life. Research carried out by Seers and Hogg (2021; 2023) highlighted that while autistic women drew upon the formalised diagnostic criteria and sought to make sense of their experiences through this, they felt conflicted by and often rejected the stereotypical, masculine and medicalised conceptualisations of autism. This conceptualisation was discordant with their experiences of being an autistic female, however, the lack of a framework within which they could see themselves directly reflected had a negative impact on their identity development. A similar sentiment is also evident among autistic adolescent girls who expressed concern about the misconceptions help by their peers due to their stereotyped knowledge of autism which resulted in them resisting their diagnosis in the school context (Josefsson and Johansson, 2024).

Stereotyped understandings of autism also played a role in the day-to-day lives of autistic females. Autistic women felt that stereotyped perceptions of autism resulted in their experiences being misunderstood (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016) with research by Hull *et al.*

(2017) highlighting that engagement in masking challenged the stereotyped narrative of autism. Upon receipt of diagnosis, some autistic females experienced individuals in their immediate circle questioning their autistic presentation and deeming it as inconsistent with societal ideals (Leedham *et al.,* 2020). This is connected to findings from Milner *et al.* (2019) where autistic females felt a pressure to mask to comply with gendered expectations within society, something which they believed autistic males were less pressured to do. Stereotyped or gender-biased knowledge of autism, along with an inadequate understanding of masking has implications for support more broadly as difficulties often remained hidden (Hull *et al.*, 2017), however, as highlighted by autistic female adults reflecting on their school experiences it also impacts in the school context whereby their behaviours were often misinterpreted and their experiences not understood (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016).

In experiencing the intersection of being autistic and female, many autistic females specifically identified the need for increased awareness, knowledge, understanding and visibility of autism in females, and varied presentations of autism more generally (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Hull *et al.*, 2017; Milner *et al.*, 2019; Harmens *et al.*, 2022). The experiences of autistic females across the lifespan highlight the impact of inadequate knowledge before, during and after diagnosis, something which has implications for many individuals including but not limited to parents, teachers, and clinical professionals (Hull *et al.*, 2017; Harmens *et al.*, 2022).

2.5.2 Responses to Diagnosis

Reflection can provide a powerful lens to explore response to diagnosis. Late-diagnosed autistic adults spoke about diagnosis as a life-altering and revelatory experience which empowered them by providing a logical explanation for their differences (Atherton *et al.*, 2022). More specifically, a systematic review of autistic females' experiences of diagnosis carried out by Kelly et al (2024) indicated that most women viewed their diagnosis as a positive experience that supported them to make sense of their lives. However, for some it was described as a mixed emotional experience ending a sometimes-lengthy search for answers (Leedham *et al.*, 2020).

Diagnosis provided autistic women with a useful lens to look back on their lives and understand their previous difficulties (Milner *et al.*, 2019; Leedham *et al.*, 2020). Women in research carried out by Bargiela *et al.* (2016) reported a renewed sense of self and increased self-understanding, something that was reiterated in other research where diagnosis was described as liberating and allowed participants to embrace their autistic

traits and live authentically and without expectation (Leedham *et al.*, 2020; Seers and Hogg, 2021; Seers and Hogg, 2023). Shifting internalised difficulties to an external reference point improved self-perception (Seers and Hogg, 2023) and facilitated women to make adjustments to their day-to-day lives without feeling guilty (Harmens *et al.*, 2022). Similar experiences were also shared by autistic adolescent girls. The only female participant in a qualitative study exploring adolescent autistic identity conducted by Mesa and Hamilton (2022) discussed the power of the autism 'label' in understanding her differences while an autobiographical account by Salter (2019) discusses how her diagnosis allowed her to understand why she reacted differently, particularly in social situations. While, in research carried out by Josefsson and Johansson (2024) diagnosis was viewed as a route to self-understanding and allowed girls to re-script their past experiences, better understand their autistic profile and in turn take positive action. Meanwhile, research carried out parents and school staff suggested that diagnosis led to increased self-awareness and a reduction in masking among autistic girls (Tomlinson *et al.,* 2021). Finally, parents of autistic girls in a study carried out by Rabbitte *et al.* (2017) believed that diagnosis helped their daughters to make sense of their experiences.

Aside from enhancing self-understanding, diagnosis also afforded other benefits. Autistic adults highlighted how diagnosis provided opportunities to access counselling and explore its implications (Atherton *et al.*, 2022). For some autistic females it legitimised their requests for provisions (Seers and Hogg, 2021) while for others, with support, it provided them with the confidence to assert themselves (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016). Research conducted by Josefsson and Johansson (2024) in the school context revealed that diagnosis was valued by some autistic girls for its role in validating their needs and increasing access to support and reasonable adjustments. It also afforded greater flexibility in school, reducing anxiety and in turn reducing absenteeism for some girls. Diagnosis also offered opportunities to research and connect with others (Kelly *et al.*, 2024). Autistic women identified connecting with others as an important part of their journey in understanding the self, while self-directed research afforded autonomy in the meaning making process (Leedham *et al.*, 2020). Others used online platforms to form friendships with other autistic individuals and used blogs to engage with the experiences of others and share their experiences, resulting in feeling accepted and understood (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016). Seers and Hogg (2023) contextualise this by highlighting that online communities may offer protection, support and provide mentorship when the

media and general population continue to misrepresent and fail to recognise the diversity of autism.

Where experiences were positive, it appeared that diagnosis was viewed as explanatory and validating, allowing experiences to be contextualised within a new framework of understanding. On the contrary, less positive responses to diagnosis were also evident in the literature. Some autistic women expressed regret at their late diagnosis and identified a grieving process where they expressed sadness for their pre-diagnosed selves and the difficulties they experienced, while others were angry that their difficulties were not understood earlier (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Leedham *et al.*, 2020; Seers and Hogg, 2023; Kelly *et al*., 2024). In the context of autistic adolescent girls, some distanced themselves from their diagnosis, perceiving it to be a burden (Josefsson and Johansson, 2024) while others felt that disclosure of diagnosis resulted in different treatment, loss of friendship, stigma and bullying in the school context (Mesa and Hamilton, 2022; Josefsson and Johansson, 2024). Similarly in research conducted by Tomlinson *et al.* (2021), two out of the three girls involved shared negative associations with their diagnosis. One of the girls found it difficult to accept here diagnosis and did not share the diagnosis with others while the other girl believed that people's expectations of her capabilities changed post-diagnosis.

A sense of disillusionment following diagnosis was also evident in research, particularly in terms of the lack of post-diagnostic support. Participants in a study carried out by Tien *et al.* (2025) shared that being officially diagnosed did not offer them anything further in terms of supports or resources and therefore questioned its worth. Meanwhile, in research by Leedham *et al.* (2020) women believed that their engagement in masking pre-diagnosis resulted in their needs being dismissed or questioned, in turn impacting access to support. Inadequate post-diagnostic support and support in the school context was highlighted (Milner *et al.*, 2019) with autistic women sharing negative experiences of support services (Seers and Hogg, 2023) and inadequate levels of support (Baldwin and Costley, 2016). Meanwhile, autistic adolescent girls noted the inaction of their schools to support them in the process (Josefsson and Johansson, 2024). A desire for support was highlighted among the participants with the women declaring that they would have liked to be supported through the process and have had the opportunity to celebrate their identity, while the girls asserted that support from a professional would have assisted them in understanding the connection between their diagnosis and the difficulties they experienced along with

developing their autistic identity (Seers and Hogg, 2023; Josefsson and Johansson, 2024)

The experiences highlighted above reflect the broader perspectives on the diagnostic process with both parents and autistic adults expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of appropriate support for autistic individuals' post-diagnosis (Crane *et al.*, 2018). The process of seeking support is portrayed as a fight, which is further exacerbated by financial constraints. Furthermore, participants noted that when supports are eventually provided the individual has often reached crisis point. These inadequacies in the system, when combined with lack of emotional support and information signposting, have implications for both the autistic individual and those advocating for them.

2.5.3 Understanding Autistic Self

It is accepted that young people's experiences at school play a role in shaping identity development (Mesa and Hamilton, 2024). As expressed by autistic individuals in a study carried out by Milner *et al.* (2019), acceptance of autism identity can support positive self-identity which in turn can help individuals to understand their differences, however, research suggests that the increased awareness of difference and the stigma associated with autism in the school context may contribute to negative outcomes for autistic young people (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008).

Autistic differences can present as unique strengths and interests but also challenges and understanding of these can support individuals to fulfil their potential and protect individuals against negative experiences and risks. According to a systematic review, engaging with autistic identity supported autistic females to recognize their strengths and realize their potential (Kelly *et al*., 2024). Autistic women in research by Milner *et al.* (2019) shared a common positive of autism as being able to see the world from a different and unique perspective while others alluded to positive sensory experiences. Others discussed how their ability to engage intensely with or discuss their interests provided a sense of fulfilment and stimulation (Bargiela *et al.,* 2016; Stagg and Belcher, 2019). For participants in research by Bargiela *et al.* (2016) interests were perceived to be a defining factor of identity with engagement occurring along a continuum, supporting personal wellbeing and achievement. The significance of shared interests for social support and friendship is also evident in research (O'Hagan and Hebron, 2017; Salter, 2019). Additional characteristics that autistic females attributed to their autism include, having a good memory, being creative, a strong sense of empathy and justice (Milner *et al.*, 2019).

It is apparent that realisation of strengths and capitalisation of interests can impact the development of positive self-identity alongside increased self-worth and sense of self. However, in a stark contrast, a number of negative experiences and challenges connected to and arising from their autistic identity are also identified by autistic females. Autistic women highlighted issues such as burnout, dependence, vulnerability and victimisation as a part of their narrative (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Milner *et al.*, 2019).

'Autistic burnout' is the term used by autistic adults to describe a 'state of incapacitation, exhaustion and distress in every area of life' (Raymaker *et al.*, 2020: 134). Research suggests that autistic females face additional demands given the lack of awareness of the internal presentation of autism, increased engagement in masking among autistic females, along with gendered expectations within society (Milner *et al.*, 2019; Hull *et al.*, 2020; Seers and Hogg, 2021; Grove *et al.*, 2023). In their own narratives, autistic females often allude to the demands of being an autistic female and the exhaustive impact of this (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Seers and Hogg, 2021). Other research by Milner *et al.* (2019) raised the issue of dependence and its implications for independence with autistic women expressing jealousy of those who do not require support.

But, perhaps more common in research was autistic women's experiences of vulnerability and victimisation (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Milner *et al.*, 2019; Seers and Hogg, 2021). Autistic women associated their perceived passivity, as arising from their autistic identity, with their experiences of unhealthy relationships, and high-risk situations. The tendency to appease rather than challenge in order to belong and/or receive affection was highlighted by autistic women with examples pertaining to sex and conflict provided (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Milner *et al.*, 2019; Seers and Hogg, 2021). Conversely, the alternative to passivity was also identified as having negative implications in terms of victimisation with women sharing how over-asserting impacted relationships (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016). Bargiela *et al.*, (2016) further emphasise the implications of social and communication differences in these negative experiences outlining the impact of difficulties reading the intentions of neurotypical others and uncertainty regarding social rules. Nonetheless, the accounts of sexual and emotional abuse emphasise the implications of a desire to belong prevailing over personal safety concerns.

The varied experiences of autistic females prior to, during and post-diagnosis emphasise the importance of appropriate support throughout the journey. Research by Leadbitter *et al.* (2021) advise listening to the views of and facilitating self-advocacy among autistic individuals in the support process. More specifically, Kelly et al. (2024) recommend that

autistic females are supported in developing a positive autistic identity, noting the potential of autobiographical accounts and the concept of neurodiversity in assisting with this. Research suggests that development of a positive autistic identity may support autistic individuals in self-advocating and asserting their requirements (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Seers and Hogg, 2021; Smith and Mueller, 2022), which in the education context may support educators in meeting their needs (Zuber and Webber, 2019; Schena II *et al.*, 2022). Alternatively, the potential of other advocates acting on behalf of autistic individuals should not be understated, however, while beneficial and often effective, literature suggests that overreliance on parental advocacy may have a negative impact on parent wellbeing (Smith-Young *et al.*, 2022).

The above discussions offer many considerations in the context of autistic girls in the school setting. Insights presented on the intersection of being autistic and female holds significance in the education context and requires reflecting on stereotyped understandings of autism among school staff and peers. The narratives of autistic females highlight the varied responses to and engagement with an autism diagnosis. Despite mixed responses, there is a clear sense that diagnosis can validate differences and exploring diagnosis can support the development of an autistic identity. Similarly, the importance of understanding the autistic-self is emphasised through the accounts of autistic women and girls. However, to ameliorate the negative experiences, support is necessary for enhanced understanding, development of self-identity and for self-advocacy. When taken together this research highlights the significance of diagnosis and accentuates the importance of accurate and holistic knowledge in relation to autism for those supporting autistic individuals across contexts.

2.6 A Parental Perspective on Supporting Autistic Girls

Consistent with developments in the field, it is important that research prioritising the voices of autistic individuals is brought to the fore (Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2018; Pellicano *et al.*, 2018). However, as acknowledged by Fletcher-Watson *et al.* (2021) other stakeholders can offer important contributions. Parents are one such stakeholder that play a key role in an autistic girls' microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Given that autistic girls are often missed, misdiagnosed or diagnosed later (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Carpenter *et al.*, 2019; McCrossin, 2022) and can present differently in the home compared to other contexts (Hopkins *et al.*, 2023), considering the voices of their parents is perhaps even more important. Furthermore, research has revealed that parents of autistic girls report significantly higher levels of parental distress compared to parents of

autistic boys (Zamora *et al.*, 2014) with some challenges perceived as being specific to parenting an autistic daughter compared to an autistic son (Hopkins *et al.*, 2023).

2.6.1 Obtaining a Diagnosis

The journey to obtain a diagnosis for their daughters was often described as emotional by parents and characterised by barriers (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). Parents reported recognising that their daughters were experiencing difficulties, but they did not attribute them to autism due to their misconceptions or misinterpreted them as more familiar mental health difficulties (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020). This theme persisted among professionals, with parents indicating a distinct lack of awareness and recognition of autism in girls, with dismissal of concerns or misdiagnosis often part of the journey (Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Freeman and Paradis, 2023). Furthermore, parents in Fowler and O'Connor (2021) identified that comorbidities potentially overshadowed autism, thus resulting in delayed diagnosis. In the case of a diagnosis being given, mixed responses existed among parents of autistic girls. Some parents viewed the diagnosis as positive, allowing greater understanding of their daughters' behaviours and needs (Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021), while others felt that the diagnosis exposed their daughters to stereotypes, with the limited visibility of their characteristics often leading to misjudgement (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021).

Parents negotiated the perceived limited visibility of autism in girls with reference to environmental presentation differences. Parents believed that they were the only ones who observed the full extent of their daughters' difficulties (Anderson *et al.*, 2020). They felt that their daughters were aware of their difficulties and actively monitored and managed them in other contexts. Their engagement in masking meant they often presented as quiet or cautious and gave others the impression that they were coping (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020). However, upon returning home the full extent of the social and emotional consequences of their masking was apparent with parents reporting that their daughters were exhausted, required time alone and experienced meltdowns (Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). Interestingly, teachers in research by Mesa and Hamilton (2022) reported that they were aware that autistic young people may present different at home and school, but, in contrast to research with parents, they did not view the school as a stressor.

While the previous insights arise from research conducted with parents of autistic girls, the distinct nature of these experiences are reinforced in research conducted by Sutherland

et al. (2017) with parents of autistic children of both sexes. Differences in presentation at home versus at school was more commonly discussed by parents of autistic girls compared to autistic boys (Sutherland *et al.*, 2017). Parents believed it was their perseverance and motivation that resulted in their concerns being acknowledged and a diagnosis being obtained (Freeman and Paradis, 2023). Considering the above discussion, it is unsurprising that challenges accessing support were also prominent in parent narratives.

2.6.2 Seeking Support

The overall limited knowledge of autism in girls appeared to influence parents' experiences of obtaining support for their daughters. While some parents were satisfied with the support their daughters had received (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017), a lack of or inappropriate post-diagnostic support was highlighted in many instances (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). Recognising the nuances of their daughters' needs, parents often reported support being unsuitable, with the idea of one-size-fits-all strongly rejected (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). The need to self-educate was also identified with parents in research by Anderson *et al.* (2020) revealing that their knowledge has come from researching. They cited online platforms as more helpful than traditional sources due to the limited and somewhat biased information often more readily available.

The girls varied presentation across contexts also presented as a barrier to accessing support. Focusing specifically on the school context, parents in research by Gray *et al.* (2021) expressed the need for schools to consider a different approach when supporting autistic girls, mindful of their high levels of anxiety, further reinforcing the impact of masking on access to support. However, research carried out by Rabbitte *et al.* (2017) highlighted while this was an issue at school level, it was also an issue in terms of access to post-diagnostic services. Parents expressed frustration at schools and services failing to support and even discharging from a service as they did not recognise or observe their daughters' difficulties. Furthermore, this often occurred without parents being first consulted to see if they could provide additional insight (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017). Despite the above experiences, where a formal diagnosis was obtained it proved to be a means to support, particularly in school contexts (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021).

2.6.3 Being a Parent to an Autistic Girl

Returning to research by Zamora *et al.* (2014) given that access to services is predictive of lower levels of parental distress, the frustration, stress and worry discussed by parents of autistic girls in the literature may be expected (Hopkins *et al.*, 2023). Some parents raised their concerns about the future, recognising the need to support their daughter in becoming independent and being able to advocate for themselves (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017). Other research alluded to the broader familial impact of supporting an autistic girl with increased stress, always being in 'mum' mode, impact on employment, family life and the financial implications of support provision identified (Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021).

Most prominent in the literature was the stress and frustration associated with advocating for an autistic girl in a system that does not understand them. Parents viewed navigating the system as a constant battle both in terms of obtaining a diagnosis and accessing support, be that post-diagnostic support, school support, financial support (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). The fight is perceived to be harder in the case of autistic girls with parents commenting on the impact of other people's perceptions, misconceptions and ignorance (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Freeman and Paradis, 2023). Parents acknowledged their role as advocates and champions, their commitment to this role, but also their frustration when they are not heard (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021; Gray *et al.*, 2021).

2.7 Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education (IE) is a contested concept much debated, with agreement on a clear definition proving elusive (Cigman, 2007; Florian, 2014; Hornby, 2015; Slee, 2018; O'Brien, 2020). Described by Liasidou (2012: 5) as a 'semantic chameleon', it is perhaps unsurprisingly that the lack of clarity and varied use of the term has influenced its realisation in practice (Slee, 2018; Tiernan, 2022). IE has been defined as 'a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education' (UNESCO, 2013: 13). Meanwhile, Winter and O'Raw (2010: 24, 39) propose that IE is a process that involves 'addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities' and 'removing barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements, to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school' in order to

have a positive influence on their 'social, emotional, physical and cognitive development'. The above definitions both perceive IE as a process reactive to the individual, rather than IE as something requiring change within the system. Therefore, perhaps more consistent with the biopsychosocial model underpinning the current research, Liasidou (2012: 5) argues that if IE is to be meaningful it 'refers to the restructuring of social and, by implication, educational settings in order to meet the needs of all learners irrespective of their diverse biographical, developmental and learning trajectories'.

2.7.1 Philosophies of Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education is often debated with reference to the dilemma of difference (Minnow, 1990). It is argued that the 'non-recognition of difference leaves in places a faulty neutrality' Minnow (1990: 159). Therefore, lack of acknowledgement of difference may result in structures facilitating the dominant group and hindering those who are different while identification can amplify difference and result in discrimination or prejudice. The discourse surrounding this debate can be divided into the 'where' and the 'how' of IE with two dominant, contradictory philosophies emerging, the rights-based perspective and the needs-based perspective. The exists tension between rhetoric and practice, particularly in relation to the 'where' aspect of this debate (Norwich, 2008; Hornby, 2015; Haug, 2017; Felder, 2019). The UNCRPD interprets IE as the educating of all children together in mainstream classes within their local school (UN, 2016; NCSE, 2024), however, in the Irish context the shift towards full inclusion in practice is slow moving and lacks conviction with a continuum of provision model persisting (Tiernan, 2021; Shevlin and Banks, 2021; NCSE, 2024).

The current research is firmly situated in the mainstream context. Therefore, more appropriate to consider is the debate of the 'how' of IE, with the competing philosophies of inclusion emphasising varied pedagogical approaches. From a need-based perspective, the use of specialist pedagogies, alongside specially qualified teachers, need to be preserved in order to meet the distinct needs of learners with SEN (Ravet, 2011; Anastasiou *et al*., 2015; Haug, 2017). Individualised and specialised approaches are perceived as mechanisms to facilitate inclusion, reduce exclusion and enable students to benefit from effective education (Ravet, 2011; Anastasiou *et al*., 2015; Haug, 2017). In contrast, rights-based inclusionists promote the use of 'common to all' strategies (Ravet, 2011), also discussed in literature as 'inclusive pedagogy' (Florian, 2010; Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian and Beaton, 2018). This approach focuses on how to

extend what is ordinarily available in the classroom to meet the needs of all learners, rejecting the notion that there exist distinct groups of learners that require special pedagogical approaches (Florian, 2010; Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Recognising the diametrically opposing nature of these philosophies, an integrative model has been proposed (Ravet, 2011; Hornby, 2015). Referred to as 'inclusive special education' or 'pragmatic inclusion' (Tiernan, 2021), this approach lies somewhere between both polarities, valuing neurodiversity but also acknowledging that there is a need for disability specific approaches to support existing inclusionary pedagogies (Ravet, 2011). Before presenting the researchers philosophical positioning in this debate, it is necessary to first explore IE from an autism perspective.

2.7.2 An Autism Perspective on Inclusive Education

A systematic review of research that elicited the voices of autistic young people revealed that their school experiences are complex and multifaceted (Horgan *et al*., 2022). These findings are consistent with recent large-scale, multi-stakeholder, research projects on the school experiences of autistic children and young people in the Republic of Ireland (Delimata and Byrne, 2023; McNally *et al.*, 2025). The findings of research suggest a dissonance between the constellation of autistic characteristics experienced by students and the practical enactment of inclusive education (as defined by Liasidou, 2012) in mainstream education contexts.

In the context of autistic students with a diagnosis at Level 1 or a former Asperger disorder diagnosis (APA, 2000; 2013; 2022), there appears to be a misconception that because these students tend to present with an average to above average academic ability, they are automatically capable of coping in mainstream settings (Morewood *et al.,* 2011; Goodall, 2018). This misconception can have profound implications for support in the mainstream setting with assumptions often made based on academic performance alone (Morewood *et al* 2011). However, drawing parallels with the constellation of autistic characteristics (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019) as discussed in *Section 2.3.4*, many autistic individuals will exhibit a 'spiky' profile (Milton, 2012b).

Research suggests that uneven patterns of achievement are evident across different academic skill areas among autistic individuals (Keen *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, atypical patterns of attention (Murray *et al.*, 2005; McDougal *et al.*, 2020) and assessment processes (Wood, 2019) can further influence achievement and/or perceptions of achievement among autistic individuals in the school context. It has also been suggested that gaps in academic attainment between autistic children and their non-autistic peers

appears to widen in adolescence (Keen *et al.*, 2016). This may point towards the increasing demands of the post-primary setting for autistic students. Traditional mainstream settings can often intensify the challenges experienced by individuals in relation to their constellation of autistic traits (Goodall, 2018; Pellicano and den Houting, 2018). Unfortunately, research suggests that autistic students are simply expected to adapt to these settings (Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022; Horgan *et al.*, 2022). Instead, authentic inclusion should be responsive in nature and requires the school environment to be adapted to meet the needs of autistic students (Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022).

Building on the work of Doherty *et al.* (2023), McGoldrick *et al.* (2025) urge due consideration to be afforded to the domains of sensory, predictability, acceptance, communication and empathy alongside physical, processing and emotional spaces. They present the Autistic SPACE for Inclusive Education as a framework to reflect on and meet the unique needs of autistic students in the mainstream classroom. While considering these domains is useful for inclusive education for all students more broadly, a specific knowledge base pertaining to autism would be invaluable when supporting autistic students, particularly where the incorporation of specialised, evidence-based pedagogies may be required to attend to needs within these domains.

The points discussed above highlight the multi-faceted nature of inclusive experiences for autistic students. They also serve as a reminder of the potential mismatch between the academic strengths of an individual and their capacity to cope in the mainstream context. While autistic individuals share common characteristics, the interplay between the school environment and an individual's constellation of autistic traits can result in needs unique to an individual (Norwich and Lewis, 2007; Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019). The spiky profile is often unrecognised by professionals supporting autistic individuals and this can result in incorrect assumptions being made about an individual's support needs (Milton 2012b). The spiky profile underscores the importance of adopting a holistic approach when working with autistic individuals in the school context. Identifying individual strengths and weaknesses across all skill areas, adopting an individualised approach to support these, and using specialist practices where necessary should be considered by educators. Furthermore, the importance of adopting flexible, criterion-referenced assessments alongside formal, standardised assessments is important to capture a more complete understanding of the autistic student's profile of academic achievement and adaptive skills (Keen *et al.*, 2016; Wood, 2019)

The challenges experienced by autistic individuals as a result of the interaction between their intrinsic characteristics, processing style, and various factors within the school environment (Roberts and Simpson, 2016; Horgan *et al*., 2022) may be best contextualised by recognising the education system as a system that favours neurotypical students in its design (Jordan, 2008; Fisher, 2023). Drawing on Beardon's (2019: 13) 'golden equation', it is by recognising and attending to the interaction between autism and the environment, that inclusive experiences of education can be the outcome for autistic students, enabling them to thrive and flourish as individuals (Fisher, 2023). Thus, the above findings highlight that Inclusive Education for autistic students in the mainstream context extends beyond assumptions made based on their academic performance but as conceptualised by autistic students in research by Goodall (2020) must be considered from the perspective of belonging, where their unique needs are supported.

2.7.2.1 *Researcher Positioning*

Returning to the philosophies of IE in light of the above discussion, the integrative approach best reflects the researcher's positioning. The possibilities of how we enact inclusion are multiple (Ravet, 2011), however, the individual needs of autistic young people must be recognised, valued and supported (Tutt, 2019; Goodall, 2020a). Acknowledging the diversity of autistic school experiences (Horgan *et al.*, 2022), particularly in the Irish Context (Delimata and Byrne, 2023; McNally *et al.*, 2025) and the continual expression of need for increased teacher knowledge of autism from various stakeholders in education (Young *et al.*, 2017; Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022; Horgan *et al.*, 2022; DoE, 2024), the integrative approach can offer a middle-ground between the polarities in IE discourse. Prioritizing teacher training in autism for all practitioners while also promoting the importance of a flexible pedagogical stance may result in a more holistic approach to IE for autistic students. There is no denying that inclusive pedagogy offers immense potential in the mainstream classroom context (Florian and Beaton, 2018), however, the given the diversity of autism and the constellation of autistic characteristics (Milton, 2012b; Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019) and the influential nature of the school environment (Beardon, 2019b; McGoldrick *et al.*, 2025), a specific knowledge of autism and the use of evidence-based specialist approaches is arguably required to meet the unique needs of autistic individuals.

2.7.3 Support Provision for Inclusive Mainstream Education

The above discussion draws attention to the mismatch between autistic experiences in school and the foundational aims of inclusive education (Winter and O'Raw, 2010; Liasidou, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). Recognising the mainstream setting as the context for the current research, it is necessary to identify the framework in place to support the realisation of IE in the mainstream context and consider how this support is operationalised.

The Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) (Circular 0013/2017; Circular 0064/2024), previously discussed in *Section 1.12.4*, grants schools' autonomy in the provision of support resources. The deployment of such support should be guided by the school's engagement with the Continuum of Support (CoS) Framework (NEPS, 2007a; DoE, 2024). The CoS framework (*fig.4*) is a three-tier model that recognises that SEN occurs along a continuum and that students may require different levels of support at different times, depending on their identified educational needs (NEPS, 2007a). This multi-tiered approach to support has been recognised as particularly effective in the case of autistic students (Roberts and Webster 2020) with Ayirebi and Thomas (2024) suggesting what support using this model may incorporate for autistic girls. Schools are guided by a problem-solving approach to identify, respond to and monitor the needs of young people. Incremental in nature, it encourages schools to consider the potential of whole school and/or classroom level, universal, preventative and proactive approaches in the first instance before moving to more intensive and individualised approaches to support (DoE, 2024a), but with decisions underpinned by the premise that 'those [students] with the greatest level of need should have access to the greatest levels of support' (DoE, 2024a: 15).

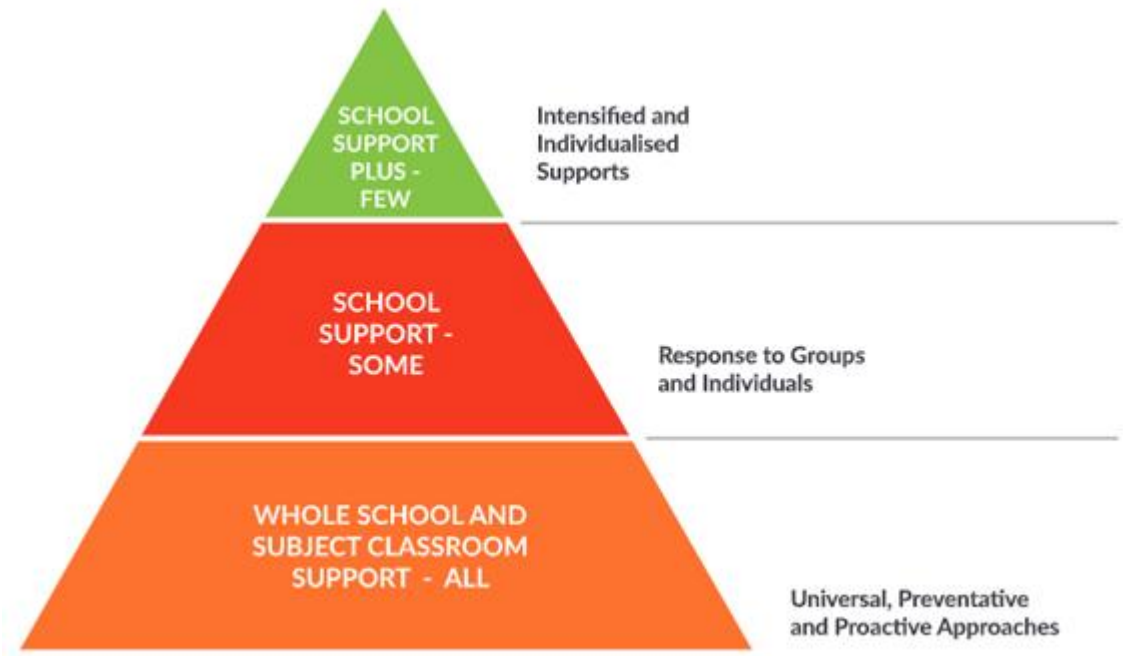


Figure 4: Continuum of Support (NEPS, 2007a) as presented in DoE (2024: 9)

It is noteworthy that the visual depiction of the continuum of support in the most recent guidelines (as presented above), does not specifically attend to the breadth of the continuum in terms of its capacity to support 'academic competence' and/or 'social, emotional & behavioural competence' as per its predecessor (DES, 2017a: 9). However, importantly from an autism support perspective, the latest guidance does specify that 'the term learning needs is used in a holistic manner throughout the guidelines incorporating young people's skills development across areas including literacy, numeracy, language and communication, sensory, physical, social and emotional development' (DoE, 2024a: 9). While this attempts to captures the diversity of potential needs that may require support in the school context, the Autism Good Practice Guidance (GOI, 2022) extend the breadth of this to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive reflective of the diversity of autism.

The level on the CoS influences the stakeholders involved in the provision of support, however, it is important to recognise that regardless of the stage of support, mainstream class/subject teachers 'have primary responsibility for teaching, learning, and assessment, for all young people within their class groups, including those with special educational needs' (DoE, 2024a: 25). Although not mandated (GOI, 2004), where a student is formally recognised as receiving support at any stage of the CoS, the development of a Student Support File and corresponding Student Support Plan to facilitate documentation has been

identified as best practice (DoE, 2024a). The importance of a collaborative approach to planning when supporting students on the CoS is outlined in policy (DES, 2017a; DoE, 2024) and inclusion of the student voice is viewed as 'central to the collaborative process' (DoE, 2024a: 11). However, older research found students had little input in the planning process (Bergin and Logan, 2013), while Mannion (2024) highlighted the persisting nature of this issue in the post-primary context more recently. This unfortunately reflects a larger pattern in terms of the value placed on student voice in post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (McCormack *et al.*, 2021). Given the transformational power of student voice, as demonstrated in research with students with intellectual disabilities conducted by Mannion (2024), this is immensely problematic. Furthermore, it could be argued that given the embodied nature of autism (Milton, 2014a; Kourti, 2021) and the potential of an internal presentation among autistic girls (Wassell and Burke, 2022; Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023), the inclusion of autistic voices in the planning process is even more pressing.

2.8 Inclusive Education for Autistic Students

The differences experienced by autistic individuals are often discussed in terms of the behavioural manifestation that can be observed by others in the environment (Myles, 2004; Fleury *et al.*, 2014). Without being contextualised with reference to autistic experience, it could be argued that positioning may (unintentionally) promote a deficit-based narrative by comparing autistic individuals to a predetermined 'norm'. Instead, Lawson (2011: 41) advocates for autism to be viewed as a 'cognitive difference or style' which results in a 'distinctive way of thinking' that can be influence behaviour within an environment. Autism theory can provide a useful lens to explore autistic differences from a strengths-based perspective, therefore will forefront the discussion on inclusive education for autistic students (Cumine *et al*., 2010; Lawson, 2011).

2.8.1 Using Autism Theory as a Foundation for Understanding

Neuropsychological theories have been developed to help us understand the way autistic individuals experience the world and respond in the way that they do (Boucher, 2017). As autism is diagnosed based on observable behaviours in relation to a set of diagnostic criteria, autism theories endeavour to bridge the gap between the behavioural features of autism and the autistic experience by providing potential cognitive explanations (Milton, 2012b; Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019). In the school context, these theories may provide a neuroaffirmative lens to better understand autistic differences[2] and encapsulate the varied presentations of autism in a meaningful way. As this research endeavours to

delve into varied presentation of autism, with consideration for gender, their inclusion and review is most pertinent. Engaging with and embracing these theories can support the development of more appropriate and effective supports. These actions should, in turn, improve the life chances for autistic individuals, something that has been identified as a priority by the autistic population (Pellicano *et al.*, 2014).

In the past, some autism theories (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1985; Frith, 1989; Frith and Happé, 1994) have been challenged for perpetuating a deficit-based narrative of autism and for their failure to consider autistic experience (Happé, 1999; Rajendran and Mitchell, 2007; Milton, 2012b; Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019; Gernsbacher and Yergeau, 2019; Holt *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, in keeping with advancements in autism research and theory and appreciating the shift toward autistic-developed autism theory, the theories of Executive Functioning, Double Empathy and Monotropism will be prioritised.

2.8.1.1 *Executive Functioning*

Executive Functioning (EF) skills are a set of interrelated mental actions that enable individuals to control their physical, cognitive and emotional behaviour in any given environment to (Rajendran and Mitchell, 2007; Chown, 2017; Beezer, 2025). EF skills include response inhibition, emotional control, flexibility, task initiation, sustained attention, goal-directed persistence, planning and prioritisation, organisation, time management, working memory and metacognition (Ozonoff *et al.*, 1991; Rutherford and Johnston, 2019; Bezeer, 2025).

EF has been identified as a cognitive theory of autism (Ozonoff *et al*., 1991; 1997), and endeavours to provide an underpinning rationale for the difficulties experienced by autistic individuals in terms of shifting attention, a preference for sameness, challenges with inhibiting impulses (Rajendran and Mitchell, 2007; Ozonoff *et al*., 1997). However, given that differences in EF have been reported among individuals with other neurodevelopmental conditions and may be experienced by all autistic individuals, the uniqueness and universality of this theory have been questioned (Hill, 2004; Rajendran and Mitchell, 2007; Sadozi *et al*., 2024). Furthermore, of particular relevance for the current study, is the recognition that some autistic individuals, particularly those diagnosed with Asperger disorder (Milton, 2012b; Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019), may have preserved EF skills. This could offer potential insight into why some autistic individuals are not as readily recognised and the outward portrayal of success may be arising from a reliance on rule-governed behaviour to mask difficulties (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019).

Nonetheless, EF remains a popular topic in autism research (Tschida and Yerys, 2022; Kenny *et al.*, 2024; Sasozi *et al*., 2024; Yeung *et al*., 2024) and is influential in shaping understanding of and support for autistic individuals in practice (Droney and Verbiest, 2022; Bezeer, 2025). The differences in EF experienced by autistic individuals may have significant implications in the classroom context (Droney and Verbiest, 2022). Noting that the school context required students to be able to follow instructions, complete tasks independently, transition between tasks and self-monitor behaviour, Pellicano (2012) highlight the importance of developing EF skills to support readiness for learning. Moreover, Tschida and Yerys (2022) reported significant difficulties relating to EF among autistic young people aged six-to-eighteen in the school context with the ability to shift attention emerging as the greatest area of difficulty. Further challenges with planning, organisation of materials and self-monitoring were also evident among students in the older age-groups (Tschida and Yerys, 2022).

This above research is further endorsed by autistic young people and parents in research (Pellicano *et al*., 2020; Kenny *et al*., 2024). In exploring young people's own subjective experiences of their current functioning, research conducted by Pellicano *et al.* (2020) found that executive functioning related difficulties were perceived to present the most challenges for young people and were identified as areas where they would require ongoing support. Similarly, when asked specifically about EF difficulties, the examples provided by the young people in research carried out by Kenny *et al.* (2024) were similar to those in Pellicano *et al.* (2020) and appeared to reflect the core areas outlined in existing theoretical models, *i.e.* shifting attention, planning, organising, prioritising. However, contrasting with the existing theoretical models of EF, the young people emphasised the variable nature of their EF experiences, emphasising that these difficulties were not omnipresent but rather dependent on context, anxiety, clarity of instructions and motivation/interest levels (Kenny *et al.*, 2024).

The above emphasises the importance of considering a holistic approach to support in relation to challenges relating to EF skills. Providing structure, incorporating interests, using visual supports and being explicit is important in the classroom context (Droney and Verbiest, 2022; Bezeer, 2025; Rose and Avnon, 2025). However, balance in support provision is emphasised by parents in research by Kenny *et al.* (2024) who expressed concern in relation to their tendency to externally control potential issues, while the autistic individuals worried about their ability to cope. Therefore, in addition to being mindful of these differences in the classroom, there is also merit in equipping autistic

young people with strategies and tools to further promote the development of EF skills, something which is further supported by evidence which suggests that autistic individuals have the capacity to improve their EF over time (Yeung *et al*., 2024),

However, in recognising the potential of EF as a theory to understand and support autistic individuals in the classroom context and beyond, it has been questioned whether the difficulties with EF may more accurately reflect differences in autistic processing more broadly, something which may be better explained by the theory of monotropism (*Section 2.8.1.3*; Milton, 2012b; Pellicano *et al*., 2012).

2.8.1.2 *Double Empathy Problem*

In the past, difficulties experienced by autistic individuals in social communication and interaction were purported to be the arising from the individual's diagnosis (Baron-Cohen *et al*., 1985; Gernsbacher and Yergeau, 2019). Conceptualised in the literature as 'deficits' in Theory of Mind (ToM), research primarily focused on how autistic individuals interact with non-autistic individuals, but with limited consideration afforded to the role of the non-autistic interactional partner (Baron-Cohen *et al*, 1985; Baron-Cohen, 1995; 2000; Frith, 1989; 2012). It has been argued that this theory negatively reinforced a single-sided responsibility within communication, resulting in harmful implications for the autistic community (Gernsbacher and Yergeau, 2019; Holt *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, research suggests that autistic individuals go to greater lengths to understand the non-autistic experience compared to non-autistic individuals' efforts to understand the autistic experience (Davis and Crompton, 2021) Furthermore, autistic individuals have shared that they often work hard to mask their autistic traits and emulate the communication and interaction style of the neurotypical majority (Hull *et al.*, 2020; Mitchell *et al*., 2021), a consideration particularly pertinent in the context of the current study with autistic females reporting higher levels of engagement in masking compared to autistic males (Lai *et al.*, 2017; Hull *et al*., 2020)

Recently, efforts have been made to challenge the former deficit-oriented perspective (Milton, 2012a; 2022; Beardon, 2019a; 2019b). The double empathy problem theory coined by Milton (2012a) refutes ToM discourse promoting that the social communication and interaction differences associated with autism arise from a disjuncture in understanding that may be exacerbated by different life experiences, language use and comprehension. The double empathy problem is therefore defined as;

> *a disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors which becomes more marked the wider the disjuncture in dispositional perceptions of the lifeworld – perceived as a breach in the "natural attitude" of what constitutes "social reality" for "non-autistic spectrum" people and yet an everyday and often traumatic experience for "autistic people"*
>
> (Milton, 2012a: 884)

A similar idea was also proposed by Beardon (2019a; 2019b) in his cross-neurological ToM theory. Therefore, instead of situating the responsibility on autistic individuals unilaterally, both Milton (2012a) and Beardon (2019a; 2019b) proposes a bidirectional failure in interaction and empathy between autistic and non-autistic individuals (Mitchell *et al.*, 2021). Of further significance is that while autistic people often have little choice but to try and develop an understanding of the expectations of the neurotypical society, a similar demand is not imposed on non-autistic individuals (Milton, 2012a; Chown, 2014).

In an effort to demonstrate the theory in action, studies examining rapport between and among neurotypes have been conducted (Crompton *et al.*, 2020; Foster *et al*., 2025; Rachanska, 2025). In research by Crompton *et al.* (2020) both autistic-autistic and non-autistic-non-autistic pairs reported higher levels of rapport compared to mixed neurotype pairs. Moreover, observations paired interactions revealed that autistic individuals experience high levels of interactional rapport when interacting with other autistic individuals, indicating rapport is influenced by a mismatch of neurotype. A similar finding emerged in research carried out by Foster *et al.* (2025) with all-autistic groups reporting significantly higher levels of enjoyment and friendliness compared to those in mixed groups. A further, smaller-scale qualitative study by Rachanska (2025) offered and additional perspective. Both autistic and non-autistic individuals recognised the presence of bi-directional challenges as impacting cross-neurotype interactions. Furthermore, both non-autistic and autistic individuals recognised and deliberated on the negative impact of non-autistic individuals' misconceptions of autism on inter-neurotype interactions. All findings align with the double empathy problem (2012a) with the latter demonstrating a further positive finding in relation to developments in the sharing of responsibility. Although the focused on autistic adults, these studies, together with the acknowledgement of the double empathy problem in education-practice literature (Droney and Verbiest, 2022; Wood, 2022) highlight the potential of the double empathy problem in understanding the social experiences of autistic students in the school context. Together, this research represents a shift in the narrative that the social differences do not lie solely with the autistic individual but rather could be better explained as a 'breakdown in

communication between two people who process information very differently' (Milton, 2012b: 3).

2.8.1.3 *Monotropism*

Monotropism, an autistic theory of autism, posits that an atypical distribution of attention is the central core feature of autism (Murray *et al.*, 2005). Where neurotypical individuals may demonstrate a polytropic attention style (the ability to broadly distribute attention and filter unnecessary stimuli), the distribution of attention for those with a monotropic processing style may be more tightly focused (Murray *et al.*, 2005). Monotropism theory postulates that a monotropic tendency may explain the difficulties experienced by autistic individuals in the areas of social interaction, the use of language, sensory processing and the shifting of attention as these all require broadly distributed attention (Murray *et al.*, 2005; Chown and Beardon, 2017).

Monotropic processing can cause challenges for autistic individuals in the school context, particularly in terms of lack of engagement with curriculum (specific interests), building inertia to focus attention (e.g. task initiation), and missing information beyond the attention tunnel (e.g. instructions; Murray *et al.*, 2005; Lawson, 2011; Wood, 2019). Furthermore, when in an 'attention tunnel' (Murray *et al.*, 2005: 147) being disrupted or being required to shift attention can cause distress for autistic individuals as articulated below;

> *To a person in an attention tunnel every unanticipated change is abrupt and is truly, if briefly, catastrophic: a complete disconnection from a previous safe state, a plunge into a meaningless blizzard of sensations, a frightening experience which may occur many times in a single day.*
>
> (Murray *et al.*, 2005)

However, this atypical distribution of attention, interests and information processing also provides opportunities which can be capitalised on in the school context. Wood (2019) highlights the potential of embracing monotropic thinking by enabling autistic learners to incorporate their interests into learning as a way to support engagement. Providing students with time to engage with interest-based tasks can enable them to enter a 'flow' state (Rapaport *et al*. 2024). Moreover, it has been suggested that hyper-focusing on a preferred task can reduce stress, support self-regulation and positively impact wellbeing (McDonnell and Milton, 2014; Atkinson *et al.*, 2024; Heasman *et al.*, 2024), all of which Wood (2019) identified as positive outcomes of incorporating interests for autistic students in the school context.

2.8.2 Supporting Autistic Learners in the Mainstream Setting

Knowledge about what makes inclusion successful is limited and inconclusive (Falkmer *et al.*, 2015). However, research has indicated that autistic students require support in relation to academic inclusion, navigating the school environment and social participation (Goodall, 2020a; Horgan *et al*., 2022). The following section will address the literature pertaining to pedagogical, environment and social considerations before highlighting more general considerations.

2.8.2.1 *Pedagogical Considerations*

Consistent with the CoS model (NEPS, 2007a) currently underpinning support in the school context (DoE, 2024a), it is apparent that both universal, inclusive pedagogies, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL; Cast.org, 2025), along with evidence-based practices (EBPs; Cook and Odom, 2013) offer potential when supporting autistic learners in the school context (Steinbrenner *et al.*, 2020; Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022; Roberts and Webster, 2020).

Inclusive pedagogy is a response to individual differences that endeavours to avoid the marginalisation that can occur when a student receives support that is different from or additional to what others receive (Florian and Beaton, 2018). It involves 'providing rich learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available for everyone, so that all learners are able to participate in classroom life' (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011: 814). UDL is one example of a framework that can support the implementation of inclusive pedagogy (Loreman, 2017). While not the only pedagogical or instructional approach informed by the principles of Universal Design (McGuire, 2014), UDL was popularised by the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the 1990s and has been gaining momentum in the Irish context of late (Flood and Banks, 2021). The UDL framework (*fig.5*) is underpinned by three core principles; Multiple Means of Engagement, Multiple Means of Representation and Multiple Means of Action and Expression and encourages planning for diversity from the outset to ensure the inclusion of all students (Meyer *et al*., 2014; Flood and Banks, 2021; Cast.org, 2025

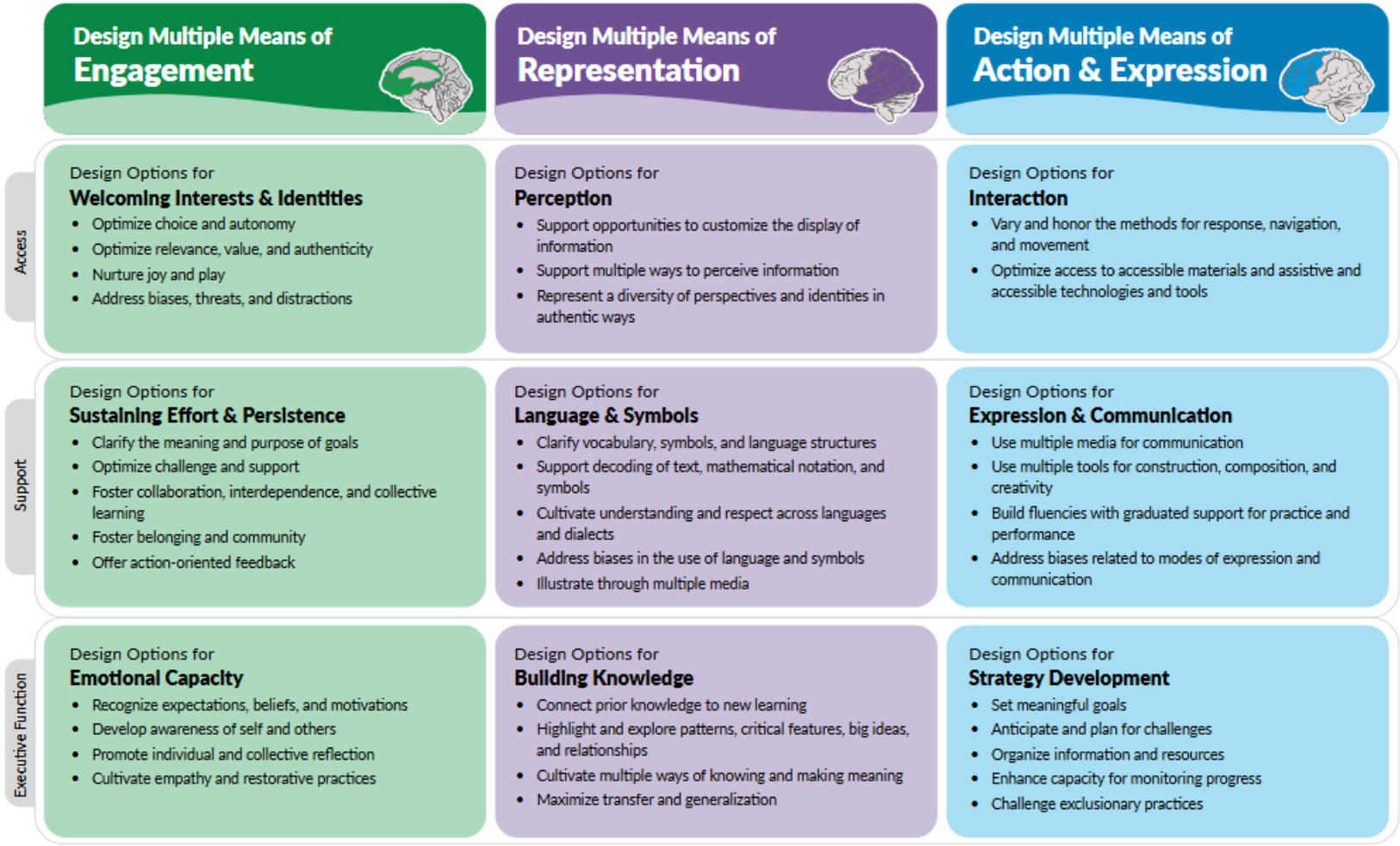


Figure 5:Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Guidelines v.3 (CAST, 2024)

Considering UDL from an autism perspective, Goodall (2015) argues that the UDL framework has the potential to underpin the creation of autism friendly schools as it values diversity from the outset and recognises that individuals can respond differently to the curriculum and the environment. The UDL framework may be particularly appealing as a framework for supporting autistic students as it contains elements that endeavour to address some of the core areas of difference associated with autism. As detailed in *Section 2.8.1.1* and identified in education-based research (Goodall, 2015), EF skills have been identified as challenging for some autistic students (Pellicano *et al*., 2020; Kenny *et al*., 2024). The UDL guidelines suggest ways to support EF in terms of emotional capacity, building knowledge and strategy development (Cast.org, 2025). Additionally, one mechanism for increasing access to the learning goal in the UDL framework is the welcoming of interests and identities, potentially capitalising on the significance of attention and interests for autistic individuals as explored in *Section 2.8.1.3* with reference to the theory of monotropism (Murray *et al.*, 2005; Wood *et al.*, 2019). Reframing autistic interests as an entry point for learning reflects a strengths-based approach to support (Fleury *et al.*, 2014; Tutt, 2019; Sewell and Park, 2021; Wood, 2021).

However, from an empirical perspective, there is a distinct paucity of research that examines the potential of UDL for autistic students in the post-primary context and indeed relating to the post-primary context more broadly (Bray *et al.*, 2024; Phelan *et al.*, 2025). This could be contextualised with reference to Goodall (2015) who argues that the principles of UDL are often not evident in the mainstream setting due to systemic barriers such as inflexible staffing, timetabling structures, pedagogical approaches and staff attitudes towards inclusion. Nonetheless, there exists some promising research. Research conducted with university students where several of the enablers of learning highlighted by the students aligned with UDL (Barrera Ciurana and Moliner García, 2024). Relating to MMR, the students noted the value of receiving information in different ways and educators drawing their attention to important information and supporting them in organising that information. They reported feeling increased confidence when objectives and expectations were clearly stated and expressed a preference for being able to demonstrate their knowledge in various ways, reflective of the principles of Multiple Means of Engagement and Multiple Means of Action and Expression. Meanwhile, in the school context Carrington *et al.* (2020) extracted evidence of the use of approaches consistent with UDL from teacher's descriptions of their practice. This is consistent with the broader narrative with a review carried out by Phelan *et al.* (2025) indicating there is

evidence of unlabelled UDL practices in the body of literature relating to inclusive practices in the post-primary context.

It could be argued that the lack of empirical research (Flood and Banks, 2021), particularly in the post-primary context (Phelan *et al.*, 2025), the systemic barriers to implementation outlined by Goodall (2015) and gaps in teacher knowledge relating to UDL practices (Carrington *et al.*, 2020; Phelan *et al.*, 2025) may be limiting the use of UDL for supporting autistic learners. However, as acknowledged by Quirke and McGuckin (2019) while UDL endeavours to reduce the need for additional support, it does not negate the need for it entirely recognising that some learners may require individualised supports/accommodations. Therefore, consistent with the integrative approach, it could be argued that targeted individualised support, underpinned by EBPs, may be particularly pertinent in terms of meeting the distinct needs of autistic students (Hornby, 2015). EBPs are 'practices that have clear evidence of positive effects with autistic children and youth' (Steinbrenner *et al.*, 2020: 7). There exist a specific set of EBPs recognised, from rigorous reviews of literature, as effective in supporting and improving outcomes for autistic students (Hornby, 2015; Steinbrenner *et al.*, 2020). In considering the mainstream context for the current study, EBPs such as 'Cognitive Behavioral/Instructional Strategies', 'Direct Instruction', 'Naturalistic Intervention', 'Self-Management', 'Task Analysis' and 'Video Modelling', among others, may be of particular relevance (Steinbrenner *et al.*, 2020). However, while the use of EBPs has been recommended in policy in the Irish context (NCSE, 2015), research conducted by Barry *et al.* (2022) revealed that overall teachers have low levels of knowledge and reported limited use of EBPs. However, it was noted that more experienced teachers, teachers in autism classes, teachers who have additional training or who receive more support from multi-disciplinary professionals have more knowledge and use EBPs more frequently.

EBPs may be particularly important in the context of supporting autistic students in developing skills that will support independence and success in the school context more broadly. Navigating the mainstream school environment can be challenging for autistic students particularly in terms of the increased demands, unpredictable social and sensory environments and transitions across environments (Morewood *et al.*, 2011; Goodall, 2020a; Horgan *et al.*, 2022). These challenges can result in increased anxiety and stress for autistic students (Costley *et al.*, 2021; Horgan *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, autistic students may require support to self-advocate in the school context (Zuber and Webber, 2019). EBPs have been associated with improved outcomes relating to the social domains,

mental health, academic skills, adaptive/self-help skills and vocational skills, among others (Steinbrenner *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, a more individualised approach to support and explicitly teaching skills using EBPs may positively impact the school experiences of autistic students (Steinbrenner *et al.*, 2020; Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022).

In light of the above, it is apparent that both UDL and evidence-based practices may hold merit when considering pedagogical approaches for supporting autistic learners in the mainstream classroom.

2.8.2.2 *Environmental Considerations*

Differences in sensory processing have been identified as a barrier for autistic learners in the school environment (Ashburner *et al.*, 2008; Howe and Stagg, 2016; Goodall, 2020a; Pastor-Cerezuela *et al.*, 2020; Hummerstone and Parsons, 2020; 2022; Horgan *et al.*, 2022). The mainstream school environment is often described as sensory chaos with the noise, crowds, lights, and smells often reported as challenging by autistic individuals (Goodall, 2018; Horgan *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, data collected from autistic students emphasises the need for greater understanding of the environmental factors that impact on their participation in the school context (Roberts and Simpson, 2016; Hummerstone and Parsons, 2020). Valuing autistic insights and recognising the significance of a regulated sensory system for enabling 'optimal learning' opportunities for engagement in learning, activities and interactions (Yack *et al.*, 2015: 28; Feeney. 2018; McCann, 2019), it is necessary consider the sensory environment when supporting autistic students in the school context.

At a whole-school level, a sensory audit of the setting should be conducted to inform how the environment may need to be modified or adapted to better support learning, and inclusive experiences more broadly (Critchley, 2019; McCann, 2019; Morewood *et al.*, 2019; Droney and Verbiest, 2022; O'Neill, 2022). Additionally, recognising the complexity of sensory processing as discussed in *Section 2.3.3*, sensory breaks or access to 'safe', 'quiet' or 'sensory' spaces may be important for some autistic students for regulation purposes (Horgan *et al.*, 2022; Droney and Verbiest, 2022; McKinlay *et al.*, 2024). Autistic students have identified fidget tools, movement, chewing gum, biting pens, being allowed to remove school jumper, being allowed to listen to music and wear noise cancelling earplugs as personal strategies to support their sensory regulation in the school environment (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Sproston *et al.*, 2017; Hummerstone and Parsons, 2020).

Beyond environmental considerations, a generalised approach to the provision of sensory supports has been cautioned against in the school context (Critchley, 2019; Woods, 2019; Dynia *et al.*, 2022). Acknowledging the embodied, individual nature of sensory differences (Hummerstone and Parsons, 2020; 2022; Dynia *et al.*, 2022), the development of a specific sensory profile should be prioritised (Feeney, 2018; Critchley, 2019; Droney and Verbiest 2022). While sensory checklists provide a useful starting point when working with autistic students and their parents (Droney and Verbiest, 2022), research recommends that addressing sensory needs in an evidence-informed manner requires collaboration with an Occupational Therapist (OT; McCann, 2019; Dynia *et al.*, 2022). While Dynia *et al.* (2022) recognise the role of teachers in incorporating strategies for addressing sensory needs in the classroom context, they raise concerns in relation to the use of strategies with limited to no evidence to support their use. Therefore, complete sensory assessments should be conducted by sensory-trained professionals who can then inform the development of an individualised 'sensory diet' or a required sensory-based intervention (McCann, 2019; Dynia *et al.*, 2022).

It is noteworthy to highlight that a capacity building model for therapeutic support is currently being piloted in the Irish context (NCSE, 2019; NCSE 2024). The School Inclusion Model endeavours to equip teachers to meet the therapeutic needs of students through the provision of in-school therapists and enhanced support from NEPS (NCSE, 2019; NCSE 2024). While providing training for teachers in the area of sensory processing has been reported as increasing teacher competence, confidence and practice in relation to identifying and supporting autistic children in the classroom (Ruttledge and Cathcart, 2019) and collaborative efforts between teachers and OTs have been reported as positive (Mills and Chapparo, 2018), timing, staffing and fidelity of intervention are identified as challenges. Furthermore, while Mills and Chapparo (2018) highlight the professional knowledge of OTs and acknowledge the benefits of such models for teacher learning, they question whether it is unrealistic to expect teachers to implement individualised sensory interventions in the classroom context. Therefore, while a capacity building model may have potential (Mills and Chapparo, 2018; Ruttledge and Cathcart, 2019), a balance between direct therapeutic input as well as sustained OT support for teachers for addressing more general sensory concerns may be more beneficial.

2.8.2.3 *Social Considerations*

Social participation is viewed as an important area for consideration when supporting autistic students in mainstream educational settings (Mamas *et al.*, 2021). Encompassing

friendships/relationships, contacts/interactions, social self-perception and acceptance by classmates (Mamas *et al.*, 2021), social participation has been identified as an area of significant challenge for autistic students (Horgan *et al.*, 2022; McKinlay *et al.*, 2024). Positive peer relationships are reported as a strong enabling feature of successful inclusion (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Saggers, 2015), however, it is recognised that autistic individuals may experience challenges with social interactions and friendships (Horgan *et al.*, 2022), may demonstrate varied social preferences (Elmose, 2020), and may or may not be concerned by reputation (Cage *et al.*, 2016).

In the past, the challenges experienced by autistic individuals in the domain of social communication and interaction were largely addressed through Social Skills Training (SST). SST is defined as 'group or individual instruction designed to teach learner's ways to appropriately and successfully participate in their interactions with others' (Steinbrenner *et al.*, 2020: 29). SST can demonstrate effective outcomes for and is desired by some autistic individuals (Zanuttini and Little, 2022). SST is often recommended in practice-based literature (Droney and Verbiest, 2022) and has been reported for supporting understanding of the hidden curriculum and the actions of neurotypical individuals (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Morewood *et al.*, 2019; Ryan *et al.*, 2021) Furthermore, social skills are often identified as a priority by parents of autistic individuals (Woods, 2019).

However, although SST is reported as an evidence-based practice, it has been contested in research (Milton, 2014b; Bottema-Beutel *et al.*, 2018). It has been argued that SST is at odds with a neuroaffirmative approach to support as it may pathologise autistic ways of being, prioritise neuro-normative communication skills, and may encourage masking (Hull *et al.*, 2017; Bottema-Beutel *et al.*, 2018; Keates *et al.*, 2022; Crompton *et al.*, 2023; Monahan *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, rather than delivering SST to autistic individuals, embracing autistic sociality and educating non-autistic individuals about autistic sociality and the Double Empathy Problem has been advocated for and are supported by research (Bottema-Beutel *et al.*, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2021; Keates *et al.*, 2022). In the school context this may be enacted through neurodiversity training programmes and neurodivergent peer support programmes.

There exist many specific anti-stigma programmes specifically focused on addressing ignorance, prejudice and discrimination relating to autism (Morris *et al.*, 2023). Where there is evidence that these can influence the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of peers, with some research specifically focused on promoting peer acceptance of autistic

females in the mainstream classroom (Ranson and Byrne, 2014), it has been suggested that these programmes may result in superficial improvements in peer knowledge and the studies assessing their effectiveness limited by a lack of methodological rigour (Kim *et al.*, 2023; Morris *et al.*, 2023).

However, recognising the need to create neuroinclusive classrooms that reconceptualise difference and diversity as a part of everyday life (Lawson, 2011; Morewood *et al*., 2011), there is emerging support for teaching neurotypical students about neurodiversity rather than about neurodivergence alone (Alcorn *et al.*, 2022; Rajotte *et al.*, 2024). Learning About Neurodiversity at School (LEANS; Alcorn *et al.*, 2022) is one such programme which shows preliminary positive results in its feasibility study (Alcorn *et al.*, 2024) and initial evaluation (Zahir *et al.*, 2024). The LEANS programme, a freely downloadable, comprehensive curriculum style programme, was developed by a neurodiverse team and teachers about information processing and learning, underpinned by the neurodiversity paradigm (Alcorn *et al.*, 2022; 2024). Research suggests that the LEANS curriculum is acceptable and is successful in its goal to introduce children to new knowledge and cultivate positive attitudes and actions (Alcorn *et al.*, 2024; Zahir *et al.*, 2024). Although targeted at the primary school context, adaption or generation of a similar programme may be useful in the post-primary context.

Another approach for supporting autistic sociality is through autistic peer support or mentoring programmes. Research suggests that autistic young people in mainstream settings can feel disconnected from their school community, experience low levels of social support and have negative perceptions of their differences (Hebron, 2018; Horgan *et al.*, 2022). These experiences may be contextualised with reference to a body of research which suggests that same-neurotype interaction and communication are more effective and fulfilling than cross neurotype engagement (Crompton *et al*., 2020; Foster *et al*., 2025; Rachanska, 2015) with differing communication styles and non-autistic misconceptions about autism and autistic ways of communication cited as factors hindering inter-neurotype interaction and communication.

Recognising the successes of autistic-to-autistic communication (Crompton *et al.*, 2020; Foster *et al.*, 2025), Crompton *et al.* (2023) propose autism specific peer support/mentoring as a potential neuroaffirmative approach to social support for autistic young people in school contexts. Research with autistic young people revealed that autistic peer support was generally positively received and identified as offering unique opportunities to connect with other autistic students and develop a sense of self-identity

(Crompton *et al.* (2023). Extending from this, the Neurodivergent peer Support Toolkit (NEST; Crompton *et al.*, 2024a), a neurodivergent-designed and neuro-divergent led peer support programme, offers a potential framework for embedding autistic peer support. An initial feasibility and acceptance study identified NEST as a success with positive responses from autistic young people and their teachers reported that it provided increase opportunities for autistic and neurodivergent students to engage in authentic interactions in a safe space within the school (Crompton *et al.*, 2024b).

2.8.2.4 *A Holistic Approach to Support*

Recognising the changing conceptualisation of autism as discussed in *Section 2.3.4*, it is imperative that a holistic approach to support autistic students in education is promoted. An individualised, strengths-based, relational approach which prioritises autistic experience and facilitates development of the self should be adopted.

In recognising that autistic experiences arise through interaction between the person and their environment (Beardon, 2019a; McGreevey *et al.*, 2024; Pearson, 2025), there is an inherent need to place the individual at the centre of the support process. Promoting an experience sensitive approach, McGreevey *et al.* (2024) encourage professionals to adopt a stance of 'unknowing' to enable them to encounter an individual from a holistic perspective, embracing their autistic experience rather than relying on a behavioural presentation. Furthermore, the importance of learning about autism more broadly rather than relying on general techniques and strategies has been identified as imperative for supporting autistic children to thrive and will facilitate a more flexible, individualised approach to support (Evans, 2025).

Understand autistic people through non-pathologising lens that recognises them as a whole person has been advocated for by Pearson (2025). Acknowledging and incorporating autistic strengths is one way to facilitate this. Autistic strengths have been documented in research (Cherewick and Matergia, 2024) and can be self-identified by autistic young people (Teti *et al.*, 2016) and research suggests that integrating and building on strengths may offer a more neuroaffirmative approach for supporting the well-being of autistic individuals in the school context (White *et al.*, 2023; Cherewick and Matergia, 2024)

It could be argued that a relational approach is at the core of individualised and strengths-based approaches to support (Pavlopoulou and Dimitriou, 2019; Chapman and Botha, 2022; McGreevey *et al.*, 2024; Pearson, 2025). Honouring autistic ways of being and recognising autistic individuals as experts of their own experiences are important

elements of a relational approach (Chapman and Botha, 2022; McGreevey *et al.*, 2024). It is suggested that meaningful dialogue and the development of a genuinely mutual relationship helps all stakeholders to make sense of and validate the autistic young person's experiences (Pavlopoulou and Dimitriou, 2019; McGreevey *et al.*, 2024). This approach will enable individualisation of support, collaborative decision making and may contribute to autistic flourishing more generally (McGreevey *et al.*, 2024; Pearson, 2025)

Lastly, re-emphasising the embodied nature of autism (Milton, 2014a; Kourti, 2021) and autistic individuals as experts of their own experience (Chapman and Botha, 2022), the importance of supporting autistic students develop self-awareness, self-understanding and self-advocacy should not be understated. Support for psychoeducation is emerging in literature with research suggesting that teaching individuals about their autistic profile can be empowering for autistic individuals (Backman *et al.*, 2018). NeuroBears (Pandas Online, 2022-2025) is one example of a self-paced programme that has reported positive results in relation to knowledge and understanding of being autistic, identity development and self-advocacy skills (Mullally *et al.*, 2024). However, better self-awareness and self-understanding, while useful may not always result in better outcomes or the removal of barriers, thus there is an inherent need to support the development of self-advocacy (Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024). Cook and Purkis (2022: 18) define self-advocacy as 'speaking up for yourself and advocating to have your needs and rights met'. It has been reported as particularly useful for neurodivergent (Cook and Purkis, 2022) and specifically autistic students in the school context (Zuber *et al.*, 2019) in terms of gaining access to support and/or facilitating involvement in individualised planning efforts or challenging exclusive practices or behaviours (Cook and Purkis, 2022; Schena II 2023). Furthermore, it has also been identified as particularly pertinent for autistic girls who may go unrecognised and/or experience challenges accessing support (Critchley and Critchley, 2019; Egerton *et al.*, 2019)

The above discussion, combined with the pedagogical, environmental and social considerations identified in this section emphasise the importance of considering IE for autistic students through a holistic, individualised and strengths-based approach. It is necessary to challenge deficit-based models of autism and build from the lived experience of autistic students to create school environments that support autistic students where they are at, value autistic experience and prioritise autistic wellbeing (Wood, 2022; Leadbitter *et al*., 2021).

2.8.3 The Teacher as a Conductor of Inclusion

Teachers are often referred to as the main facilitators of, and barriers to inclusive education (Falkmer *et al.*, 2015). A large-scale national study of the experiences of post-primary students with SEN, commissioned by the NCSE, reported that students' school experiences are largely dependent on their relationships with teachers and the ability of teachers to implement strategies that promote an inclusive classroom (Squires *et al.*, 2016).

The importance of the teacher's role is evidenced in a review of papers that elicited autistic students' experiences of mainstream whereby strong relationships with teachers were identified as the foundation of inclusive practice and were underpinned by teachers understanding individual needs, holding high expectations, and showing an interest in students (Horgan *et al*., 2022). Characterising a good teacher, students in research by Hummerstone and Parsons (2020) emphasised the importance of teachers who were caring, supportive and understanding. The importance of teachers focusing on individual students and adapting their whole class teaching practices was also noted.

However, student experiences sometimes did not reflect these positive conceptualisations. The Autistic students in research by Goodall (2020) reported that their teachers did not understand autism, nor did they have the necessary knowledge of autism or express a desire to want to support autistic young people. Research conducted by Hummerstone and Parsons (2020) interviewed autistic students and their teachers with some discrepancies emerging between the two accounts. Despite the teachers mentioning how important it was to consider individual students; this was not reflected in the accounts of the students nor in the teachers' reflections of their teaching. Furthermore, the students also highlighted the negative impact (*i.e.* feeling misunderstood and being made to feel bad), of some of the teachers' practices, with specific reference to their sensory differences. The discrepancies in these reports not only emphasise the needs of the students, but more importantly the impactful role of the teacher in facilitating positive experiences in the mainstream setting.

It is important to acknowledge the relational aspect of educational experiences. However, specific strategies and approaches are necessary for autistic learners to succeed, and their enactment is largely dependent on teachers' awareness, understanding and knowledge of autism and what works for this cohort of students (O'Byrne, 2018). In addition to this, educators have an important role in identifying children who need a diagnosis so gaps in their knowledge could ultimately contribute to some students not getting the support they

require (Crane *et al.*, 2018; O'Byrne, 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to review literature to reflect on teachers' knowledge and understanding of inclusion in the context of autistic learners.

2.8.3.1 *Teacher Understanding and Knowledge of Autism*

It is argued that in order to facilitate inclusive education for autistic learners, teachers require specialist understanding, knowledge and skills (Parsons *et al.*, 2009), however, research reveals mixed results in relation to teachers' levels of awareness, knowledge, understanding and confidence (Gómez-Marí *et al.*, 2021). Research by Nolan and Hannah (2019) suggests that autism specific training can improve teacher outlook and use of inclusive practices while a review conducted by Gómez-Marí *et al.* (2021) revealed that training, practical experiences and prior contact with autistic students play a role in teachers' capacity to support autistic students in the classroom context.

At an international level, a review of stakeholder perspectives on inclusion for autistic students conducted by Roberts and Simpson (2016) revealed that perceived level of knowledge and understanding of autism varied. Principals, special education teachers and school psychologists rating themselves more aware of strategies that mainstream teachers. Mainstream teachers were concerned about their limited knowledge of autism and supportive strategies, while further highlighting that this resulted in them using reactive rather than proactive strategies. These findings are consistent with research conducted at a national level. Teacher knowledge of autism has been consistently problematic in the Irish landscape, with earliest concerns being raised by the Task Force on Autism (DESc, 2001). Limited knowledge was highlighted again as a persistent barrier to inclusion by Travers *et al*. (2010) however, a promising shift was reported by Daly *et al.* (2016). Utilising a multiple case study approach to evaluate sites of provision for autistic students, it was found that staff at primary and post-primary level who had responsibilities in special education demonstrated excellent knowledge and understanding, however, mainstream class teacher knowledge and understanding varied markedly and mainstream teachers often relied on specialist teachers in the school for information and expertise.

Examining mainstream teachers' perceptions of inclusive education for students with autism, specifically those with Asperger syndrome, at the post primary level, McGillicuddy and O'Donnell (2014) reported that all the teachers reported some confidence in their ability to teach children with autism. However, some of the participants expressed concern in relation to mainstream teachers' level of understanding

of autistic students in general. They noted that some of their colleagues demonstrated a resistance to supportive strategies such as differentiation, co-teaching and the presence of an SNA. Contrary to the findings presented by McGillicuddy and O'Donnell (2014), research by Anglim *et al.* (2018) on the self-efficacy of primary teachers in supporting the inclusion of children with autism reiterated earlier concerns in relation to mainstream teachers. Out of the six teachers interviewed, more than half reported feeling a lack of confidence or some apprehension. The uncertainty in relation to supporting autistic students expressed by the participants was attributed to a lack of experience and expertise and a lack of adequate training and five out of the six participants referred to using trial and error as a method of support. In both studies, initial teacher training was reported as insufficient and personal experience was viewed as most beneficial (McGillicuddy and O'Donnell, 2014; Anglim *et al.*, 2018).

In an effort to quantify teacher knowledge and understanding, Young *et al.* (2017) adopted a mixed methods research design with mainstream post-primary teachers to elicit diagnostic and intervention knowledge in relation to Asperger syndrome while also gathering demographic data and information relating to continuous professional development. The data revealed that teachers only felt 'somewhat confident' in relation to working with a student with Asperger syndrome. Consistent with previous research (McGillicuddy and O'Donnell, 2014; Anglim *et al.,* 2018), those who had previously taught a student diagnosed with Asperger syndrome rated themselves as 'very confident' or higher, reiterating the significance of experience. Perhaps, more interesting was the level of knowledge and understanding of these teachers in relation to Asperger Syndrome. While participants answered 71.18% of items correctly, 24.23% of these responses were answered correctly but responses were coded as uncertain. When combined with the 28.82% of incorrect responses, approximately half of responses were answered incorrectly or correctly but uncertain, a somewhat worrying finding as an uncertain answer may indicate guesswork or lack of confidence on the participants behalf. These findings raise concerns in relation to the support provided by teachers and essentially the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream settings.

The mismatch between teacher perceived knowledge and understanding and the implementation of this in practice is also discussed by Rodden *et al.* (2019). Following critical discourse analysis, it was revealed that although teachers expressed a strong desire to support and include autistic students and demonstrated their willingness to upskill to do this, their discourses revealed low levels of self-efficacy in relation to their pedagogical

ability to differentiate for and meet the needs of autistic learners in post-primary classrooms. It was also interesting to note that the mainstream teachers positioned the SEN department as a separate entity in the school. This had additional implications in terms of the learning of students with autism as the mainstream teachers expressed ownership of their own subject but did not demonstrate similar ownership towards the inclusion of students with autism. This correlated with findings from Daly *et al.* (2016) whereby mainstream teachers view special education teachers as responsible for facilitating inclusive practices for students with SEN, with their remit being the transmission of knowledge.

In light of the proposed focus on teacher knowledge of autism in girls, there is an inherent need to further refine the literature review. There is a dearth of research that looks specifically at teacher understanding and knowledge of autism and its presentation in girls with no studies completed in the Irish context. However, three studies have been identified as relevant for review two of which are UK based with the third conducted in New Zealand (Whitlock *et al.*, 2020; Gray *et al.*, 2021; Ward *et al*., 2022). The primary study for review examined SENCo[4] views in relation to their knowledge and understanding of the presentation of autism in girls and support provided (Gray *et al.*, 2021) while the two other studies focused on teacher's ability to identify the female phenotype of autism from vignettes (Whitlock *et al.*, 2020; Ward *et al.*, 2021).

Research by Gray *et al.* (2021) revealed mixed findings in relation to SENCo knowledge of autism in girls. The majority of SENCos were aware that autism presented differently in males and females and reported their knowledge of autism in general as either 'quite high' or 'high', however, they were less confident in their ratings of their knowledge of autism presenting in girls with 40% of participants falling in the 'low' or 'quite low' category. While 60% of respondents rated their confidence as moderate to quite high, the qualitative data revealed that the majority of SENCos would provide support for girls consistent with the male profile. There also existed some discrepancies in SENCo knowledge in the qualitative data with common misconceptions in the area of challenging behaviour, rigidity in routine and restricted interests identified. These findings suggest that SENCos may be relying on their knowledge of how autism presents in males, raising concerns in relation to whether autistic girls are receiving the support they require.

[4] A SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) is an individual with a certain responsibility for Special Education Provision in the School Context.

Research by both Whitlock *et al.* (2020) and Ward *et al.* (2022) utilised vignettes in their research. Whitlock *et al.* (2020) asked educators (N=289) to rate the likelihood of the described child being autistic and the likelihood of them seeking help for the described child. The findings indicated that primary school educational staff were more likely to identify autism in males than females and were more attuned to the male presentation of autism compared to the female presentation. The study also revealed that this bias against girls exists for those showing the female phenotype but not for girls displaying a more male presentation. Investigating whether gender-based assumptions impacted the identification of autism, Ward *et al.* (2022) examined whether student gender was associated with teaching staff identification of autism. The results suggested that the perceived gender of the child did not significantly influence the selection of autism, nor the participants likelihood rankings, confidence levels or concern levels, thus indicating that participants were not influenced by gender biases. While the results are positive, the researchers revealed that the inclusion of externalising behaviours in the vignettes may have depicted a more typical male phenotype which could have skewed participant responses. The findings of this study may solely indicate that participant understandings of autism were based on a male presentation and if a more subtle presentation was depicted in the vignettes the results may have presented differently.

The inconsistent findings in relation to teacher knowledge and understanding presented in the studies is also reflected in larger scale studies and reviews of provision for autistic students commissioned by the Irish statutory body, the National Council for Special Education (Rose *et al.*, 2015; Bond *et al.*, 2016; Daly *et al.*, 2016) and highlights the need for continued development of teacher knowledge and understanding in the area of inclusion and autism. Considering these findings in light of reports from autistic women and girls (Baldwin and Costley, 2016; Bargiela *et al.,* 2016; Milner *et al*., 2019) who indicated that their delay in getting a diagnosis could in part be attributed to professionals and teachers having an inadequate understanding of how autism presents in females, signifies the need to specifically challenge the gender-biased narratives of autism and ensure teachers are aware of diverse presentations.

2.8.4 Effective Inclusion Extends Beyond the Teacher and their Classroom

Teachers play an integral role in determining the school experiences for autistic students. However, effective inclusion extends beyond the teacher and their classroom, with a number of factors influencing a teachers' ability to support autistic learners effectively, *e.g.* collaboration with parents and other professionals, school ethos and policy.

2.8.4.1 *Communication and Collaboration*

Effective inclusive education for autistic students requires communication and collaboration (Lindsay *et al*., 2014; Roberts and Simpson, 2016; Roberts and Webster, 2020; Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022).

Collaboration between teachers can strengthen capacity to provide inclusive education through engagement with organic professional development in the form of sharing of knowledge and information (Forlin, 2010; Mulholland and O'Connor, 2016), to date, this has largely been evidenced by mainstream teachers requesting information from Special Education Teachers (Daly *et al.*, 2016) however, it has immense potential in terms of sharing of expertise among all teachers. The Communities of Practice (CoP) or Professional Learning Communities (PLC) models have been identified as potential frameworks to support the sharing of expertise among teachers (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2018) with success reported among teachers of autistic students (Ver Loren Themaat, 2019).

Inter-professional collaboration between teachers and other external professionals has also been identified as crucial to support autistic students' development and success in education (Lindsay *et al.*, 2014; Dunleavy-Lavin *et al.,* 2018; GOI, 2022). Collaboration with external professionals is necessary to capitalise on the specialist knowledge of others. For example, collaboration with OTs has been deemed imperative in supporting the sensory needs of autistic students in the classroom context (Dynia *et al.*, 2023).

Collaboration between teachers and parents has been identified, in policy and literature, as one of the most important partnerships when supporting autistic students (Lindsay *et al*., 2014; Roberts and Simpson, 2016; Roberts and Webster, 2020; GOI, 2022; DoE, 2024). There is ample evidence to suggest that communication and collaboration between education settings and parents can improve the outcomes for autistic children with benefits in relation to school performance, positive attitudes, behavior, social participation and self-esteem cited (Murray *et al.*, 2011; LaBarbera, 2017; Roberts and Webster, 2020). Moyse (2022) argues that authentic collaboration is potentially even more important in the case of autistic girls who may mask their autistic characteristics and internalise their distress in the school context, and therefore teachers may not recognise their need for support.

While teachers (Lindsay *et al.*, 2014; Bond and Hebron, 2016) and parents (Falkmer *et al.*, 2015; Hebron and Bond, 2017) recognise the benefits of positive partnerships, there is evidence to suggest these parent-professional partnerships are not always easy to

establish, nor do they always exist (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013; Critchley *et al.*, 2019; Moyse, 2022). Differences in perceived collaborative effort (LaBarbera, 2017), differences in attitudes and expectations (Woods, 2019) as well as differing perceptions of the child's needs (Gray *et al.*, 2021; Moyse, 2022) can impact collaborative efforts.

2.8.4.2 *School Ethos*

Ethos has been identified as one of the key principles to support best practice for the inclusive provision for autistic students (GOI, 2022). Irish policy defines an inclusive school ethos or 'culture' as one that recognises inclusion as the responsibility of the whole school, with an emphasis placed on the belonging and connectedness of all students (DoE, 2024a: 8). Research indicates that a school with an inclusive ethos or culture is a place where students tend to feel safe, secure, competent and valued (Tjernberg and Heimdahl Mattson, 2014; Rajotte *et al.*, 2024). The role of a positive and inclusive school ethos has also been credited for its potential to challenge stereotypes, remove stigma and increase expectations for all children (Goodall, 2015). The importance of ethos has been acknowledged by autistic students in research who emphasised the link between school ethos and inclusion, conceptualising inclusion as 'being happy, safe and being part of the school community rather than being the outsider looking in' (Goodall, 2020a: 1304).

However, research by McKeon (2020) highlights two significant factors influencing the enactment of a truly inclusive ethos in the post-primary context in Ireland. McKeon (2020) found that rather than placing individual students and their needs at the centre of decision making, SEN students were viewed as a homogenous group in terms of how they interacted with policies, procedures and organisational structures in the school. Furthermore, the 'academic' ethos that permeates Irish post-primary schools can dictate whether meaningful inclusion occurs for students with SEN (McKeon, 2020). These systemic challenges are also emphasised by Fitzgerald (2018) who addressed the need for post-primary schools to adopt a functional system whereby students' progress on their individual targets are recognised in addition to their examination performance.

Recognising ethos as a downward cascade from macro system level to microsystem practices, the pivotal role of school leadership must be acknowledged as a critical component. It is proposed that to create an inclusive ethos, leaders need to promote understanding of difference and diversity, build capacity and facilitate inclusive practice within and beyond the school setting (Riehl, 2000; Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2018). Developing an inclusive ethos mindset at a whole-school level may support can impact the implementation of inclusive practices at a classroom level, with Communities

of Practice (CoP) identified as a mechanism to support this (Fitzgerald, 2018). However, leaders must also recognise individual teacher's unique needs in terms of capacity building (Fitzgerald, 2018; Shevlin *et al.*, 2013).

Arguably, the many core elements required to facilitate an inclusive education for autistic students are underpinned by the concept of ethos (Roberts and Webster, 2020). The literature explored in this section has attempted to highlight the many facets of inclusive education for autistic students, including the need for flexible provision, environmental adaptations, universal and targeted support, teacher knowledge and understanding, and communication and collaboration with parents and other professionals (Morewood *et al.*, 2011; Goodall, 2015; Lloyd, 2019). However, in appreciating the importance of school ethos and leadership, it is important to recognise that some barriers to inclusion exist at a macro level, in terms of resourcing and policies (Lindsay *et al*, 2013; Roberts and Simpson, 2016). The above emphasises the complex and multi-layered nature of inclusive education for autistic individuals in mainstream settings.

2.9 Educational Experiences of Autistic Girls

This section will review the extant literature examining the school experiences of autistic girls, focusing on the learning process, transitions, the interactional and sensory environments, anxiety and mental health and differences in staff and parent perspectives. As detailed in *Section 2.2.1*, while research eliciting the voice of autistic girls directly will be prioritised, parental and educator perspectives may supplement the review. Previous research has predominantly utilised semi-structured interviews/surveys to gain insight into the autistic students' experiences of mainstream education (Fayette and Bond, 2018). However, the use of more varied and alternative participatory methods in research is emerging, with some evidence existing in studies with autistic girls. Examples of some of these diverse methods include photo voice, diamond ranking, visual templates and drawing/diary activities (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson *et al*., 2021). Accommodations such as facilitating engagement through email, phone calls or video calls were also reported (Honeybourne, 2015; Vine Foggo and Webster, 2017). While the majority of studies reviewed were focused on the post-primary context, given the emerging nature of this research area some studies relating to the primary context are included. Participant sample sizes ranged from two autistic girls to 100 autistic girls and boys. For the most part, sample sizes in studies examining the mainstream educational experiences of autistic girls are small. Appendix F provides a summary of the literature reviewed.

2.9.1 The Learning Process

Research suggests that autistic girls face a variety of barriers engaging with and experiencing success in learning in the mainstream classroom (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2020; Ayirebi and Thomas, 2024; Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024). Autistic girls often noted that they experienced significant challenges with many of the pre-requisite skills to engage with learning in the mainstream class such as organisation, planning, prioritising and time management (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020). Unclear criteria and expectations alongside instructions that lacked clarity and tasks that lacked a clear rationale impacted understanding of and engagement with tasks (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020). Other challenges, such as difficulties with higher order thinking, understanding complex or abstract ideas, generalising, making inferences, summarising and synthesising were also identified (Honeybourne, 2015; Jarman and Rayner, 2015).

Staying on task throughout lessons appeared to be a significant challenge for many girls (Moyse and Porter, 2015) with the sensory stimuli in the mainstream classroom having implications for attention (Honeybourne, 2015; Sproston *et al.*, 2017; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020). For some, added social demands such as collaborative activities or group discussions further influenced learning experiences with the demands of flexible thinking, social interactions and fast paced discussions exacerbating challenges (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015). Some research also highlighted challenges relating to assessment of learning (Jacobs *et al.*, 2020; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). Girls reported anxiety around tests and assessments, highlighting issues such as inadequate support, high expectations, and uniform approaches to assessment (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021) but recognising the value of flexible assessment formats (Jacobs *et al.*, 2020).

It is apparent that challenges accessing and engaging with the learning process resulted in increased anxiety and stress for autistic girls (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Sproston *et al.*, 2017; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020). Concerns about falling behind with work and getting into trouble were raised by some girls (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019). Similarly, in research by Jacobs *et al.* (2020) uncertainty, fear of failure or task incompletion and stress relating to workloads were reported. These challenges were exacerbated by low self-confidence and a reluctance to ask for help. This is further supported by Wagner (2019) who raised concerns that autistic girls are often reluctant to ask for help and difficulties coping with the increasing complexity of work may result in withdrawal. This is somewhat evidence in research by Sproston *et al.* (2017). Girls who

had experienced exclusion from mainstream settings spoke about their experiences of performance anxiety while their parents attributed the pressure associated with attendance and academic achievement in the mainstream context as a contributor of their exclusion (Sproston *et al.*, 2017). Academic pressure was also discussed by girls in research by Jarman and Rayner (2015) who acknowledged their academic success in the mainstream classroom but emphasised that a significant among of effort was required to overcome the many barriers they faced to achieve this.

2.9.2 Transitions across and within settings

Education transitions have been identified as a significant challenge for autistic students (Nuske *et al.*, 2019; Horgan *et al.*, 2022; Lynam *et al*., 2024) and a critical area for support for all students with SEN more broadly (DoE, 2024a). A systematic review recognised the transition to secondary school as particularly challenging for autistic students and is marked by increased anxiety and social relationships challenges.

Research has drawn specific attention to the increased demands associated with the post-primary context that can negatively impact the transition experience for autistic girls (Cridland *et al.,* 2014; Peters and Brooks, 2016). Factors such as new routines, unstructured periods, changing teachers and classrooms, increased organisational demands and changes to commute have been cited as specific aspects of the transition process that may cause difficulties and result in increased stress (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Peters and Brooks, 2016; Essex and Melham, 2019; Matthews *et al.*, 2019). Contrasting stark transition experiences, Hebron (2019) emphasised the importance of effective communication and collaboration for successful transitions. Furthermore, the need the transition to be a gradual, structured process supported by proactive staff and strong leadership were recognised as important (Hebron, 2019; Essex and Melham, 2019) with parents of autistic girls emphasising the importance of clarity around expectations and fostering positive relationships from the outset (Peters and Brooks, 2016; Gray, 2021). In addition, autistic young women emphasised the importance of staff being aware of their autism diagnosis in the transition beyond the post-primary context (Essex and Melham, 2019).

It is noteworthy that the challenges associated with transitions are not limited to the initial transition experience of girls moving from primary to post-primary, but in some cases persistent as challenges throughout the post-primary experience (Tomlinson *et al*., 2020; Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024). Furthermore, other within setting transitions appear to cause challenges for autistic girls (Tomlinson *et al*., 2020). Moving from structured lesson

to unstructured periods such as play or lunchtime were identified as stressful for some of the girls, with particularly focus on the sensory environment during these transitions (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Honeybourne, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). The attentional resources required in changing classes and switching focus between lessons was identified as another transitional challenge by girls (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021).

2.9.3 The Interactional Environment

Research has suggested that autistic girls may appear more socially adept from the outside looking in (Hiller *et al.*, 2014), however, social communication and interaction difficulties permeate research with autistic girls (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2020; Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024) with peer interactions, friendships and interactions with adults frequently discussed in the school context.

2.9.3.1 *Social Interactions in the School Context*

Social experiences appear to play a significant impact in autistic girls' sense of belonging in the school context (Myles *et al*., 2019; O'Hagan *et al*., 2024), however, these experiences can be influenced by the challenges experienced by autistic girls in the domain of social communication and interaction along with the actions or inactions of others in the environment.

Many autistic girls attribute their challenges interacting and building relationships with peers to difficulties with social communication and a lack of confidence, beliefs that are often shared by their parents and teachers (Moyse and Porter, 2015; O'Hagan and Hebron, 2017; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Milner *et al.*, 2019; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). It has been reported that the unpredictable nature of social interactions can cause stress and anxiety for autistic girls (Rainsberry, 2017) with difficulties understanding the social rules of interactions further exacerbating experiences (Myles *et al.*, 2019; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020).

Likened to being a 'wall flower', autistic women and girls in research carried out by Milner *et al.*, 2019: 2398) shared that it was sometimes easier to distance themselves from interactions rather than experience difficulties such as not understanding humour and not knowing how to join or engage with conversations. These challenges have been discussed within the school context also with autistic girls expressing a desire to be involved in groups and to interact with others, however they identified challenges in terms of entering groups and sustaining interactions (Honeybourne, 2015; Myles *et al.*, 2019; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021; O'Hagan *et al*., 2024). Although conducted in the primary school context, observations in research by Moyse and Porter (2015) reinforced these challenges as the

girls struggled to participate in group interactions and exhibited challenges in understanding of social cues.

In some instances, girls reported feeling different from their peers and attributed their challenges to their autism diagnosis, citing it as a barrier to successful social interactions (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Salter, 2019). Salter (2019) addressed the impact of her challenges interacting with her peers, reporting on their negative impact on her school experiences. Negative experiences alongside challenges appeared to promote the use of masking among autistic girls in the school context (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2020; Josefsson and Johansson, 2024) which resulted in meltdowns and/or shutdowns upon return home to their safe space (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Milner *et al.*, 2019; Mesa and Hamilton, 2022). It could be argued that engagement in masking may be prompted by a fear of judgement from peers with research with autistic girls highlighting peer ignorance about autism and its impact on their inclusion (Cook *et al.*, 2018; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Salter, 2019).

Reports of bullying and social isolation were prevalent in research with autistic girls (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Cook *et al*., 2018; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Salter, 2019). Being bullied was identified as a main concern in research by Goodall and MacKenzie (2019) with reference made to verbal, physical and one count of sexual abuse as well as being actively excluded from plans. In research by Cook *et al.* (2018) bullying was a feature of all the girls' experiences, both in mainstream and in their specialist class. bullying was perceived to be more intentional and deliberately intended to cause harm in the mainstream context (Cook *et al.*, 2018). Meanwhile, findings in Sproston *et al.* (2017) revealed that bullying and being bullied played a significant role in the experiences of autistic girls who had been excluded from the mainstream context.

The impact of bullying was also discussed in research. For some bullying let to feelings of social isolation (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Salter, 2019) while Honeybourne (2015) highlighted the long-term mental health implications. Loneliness was also highlighted by girls (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson *et al*., 2021) and was attributed to social communication and interaction challenges arising from autistic identity as well as the perceptions and judgement of others, drawing parallels with accounts of loneliness among autistic adults (Elmose, 2020). It has been argued that tailoring interventions by gender needs may be beneficial for autistic girls to support participation in peer groups and discuss potential issues arising in interactions but also to

develop self-awareness and understanding (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Dean *et al.*, 2017).

2.9.3.2 *Friendships*

Friendship was identified in some studies as one of the most important but difficult aspect of school (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Myles *et al.*, 2019). Autistic girls, for the most part, expressed a desire for friendships and opportunities for social engagement, however, they often faced challenges in this area (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Vine Foggo and Webster, 2017; Cook *et al.*, 2018; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Halsall *et al.*, 2021).

Some girls shared that they did not have any friends and with some reporting that this negatively impacted their wellbeing (Rainsberry, 2017; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019), however, others indicated that they did not have friends and were happier to spend time alone (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019). Other research acknowledged the loss of friendships, particularly during periods of transition (Vine Foggo and Webster, 2017; Essex and Melham, 2019; Ryan *et al.*, 2021). In the case of limited and/or loss of friendships, it was sometimes hypothesised that the disability/diagnosis played a role in this (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Sproston *et al.*, 2017; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019).

Some research addressed the challenges experienced by girls in 'finding their tribe' (Sedgewick *et al.*, 2016; Cook *et al.,* 2018; Halsall *et al.*, 2021: 2074). In some research girls recognised they were on the periphery of social groups and expressed a desire for more fruitful friendships (Vine Foggo and Webster, 2017; Myles *et al.*, 2019). This appeared to be amplified for autistic girls in research by Halsall *et al.* (2021) who experienced both the mainstream setting and had access to a base case. The girls and their parents alluded to tensions negotiating identity across these contexts, with girls expressing a lack of fulfilment in friendships in their base class but recognising they were unable to maintain the friendships with girls in their mainstream class. Other research however, reported that autistic girls experienced greater friendship successes when accessing specialist settings, establishing friendships with autistic girls or those with similar interests (Sedgewick *et al.*, 2016; Cook *et al.*, 2018). However, while the school context has been identified as a significant context for friendships (Ryan *et al.*, 2021), broader research acknowledges that other contexts such as common interest groups and disability support services among others may offer additional opportunities for autistic individuals to find their tribe (Chan *et al.*, 2023)

In cases where friendships appeared to exist, the complexity of adolescent female friendship (*Section 2.4.1.2*), appeared to negatively impact girls' the experiences and their ability to maintain these friendships (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Vine Foggo and Webster, 2017; Cook *et al.*, 2018; Ryan *et al.*, 2021; Halsall *et al.*, 2021; O'Hagan *et al.*, 2024). Continual shifts in friendships groups, differences in communication, misunderstandings and bullying permeated experiences for the girls. Girls in research by Vine Foggo and Webster (2017) drew specific attention to difficulties navigating conflict and disagreements and the implications of this in terms of social exhaustion. Parents in these studies attributed the friendships between autistic girls and their non-autistic peers are often unsuccessful due to the divergence in expectations between both groups and the complex set of social skills required in these friendship interactions (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Cook *et al.*, 2018; Halsall *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, Tomlinson *et al.* (2021) raised concerns in relation to autistic girls' perceptions of their friendships, with their research indicating a mismatch occurred between the student's perception and their parents'/psychotherapist's perceptions of peer relationships. The autistic girl believed she had positive interactions with peers, good relationships with classmates and access to support from her close friends, however, a counter-belief was shared by her parents/psychotherapist who believed she experienced more social conflict than she had shared.

Despite the identified challenges, research has also highlighted experiences which indicate positive experiences of friendship among autistic adolescent girls (Rainsberry, 2017; Vine Foggo and Webster, 2017; Sedgewick *et al.*, 2019b; Ryan *et al.*, 2021). Reports of positive friendships were often underpinned by the notion of similar neurotypes. Analysis of successful friendship in the study carried out by Cook *et al.* (2018) revealed that the autistic girls formed these friendships with other girls with SEN and unknowingly drifted towards other autistic girls. This finding also emerged in other research with autistic individuals (Black *et al.*, 2024) and more specifically autistic girls (Honeybourne, 2015; Rainsberry, 2017).

Research emphasised the importance of friendships for belonging in the school context (Rainsberry, 2017; Myles *et al.*, 2019; O'Hagan *et al.*, 2024). Having one or a small group of special or close friends was reported in literature (Rainsberry, 2017; Salter, 2019; Sedgewick *et al.*, 2019; Lam *et al.*, 2020; Ryan *et al.*, 2021) with the role of extra-curricular clubs identified as significant for friendship (O'Hagan *et al.*, 2024). Girls in research by Myles *et al.* (2019) reported that their friendships enabled them to feel

comfortable, understood and safe. Furthermore, close proximity to friends provided social security and resulted in increased confidence in the post-primary context. The significance of this is further highlighted by Ayirebi and Thomas (2024) who recognised that unstructured times may offer benefits for autistic girls by providing an opportunity to reconnect with friends, in preferred spaces and that external support in the domain of friendships such as the provision of opportunities to meet with others and the opportunity to attend activities may be useful. The above research corresponds with general autistic conceptualisations of friendship that position shared understanding, similar interests and security as important elements of friendships (Black *et al.*, 2024)

2.9.3.3 *Adults in the School Environment*

Autistic girls demonstrated varied perceptions of adults in the school environment with their experiences often influenced by their interactions with them. Autistic girls recognised and praised teachers who supported them in the school context (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Rainsberry, 2017; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). Girls in research by Rainsberry (2017) highlighted the positive personality characteristics of teachers. Similarly, girls in research by Goodall and MacKenzie (2019) who highlighted the need for teachers to care for and make an effort to understand autistic girls, reiterating the importance of the relational aspect underpinning school experiences. Focusing on support specifically, girls valued teachers who demonstrated flexibility and made adjustments to enable them to experience success in the mainstream context (Rainsberry, 2017; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020). More broadly, girls positioned teachers as facilitators of inclusion (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). They were grateful for the support networks and individualised accommodations that were available to them and acknowledged the importance of trusted staff-student relationships to facilitate these.

On the other hand, the perceptions, attitudes and actions of schools staff negatively impacted the experiences of some girls (Rainsberry, 2017; Sproston *et al.*, 2017; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021; O'Hagan *et al.*, 2024). Negative staff attitudes towards and perceptions of autism resulted in autistic girls not feeling included in the mainstream setting (Rainsberry, 2017; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019). Negative attitudes and a lack of a knowledge of autism impacted the girls' ability to develop relationships with their teachers, while other felt invisible to teachers (Honeybourne, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019).

Contrasting sharply to feelings of invisibility, one of the girls in research by Tomlinson *et al.* (2021) expressed that some teaching assistants provided too much help, which drew

unwanted attention on the girl. Similar tensions relating to support provision were also discussed in research by Jacobs *et al.* (2020) with one of the girls rejecting support provision in the form of withdrawal due to its overt nature, while another preferring to receive help outside the classroom context.

Inconsistencies in staff awareness in relation to support needs was also identified by girls, particularly in the case of substitute teachers. This was discussed in the context of individualised accommodations and inappropriate expectations where the girls believed some staff did not understand their needs and lead to frustration and discontent (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). For others however, the impact of inadequate knowledge had profoundly negative impacts. Girls who had been excluded from the mainstream context reported that tensions with teachers had contributed to their exclusion (Sproston *et al.*, 2017) while insufficient understanding of autism had led to inappropriate sanctions for girls re-engaging with the mainstream context and breakdowns in trust tended to exacerbate an already challenging process (O'Hagan *et al.*, 2024). Although arguably insufficient from an inclusive perspective, having at least one key adult in the school environment was deemed as a supportive factor which could positively mediate school experiences for autistic girls (Sproston *et al.,* 2017; Gray *et al.*, 2021; O'Hagan *et al.*, 2024).

2.9.4 Sensory Environment

The sensory environment is often identified as a challenging aspect of mainstream education for autistic girls (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2020; Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024) with inadequate teacher knowledge of sensory differences cited as a further barrier (Jarman and Rayner, 2015). Sensory sensitivities contributed to the overwhelming nature of the school environment (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Sproston *et al.*, 2017; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). Noise levels (including fire alarms and school bells), bright lights, busy corridors and lunch space were reported to varying extents in different studies as causing sensory distress for autistic girls (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Rainsberry, 2017; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). In contrast, research by Tomlinson *et al.* (2021) reported that the school environment enhanced the educational experience for one autistic girl, citing an abundance of quiet spaces and green spaces around the school and their calming effect.

Beyond influencing school experiences more generally, inappropriate sensory environments were also reported to influence learning for autistic girls (Honeybourne, 2015; Sproston *et al.*, 2017). Girls in research by Sproston *et al.* (2017) compared the

busyness of the mainstream setting with the calmer, quieter, pupil referral unit, identifying the latter as more conducive to learning. Speaking to the diversity of sensory needs, contrasting sensory preferences for learning were identified in research by Honeybourne (2015) with some girls reporting a need for background noise while others expressing a preference to work quietly.

2.9.5 Anxiety & Mental Health

Although anxiety is not a core feature of autism, many of the core features of autism may result in increased anxiety in the school context when not supported (Costley *et al.*, 2021). It is apparent in the literature that the mismatch between the core characteristics of autism and the school environment, further amplified by a doubly minoritised status of being an autistic girl, can negatively impact the wellbeing of autistic girls (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2020; Ayirebi and Thomas, 2024; Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024). Anxiety permeated many of the girls' accounts, either implicitly interpreted by researchers or explicitly addressed by the girls themselves (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Rainsberry, 2017; Cook *et al.*, 2018; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020). For some girls, anxiety was a result of academic demands (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020), however, for others, it was associated with sensory sensitivities, social challenges and feelings of difference (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Cook *et al.*, 2018; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019). Interestingly, while the narratives of autistic girls and their parents were often similar, in discussing anxiety it appeared that parents underestimated the extent of the challenges faced by the girls in the school context and thus, their impact (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). Given these experiences, it is unsurprising that emotional support to address mental health and anxiety has been identified as critical for autistic girls (Ayirebi and Thomas, 2024).

Girls identified personalised and individualised support as importance for addressing anxiety, highlighting the usefulness of flexible communication, safe spaces and time to regulate with school well-being animals (Tomlinson *et al.,* 2021). The importance of safe spaces was also addressed in other studies in terms of the need for calm, quiet areas within the school, with girls citing the busy school environment as anxiety inducing (Cook *et al.*, 2018; Myles *et al.*, 2019; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). Access to such supports was largely dependent on individual teachers and their awareness of and capacity to support (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020). However, protective and compensatory behaviours were sometimes adopted by the girls to hide anxiety (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Goodall and

MacKenzie, 2019). In some instances where supports were not provided, autistic girls made use of personal modifications to cope (Moyse and Porter, 2015). Withdrawal from social spaces, school avoidance and the need to separate home and school were also reported as coping mechanisms (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Ayirebi and Thomas, 2024).

In addition to within-school supports, access to external professionals both within and beyond the school environment were reported as valuable (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021; O'Hagan *et al.*, 2024). In research by Tomlinson *et al.* (2021), the availability of a psychotherapist in the school setting was praised by both the girls and their parents and was identified as a key factor in determining experiences and supporting engagement with the school context. Similarly, findings from O'Hagan *et al.* (2024) emphasised the importance of external professionals such as counsellors, psychiatrists and key adults in supporting autistic girls with school attendance, processing experiences and self-understanding as they re-engaged with the mainstream context.

While anxiety was discussed to the greatest extent, other studies reveal more broad concerns around the mental health (Honeybourne, 2015; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). Girls in a study conducted by Honeybourne (2015) reported feelings of depression, while mental health concerns relating to self-identity, self-injurious behaviours and experiences of suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and disordered patterns of eating along with reports of intense stress were identified to a greater extent in research by Tomlinson *et al.* (2021).

2.9.6 Differences between Staff and Parental Perspectives

It is argued that strong parent-professional partnerships may be particularly pertinent in the context of autistic girls where less may be known by professionals in terms of recognising and supporting this cohort (Tutt, 2019; Moyse, 2022). A systematic review of research further enforces the importance of supportive relationships between home and school in the case of autistic girls (Ayirebi and Thomas, 2024), however, significant discrepancies between school staff and parent perspectives have been highlighted as an issue (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2020).

Moyse (2022) highlighted that parents of autistic girls are acutely aware of the difficulties their daughters are experiencing in the school context, however, consistent with findings from Moyse and Porter (2015), parents shared that schools were not receptive to this information. Furthermore, they noted that assumptions were often made about their daughters, potentially due to incomplete or outdated knowledge of autism, and in some cases, schools removed supports where they misunderstood or failed to appreciate its

purpose. Other tensions that permeate this discourse are focused on parental assessment of need being of greater severity than recognized by school staff (Moyse and Porter, 2015), parents' views or concerns not being valued (Cook *et al.*, 2018) and in some cases dismissed entirely (Jarman and Rayner, 2015).

Parents in several studies reported working with school staff as challenging. In research by Jarman and Rayner (2015) parents felt that teachers disregarded their daughters' difficulties and demonstrated an unwillingness to help (Jarman and Rayner, 2015) while findings from Gray *et al.* (2021) revealed discrepancies between parental views of what would be best in terms of support for their daughters in mainstream and the support currently being offered. Parental reports often questioned the knowledge and understanding of teachers and school staff in relation to the characteristics of autism in girls and stressed the need for educational practitioners to receive specific training in this area to facilitate the provision of meaningful and appropriate supports (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Gray *et al.*, 2021). From a somewhat different perspective, parents of autistic girls who have been excluded from mainstream education were frustrated by the limited understanding of their daughters' needs at school and questioned whether school staff were frightened by the level of support required (Sproston *et al.*, 2017). They emphasised the need for at least one person in the school to be knowledgeable in the area.

On the contrary, other research demonstrated how collaborative home-school communication enabled parents and staff to share information and concerns, and make suggestions for support, resulting in positive outcomes for autistic girls (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; O'Hagan *et al.*, 2024). Experiencing both extremes, parents in research by Sproston *et al.* (2017) contrasted the effective communication, supportive working relationships and bi-directional understanding between teachers and parents when their daughters were in specialist provision compared to when they were in mainstream provision.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the value of home-school communication and collaboration when supporting autistic girls in the mainstream context. They highlight the importance of including the student, parent and educator voice in research. Exclusion of a cohort may limit exploration of potential discrepancies of thought of differences in opinion. If these discrepancies are not identified, autistic girls may be required to make their own modifications to compensate for inadequate recognition, support and accommodations.

2.10 Conclusion

From a diagnostic and experiential lens, the first part of this review examined an emerging field of research, *i.e.* sex/gender differences in autism. While research developments in this area are positive and extremely welcome in terms of addressing the historical marginalisation of autistic females (Saxe, 2017; Moore *et al.*, 2022), the experiential literature reveals that knowledge arising from research surrounding sex/gender differences in autism is slow to filter into the public domain. Furthermore, research must reach the hands of those whom it can have a practical impact on and for (Barrett and Prendergast, 2025a). This issue is illustrated in the second part of the review. The literature reviewed in relation to autistic girls' experiences of education suggest that research progress is exceeding changes to practice. Recognising the potential implications for the education context, consideration must be afforded to the research-to-practice gap (Green, 2014; Barrett and Prendergast, 2025a).

It has been suggested that the use of research evidence in Irish schools is focused on how to conduct research as a part of self-evaluation processes rather than the dissemination of findings from research studies, with lack of time, the inaccessibility of research and the disconnect between schools and higher education cited as barriers (Barrett and Prendergast, 2025a; 2025b). Recognising these barriers, Research Learning Communities (RLCs; Mintz *et al.*, 2021) and Communities of Practice between academics and practitioners (CoPs; Guldberg, 2016) may support school staff in the dissemination of research. However, given the complexity and nuance involved in inclusive education, it could be argued that CoP or PLCs may also be required within school contexts to bridge the theory-to-practice gap to support educators to enact their knowledge in practice (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2018; Ver Loren Van Themaat, 2019).

Therefore, based on the literature explored in this review, while developments in research are evident, the marginalisation of autistic females appears to persist in practice contexts. The following chapter will present the methodological underpinnings of the current study examining this phenomenon in the Irish education context.

Reflective Note:
Throughout the literature review process, I reflected upon the direction of the initial research questions discussed in Section 1.14. What I was reading made me challenge the reductionist nature of my questions and contemplate the presumed stability of experience implied within the phrasing of the 'a prior' questions I had set out. The empirical literature emphasised the nuances of lived experience, the complexity of school experiences and the role of context in determining such experiences.

Furthermore, at this point my engagement with existing studies in this field drew my attention to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a potential approach to underpin my study. IPA studies by their very nature are exploratory in nature, focusing on eliciting and understanding the lived experience of individuals. However, the 'a priori' questions positioned the autistic girls as sources of data, rather than meaning-makers whose subjective experiences are individual and diverse. Therefore, informed by the empirical literature, a growing understanding of the concepts underpinning the research and consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of IPA research, I modified my research questions to embrace a more experiential, interpretive orientation. I believe switching from a 'what' to a 'how' orientation invited a more holistic, open-ended exploration of school experiences, leaving space for complexity, contradiction and nuance in the research. Aside from its primary purpose, the literature review process proved integral in the development of this research, supporting me to reframe my research questions and consider those questions through a broader methodological lens.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological underpinning of the current research. The overarching aim of the research and the research questions are first presented before a rationale for the complementary use of the pragmatic-interpretivist paradigm is presented. The research design and theoretical perspectives informing the research are explored, before a section on researcher positionality is presented. An overview of the research sample, with reference to sex/gender considerations, precedes a critical examination of ethical considerations for inclusive research. The second part of this chapter is broken into two parts: the primary study and the embedded study. The ontological and epistemological underpinnings of each study are outlined, and the approach adopted detailed. Specific information on the sample, data collection methods, procedures, and analysis will be documented. The final part of this chapter attends to the concepts of quality and reflexivity, before presenting the overarching conceptual framework of the study.

3.2 Research Aim and Questions

Recognising the paucity of research examining the school experiences of autistic girls, this research provides a groundbreaking contribution in the Irish educational research landscape and adds to the development of the emerging body of empirical research internationally. Attending to methodological critiques within autism research, this research amplifies the voices of autistic girls, while also recognising the value of other stakeholder perspectives.

This research endeavoured to establish a greater understanding of the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream education settings at post-primary level in Ireland. The primary objective of the study was focused on conducting research with an underrepresented community in research, autistic girls, to explore the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of school experiences. Recognising the intrinsic characteristics and the broader systemic factors that potentially influence the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream provision, a multi-informant, mixed methods approach was adopted, as reflected in the main research question below:

- How can the mainstream educational experiences of autistic female students be better understood through examination of student, parent/guardian and teacher perspectives?

Five research questions guided me in attending to the overarching research question. The first three questions pertain to the primary study and question four and five relate to the secondary study.

1. How do autistic girls experience mainstream education provision at post-primary level?
2. How do girls interact with their autistic identity with reference to the school context?
3. What are parents/guardians' perspectives on their daughters' experiences in mainstream settings?
4. How do mainstream class teachers evaluate their knowledge of autism (generally and in girls); their confidence recognising autism in girls and supporting autistic girls in the education context, and their professional development needs?
5. Are teachers aware of gender differences in autism?

3.3 Paradigm

A paradigm is a 'way of looking at the world' (Mertens, 2020: 8). Commonly referred to as a researcher's 'worldview' (Kuhn, 1962) and composed of certain philosophical assumptions which guide and direct the research action, the underpinning paradigm of a piece of research not only influences the methods chosen for a given study, but can also act as the conceptual lens through which all methodological aspects of the research project can be examined (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2020; Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

I opted to adopt an amalgam of the pragmatic and interpretivist paradigm for this research to fulfil the methodological needs of this multi-informant, mixed methods study (Mertens, 2020). The pragmatic paradigm is identified as appropriate for mixed methods research design (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009) as it recognises that a mixture of ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology is acceptable to understand social phenomena (Wahyuni, 2012). However, as autistic girls' experiences are at the core of this research, I believed that the value placed on subjectivity within the interpretivist paradigm had to be recognised (Mertens, 2020), thus the arrival at an amalgamation of paradigms.

Grounded in the 'behavioural phenotype' framing of autism, historically autism research has been situated in the positivist paradigm. While a positivist lens could be argued as useful, particularly in terms of providing an objective set of criteria for diagnosis, it fails to value the varied, subjective and experiential nature of autism, instead framing it as a reality external to individual consciousness (Milton and Green, 2024). Appreciating the multiplicity of autistic experience, I endeavoured to gain insight into the experiences of autistic girls mindful that their experiences may differ from those of autistic boys. Nonetheless, in recognising the confines of the current diagnostic process, I recognised the merit in adopting a more objective stance to examine the ways in which autistic females meet the diagnostic criteria and explore teachers' perceptions of their awareness, knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to autism and girls. Considering the complexity of autism, school experiences and the multiple perspectives required to gain a more holistic understanding of autistic girls' mainstream educational experiences, the adoption of a merged paradigmatic stance was integral to the success of this research (Mertens, 2020). The pragmatic-interpretivist paradigm facilitated the collection of qualitative data from interviews with autistic girls and their parents and a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data from teachers through an online questionnaire (Wahyuni, 2012).

3.4 Research Design

A Mixed Methods Research (MMR) design, underpinned by the pragmatic-interpretivist paradigm, was selected to fulfil the qualitative and quantitative needs of the current study. The adoption of MMR facilitated multiple worldviews to be reflected upon and appreciated, thus bridging the polarities of existing singular paradigms (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011). Recognising the embodied nature of autism and the interacting systems that influence experience in an education setting, MMR presented as a suitable design to underpin this research in which multiple perspectives garnered through multiple methods were required to gain a deeper understanding of the school experiences of autistic girls.

Referred to as the new or 'third methodological movement' (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003: 3 as cited in Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009) MMR combines qualitative and quantitative data to develop a more comprehensive data set, facilitate the elicitation of various perspectives and answer questions in the most intuitive and appropriate way (Jick, 1979; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Denscombe, 2007; Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011). MMR holds significant popularity in educational and psychological research with

the synergy and integration of quantitative and qualitative data deemed particularly useful in solving problems that present in complex educational and/or social contexts (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Fetters and Freshwater, 2015; Mertens, 2020). I believe that this holds true in the current research. Quantitative data will be gathered from teachers to better understand their perceptions of their awareness, knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to autism and girls while qualitative data will seek to provide insight into the school experiences of autistic girls, from both their perspective and their parents/guardians.

MMR is, however, not without its criticisms and while some methodologists believe that researchers should be free to choose what works in order to achieve the research aim (Howe, 1988; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Cohen *et al*., 2018), others believe that it is inappropriate to mix both qualitative and quantitative methods due to their contrasting philosophical orientations (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011; Liu, 2022). Justification for the use of MMR in this study will be explored more comprehensively in *Section 3.4.2* with reference to the specific MMR design selected. However, from a broader perspective, in order to build context and understand school experiences, I believed one data source to be insufficient for this study, with the overall research aim best addressed through multiple projects (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011).

3.4.1 Enacting Mixed Methods Research

MMR goes beyond the mixing of qualitative and quantitative research methods, requiring engaged reflection on the philosophical and methodological orientation of the research (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011). Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) argue that the enactment of MMR is complex and varied and is guided by a series of key decisions made by the researcher (*fig.6*). The decisions as detailed below determined the specific design to be adopted in the current study.

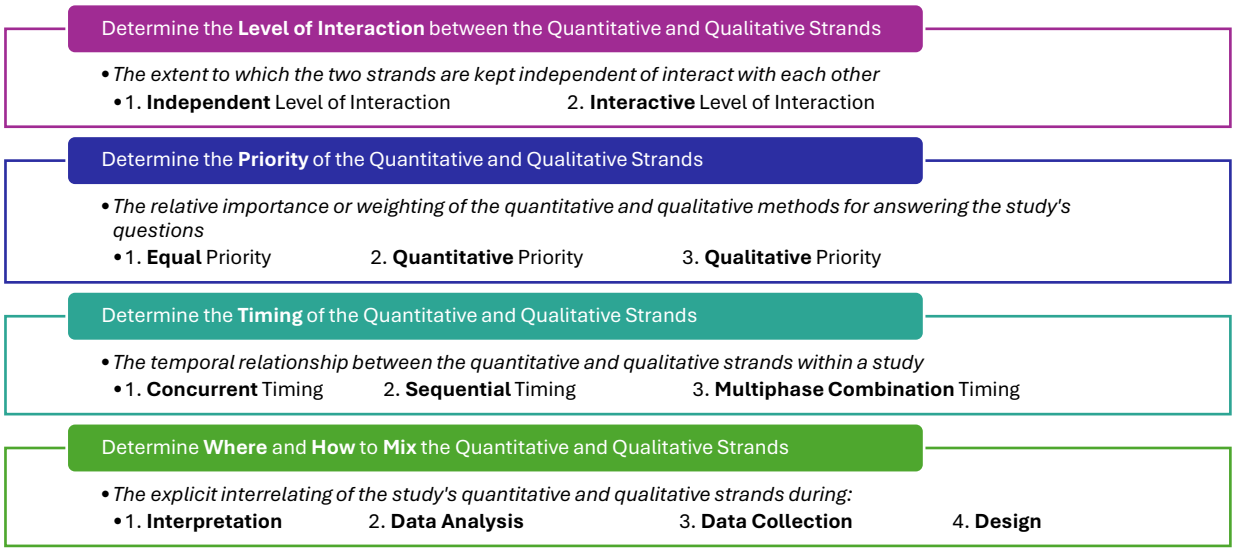


Figure 6: Key Decisions in Choosing a Mixed Methods Design (Adapted from Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011).

The first decision made was in relation to the **priority** of the strands. In line with the overarching aim of the research and in light of my pragmatist-interpretivist paradigmatic stance, a qualitative priority was selected. This decision is also consistent with literature which states that an IPA study should be viewed 'at the very least' as an 'equal partner' in an MMR design (Smith *et al.,* 2022: 124). **Timing** was influenced by the qualitative priority within the research and the associated logistics of this. Therefore, *sequential timing* was selected to enable the secondary study to precede the primary, qualitative study. An interactive **level of interaction** was selected to enable the qualitative and quantitative strands of the study to interact at different points during the research. In selecting an interactive design, the *point of interface* refers to the stage within the process of research where the qualitative and quantitative strands are mixed. **Mixing** in this study occurred in four out of four possible points during the research process, namely; design, collection and analysis, and interpretation. At the design stage mixing was operationalised through *embedded mixing* whereby supplemental quantitative and qualitative methods were embedded within a larger qualitative design. Mixing during data collection was evident in the embedded study through the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. Mixing during data analysis, *i.e. merging,* was used in the secondary study as the national survey included both closed and open-ended questions and was therefore not entirely quantitative. The final point of mixing was during interpretation where both strands were mixed in the final step of the research process, allowing inferences and conclusions to be

drawn. Using the decisions framework presented by Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) provided clarity and structure for thinking about and navigating the MMR process.

3.4.2 Embedded Mixed Methods

Reflecting on the decisions made in relation to the strands within the study and the main mixed methods design types, this study can be situated in an Embedded Mixed Methods (EMM) design (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011; Creswell, 2014). Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) describe EMM as a design where a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data is collected and analysed within a traditionally quantitative or qualitative research design. Adopting an EMM design enabled me to develop a more holistic and contextually sensitive research study to better understand the school experiences of autistic girls. Guided by my pragmatic-interpretivist stance, I selected a 'dominant – less dominant' (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), embedded design (*fig.7)*. As a result, this PhD research comprised of two studies: a primary study and a secondary study. The primary study explored school experiences using parent/daughter dyads. Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith *et al.*, 2022), this study was situated within the dominant, qualitative element of this design and allowed for the collection of rich, think descriptions from autistic girls and their parents/guardians. Meanwhile, the supporting, less dominant element of the research facilitated the inclusion of an initial, mixed method questionnaire which I recognised as necessary for locating the research in the Irish context. This secondary study facilitated the exploration of mainstream teachers' perceptions of their awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism in girls in the mainstream context. This multi-informant, mixed method approach allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of the school experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream post-primary settings in Ireland.

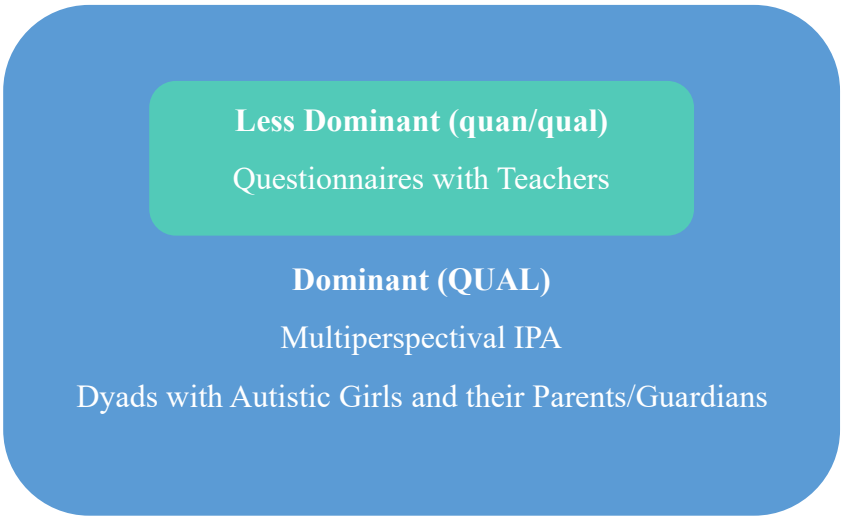


Figure 7: Embedded Mixed Method Design

As an amalgam of the pragmatic-interpretivist paradigm was selected as the overarching paradigm of this research, further exploration into the epistemological and ontological standpoints of researcher in terms of the two components of this EMM study will be delineated separately in *Section 3.10* and *3.11*, respectively. However, in advance of these discussions, the underpinning theoretical perspectives of the research are presented, an overview of the sample provided and the ethical considerations for this research attended to.

3.5 Theoretical Perspectives

This research has been informed and guided by two theoretical perspectives, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and the theory of Intersectional Feminism (Crenshaw, 1989; Carastathis, 2014; Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2015). The bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) is the most robust framework to explore the complexity of school experiences, while Intersectional Feminism provides a complementary theoretical lens that allows for the critical consideration of how gender and neurodivergence intersect and interact with various systems to shape the experiences. Together, these theories provided a lens through which this research and its subsequent findings can be conceptualised and reviewed with reference to.

3.5.1 Bio-Ecological Systems Theory

It is recognised that there are multiple overlapping social systems that influence individual autistic students' experiences of the mainstream setting ranging from home-school collaboration, to teachers and school staff, to school ethos to socio-political systems and wider policy discourse (Hassan *et al*., 2022). Similar to the experiences of

autistic students more generally, a variety of individual and systemic factors influence the educational experiences of autistic girls (Munroe, 2023). Bronfenbrenner's (bio-)ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1995) has been identified as a useful conceptual lens in both research and practice to better understand the lives of children and young people and indeed underpins the Growing up in Ireland National Longitudinal Study of Children (Greene *et al.*, 2010; McGuckin and Minton, 2014). It offers particular potential in the context of inclusive education (Quirke *et al.*, 2024) and has been previously used as a model for conceptualising the inclusion of autistic learners in mainstream schools (Bond and Hebron, 2016; Hebron and Bond, 2017).

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological systems theory, as delineated in *Figure* 8, provides an appropriate theoretical footing for the current study. Bronfenbrenner's original theory acknowledged that individual experiences within an environment are resultant of the complex array of immediate and distant interacting systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979). The theory evolved over time and afforded consideration to development over time (chronosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), acknowledged the influence of biological factors and emphasised the dynamic interplay between the individual and their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 2005). The later developments in the theory position it as particularly appropriate in examining the interconnected interactions between autistic girls and the social and organisational factors that may influence their school experience over a period of time.

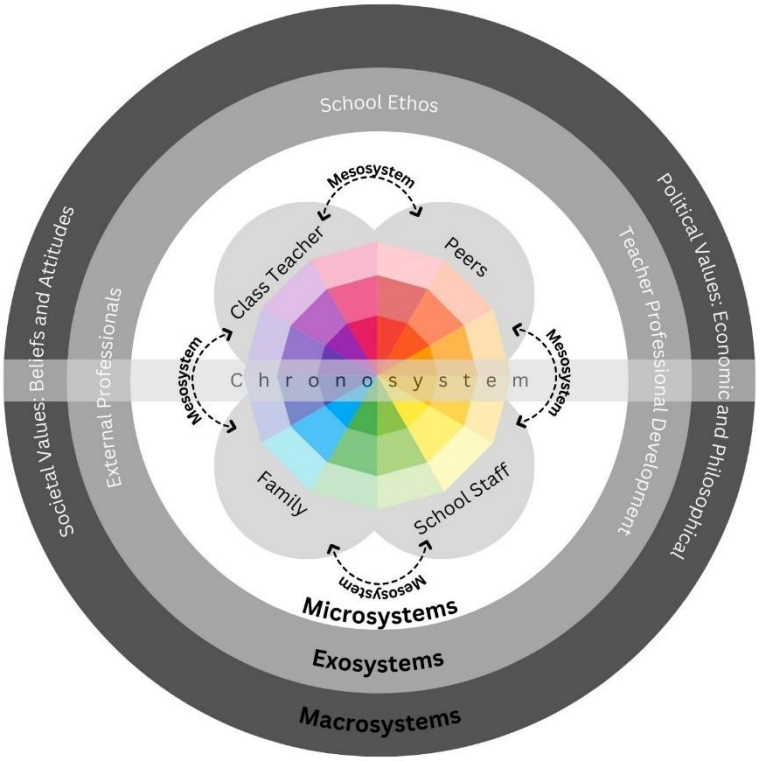


Figure 8: Conceptualising Bronfenbrenner's (1995; 2005) Bio-Ecological Theory

The initial four levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system, *i.e.* the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-system, support us to think about the external factors that may influences an autistic girls' experience within the school context (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979). Most immediate to the individual, the microsystem refers to interactions that occur within the classroom and the broader school environment, with school staff, with parents and with peers. The mesosystem refers to the dynamic interactions that occur within the microsystems. Collaboration between parents and teachers and classroom interactions between teacher, peers and other school staff are examples of these interactions. In the context of mainstream education, the exosystem is concerned with the ethos of the school, involvement of external professional agencies such as psychologists, occupational therapists, mental health services, along with staff participation in further professional development. Referring to broader concepts such as belief systems and philosophies, the macrosystem considers attitudes about inclusion and equality within the wider societal discourse and political landscape. The macrosystem is represented through national policies and DoE issued circulars, and more locally school policy, all of which may shape the educational experiences of the girls in this study.

The chronosystem provides scope to consider the influence of transitions within and across school contexts, as well as individual development over time. However, perhaps

most significant in the context of the current research and in line with the adoption of the biopsychosocial model of disability (*Section 1.6.3*), is the recognition afforded to the biological component which recognises the interplay between individual biological characteristics and the person's environment (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 2005). This has been reported as particularly beneficial when considering atypical biological and/or neurological factors, such as in disability research (Sontag, 1996) or autism research (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019). Furthermore, in recognising the phenomenological and experiential aspects of an experience, this model appreciates that individuals (autistic and non-autistic) may perceive the environment differently and have unique, subjective feelings about a given experience (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Therefore, consistent with my understanding of autism as a constellation of characteristics, embodied in nature, the bio-ecological systems theory provides a useful lens to consider how the autistic identity of the girls in this research may influence their experiences in various ways, to varying extents, depending on the context and the proximal processes at play.

3.5.2 Intersectional Feminism

Research suggests that the intersection of the non-dominant gender with disability can disadvantage individuals and result in negative life outcomes (UN Women, 2022b). As discussed in Chapter 1, autistic females have been historically disadvantaged in autism research. Autistic women and girls have two clearly identifiable oppressed identities, making them doubly discriminated by their gender and the normatively perceived disability of autism. However, perhaps less obvious is the identity of being an autistic female that is a result of the intersection of the two above minoritised identities. This specific combination of oppressed identities, in a landscape where 'autism has been coded "male"' (Moore *et al.*, 2022: 422), has had a profound impact on the experiences of autistic women in terms of identification, understanding and support (Wilkinson, 2008). Therefore, in an effort to refute the traditional androcentric bias related to autism and autism research and open up an 'intellectual and emotional space' for autistic girls to share their experiences of mainstream education provision (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2015: 72), this research will adopt Intersectional Feminism as an analytical lens (Wilson, 2013) and 'a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other' (Crenshaw, 2020).

Stemming from a realisation that there was firstly an underrepresentation of female participants in social science research and secondly, that female experiences are qualitatively different to male experiences (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2011), feminist

research encourages the exploration of difference and diversity to unveil subjugated knowledge of women's unique lived experiences (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2015). Intersectionality proposes that individuals with various oppressed identities will experience life in a very different way to those who share one or only some of the oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Therefore, Intersectional Feminism, informed by Crenshaw's (1989) work on intersectionality, builds on feminist research and acknowledges that gender also interacts with other sites of inequality such as ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Crenshaw, 1989; Saxe, 2017).

It has been argued that feminist research supports a universal feminist standpoint which generalises the oppression of females, essentially further marginalising some women from others (Gillies and Alldred, 2002). However, recognising the flexibility of intersectionality, adopting a combined stance of IF may offer a solution (Cho *et al.*, 2013; Patil, 2013; Davis, 2020). I believe that the principles underpinning feminist research and the 'incompleteness, open-endedness, and even contradictoriness' of intersectionality (Davis, 2020: 122), along with its potential to challenge traditional deficit-oriented practices and illuminate the structures that perpetuate inequality in disability discourse (Liasidou, 2013; Saxe, 2017) situate IF as compatible with this research. While IF does not appear to be widely used in autism education research in Ireland, there is an emerging acknowledgement of the intersection of autism and gender in policy (GOI, 2022; 2024) and its potential for furthering autism research has been highlighted (Saxe, 2017). I believe that adopting an IF lens may support enriched interpretation of the data to better understand the potential inequalities autistic girls may experience in the school context. Therefore, grounded within feminist research, IF appreciates that being female (the non-dominant gender) and autistic may result in autistic girls having different school experiences to their male counterparts, and in order to access authentic understanding of those school experiences, research with this cohort is necessary and justified.

3.5.3 Theoretical Reflections

It is important to acknowledge that while the bio-ecological systems theory and the theory of IF were selected as the guiding perspectives, Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) was also considered as a potential theoretical perspective for this research. The Lundy Model (2007) provides a valuable framework for promoting and safeguarding children's rights to express their views and be taken seriously. However, the model focuses on the conditions (Space, Voice, Audience and Influence) required to facilitate these rights rather than offering a framework for understanding the complex, multi-layered systems that

shape experiences. As this research sought not only to hear the voices of autistic girls but also critically analyse the broader systems and structures that influence the experiences of the autistic girls, I felt that the bio-ecological theory and theory of Intersectional Feminism provided greater theoretical applicability and depth to interrogate individual experiences and the systems that influence those experiences.

Furthermore, in terms of facilitating the participation of the autistic girls involved, this research was guided by the 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research' model (see *Section 3.9.1*; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021). While Lundy's model epitomises best practice measures for participatory research, the selected framework provided more targeted support for facilitating a neuro-affirmative approach to working with autistic participants. Therefore, although The Lundy Model (2007) undeniably influenced how I thought about this research, it was ultimately not adopted as an underpinning theoretical perspective.

The theories presented above provide insight into the varied perspectives that informed, guided and shaped the current research study and indeed supported me in understanding and interpreting the data. Engagement with Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory (2005) endeavoured to provide a more holistic view of the phenomenon of school experience affording consideration to the many interacting systems at play. Meanwhile, adopting an intersectional feminist standpoint sought to amplify the voices of a doubly marginalised community of autistic girls and better understand their experiences.

3.6 Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality is concerned with examining one's position in relation to the broader context of their work and acknowledging that this position has implications for the research process, and in turn the outcome (Berger, 2015; Kara, 2021; Bayeck, 2022).

As explored in Chapter 1, the current research is underpinned by a neurodiversity affirmative approach, both in terms of understanding autism and with regards to the research process itself. Furthermore, the adoption of IF as a theoretical lens emphasises that those holding minoritised identities may experience inequality. Therefore, feminist in standpoint and in keeping with the above, I recognised the need to position myself as an 'ally' to the autistic girls in this study (Bourne and Levy, 2023), a cohort whose voices are so often manipulated by the neurotypical perspective or totally silenced in research.

In terms of personal positionality, I identify as a white, female, neurotypical individual with professional experience as both an educator and researcher. While not autistic, I am

passionate about improving the experiences of autistic individuals, particularly in the context of education. Nonetheless, this positioning situates me as an 'outsider' in the context of researching with autistic girls. This positionality also stands in terms of working with parents/guardians as I do not have direct experience of parenting an autistic individual. The boundaries in positionality become more blurred in terms of researching the perceptions of teachers due to my previous role as an educator and my current role as a teacher educator. The use of survey methodology in this component of the research helped to minimise the impact of my 'insider/outsider' positionality. However, my personal and professional identities, as with many qualitative dominant studies, resulted in a messy positionality (Folkes, 2022), which as reported in literature may have had implications at various stages of the research process (Darwin Holmes, 2020), a summary of which is provided in Appendix G. Given this messy positionality, and the implications of positionality in terms of power dynamics and ethical practice in research, there was an inherent need for explicit monitoring of positionality and its role in the current research of which the practical considerations of such will be explored in detail in *Section 3.12*.

3.7 Sample Overview

This research comprised of a three-part sample, including autistic girls and their parents/guardians and mainstream post-primary school teachers in the Republic of Ireland. The specific sample information for each component of this research and the sampling strategies used are discussed in detail in *Sections 3.10.4* and *3.11.4* respectively. *Table 5* provides an overview of the final sample.

Table 5: Overview of Study Sample

Primary Study	
Autistic Girls	*N*=6
Parents/Guardians of Autistic Girls	*N*=6
Embedded Study	
Mainstream Post-Primary Teachers	*N*=262

3.7.1 Sex/Gender Considerations in the Sample

Unequal gender representation has been acknowledged within this study, warranting further discussion. The core sample for this research, cohort one consisted entirely of autistic girls[5]. While this presents a clear gender imbalance, a subdiscipline of autism

[5] The stated criteria for the recruitment for this cohort was that participants would be of the female sex. However, it may be the case that these females identified with a different gender.

research that focuses sex- and gender-informed research to address the inequity of male predominance in autism research and to improve the life experiences of autistic girls has been identified as necessary (Mandy and Lai, 2017; Saxe, 2017; Delimata and Byrne, 2023). This can be further contextualised with reference to the discussion on IF presented in *Section 3.5.2*.

Cohort two consisted of the parents of the autistic girls. Mitchell *et al.* (2007) highlighted that in studies where parents are the sampling unit, mothers are typically identified first, acting as the family's gatekeeper for engagement in research. While I ensured the recruitment call for participants was left open to all parents/guardians, a sampling bias was apparent with all parent participants identifying as mothers. However, consistent with Johnson and Simpson (2013), limited father representation should not impact the study quality.

The final cohort in this sample were mainstream post-primary teachers. Data obtained from Central Statistics Office (2025) revealed that at post-primary level, 67.2% of teachers were female and 32.8% were male, therefore, it was anticipated that there would be a higher female response rate among this cohort. The final sample comprised of 76.1% female, 22.1% male, .4% other and .8% preferring to withhold this information. Despite lower male representation in this study, it is believed that this did not affect the overall trustworthiness of the findings as the sample is reflective of gender imbalance of the total population of Irish post-primary teachers.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics relates to 'what researchers ought and ought not to do in their research and research behaviour' (Cohen *et al.*, 2018: 111). It is a complex and multifaceted concept and is concerned with the procedures undertaken, decisions made, and actions carried out by researchers. Of immense significance is the recognition that attention to ethics should be an ongoing, contextually situated and reflective process (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Quirke *et al.*, 2022). The following section will present the ethical considerations for this research, incorporating discussion on the formal procedures, the principles and practices of ethical research, before a final discussion on ethics and inclusive research.

3.8.1 Procedural Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was granted from Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) on the 21st of March 2023 [REF: A23-009] (Appendix H). A Safeguarding Children in Research Statement was created by to accompany the ethics application as a part of the formal ethics review (Appendix I) and Garda Vetting was

obtained. Guillemin and Gillam (2004: 263) define these measures as procedural ethics, a mere 'formality' of the process. They propose that attending to procedural ethics alone is insufficient with Brooks *et al.* (2014) viewing it as one part of a suite of risk management. Thus, highlighting the need for continued engagement with ethics as a process, supported by reflective and reflexive practice.

3.8.2 Principles and Practices of Ethical Research

The principles of respect, beneficence (and non-maleficence), and justice are components of most national and international research ethics frameworks (DHEW, 1979; DCYA, 2012; BERA, 2024) and must be considered in the context of conducting ethical research. Due to the vast array of measures implemented to ensure inclusive research with the autistic girls, additional ethical measures will be discussed in greater detail in *Section 3.9.1*.

3.8.2.1 *Respect*

Addressing the principle of respect (Brooks *et al*., 2014), all participants were provided with information sheets, granted time to consider and informed of their right to withdraw (with limitations in the instance of anonymous engagement with the teacher questionnaire; Appendix J and ZZ). Informed consent was obtained (Appendix K and XX). It is argued that the principle of free choice, underpinning informed consent, can be challenged by the use of incentives in research (Brooks *et al.*, 2014; BERA, 2024) making their adoption a much-disputed area in terms of ethical practice (Ripley, 2006; Silverman, 2010). However, following consultation with research literature (Huang *et al*., 2014; Gowen *et al.*, 2019; Costley *et al*., 2022; NIHR, 2022) and engagement with an autistic researcher working with an autism organisation, I opted to provide a small reimbursement to autistic girls and their parents. A gift voucher to the value of €10 was given to the autistic girls to demonstrate appreciation (NIHR, 2022) for the time they have given and their contribution to the research process. A €10 gift card was also given to their parent as they may have incurred financial/time costs in both their participation and the participation of their child (car expenses/time/etc; Gordon *et al.*, 2002). As advised in literature, the reimbursement was not advertised on the call for participants to avoid the risk of inducement (Silverman, 2010; Huang *et al*., 2014).

The principle of respect is bipartite and also includes a requirement to protect those with diminished autonomy (Brooks *et al.*, 2014). This has led to children (Huang *et al.*, 2016) and individuals with disabilities (Quirke *et al.*, 2022) being excluded from the research process in the past with parents/guardians and other stakeholders recruited as proxies.

Being both under eighteen and having a formal diagnosis of autism situates the autistic participants in this study as a vulnerable cohort and having diminished autonomy in terms of research ethics. However, in agreement with Quirke *et al.* (2022) and recognising the rights of children and individuals with disabilities in relation to participation in decision making, freedom of expression, privacy and accessing appropriate information (UNCRC, 1989; UNCRPD, 2006), I too challenge the concept of 'diminished autonomy'. I recognise the autistic girls as experts of their own experience who must be empowered to have their voice heard. Therefore, accepting the onus placed on me, as a researcher, to think of creative ways to facilitate appropriate and inclusive processes within research (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012; Mertens, 2020; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021), *Section 3.9.1* delineates the measures I put in place to attend to this. Despite arguments that parental consent reinforces the narrative of vulnerability and diminished capacity, infringes on personal autonomy and may limit engagement (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; Brooks *et al.,* 2014; Quirke *et al.,* 2022), parental consent was sought in line with best practice and existing research ethics structures (Appendix K; Huang *et al.*, 2016).

3.8.2.2 *Beneficence and non-maleficence*

Consistent with the scope of educational research more broadly, the current study aims to inform policy and practice in educational contexts in the Republic of Ireland, thus, leading to an improved quality of education for autistic girls (Brooks *et al*., 2014; Preissle *et al.*, 2015; Huang *et al*., 2016). On the other hand, while the potential risks associated with educational research are not perceived to be significant, they are no less important to address (Brooks *et al.,* 2014). Random ID numbers and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. While the pseudonyms provided external anonymity to participants in terms of the dissemination of data in the thesis and beyond, as IPA dyads were used, internal anonymity was not guaranteed as participants may be able to recognise the narrative of the other half of their dyad (Larkin *et al.*, 2019). To assure confidentiality, all digital data was stored on a personal, password protected laptop. I, the researcher, had sole access to this laptop. Survey data collected via Qualtrics were downloaded in excel file format following closure of the survey with quantitative data uploaded to SPSS for analysis. Audio recordings from data collection sessions were uploaded onto my laptop for transcription with the original recording deleted from the Dictaphone. As manual data analysis was carried out for the primary IPA study, all paper documents were stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home. All data and research records associated with this study are anonymised and, in line with Mary Immaculate College Data Protection and Research Integrity Policies (Mary Immaculate College, 2019; 2024), may be retained indefinitely

by me on a personal, encrypted laptop, with a minimum of five years from date of publication recommended. Participants were made aware of the measures (and limitations of the measures) used to protect their anonymity and were assured of confidentiality in the information sheets provided to them.

3.8.2.3 *Justice*

The principle of justice relates to the fair distribution of burdens and benefits among people (Brooks *et al.*, 2014). The use of a call for participants, in both studies (Appendix L and M), afforded individuals meeting the criteria freedom to volunteer to participate. Inclusion criteria were specified for the primary study. While it may be questioned whether inclusion criteria are consistent with the principle of justice (DHEW, 1979; Brooks *et al.*, 2014), it is argued as necessary given the specificity of the current research project.

3.9 Inclusive Research

Children and young people may feel powerless in the presence of a researcher; therefore, it is necessary that steps are taken to ensure respectful, inclusive and ethical research is conducted (Creswell *et al.,* 2014). Considering the intersectionality of vulnerabilities of gender, neurodivergence and age in Cohort 1 of this study, the following section is dedicated to considering the ethics process when researching with autistic girls through the lens of inclusive research.

Participatory Research has gained traction as being a suitable, appropriate, and potentially transformative approach to research with the autistic community (Nind, 2011; Chown *et al.*, 2017; Fletcher Watson *et al.*, 2018; Crane *et al.*, 2020). There exists a small but growing body of participatory research studies that demonstrate the capabilities of autistic participants and the value of their input in research (Nicolaidis *et al*., 2011; Parsons *et al*., 2013; Harrington *et al*., 2014; Pellicano *et al*., 2020). However, nomenclature of participatory research is inconsistent in literature and ranges from participant involvement at some level in the research design and analysis (Van Schalkwyk and Dewinter, 2020) through to involvement across the entire research process (Crane *et al.*, 2020) with ideal circumstances situating participants as co-researchers (Parsons *et al*., 2020). However, barriers such as time, funding, and support have been identified (Pickard *et al.*, 2022). To address the limitations of the rudimentary nature of existing participation frameworks, Fletcher-Watson *et al.* (2021) developed 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research', a model of inclusive practice for research which appreciates different degrees of inclusion depending on the resources available, the scale of the research and the

probable impact. Therefore, while a full participatory approach was not employed in this research, it is underpinned by the six key pillars (*fig.9*) in the Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research (Fletcher-Watson *et al.,* 2021) and supplemented by principles of good practice discussed by other leading authors in this field (Cascio *et al.*, 2020; Crane *et al.*, 2020; Costley *et al.*, 2022).

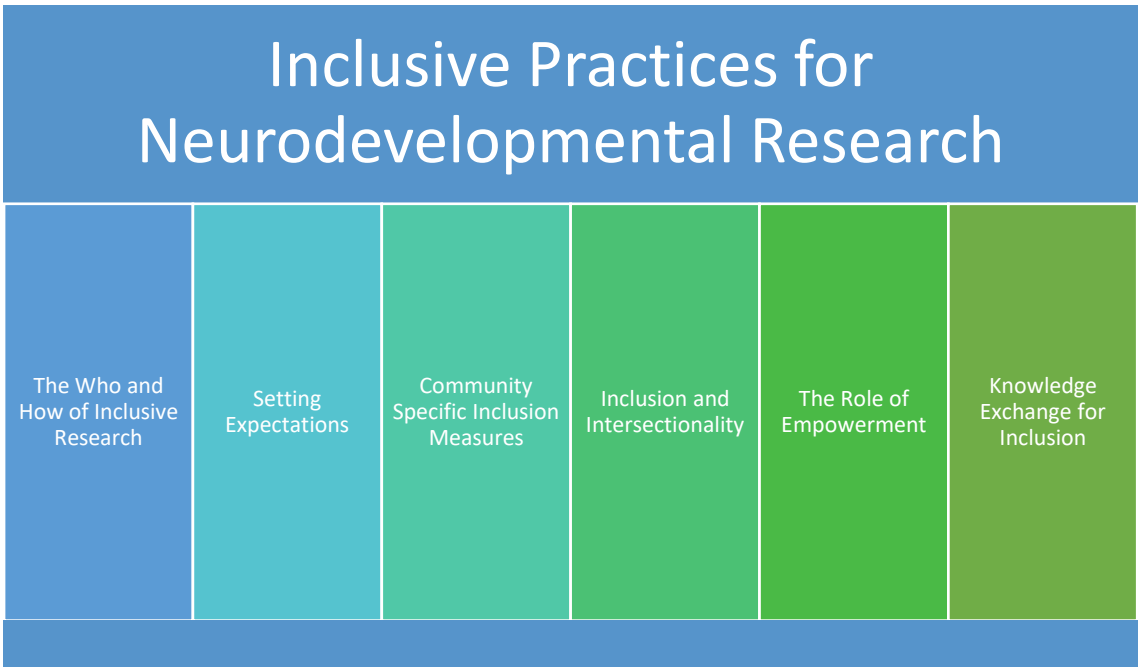


Figure 9: Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021)

Responding to a call for greater transparency relating to methodological and inclusive practices being used in autism research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021; Scott-Barrett et al., 2023) and in an effort to demonstrate how I applied the framework in practice, I presented the below paper at 'The Future of Education' Conference (Pixel Conference). Recognising the existence of such publication (Appendix N)*, the following section will attend briefly to how the six key pillars of the model were attended to in the current research.*

Munroe, A. (2024) 'Using 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research' (Fletcher-Watson *et al*., 2021) as an Ethical Framework for Eliciting the School Experiences of Autistic Girls', in *14th International Conference "The Future of Education",* Florence, Italy, 19-21 Jun, Filodiritto Proceedings, 1-7, available: https://conference.pixel-online.net/FOE/files/foe/ed0014/FP/9080-ESOC6661-FP-FOE14.pdf

3.9.1 Enacting Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research

The 'Who' and 'How' pillar of inclusive research shaped the entire research process. Appreciating autistic girls as experts of their own experience, their inclusion in this research was undisputed from the outset (Stack and McDonald, 2014; Fletcher-Watson *et al*., 2021). Informed by extant literature and reflective engagement, I opted to use IPA as the mechanism to guide the 'how' of this process. Adopting IPA enabled the prioritisation

of the voices of autistic girls and afforded an openness to the process that may not have been achieved through other approaches (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, IPA supported the use of a multiperspectival design (Larkin *et al.*, 2019), allowing parents' insightful, supplementary perspectives to be gathered (Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021). Inclusion and intersectionality were considered through incorporation of Intersectional Feminism as a theoretical perspective in *Section 3.5.2*. However, the intersecting identity of being a student was also important to consider. In this study on school experiences, these intersecting identities may have influenced how the girls felt about sharing their school experiences and/or what they shared with me (Scott-Barrett *et al*., 2019). In an effort to reassure the girls that I was not connected with their school and that it was their honest insights that I sought, in addition to the formal information available to them, I took time to reiterate this at the start of every session.

The guidance in relation to the pillars of 'setting expectations' and 'knowledge exchange for inclusion' informed the how I planned for and disseminated information about the goals, processes and outcomes of the research (Pellicano *et al.*, 2017; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021). In order to increase accessibility and ensure transparency, I created a webpage which enabled me to introduce myself and share information about the research study and the research process using multiple means *e.g.* text, video, imagery (Appendix O). Inclusion criteria were also detailed here. Recognising that technical language and specialist knowledge can be a barrier to engagement in research (Cascio *et al.*, 2020; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021), the webpage contained a feature which allowed the participants express their interest in participating but also to request contact from the researcher to discuss the research further (Appendix P). Furthermore, in an effort to address potential knowledge exchange barriers and mindful of the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a), all recruitment material, interview questions and data collection activities were reviewed by an autistic individual with advocacy experience.

The constellation of autistic traits (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019) may influence how autistic individuals experience the research process. Informed by Cascio *et al.* (2021), consideration was afforded to four areas for individualised adaptations: individualised consent procedures; individualise research design and data collection; individualise support for participants during the study; and tailor the language to each individual's preferences. Accessible, age-appropriate information and consent forms that used clear, concise language were designed for the girls (Appendix Q and R). Assent was reassessed at the start of both sessions, however, mindful of acquiescence, 'process consent' was also

adopted, as it is deemed a better way of safeguarding participants than a once-and-for-all 'informed consent' (Silverman, 2010; Harcourt and Conroy, 2011; Brooks *et al.*, 2014). Colour coded visuals were incorporated into the data collection sessions as a method to minimise stress and enable the girls to control whether the process continued, paused or stopped at any point (Appendix S; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Scott-Barrett *et al.*, 2019).

Recognising the potential challenges of engaging with the research process, I sought to minimise difficulties, reduce discomfort, and support engagement (Preece and Jordan, 2010; Ellis, 2017). Prior to engagement in data collection, the girls completed a wellbeing plan adapted from Cassidy *et al.* (2022; Appendix T) which allowed me to gain individualised information in relation to their preferred terms (*e.g.* autistic individual, individual with autism, other), sensory needs, distress signs and identified support personnel as well as provide signposting to organisations with confidential helplines for support. I adopted a two-session approach to data collection (Huang *et al.,* 2014; Costley *et al*., 2022). Prompts were provided in advance of the 'walk and talk' session and a topic guide was provided in advance of the interview (Appendix U) (Griffith *et al.*, 2012; Harrington *et al.*, 2014; MacLeod *et al.*, 2018). The girls were given the option to invite a familiar adult to accompany them during the session. While this practice has been contested (Preece and Jordan, 2010; Cascio *et al.*, 2020), it is a commonly reported practice in research with autistic children and young people (Huws and Jones, 2015; Fayette and Bond, 2018). During the data collection session, adequate wait time was provided before prompting or rephrasing (Scott-Barrett *et al*., 2019), clarification was offered, visual supports were incorporated (Rutherford *et al.*, 2020), and multiple activities were included (Colucci, 2007; Huang *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, in keeping with research on working with autistic young people but being mindful of the research objectives, the participants were offered to engage with the second session via an online medium such as Teams or Zoom (MacLeod *et al*., 2018).

Lastly, payment and feedback on the process have been identified as mechanisms of empowerment in research (Pellicano *et al.*, 2017; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021). As discussed in *Section 3.8.2.1*, a token of appreciation was given to the autistic girls and their parents. I commissioned a sketch-note artist and fellow education professional to create a one-page visual summary of the findings generated from data collected from the girls. This visual summary, along with a brief written synopsis of the findings (Appendix V) was sent to the girls and their parents in the form of a booklet. I have also committed

to share the link to the thesis upon completion and any publications arising from the thesis.

3.10 Primary Study

Focused on exploring autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education provision at post-primary level in Ireland, this study was guided by three research questions.

- How do autistic girls experience mainstream education provision at post-primary level?
- How do girls interact with their autistic identity with reference to the school context?
- What are parents/guardians' perspectives on their daughters' experiences in mainstream settings?

3.10.1 Ontological and Epistemological Underpinnings

There exist many contradictory discourses in the field of autism research in relation to what constitutes knowledge of autism (Milton, 2014a; Botha, 2021). Historically, research presented largely deficit-oriented perspectives on autism with limited interaction with the community and minimal credence afforded to the embodied knowledge of autistic individuals themselves (Botha, 2021). As a result, some research has had negative implications with misrepresentations of the autistic community presented (Milton and Bracher, 2013; Milton, 2014a; Botha, 2021). Fortunately, a new era of autism research is emerging, informed by and responsive to daily experiences of autism (Pellicano *et al.*, 2018). While the developments in autism research are considered positive, it is questioned whether the autistic lifeworld can be fully understood and conceptualised by non-autistic researchers due to the embodied nature of autism (Milton, 2014a; Kourti, 2021). Despite this, researchers argues that every autism researcher has a responsibility to include the autistic voice if their research is to be as close to the 'intransitive' reality of autism as possible to ensure 'ethical and epistemological integrity' (Milton, 2014a: 796; Kourti, 2021: 13).

The current study is underpinned by a relativist ontological position, inextricably linked with the interpretivist paradigm (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). A relativist ontological position appreciates that reality can be varied, dependent on an individual's interactions with and perceptions of the world (Mertens, 2020). This understanding of reality corresponds with the neurodiversity paradigm and values the diversity of autistic experience (Leadbitter *et al*., 2021; Fletcher-Watson, 2022). The relativist position assumed that the autistic girls

would each bring their own unique experiences to the research, with the shared experience of autism characteristics coming second. This was realised through the adoption of IPA whereby the individual lived experience is first prioritised before universals are drawn at a group level (Cuthbertson *et al.*, 2020; Smith *et al*., 2022).

Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm and a relativist ontological position, a subjectivist epistemological standpoint appreciates that individual's assign their own meanings to their experiences (Mertens, 2020; Wahyuni, 2012). I believe that by appreciating the embodied experience of being autistic as shared by autistic participants, this research can reveal the multiplicity of autism realities, and the subjective nature of knowledge that autistic individuals assign to their experiences (Kourti, 2021). Therefore, underpinned by a subjectivist epistemological stance, the insights shared by autistic girls, and their parents/guardians, were each afforded their own legitimacy which resulted in the creation of multiple perspective which were constructed, interpreted, and altered within the context of the study and later within the extant literature (Cuthbertson *et al.*, 2020). While it is accepted that the knowledge will be value laden, socially constructed and will evolve through processes of interaction and interpretation between participants and the researcher, this will be continually reflected upon in the context of research reflexivity (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017; Cuthbertson *et al.*, 2020).

3.10.2 Approach

Consistent with the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the researcher, qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate to fulfil the objectives of the primary study (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Mertens, 2020). There are several branches of inquiry within qualitative research, with the current study underpinned by phenomenological inquiry (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Mertens, 2020). Phenomenological inquiry accepts individuals' direct experiences at face value and endeavours to give prominence to their perceptions and the meaning they assign to their experiences (Emery and Anderman, 2020; Mertens, 2020). A phenomenological approach has been identified as appropriate for exploring concepts such as inclusion and disability from the perspective of those who experience them (Mertens, 2020), supporting its adoption for the current study. Moreover, in the case of autism, Fuchs and Schlimme (2009) argue that there exists a distinction between the subjective internal or 'embodied' experience, *i.e.* autistic experience, and autism as it is perceived by others. This argument further emphasises the need to explore phenomenon from the first-hand lived experience perspective, reinforcing the appropriateness of adopting a phenomenological approach. Having first considered and

rejected Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), Narrative Research (Willig, 2013) and Descriptive Phenomenology (Giorgi, 1992) as potential approaches, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was selected as the most suitable approach to the current research.

3.10.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a specific qualitative approach positioned within the broader context of phenomenological inquiry (Smith *et al.*, 2022). First developed by Smith (1996) and used within the field of health psychology, IPA has since gained traction in education and educational psychology research (MacLeod, 2019; Howard *et al*, 2019a; Emery and Anderman, 2020). It is an idiographic mode of inquiry that priorities examination of the individual case and understanding of experience in its own terms (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2022).

Two theoretical axes underpin IPA; experience and interpretation (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Experience refers to the lived experience of a phenomenon, while interpretation refers to the sense-making involved in understanding that experience (Smith *et al.*, 2022). IPA research affords an individual the opportunity to share their lived experience of the phenomenon at hand, in this instance school experience. However, IPA is unique in its approach to interpreting these experiences. In the first instance, interpretation consists of the participant reflecting upon and making sense of their own experiences. Only following this does the researcher attempt to interpret the participant's experience and in turn, their sense-making of the experience. This process is known as the double hermeneutic (*Section 3.10.3.1*). It is important to acknowledge at this point that insight into the *experience* is dependent on what the participant shares with the researcher. Therefore, the narrative put forth in an IPA study can be conceptualised as a balance between the phenomenological description of an experience and the constructed interpretation of that experience (*fig.10*).

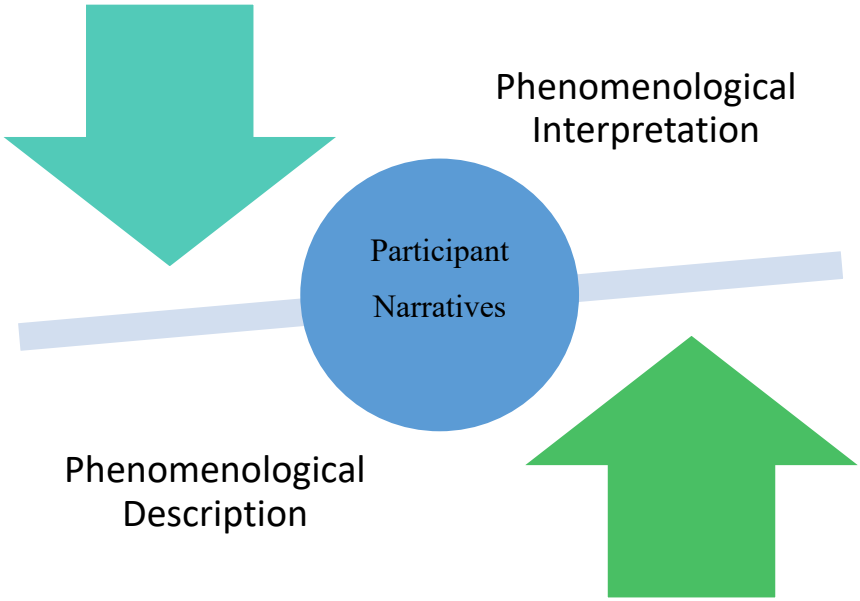


Figure 10: IPA as a 'balance' of participants' narratives between the description of a phenomena and their interpretation of the phenomena.

3.10.3.1 *Philosophical Underpinnings of IPA*

IPA, as an approach, has been developed based on the pioneering contributions of key individuals with reference to its core tenets; phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience that has been developed, adopted and adapted by different philosophers, each bringing their own interests and emphases to the concept (Langdridge, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2022). Husserl's work on 'transcendental' phenomenology, Heidegger's existential approach and Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on 'embodied' experience, offer unique perspectives for consideration. However, the guiding principle of all phenomenological inquiry is that 'experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and in its own terms' (Smith *et al.,* 2022: 8). Heidegger's concept of 'being-in-the-world' emphasises the nature of existence being 'always perspectival, always temporal and always "in-relation-to" something' (Langdridge, 2007; Smith *et al.,* 2022: 13) while Merleau-Ponty promoted understanding of the 'embodied' nature of experiencing the world (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Merleau-Ponty argued that the lived experience of being a 'body-in-the-world' is of critical importance and only when the feelings, sensations, emotions, embodied language, and experience is shared can one endeavour to understand someone else's perspective. This understanding is of significance in autism research, particularly in the context of a non-autistic researcher engaging with autistic participants. In keeping with Merleau-Ponty, I acknowledge that it is not possible to entirely 'share', 'capture' or 'absorb', the

experience of the autistic participants as their experience is inextricably linked with their embodied position in the world (Smith *et al.*, 2022: 14-15). However, by seeking and remaining close to their accounts of experience, meaning can be garnered.

Hermeneutics, also referred to as the theory of interpretation, underpins the 'interpretative' aspect of IPA (Smith *et al.*, 2022) and is concerned with interpreting participant accounts to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences in the lifeworld (Langdridge, 2007). In IPA, a double hermeneutic is employed whereby the researcher engages in 'first-order' sensemaking as they strive to make meaning from the account, mindful that they do not have the same access to the experience and instead are relying on what the participant shares (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). In addition to this, the researcher also engages with 'second-order' sensemaking as they understand the narrative shared through their own experiential lens (Cuthbertson *et al.*, 2020; Smith *et al.*, 2022).

The idiographic nature of IPA requires the detailed examination of individual cases (Smith *et al.,* 2022) to reveal something about the unique experience of individual participants. To achieve this, emphasis is placed on individual case by case analysis first and foremost, with the aim of developing an interpretative analysis or a second order account in which the initial description account is positioned in a social, cultural and theoretical context (Smith *et al.*, 2022). This is something that is of particular importance in the current study as the experiences of autistic individuals are in some senses defined by their social context and life world, as evidenced by other researchers (MacLeod, 2019; Lopez and Willis, 2004). It is only after this in-depth exploration of individual experience can similarities and differences between participants be explored and more general claims made (Smith *et al.*, 2022) potentially adding new understandings and knowledge to the field of autism research (MacLeod, 2019).

3.10.3.2 *A Rationale for IPA*

It is argued that exploratory work is still necessary for underrepresented cohorts, with 'insider interpretations' still lacking in autism research, positioning IPA as a suitable approach appropriate to this type of research (Pellicano *et al.*, 2013 cited in MacLeod, 2019: 50; Emery and Anderman, 2020). The current research endeavours to explore the mainstream educational experiences of autistic girls, a cohort that are doubly marginalised by their gender and diagnosis of autism (Saxe, 2017), 'understudied, under identified, misdiagnosed and misunderstood' and often excluded from research (Haney and Cullen, 2017: 58; D'Mello *et al.*, 2022). Considering this, it is imperative that autistic

girls are given the opportunity to share their experiences to establish the needs and requirements of this cohort going forward.

IPA ensures that the *subjective experiences* of participants are brought to the fore (Noon, 2018; Smith *et al.*, 2022). Autistic experiences are undeniably diverse as a result of the unique constellation of autistic characteristics and processing differences (Lawson, 2011; Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019). The idiographic nature of IPA appreciates this diversity of experience, enabling each autistic girl's experience to be valued and viewed in its own right (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Secondly, IPA inherently provides opportunity for *unexpected responses* due to the inductive nature of IPA interviews. In recognising the autistic girls as 'experiential experts' (Noon, 2018: 75), they were empowered to lead the direction of the interview and focus on aspects of unique significance for them. Lastly, the *flexibility* of IPA was a critical factor within the current research. Although detailed guidance is provided in relation to conducting an IPA study (Smith *et al.*, 2022), the absence of a prescriptive framework is often valued (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). It was this flexibility that enabled me to incorporate accessible and inclusive approaches to data collection process with autistic girls.

It is recognised that an experience, *e.g.,* navigating mainstream provision for an autistic girl, is not solely located in the accounts of those with the diagnosis but also in those who belong to the lived-world of the person with the diagnosis (Howard *et al.*, 2019a; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021). IPA enabled the adoption of a multiperspectival design, which enabled the girls' parents to extend understanding of the experience (McInally and Gray-Brunton, 2021). While it is noted that a multiperspectival design can support triangulation (Smith *et al.*, 2022) the researcher is particularly conscious that parents/guardians will not have access to the embodied, lived-experience perspective that the girls have. Therefore, parents were included to provide a supplementary perspective, with girls' experiences prioritised.

3.10.3.3 *Considerations for IPA in Autism Research*

Researchers who have conducted IPA studies with autistic individuals have reported that this cohort can find it difficult to access and detail experience (DeWinter *et al.*, 2017), however, with appropriate support IPA can facilitate autistic individuals to capture their experiences accurately and may reduce the impact of the double empathy problem (Howard *et al.*, 2019a; Howard *et al.*, 2019b). The sensitive nature of topics, vocabulary complexities, and the fact that the identified experience may not be frequently discussed by participants may present as barriers to be navigated (Smith *et al*., 2022). Furthermore,

drawing attention to the concept of embodiment, Boden and Eatough (2014) recognise that some aspects of experience are not straightforward and can be difficult to explain in a verbal mode. This is further contextualised with reference to *felt-sense* which is described as something 'fuzzy' that is difficult to refine and verbalise but nonetheless is meaningful and tells one about their situation (Gendlin, 2004 as cited in Boden and Eatough, 2014). This bodily knowing and the ability to articulate the embodied experience is particularly pertinent in the context of research with autistic individuals who experience and understand the world differently to non-autistic individuals as a result of sensory, perceptual and cognitive differences (Milton, 2012a).

In light of the above and consistent with efforts to accommodate diversity in research more broadly (Langdridge, 2007; Mertens, 2020), the inclusion of alternative methods or engagement modes have been positioned as potentially useful tools for IPA studies with autistic participants (Howard *et al.*, 2019a). Furthermore, Smith *et al.* (2022) acknowledge that presenting participants with more than mode of engagement can scaffold the development of a verbal account which will be richer than if solely verbal mode (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Multi-modal approaches may be particularly useful for autistic individuals as they may align more closely with the expressive and communicative preferences of this cohort, support reflection and self-expression and reduce anxiety (Loyd, 2015; Scott-Barrett *et al.,* 2023). While Smith *et al.* (2022) identified several examples of multi-modal approaches that can be used in IPA research, including timeline activities, the use of imagery and metaphor elicitation, engagement with empirical research revealed a greater diverse range of approaches including the Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2003), photography and map making (Miller, 2020), drawing, diamond ranking, beans and pots activities (Goodall, 2020b), walk and talk sessions (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Ytterhus & Åmot (2021), storyboarding (Warren *et al.,* 2021). The specific approaches incorporated into this research are detailed in *Section 3.10.5*.

3.10.4 Sample

Consistent with recommendations in IPA literature (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Noon, 2018; Smith *et al*., 2022), the sample consisted of twelve participants. In consultation with the emerging taxonomy of multiple perspectives of IPA (Larkin *et al.*, 2019), a dyadic design type was selected for the current study. This research consisted of six girl-parent/guardian dyads (*N*=12). *Table 6* introduces the autistic girl/parents dyads using pseudonyms.

Table 6: IPA Dyads and Pseudonyms

Dyad Number	Autistic Girl	Parent/Guardian
1	Ava	Arlene
2	Bella	Bronagh
3	Ciara	Catriona
4	Danielle	Deirdre
5	Emma	Eimear
6	Freya	Fiona

3.10.4.1 *Sampling Strategy and Recruitment*

As an IPA study aims to gain insight into a particular experience and develop detailed descriptions of the experience, a level of homogeneity within the sample is necessary (Langdridge, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2022). As this research sought to explore mainstream school experiences from the perspective of autistic female students, the study in its nature defined its own boundaries (Smith *et al.,* 2022). Considering this, the sampling strategy adopted for the current study was identified as homogeneous, purposive sampling (Teddlie and Yu, 2007).

In order to fulfil the requirements of the homogeneous sample, a variety of sampling procedures were employed (Lee and Spratling, 2019). Firstly, a flyer (Appendix M) was designed and shared by via X/Twitter and social media groups (groups for autism families, autism advocacy groups on Facebook; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021). The flyer contained a QR code linked to the purpose designed webpage (Appendix O). Secondly, emails containing a Letter of Information (Appendix W) were sent to a select number of national and regional autism organisations requesting that they would share the study information on their various online platforms. Finally, recognising the potential of teacher-parent relationships, an email (Appendix X) was sent to teachers (who, during the secondary study, opted in to receive further information about primary research study) asking them to disseminate information about the study using the flyer. Additionally, as the autism community is considered a close-knit community in Ireland with many families building networks through local and regional services, charities and events, snowball sampling was also employed (Teddlie and Yu, 2007; Sadler *et al.*, 2010). In this instance, when autistic girls and their parents/guardians committed to participating in the study, I requested that they pass on the study information to others in their network.

3.10.5 Data Collection Methods

In-depth, semi-structured IPA interviews were carried out with the parents/guardians and the autistic girls. Semi-structured interviews were deemed most suitable for the data collection process in this study as they facilitated the creation of a loose agenda to ensure that the key topics and issues would be discussed. Informed by pilot interviews (Appendix Y and Z) a finalised schedule was produced (Appendix AA and BB; Smith *et al*., 2022). However, recognising the limitations of traditional data collection processes for children and young people, and indeed autistic individuals (Preece and Jordan, 2010; Gibson, 2012; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2019; 2021), an eclectic approach to data collection was adopted with the autistic girls. Data collection with the autistic girls was completed over two sessions with the intention of supporting rapport building, reducing cognitive demands and facilitating greater engagement (Gibson, 2012). The first session took the form of a 'walk and talk' session in the school environment while session two adopted Shephard's (2015) approach of the 'interrupted' interview. *Table 7* demonstrates how this multi-method approach to data collection was operationalised with the autistic girls.

Table 7: Operationalising Data Collection with Autistic Girls

Method	When?	How?	Additional Notes
Walk and Talk	Session 1	Used as a standalone data collection session Pictures taken during the walk and talk session to be used in 'picture as stimulus' activity in Session 2	Photographs of selected locations taken by the participant/researcher using the researcher's device.
Diamond Ranking	Session 2	Activity introduced in Session 1 Activity completed online before Session 2 Activity discussed during Session 2 as a part of the 'interrupted' interview	Participant responses downloaded and printed by the researcher in advance of Session 2 to support discussion.
Picture as Stimulus	Session 2	Pictures taken during the 'walk and talk' session (1) were discussed during Session 2 as a part of the 'interrupted' interview	Emoji stickers made available to participants during this activity to support discussion of places. Engagement with emoji stickers was optional.
Dixit Cards	Session 2	Final activity to draw the 'interrupted' interview to a close	Level of engagement was dictated by participants. Participants afforded choice in terms of how many, if any, Dixit cards were selected.

3.10.5.1 *Walk and Talk Session*

Informed by the 'walking interview' method (Kinney, 2017), the first meeting with the girls was designed as a 'walk and talk' session. The inclusive nature of a 'walk and talk' approach positioned it as a positive precursor to the primary data collection session. The partnership, side-by-side aspect of the process, the positioning of the participant as the guide in the walk and the familiarity of the location have been reported to ease anticipation and reduce power imbalances when working with 'vulnerable' participants, those who experience anxiety and those who may have difficulties in the area of social interaction and communication (Clark and Emmel, 2010; Trell and Van Hoven, 2010; Kinney, 2017), pertinent aspects to consider when researching with autistic girls. Furthermore, identified as particularly useful when a location is relevant to the research and the participants (Kara *et al.*, 2021), walking interviews have been successfully used

in IPA studies with reports that they can help researchers to better understand the lifeworld of the participant by placing themselves in the context of the experiences (D'Errico and Hunt, 2019; Woollacott, 2019). In the context of the current research, the walk-and-talk session in the school context was included to support the girls to articulate their experiences by placing events, stories and experience in their spatial context (Clark and Emmel, 2010). Photographs were taken of each significant location visited during this session and were then used as prompts for discussion in the second session.

3.10.5.2 *Interrupted Interview*

As discussed in *Section 3.10.3.3*, the nature of an IPA study as one that delves into lived experience required careful consideration to ensure the process was operationalised in an inclusive and accessible manner. In light of this, the second session with autistic girls adopted the 'interrupted' interview approach (Shephard, 2015). Although coined by Shephard (2015), this approach is similar to other models used for researching with children, such as the use of structured activities in research interviews and activity-oriented interviews (Colucci, 2007; Gibson, 2012). Involving a semi-structured interview, punctuated by various activities, it is reported that the incorporation of visual mediated methods may support engagement, reduce the intensity of a traditional interview format and allow for periods of silence providing additional processing time (Lewis, 2001; Shephard, 2015). In keeping with the belief that multi-modal methods can scaffold the sense-making process for autistic children and young people (Loyd, 2015; Scott-Barrett *et al.,* 2023), and have been approved for use in IPA research (Smith *et al.*, 2022), three multi-modal approaches, namely, Diamond Ranking, Picture-as-Stimulus and Dixit Cards, were identified and integrated into the second session to guide discussion, as per the format detailed by Shephard (2015).

3.10.5.2.1 Diamond Ranking

Diamond Ranking is recognised as a thinking skills tool that helps young people to explore, construct and interpret information by ranking statements, objects or images and discussing their decisions (Rockett and Percival, 2002; Clark, 2012). Often used in classrooms (Clark, 2012), this activity has been identified as a participatory research method, effective for use with young people (Niemi *et al.*, 2018), has been successfully adopted in research with autistic young people (Goodall, 2020b).

I developed two different diamond ranking activities with statements based on common themes found in the literature. The first activity related to the concept of *Supportive Aspects of School* while the second focused on the *Potential Worries about School*

(Appendix CC). While the literature informed the statements presented in this activity, I felt it was important to allow the girls to swap the statement of least importance to them with a personally generated one that they felt was more appropriate to include. As the goal was to facilitate the girls to reflect on the task without the pressure of sorting in the 'right' order, this task was designed on the digital platform Google Jamboard™, the link was sent to the girls following session one and the completed activity was then used as a stimulus and support for discussion in the session two (Shephard, 2015).

3.10.5.2.2 Photo Elicitation

Identified as a suitable approach for engaging children and young people (Shaw, 2021), including autistic individuals (Scott-Barrett *et al.*, 2023; Howe *et al.*, 2023), in research, photo elicitation is described as the process of inserting photographs (researcher or participant generated) into a research interview, enabling it to be used as a reference point and stimulus for discussion (Danker *et al.*, 2017; Shaw, 2021).

The current study used the photos taken during the walk-and-talk session to promote reflection, elicit further information and evoke feelings and memories associated with the identified places (Harper, 2002; Pyle, 2012; Morrey *et al.*, 2021; Shaw, 2021). Inspired research that has incorporated Emotion Mapping[6] (Gabb and Singh, 2015), a technique pioneered by Gabb (2009) and given that Smith *et al.* (2022) recognise emotion mapping as an appropriate multimodal approach in IPA, the use of emoji stickers was incorporated to further support the activity. From a phenomenological perspective, it has been hypothesised that using emojis as a reference tool may allow for deeper engagement with the phenomenological aspects of the study by focusing on emotions, which have been seen as being both relational and embodied in nature (Bertrando and Gilli, 2008; Goldman *et al.*, 2022).

3.10.5.2.3 Dixit® Cards

Illustrated metaphorical cards have been used in participatory research to explore big ideas, support reflection and generate new understandings (Kwiatkowska *et al.,* 2014; Karnieli-Miller *et al.*, 2017; Carver, 2020). Furthermore, consistent with projective techniques[7] used in therapy and research, cards can provide participants with a means of

[6] Emotion mapping is a graphic participatory method and involves the production of a map/floor plan, the placement of emotions on the map and a discussion facilitated by the end product (Gabb and Singh, 2015).

[7] Projective techniques are grounded in the field of psychology and have been used to investigate feelings, emotions and motivations for action. They facilitate deep exploration of a topic that might otherwise be unobtainable. Projective techniques use vague stimuli that are open to different interpretations with the

expressing their story, values and experiences (Karnieli-Miller *et al.*, 2017). Research in the therapeutic realm has highlighted the potential of illustrated metaphorical cards as a technique to enrich the qualitative narrative interview and overcome potential linguistic and expressive difficulties (Mousnier *et al.*, 2016; Karnieli-Miller *et al.*, 2017; Dushina *et al.,* 2019). The use of cards may also provide a powerful external point of reference, reduce defences, support the creation of a safe environment for self-discovery or exploration of the participants emotional lives (Karnieli-Miller *et al.*, 2017; Dushina, 2019)

From a phenomenological perspective, this approach may support the double hermeneutic aspect of IPA (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Instead of inferring the meaning of an experience for an individual, the card and the storyteller's interpretation aid in grounding the researcher's understanding and explanation, thus reducing speculative interpretation (Dushina, 2019). This benefit is further supported by insights from Boden and Eatough (2014: 163) who believe that analogy, metaphor and imagery can support individuals to communicate the complexities of the *felt-sense* and allow them to detail the 'unsayable' beyond literal language.

I opted to use Dixit®[8] Cards in this research based on my experience using it as an educator and my engagement with literature. The cards (Appendix DD) were included to act as stimuli for discussing how the girls interacted with their autistic identity with reference to the school context. I hoped that the Dixit® Cards would support an enriched understanding of autistic experience through appreciation for the *felt-sense* (Boden and Eatough, 2014). In this study, the Dixit cards were introduced as a final activity in the 'interrupted' interview. The girls were asked to choose a card that best represented how they experience autism in the school context. Emphasis was placed on freedom of choice and the idea that there was no right or wrong answer in terms of the card selected or the response provided. In addition, the invitation to engage was flexible in so far as the girls could pick one card or a few cards or could decide not to select a card.

3.10.6 Data Collection Procedure

As the first session was developed to take place in the school setting, this required school involvement. With the consent of the girls and their parents, I, as the researcher, contacted

expectation that the individual will assign meaning. They can support articulation of abstract or intangible ideas (Levin-Rozalis, 2004).

[8] Dixit® is exploration-based, storytelling card game based around a deck of illustrated cards, developed by Jean-Louis Roubira and illustrated by Marie Cardouat. The cards present illustrations that are somewhat abstract with their meaning open to interpretation, allowing the individual to assign their own associations to it (Kwiatkowska *et al.*, 2014).

the individual schools to request their consent to undertake this session on school grounds. I provided principals with a Letter of Information (Appendix EE) detailing the research and outlining the potential their role in facilitating this session. Upon receiving principal consent (Appendix FF), I liaised with principals and/or SENCos to arrange the logistics. To protect the anonymity of the participants but also for data protection purposes to ensure no other individuals would be recorded in the data collection either via the audio recording or in any photographs taken, the session could only take place when the school was quiet with minimal other students walking around. These sessions lasted approximately 10-15 minutes in duration. A small handheld Dictaphone with a lapel microphone was used for audio recording while a tablet was used to capture images of the places visit during the session.

The second session was designed to be the primary data collection session. At this stage, the researcher and the participants had already met on at least one occasion and so were familiar with each other. The researcher, the autistic girl and their parents/guardians worked together to plan the logistics of this data collection session. Location options presented to the participants included their home, their school (with school approval), or a quiet public place of their choosing.

Data collection sessions with parents/guardians, where possible took place on the same day as the first session with the autistic girls for convenience and practicality for the researcher and the participants. Parent/Guardian sessions were carried out in their homes or in a quiet public place with interviews lasting between 40 minutes and 1 hour.

3.10.7 Data Analysis

IPA data analysis has been described as an iterative and inductive process (Smith *et al.* 2022). Analysis commenced at an individual level before progressing to a more holistic and encompassing group level understanding, gradually evolving from a descriptive presentation to a more interpretive account (Smith *et al.*, 2022). This process was facilitated through flexible engagement with an eight-stage process (*tab.8*). To demonstrate quality in IPA analysis, each stage contains a supporting appendix to detail the process for one case. A prevalence table demonstrating participant presence within final themes can be found in Appendix GG.

Table 8: Process of IPA Data Analysis

Process of Data Analysis		
1.	Reading and re-reading	The analysis process commenced with close examination of each transcript in their own right (idiographic commitment). Transcripts were read and re-read. 'Free coding' was employed to facilitate reflection at the start of analysis to 'reduce the level of noise' (Larkin and Thompson, 2012: 106). Free coding supports 'bracketing' to allow a more systematic approach to initial formal coding (Appendix HH)
2.	Exploratory noting	This step involved line-by-line reading of the transcript and initial noting. I loosely explored the data at a descriptive, linguistic and conceptual level. (Appendix II)
3.	Constructing experiential statements (ES)	The exploratory notes I created in the previous stage were distilled into statements which aimed to succinctly describe the individual's experience while maintaining the complexity and nuance of that experience. ES are written to reflect the lived experience and also capture the interpretation of the lived experience (Appendix JJ). Each case had a corresponding Excel file where I recorded the ES, its corresponding quote and a location identifier (Appendix KK)
4.	Searching for connections across experiential statements	In order to search for connections and patterns across ES, I compiled a document containing all ES within a case, printed them out and cut them up (Appendix LL). I then attempted to 'cluster' (Smith *et al.*, 2022) the ES in terms of shared ideas or concepts. Engaging with the transcript and my exploratory notes supported the development a broad structure of connections represented within the case narrative (Appendix MM). In addition to the manual analysis, I tracked this stage of analysis within the accompanying excel file using colour coding (Appendix NN)
5.	Naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and consolidating and organising them in a table	I spent some time negotiating the initial clusters before finalising the clusters and assigning a descriptive title. The assigned title endeavoured to capture the essence or meaning underpinning the cluster (Nigbur and Chatfield, 2025). These clusters now represented the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) associated with a case. The excel file allowed me to extract the colour coded ES from the initial clustering in step four to a new workbook where the PETs were then recorded (Appendix OO).
6.	Continuing the individual analysis of other cases	Step one to five was repeated for the remaining participants in both cycles. Recognising the importance of the idiographic commitment, the process of free coding in step one was important to allow me to monitor my initial thoughts to each transcript. Appendix PP and QQ provide an overview of the PETs for each case across both cohorts.
7.	Working with PETS to develop Group	Step seven involved the identification of patterns of convergence and divergence across the PETs for the participants*. This step does not seek to establish a unifying

	Experiential Themes (GETs) across cases	narrative but instead endeavours to 'highlight the shared and unique features of experience' (Smith *et al.*, 2022: 100) across the sample. I grouped related PETs together to generate the GETs. Data management of this step involved moving the relevant PET from each case into a new GET workbook (Appendix RR). At this stage, each dyad was assigned a colour so they could be tracked in the GET workbook. Appendix SS and TT provide an overview of the GETs for both cohorts. *I worked with the PETs for each cohort separately. PETs to GETs for autistic girls. PETs to GETs for the parents of autistic girls.
8.	Across-group analysis	Only once stages one to seven were completed for both cohorts (autistic girls and their parents) did across-group analysis occur. The GETs generated for each cohort informed the development of the across-group themes. Across group themes were tracked in a new excel file with each theme assigned its own workbook within the file (Appendix UU) Appendix VV provides an overview of the across-group GETs. This table indicates what GETs (and corresponding PETs) fed into the across-group themes. It also highlights where parents' data was included for supplementary or main purposes.

3.10.8 Quality

It has been argued that due to the epistemology differences between qualitative and quantitative research, qualitative evidence should not be evaluated against the same criteria as quantitative methodology (Yardley, 2017). Various guidelines have been developed to assist researchers in ensuring quality within qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, Yardley, 2000). The work of Yardley (2000) in relation to quality in qualitative research has been reviewed by Smith (2011) and incorporated into a quality evaluation guide for IPA. Addressing sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance, this framework has been adopted to review this research.

3.10.8.1 *Sensitivity to context*

This research was guided from the outset by my interest in autism, autism and girls and education, however, engagement with existing research and theoretical literature supported me to develop and refine the research questions and associated data collection tools. My professional experience as a teacher, along with my engagement in professional development and specialist qualifications in SEN, autism and specific learning difficulties were valuable when preparing recruitment materials, planning for data collection, and working with and engaging with autistic girls at post-primary level. Furthermore, my

engagement with training on Selective Mutism proved valuable in supporting one of the girls to engage with the study.

3.10.8.2 *Commitment and Rigour*

As a former teacher and current teacher educator, I was personally invested in completing this research to the highest standards with the hope of informing practice on the ground. I demonstrated in-depth engagement with the research topic through reading and professional development opportunities. I completed Research Integrity Training in advance of finalising study design and data collection (Epigeum, 2023). In order to demonstrate commitment and rigour to the IPA methodology, I regularly attended Phenomenology of Health and Relationships (PhAR) group meetings, a network of IPA researchers with sessions facilitated by Michael Larkin[9]. I subscribed to an IPA group mailing list where queries could be posted, and support offered. I also participated in a one-day introductory workshop to IPA delivered by Jonathon Smith[10] and a one-day IPA Data Analysis workshop delivered by Elena Gil-Rodriguez[11] which were invaluable in terms of developing my understanding of IPA, its theoretical underpinnings and the procedures required to ensure rigorous data analysis.

3.10.8.3 *Transparency and Coherence*

I used a mixture of hand-written inputs and digital records to detail decisions made and procedures undertaken throughout the project. This paper trail acts as evidence to support transparency and coherence in the research process. A thorough description of the methodology adopted, and the analysis procedures are detailed. The interviews were transcribed, and verbatim quotes were incorporated into the findings to ensure the findings, and the associated interpretations of those findings remained consistent with the participant's narrative. My use of appendices provides evidence of the systematic data analysis process undertaken. A clear description of researcher positionality was provided in *Section 3.6*. Additionally, the use of a reflexive research diary was essential to facilitate the monitoring of bias and reflection on all parts of the process.

3.10.8.4 *Impact and Importance*

Uncovering the female autistic experience has been identified as important to extend knowledge and understanding of autism (Saxe, 2017). Research into the school experiences of autistic girls is gradually emerging, however, there is a need for continued

[9] Michael Larkin is a Professor in the School of Psychology at Aston University. He has made significant contributions to the development of IPA.
[10] Jonathon Smith is a Professor of Psychology at Birkbeck University of London. He developed IPA as an experiential qualitative approach to research.
[11] Elena Gil-Rodriguez (DPsych Counselling Psychology) provides live, online training on IPA.

engagement with this topic to lead to the establishment of a high quality and varied body of literature. Furthermore, there is no research of this nature in the Republic of Ireland, this study aimed to address this gap and provide insight into the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream education in Ireland. As a result of this, the current study has both theoretical and practical implications in the context of supporting autistic girls at a macro level all the way through to the micro-level. Considering the above, dissemination of the research was critical. I engaged with dissemination at multiple points throughout the process from the initial stages of literature reviewal to methodological presentations through to presentation of findings. Engagement with dissemination will continue post-submission (Appendix WW).

3.11 Secondary Study

A mixed methods questionnaire was employed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling analysis of both standardised and open responses in relation to mainstream teachers' awareness, knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to autism in girls. This study addressed the fourth and fifth research questions set out at the beginning of this chapter:

- How do mainstream class teachers evaluate their knowledge of autism (generally and in girls); their confidence recognising autism in girls and supporting autistic girls in the education context, and their professional development needs?
- Are teachers aware of gender differences in autism?

Context is crucial in research and can be considered in many ways, e.g. the field you are researching; the location of your research; your own context and positionality and the contexts of your participants (Kara *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, it is argued that the context in which the data is gathered in an IPA study should be considered (Reid *et al.*, 2005). As there is currently no literature exploring teacher knowledge of autism in girls in the Irish context, the current study was designed in response to this and endeavoured to contextualise the experiences shared by the autistic girls in the primary study.

3.11.1 Ontological and Epistemological Underpinnings

Recognising the pragmatic-interpretivist paradigmatic stance underpinning this research (*Section 3.3*), the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the secondary study situate it within the pragmatic paradigm. The adoption of the pragmatist perspective for this secondary study was driven primarily by its ability to facilitate the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data (Mertens, 2020). It is argued that combining qualitative

and quantitative data in surveys can be useful to understand large scale patterns in educational reforms (Mertens, 2020). As the study wanted to gauge teachers' perceptions of their awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism in girls, a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative data was necessary. The incorporation of quantitative data would allow for standardised measurement in terms of perceived knowledge while the inclusion of qualitative data would allow for more open-ended responses for participants to share their subjective insights into the phenomenon (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

3.11.2 Survey Methodology

Survey methodology was employed to explore how post-primary teachers evaluated their knowledge and understanding of autism in girls. Without an accurate description of an educational phenomenon as it exists at a point in time, its explanation and/or transformation lacks grounding (Gall *et al.*, 2003). Thence, gathering information directly from teachers may provide insight into the needs of this cohort in relation to professional development opportunities to better serve autistic girls in mainstream settings.

3.11.3 Data Collection Tool

The survey was based on a questionnaire developed by Gray *et al.* (2021) who sought the views of UK-based SENCos to investigate their understanding of autism and girls[12]. Informed by the limitations outlined by the previous authors, and guided by my engagement with literature, the survey was adapted to better reflect the aims of the current study and the context in which it was being undertaken.

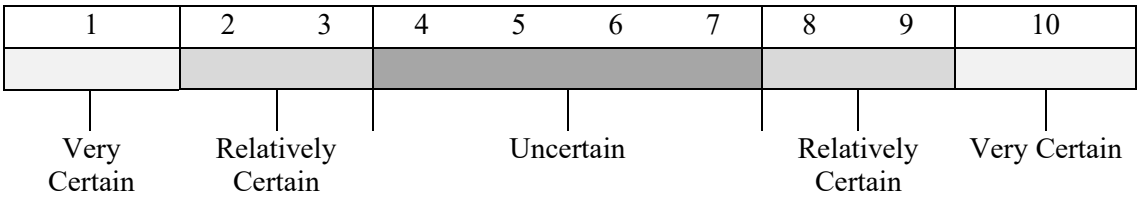
The survey was designed on Qualtrics, and a pilot was completed (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Mertens, 2020) on the initial design (Appendix XX). The pilot was undertaken with five primary teachers (colleagues of the researcher) and one post-primary teacher. As the survey was focused on collecting self-report data and responses to statements and was not context-dependent, I piloted it with my primary trained colleagues. Guided by the Seven Question Framework proposed by Bell (2010), feedback on the clarity of instructions, the ambiguity of questions, question appropriateness, topics included layout and the time it took to complete, with a space for additional comments was collected (Appendix YY). Minor amendments in relation to the wording of questions and the survey structure were made based on the feedback. A revised survey was generated and sent to one post-primary teacher to review to ensure no errors were present in terms of applicability to the post-primary context. One minor amendment was made in relation to a question on

[12] The corresponding author of this study was contacted and a copy of the questionnaire they developed requested.

qualifications to include 'Higher Diploma in Education' as an option as this degree option preceded the Professional Master of Education degree currently in place.

The final survey consisted of four sections (Appendix ZZ). The first section sought demographic information while the second section gathered self-report data, as well as knowledge sources. The third section focused on gender differences in autism, exploring prevalence and presentation along with self-reports on confidence recognising and supporting autistic girls. The final section of the survey elicited the professional learning needs of teachers.

Section three incorporated a 15-item (1-10 Likert) scale developed to evaluate teacher's ability to identify characteristics associated with the presentation of autism in females. The statements were informed by work of Gray *et al.* (2021) with some adaptations/additions informed by literature pertinent to sex/gender differences in autism and exploration of the female profile of autism (Appendix AAA). They were analysed in terms of their theoretical alignment with the presentation of autism in females as per literature[13]. To facilitate further analysis of teacher responses, a certainty scale was also considered (*fig.11*). The respondent rating of the statement on the 1-10 scale was taken to indicate the level of certainty in their response. Three levels of certainty were adopted; 'certain', 'relatively certain' and 'uncertain'.



Uncertain = 4,5,6,7
Relatively Certain = 2, 3, 8, 9
Very Certain = 1, 10

Figure 11: Scale Certainty Breakdown

It is acknowledged that this scale does not credit the individuality of autistic experience, however, it provides a starting point in terms of understanding teacher awareness of a more internal presentation of autism that is commonly experienced by autistic girls.

[13] For the purpose of this PhD, I defined this as Theoretical Alignment with Literature (TAL).

3.11.4 Sample

Qualified teachers, teaching in a mainstream setting in a post-primary school in the Republic of Ireland were identified as the sample for this national study. Criterion based, purposive sampling was deemed the most appropriate sampling strategy (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). A purposive sample was necessary in that post-primary teachers were required as the participant cohort. A further criterion was added to refine the sample with teachers required to be teaching in a mainstream capacity. A complete list of all post-primary schools was sought from the Department of Education's Statistics Section to support distribution of the survey. Teachers teaching in all types of post-primary schools were eligible to participate, including Mixed Schools, Girls' Schools, Boys' Schools[14], Gaelscoileanna[15], Scoileanna sa Ghaeltacht[16].

3.11.5 Data Collection

Upon ethical clearance being granted, distribution of the national survey commenced. The approach to survey dissemination was threefold to support participant engagement. Firstly, a Letter of Information (Appendix BBB), together with the link to the survey was provided to all schools via email with email addresses obtained from the DoE database. This email requested that teachers complete the survey within a three-week timeframe and a reminder email was scheduled to send with one week remaining. Due to lower-than-expected response rates, a final email was issued to schools on the original closing date outlining the decision to extend the deadline by one week.

Running parallel to the school-based survey dissemination, a similar process was replicated with Directors of Education Centres and Heads of School in third level institutions who provide postgraduate programmes in the areas of Special and Inclusive Education. A similar email containing a Letter of Information (Appendix CCC and DDD) was sent to these gatekeepers with a request to share details of the teachers on their Education Centre mailing list/Post-Graduate Student mailing lists. Flyers (Appendix M) were included in the emails to principals, directors of education centres and heads of school to support dissemination.

[14] Surveys were distributed to boys' schools as teachers the research aimed to elicit the understanding of all mainstream post-primary teachers regardless of school setting. Teachers in this setting may not remain in this setting the following year.

[15] School located outside a Gaeltacht area where Irish is the primary language of teaching and communication.

[16] School located within a Gaeltacht region where Irish is the primary language of teaching and communication.

3.11.6 Data Analysis

The use of quantitative data analysis was necessary in the current study in order to draw conclusions from the online survey completed by teachers. However, as the survey included both closed and open-ended questions, the mixing strategy of merging detailed in *Section 3.4.1* (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011) was adopted to facilitate the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in this embedded study. SPSS[17] was selected as the analytical tool for the current research as institutional access was provided and supports and training were readily available. *Figure 12* outlines the process of data analysis undertaken as recommended by Pallant (2016). All analytic processes undertaken in SPSS were recorded using the Syntax function with Outputs generated, facilitating the creation of an audit trail.

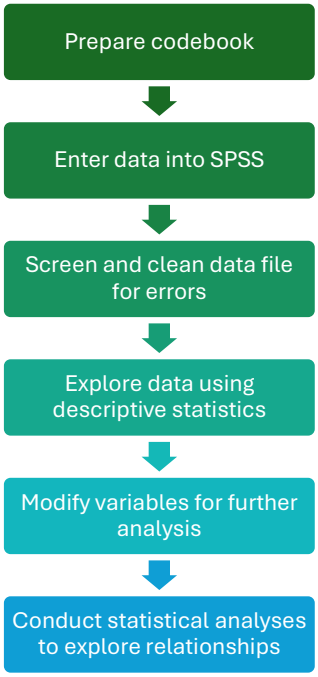


Figure 12: Flowchart of Data Analysis Process

3.11.6.1 *Preparing Quantitative Data for Analysis*

Data were downloaded from Qualtrics as an Excel file to facilitate upload to SPSS. The separation of the closed [quantitative] and open-ended [qualitative] data occurred at this point. A codebook (Appendix EEE) was developed to convert the information obtained from each participant in response to the survey into a numerical format that could be understood by SPSS. This process involved defining and labelling each of the variables used in the survey and assigning numbers to each of the possible responses (Pallant,

[17] IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28.0.0.0

2016). Appendix FFF details the preparatory processes undertaken in SPSS to prepare quantitative data for analysis. Following a thorough check of all variables in the data file for errors, formal procedures could commence.

3.11.6.2 *Quantitative Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics allow for the description of characteristics from a large sample and can collect important data pertinent to the sample, enabling a specific research question to be addressed (Cook and Cook, 2016; Pallant, 2016). This information can be useful for professional and policy development and foundational for further empirical research. Consistent the aims of this research, descriptive statistics were the primary mode of data analysis used. Outputs detailing frequencies, percentages and other numerical patterns provided comprehensive summary data. Visual representations of this data, including tables and bar charts, were used to demonstrate the findings.

As descriptive statistics do not demonstrate how different variables interact with each other (Cook and Cook, 2016), inferential statistics were also used. Inferential statistics use information collected from the study sample to make predictions and draw conclusions about the population based on probability (Cohen *et al*., 2018). SPSS was used to obtain inferential statistics based on the survey data used in the current study. Difference tests including *Independent-samples t-tests*, *One-way between-groups analysis of variance* (ANOVA) and *mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance* (Mixed ANOVA) were used to gain a more complete understanding of the data collected.

3.11.6.3 *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Qualitative data were extracted from Qualtrics, inputted in an Excel File and printed. Data were first analysed using the phase one and two of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. I had been scanning the questionnaire responses while the survey link was live and engaged with a brief complete reading of the response upon closure of the survey and a more thorough re-reading to commence the analysis process, fulfilling the first phase of familiarisation. Phase Two was concerned with initial coding of data and was enacted though notations on the printed Excel file before being cut up and organised thematically. The mechanics of analysis were informed by the "Scissor and Sort" technique (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014; Appendix GGG). Analysis of both the open-ended survey responses and the descriptive and inferential statistical analysis of the quantitative data gathered from the national survey will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

3.11.7 Validity and Reliability

Validity refers to the extent to which an instrument measures what it was intended to measure (Mertens, 2020). The questionnaire items were informed by thorough engagement with extant research, both empirical evidence and literature presenting clinical insights, foundational for content validity. An interrogation of the diagnostic criteria for autism with reference to the literature was carried out to ensure the items covered relevant aspects, however it is important to note that this was based on professional judgement rather than systematic measurement. Furthermore, given the similarities between the questionnaire items in the current research and those in research carried out by Gray *et al.* (2021), comparisons may be carried out by means of convergent validity (Bourne, 2017).

Reliability refers to degree to which a measurement tool consistently produces similar results with a similar group of respondents in a similar context, over time (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Internal consistency, measured using Cronbach's alpha test, is one approach that determines reliability. In this study the *identification of characteristics* scale had poor internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha value of .23. The lack of internal consistency within the items may be explained by the exploratory nature of the research, in terms of tapping into nuanced aspects of a broad concept, the presentation of autism in girls. The scale was devised to consider the broad construct of autism presentation with the individual items presenting statements relating to different domains of this broader presentation. It could be argued that the limited inter-relatedness of items and the inclusion of heterogenous constructs may have influenced the internal consistency, which may have been further amplified by the low number of items included (Schmitt, 1996; Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). However, low levels of internal consistency may still yield reliable information (Schmitt, 1996; Tang *et al.*, 2014)

Given the pragmatic-interpretivist paradigmatic stance underpinning the research, the results emerging from this scale were further contextualised in terms of their dependability, *i.e.* an interpretivist response to reliability, (Mertens, 2020). Adopting a hermeneutic approach enabled more holistic, integrative interpretations of the data allowing the results to be understood as a whole, in light of its component parts (Mertens, 2020). Considering the results with reference to additional qualitative research collected, the extant literature and my contextualised interpretations allow the conclusions to be evaluated through an alternate lens to quantified levels of consistency. However, in

recognising the limitations in terms of internal consistency, recommendations are presented in *Section 7.6.3*.

3.12 Reflexivity

To ensure ethical practice and quality in this research, reflexivity was prioritised throughout the project (Brooks *et al.*, 2014). Identifying and monitoring of values, beliefs and preconceptions was deemed important to reduce bias within the study (Malterud, 2001). Furthermore, considering the nature of the primary study in engaging autistic girls in the research process, the significance of positionality and its implications in terms of power cannot be understated. Therefore, in addition to presenting a positionality statement (*Section 3.6*), I recognised and reflected upon the potential influence of my identity at different intersections of the current research and the implications of this identity in terms of power (Appendix G). I used my researcher diary and frequent voice noting to document my thinking throughout the process (Cohen *et al.*, 2018) and recorded my feelings, assumptions and thoughts prior to and following all data collection sessions (Appendix HHH). Given that a systematic approach to the research process can increase the trustworthiness of a study and offset the potential of researcher bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), all research activities and decisions were documented. Digital and written records were maintained, procedures for data analysis stored and step-by-step evidence of IPA analysis recorded. Additionally, detailed rationales were provided throughout this chapter to justify decisions made in relation to the entire research process. It is these rationales, combined with various appendices that demonstrate research rigor, that act as an audit trail for this study.

3.13 Conceptual Framework

Drawing the above sections together, *Figure 13* presents the overarching conceptual framework underpinning this PhD research. Positioned within the research problem outlined in Chapter One, the theoretical perspectives and approach to research are presented with reference to the intended outcome of the project. Considering the multi-faceted nature of school experiences and the impact of gender biased knowledge of autism, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory (2005) is identified as an appropriate theoretical lens to better understand the experiences of autistic girls and the various interplay of systems that influence these experiences. Secondly, this research recognises the need to prioritise the voices of autistic girls. Doubly marginalised by their minoritised identities, autistic females are consistently disadvantaged in terms of identification, understanding and support. Given the dearth of research on the school experiences of

autistic girls and to add to the emerging base of sex/gender specific research, Intersectional Feminism is the second theoretical lens adopted for this study.

This mixed method, multi-informant research study aimed to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the mainstream school experiences of autistic girls. The research with autistic girls and their parents/guardians was qualitatively driven to elicit in-depth, experiential data. Furthermore, in recognising the autistic profile and in line with the aim to amplify the voices of autistic girls, alternative modes of engagement were incorporated into data collection. Lastly, a questionnaire containing open and closed-ended questions generated data from teachers in relation to their perceived knowledge of autism and girls. The framework guiding this research was designed with the intention of producing authentic knowledge from key stakeholders involved autistic girls' school experiences in order to inform policy and practice going forward.

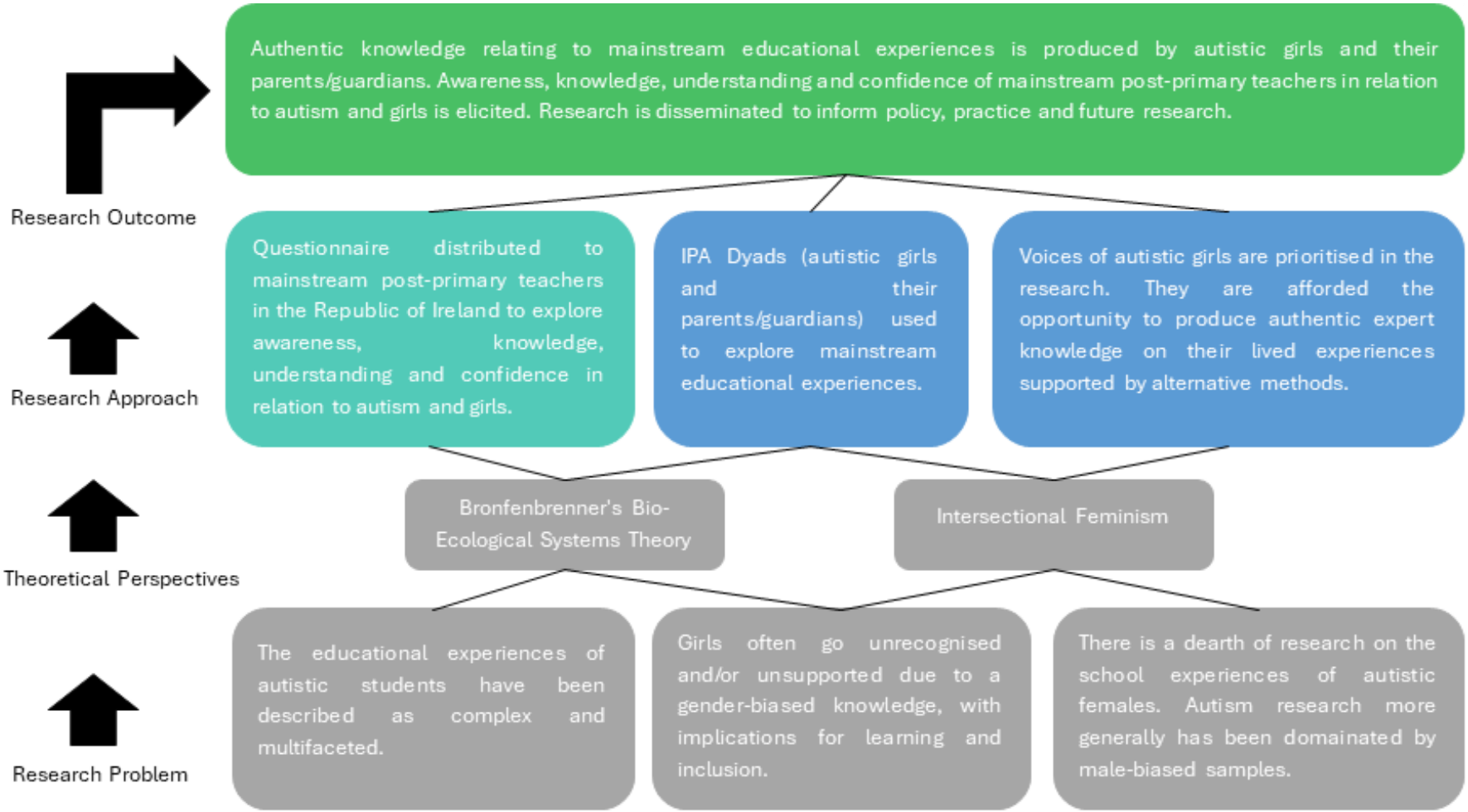


Figure 13: Visualising the Conceptual Framework

3.14 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter first presented the theoretical underpinnings of the current research before presenting the overarching study design and attending to the ethical considerations of the study with particular reference to doing inclusive ethical research. The two studies within the research, the primary study with autistic girls and their parents/guardians and the secondary study with mainstream post-primary teachers, were delineated. In addition, other pertinent aspects concerned with the rigorous enactment of this project, including positionality and reflexivity, were addressed. Finally, in an effort to draw together all components of the project, a conceptual framework was presented. The next chapter will present the findings pertaining to the embedded study exploring teachers' perceptions of knowledge of autism in girls before the findings of the Primary Study are presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 Secondary Study Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results from the secondary study in this PhD research which sought to explore mainstream post-primary teachers' awareness, knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to autism and girls. Demographic information is first provided before the two underpinning research questions are addressed using descriptive and inferential statistics as well as qualitative data collected from the open-ended response questions.

4.2 Demographics

Survey links were distributed to all mainstream post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (*N*=728; GOI, 2023). Within the allocated period for engagement with the survey, 348 responses were recorded, of which 86 were removed due to being partially completed[18]. Following data cleaning, 262 surveys were available for analysis. The sample therefore consisted of 262 mainstream post-primary school teachers. The gender breakdown for this cohort was 201 females (76.1%), 58 males (22.1%), one individual identifying as other (.4%) and two individuals did not wish to have this data recorded (.8%). Varied teaching qualification routes were represented with a number of teachers also holding additional qualifications. 27.1% of respondents reporting having a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education. Teaching experience and school context varied among respondents. The nature of the current study and its relevance to teachers in a permanent capacity in a single-sex boys' school may provide some explanation for the lower uptake of participation in this cohort of teachers. Most of the respondents 84.7% reported that they had taught a girl diagnosed with autism in their teaching career. It is interesting to note that 29 teachers stated that they had not taught a girl with autism while a further 11 were unaware if they had taught a girl with autism. *Table 9* presents an overview of the respondents' demographic data.

[18] Engagement with Section 3 Question 11 of the questionnaire (characteristics of the presentation of autism in females) was required for inclusion in analysis.

Table 9: Demographic Information (Secondary Study)

Variable			Frequency	Percent
Gender				
	Male		58	22.1
	Female		201	76.1
	Other		1	.4
	Prefer not to say		2	.8
Additional Qualifications				
	Postgraduate Qualification in Special/Inclusive Education			
		Yes	71	27.1
		No	191	72.9
	Other Qualification			
		Yes	46	17.6
		No	216	82.4
Years Teaching				
	0-5 years		54	20.6
	6-10 years		40	15.3
	11-15 years		41	15.6
	16+ years		127	48.5
School Context				
	Single sex girls' school		49	18.7
	Single sex boys' school		23	8.8
	Mixed School		190	72.5
Taught a girl diagnosed with autism				
	Yes		221	84.4
	No		29	11.1
	Don't Know		11	4.2
	Missing		1	.4

4.3 Embedded Question 1

How do mainstream class teachers evaluate their knowledge of autism (generally and in girls); their confidence recognising autism in girls and supporting autistic girls in the education context, and their professional development needs?

4.3.1 Self-Reported Knowledge/Understanding of Autism

Using a 5-point scale ranging from low to high, teachers were asked to self-report their own knowledge/understanding of autism and autism in girls, respectively. In relation to knowledge of autism more generally, approximately half of respondents (51.6%) rated their knowledge/understanding in the high to quite high range. A further 34% of respondents recorded having a moderate level of knowledge/understanding, while the remaining 14.5% of teachers reported their knowledge/understanding as being quite low to low. Interestingly, a lower average (M = 3.06, SD = 1.07) was recorded in relation to respondents' self-rating of knowledge/understanding of autism in girls, compared to autism more generally (M = 3.47, SD = .98). Fewer teachers (33.2%) reported their knowledge/understanding to be in higher categories while having a moderate knowledge/understand was reported most frequently (36.6%) by teachers. Self-reports of quite low to low were recorded by 24.9% of respondents. *Figure 14* illustrates differences in self-reported knowledge/understanding in autism compared to autism in girls.

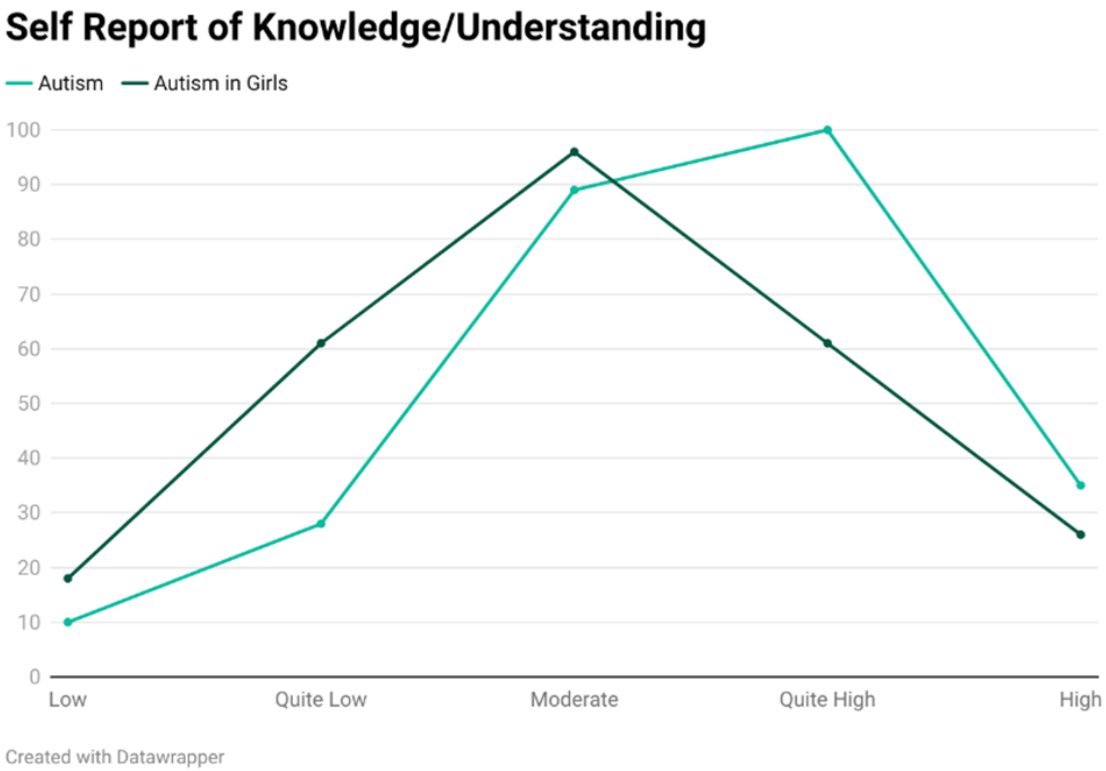


Figure 14: Comparison of Self-Reported Knowledge/Understanding of Autism

4.3.2 Attribution of Sources of Knowledge/Understanding of Autism

Respondents attributed their knowledge and understanding of autism to a varied range of sources. The most popular selection was that knowledge and understanding were grounded in professional experience with 197 (72.2%) of respondents selecting this option. Lower cited with 104 teachers (39%) choosing this category was training from the Department of Education/NCSE. Training from Education Support Centres and External Organisations were ranked similarly at 81 (30.9%) and 73 (27.9%), respectively. Only 71 teachers (27.5%) reported that their knowledge and understanding of autism could be attributed to training received as part of their Initial Teacher Education programme. Personal experience was also selected by some 65 (24.8%) of teachers. A further 36 (13.7%) of teachers shared other sources to which they credit their knowledge and understanding to. These included in-school training, colleagues, postgraduate qualifications, self-directed learning, knowledge from previous employment/volunteering roles. *Table 10* presents an overview of demographic information in relation to self-report knowledge/understanding pertinent to autism, and autism in girls.

Table 10: Demographics and Self-Reported Knowledge/Understanding

			Knowledge/Understanding of Autism					Knowledge/Understanding of Autism in Girls				
			Low	Quite Low	Moderate	Quite High	High	Low	Quite Low	Moderate	Quite High	High
Name	Categories	*n*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*
Gender	Male	58	5.2	10.3	43.1	36.2	5.2	10.3	32.8	41.4	13.8	1.7
	Female	201	3.5	10.9	31.8	38.3	15.4	6	20.9	35.3	25.5	12.4
	Other	1	0	0	0	0	100	0	0	0	100	0
	Prefer not to say	2	0	0	0	100	0	0	0	50	50	0
Qualifications	PGSE											
	Yes	71	1.4	1.4	19.7	46.5	31	2.8	5.6	36.6	33.8	21.1
	No	191	4.7	14.1	39.3	35.1	6.8	8.4	29.8	36.6	19.4	5.8
Years Teaching	0-5	54	1.9	16.7	38.9	35.2	7.4	9.3	31.5	31.5	24.1	3.7
	6-10	40	5	7.5	27.5	42.5	17.5	5	22.5	40	17.5	15
	11-15	41	4.9	4.9	29.3	41.5	19.5	7.3	19.5	24.4	34.1	14.6
	16+	127	3.9	11	35.4	37	12.6	6.3	21.3	41.7	21.3	9.4
School Context	Mixed	190	3.7	10.5	33.7	35.8	16.3	6.3	23.2	38.4	20.5	11.6
	Single sex girls	49	4.1	10.2	38.8	42.9	4.1	4.1	22.4	30.6	38.8	4.1
	Single sex boys	23	4.3	13	26.1	47.8	8.7	17.4	26.1	34.8	13	8.7

4.3.3 Examining the Role of a Postgraduate Qualification on Self-Reported Knowledge/Understanding of Autism

Considering the demographic information in *Table 10* pertaining to postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education, and in light of literature that highlights the importance of specialist training when supporting autistic students, engagement with further inferential testing was warranted to identify whether there is an association between having a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education and self-reported knowledge.

Assumption checks were carried out the data prior to conducting tests. Having met the assumption of homogeneity of variance as well as additional necessary assumptions (Appendix III), a mixed ANOVA, guided by the below question, was conducted.

→ *Is there an association between having a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education and self-reported knowledge/understanding?*

The within-subject factor was autism knowledge, with two levels (autism in general and autism in girls). The between-subjects factor was qualification, with two levels (postgraduate qualification and no postgraduate qualification). The dependent variable was self-reported knowledge/understanding.

The null hypothesis is first outlined before the results are presented.

> *H_0. Individuals with and without a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education will self-report similar levels of knowledge/understanding in autism and autism in girls.*

There was a significant main effect of qualification on self-reported knowledge overall, $F(1, 260) = 41.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .137$. This effect tells us that the ratings of those with a postgraduate qualification were significantly higher than those without a postgraduate qualification in both self-reported knowledge of autism and knowledge of autism in girls as evidenced in *figure 15*. A second main effect was also evident in that regardless of whether respondents had a postgraduate qualification or not, they exhibited greater perceived familiarity with autism more generally compared to autism in girls $F(1, 260) = 65.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .200$. There was no significant interaction effect between qualification and self-reported knowledge of autism (autism in general / autism in girls), $F(1, 260) = .02$, $p = .888$, $\eta^2 = .000$, with a similar pattern of results in terms of self-reported knowledge of autism ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .84$ [Qual] v $M = 3.25$, $SD = .95$ [no Qual])

and autism in girls ($M = 3.65$, $SD = .97$ [Qual] v $M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.02$ [no Qual]) revealed for both those with and without a qualification in special/inclusive education.

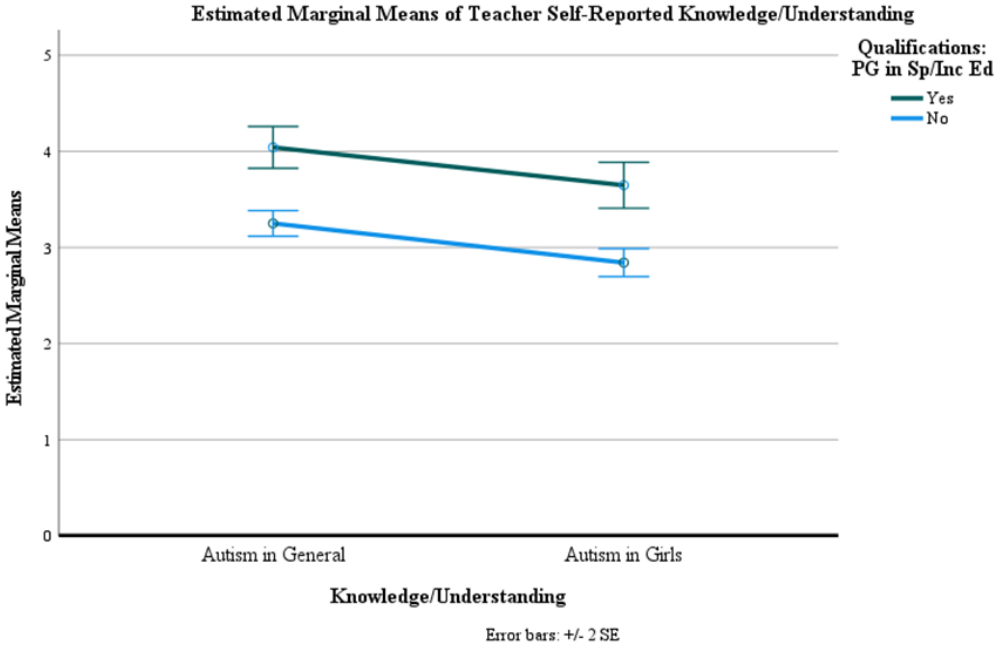


*Figure 15: Plot of two-way 2*2 Mixed ANOVA (Knowledge: Autism in General v Autism in Girls * Qualification: PG Qualification v No PG Qualification)*

These results do not support the null hypothesis in its entirety. While individuals with and without a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education exhibit a similar pattern of results in relation to their self-reported knowledge/understanding, self-reports from those with an additional qualification were significantly greater than the self-reports from those without such a qualification, perhaps as expected. However, interestingly, despite the increase in knowledge reported for those with a postgraduate qualification, they still reported feeling less knowledgeable about autism in girls. Furthermore, the relative difference of knowledge of autism in girls is basically identical for those with and without a postgraduate qualification. As the data indicates that qualification does not close the gap between knowledge of autism in general and knowledge of autism in girls, this raises the question of whether postgraduate programmes are adequately attending to the nuanced presentation of autism in girls. Nonetheless, the results indicate that there is an association between a postgraduate qualification in Special/Inclusive Education and self-reported knowledge/understanding. It appears that those who possess a postgraduate qualification in this area are more likely to report higher levels of knowledge/understanding than those without, which may suggest that those who have

completed further study in special/inclusive education have a stronger sense of self-efficacy compared to their colleagues without such qualifications.

4.3.4 Self-Reported Confidence Recognising Autism in Girls and Supporting Autistic Girls in the Education Context

Using rating options ranging from 1 to 5 (1: Not at all confident, 2: Not Very Confident; 3: Somewhat Confident, 4: Very Confident, 5: Extremely Confident), teachers self-reported a) their confidence in recognising autism in females and b) their confidence in supporting autistic females in the mainstream classroom.

4.3.4.1 *Self-Reported Confidence Recognising Autism in Girls*

On average, a moderate level of confidence was reported by respondents in relation to recognising autism in girls ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .894$), however, the responses varied amongst the respondents. Almost half of the respondents (49.2%) reported feeling somewhat confident while only 18.7% of respondents rated their confidence in the high categories. A small percentage of teachers (3.1%) reported feeling extremely confident in their ability to recognise autism in females. Conversely, 32% of respondents reported low levels of confidence.

4.3.4.2 *Self-Reported Confidence Supporting Autistic Girls*

A marginally higher mean ($M = 2.92$, $SD = .869$) was reported in terms of teachers' confidence levels supporting autistic girls already diagnosed. The majority of respondents (48.1%) reported feeling somewhat confident. Meanwhile, 22.9% of teachers self-reported feeling very confident or extremely confident while 37% selected the options of not very confident and not at all confident.

A breakdown of self-reported confidence in relation to recognising autism in girls and supporting a girl with an autism diagnosis by demographics is provided below in *Table 11*.

Table 11: Demographics and Self-Reported Confidence

			Confidence Recognising Autism in Girls					Confidence Supporting Girls with an Autism Diagnosis				
			Not At All Confident	Not Very Confident	Somewhat Confident	Very Confident	Extremely Confident	Not At All Confident	Not Very Confident	Somewhat Confident	Very Confident	Extremely Confident
Name	Categories	*n*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*	*n%*
Gender	Male	58	5.2	29.3	55.2	10.3	0.0	3.4	25.9	55.2	15.5	0.0
	Female	201	8.5	23.4	47.3	16.9	4.0	5.5	23.9	45.8	20.9	4.0
	Other	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0
	Prefer not to say	2	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0
Qualifications	PGSE											
	Yes	71	2.8	9.9	50.7	31.0	5.6	1.4	14.1	43.7	36.6	4.2
	No	191	9.4	29.8	48.7	9.9	2.1	6.3	27.7	49.7	13.6	2.6
Years Teaching	0-5	54	7.4	40.7	37.0	13.0	1.9	5.6	27.8	40.7	24.1	1.9
	6-10	40	2.5	20.0	50.0	22.5	5.0	5.0	25.0	42.5	20.0	7.5
	11-15	41	7.3	19.5	53.7	17.1	2.4	4.9	19.5	46.3	29.3	0.0
	16+	127	9.4	20.5	52.8	14.2	3.1	4.7	23.6	53.5	15.0	3.1
School Context	Mixed	190	8.4	27.9	44.2	15.3	4.2	3.7	24.2	48.4	20.5	3.2
	Single sex girls	49	4.1	16.3	65.3	14.3	0.0	6.1	20.4	55.1	16.3	2.0
	Single sex boys	23	8.7	13.0	56.5	21.7	0.0	13.0	30.4	30.4	21.7	4.3

4.3.5 Examining the Role of a Specialist Qualification on Self-Reported Confidence Recognising Autism in Girls and Supporting Autistic Girls in the Classroom

It was of interest to consider whether having a postgraduate qualification influenced teachers' self-reported confidence levels in relation to recognising autism in girls and supporting autistic girls in the classroom. Assumption checks were carried out the data prior to conducting tests. Having met the assumption of homogeneity of variance as well as additional necessary assumptions (Appendix JJJ), two independent samples t-test, with hypotheses guided by the below question, were conducted.

→ *Is there an association between having a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education and self-reported confidence?*

4.3.5.1 *Teacher Confidence Recognising Autism in Girls*

H_0. Individuals with and without a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education will self-report similar levels of confidence recognising autism in girls.

In relation to confidence recognising autism in girls, there was a significant difference in self-reported confidence levels of teachers with a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education (M = 3.27, SD = .827) and those without such qualification (M = 2.65, SD = .862; t (260) = -5.17, p = .001, two-tailed). Cohen's d (.853) indicated a large effect size.

4.3.5.2 *Teacher Confidence Supporting Autistic Girls*

H_0. Individuals with and without a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education will self-report similar levels of confidence supporting autistic girls.

In relation to confidence supporting autistic girls, there was a significant difference in self-reported confidence levels of teachers with a postgraduate qualification in the area of special/inclusive education (M = 3.28, SD = .814) and teachers without such qualification (M = 2.79, SD = .853; t (260) = -4.24, p = .001, two tailed). Cohen's d (.843) indicated a large effect size.

The results from the independent samples t-test do not support the null hypothesis, in either instance. Self-reports from those with an additional qualification were significantly greater than the self-reports from those without such a qualification, which may suggest that those who have completed further study in special/inclusive education have a stronger sense of self-efficacy compared to their colleagues without such qualifications.

4.3.6 Teacher Professional Learning Needs

The above findings in relation to teacher self-reported knowledge/understanding and confidence are mixed, however, they do suggest that teachers do not feel as informed or confident in relation to their knowledge/understanding of autism in girls compared to their knowledge base in autism more generally. When asked about their Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) needs, emphasis was placed on the need for 'specific training on strategies and interventions to support girls with a diagnosis of autism' with 116 respondents (44.3%) selecting this as the most helpful form of TPL. This type of training was also reiterated teachers in some of the qualitative data. Some teachers commented on the abundance of introductory courses on autism and noted that while they provide an overview, they lack depth and practical application. While the desire for practical based TPL is understood, only 45 respondents (17.2%) reported training on how to identify autism in girls as helpful. This is somewhat concerning considering that teachers are often the first port of call for referrals and support is often only implemented following identification of the need. As girls often fly under the radar due to an internal presentation, an inability to recognise may have implications in terms of lack of support provided. Along with requests for workshops on the topic of women and girls with autism (23.3%), alternative ideas for TPL were also shared (11.1%).

Many of the teachers felt it was important that training included the voices of autistic individuals while others suggested that training should only be provided by individuals who are 'actually autistic'. Some teachers stated that increased training in relation to autism in general, with references to gender differences, neuroaffirmative and whole school approaches should be prioritised as a greater understanding of autism continues to be necessary in school contexts. It was also mentioned that characteristics of autism continue to be pathologised and misunderstood, indicating a need for training to be grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm. Teachers expressed that time to collaborate with parents, psychologists and other professionals working with the autistic girl would be more beneficial than TPL. In addition to training, some teachers highlighted the need for increased resources, ranging from SNA provision to physical resources (e.g. worksheets, visuals, practical examples, presentations that accompany training) to assist teachers in supporting autistic learners by having a reference point or something to look back on.

4.4 Embedded Question 2

Are teachers aware of gender differences in autism?

Teachers were prompted to consider the prevalence of autism in males and females and the concept of sex/gender differences in presentation. Over half of respondents (n=166 / 63.4%) were aware that the current reported prevalence of autism is not the same in males and females. In terms of awareness of presentation differences between sex/gender, 214 respondents (81.7%) recognised that autism can present differently in males and females. Only four (1.5%) selected that autism did not present differently, while 44 (16.8%) were unsure whether there were sex/gender presentation differences. *Table 12* provides a further breakdown of awareness of gender differences against demographic information.

Table 12: Demographics and Knowledge of Gender Differences

			The prevalence of autism is the same in males and females		Do you think autism presents differently in males and females?		
			TRUE	FALSE	YES	NO	UNSURE
Name	Categories	*n*	n%	n%	n%	n%	n%
Gender	Male	58	43.1	56.9	65.5	1.7	32.8
	Female	201	34.8	65.2	86.6	1.5	11.9
	Other	1	100.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0
	Prefer not to say	2	0.0	100.0	50.0	0.0	50.0
Qualifications	PGSE						
	Yes	71	32.4	67.6	90.1	0.0	9.9
	No	191	38.2	61.8	78.5	2.1	19.4
Years Teaching	0-5	54	40.7	59.3	90.7	0.0	9.3
	6-10	40	55.0	45.0	85.0	0.0	15.0
	11-15	41	36.6	63.4	87.8	2.4	9.8
	16+	127	29.1	70.9	74.8	2.4	22.8
School Context	Mixed	190	36.8	63.2	84.7	1.1	14.2
	Single sex girls	49	28.6	71.4	79.6	2.0	18.4
	Single sex boys	23	52.2	47.8	60.9	4.3	34.8

4.5 Embedded Question 2(i)

Are teachers able to identify characteristics associated with the female presentation of autism?

Presented with 15 statements, teachers rated, using a 1-10 scale (1 representing strongly disagree and 10 representing strongly agree), the extent to which they agreed or strongly agreed that the characteristic presented was associated or not with the presentation of autism in girls. As discussed in *Section 3.11.3*, the statements were informed by a previous study and extant literature and were coded as either being reflective or not with the profile of autism in girls as per literature. I recognise that characteristics of autism cannot be reduced to dichotomous scale and appreciate that this scale does not credit the individuality of autistic experience, however, consistent with the exploratory aim of this study it provides a starting point in terms of understanding teacher awareness of a more internal presentation of autism that is commonly experienced by autistic girls. In light of this, rather than being perceived as correct or incorrect, participant responses were analysed in terms of their Theoretical Alignment with Literature (TAL; (A)ligned or (D)iscordant, with levels of certainty in their responses also considered.

On average, 60.19% of responses to statements were identified as being aligned with literature with 39.81% discordant with the prevailing discourse. However, there was a significant level of uncertainty in responses (*tab.13*). While 60.19% of statements were aligned with literature, 31.23% of these were uncertain responses. When combined with the discordant responses, the data indicates that 71.04% of responses did not demonstrate TAL (not reflecting the literature on autism and females) or aligned but answered with uncertainty.

Upon inspection of the responses, it was revealed that a greater number of participant responses were reported as being aligned with literature when the statement reflected characteristics associated with the more traditional profile of autism, for example, engages in repetitive behaviours (A:74.4% / D:25.6%); experiences sensory processing differences (A:85.5% / D:14.5%); finds change in routine difficult (A:88.9% / D:11.1%); are not in long term friendship groups (A: 72.9% / D:27.1%); may not have lots of friends (A:89.3% / D:10.7%).

When the statements reflected characteristics more commonly associated with the presentation of autism in females, the responses were more evenly distributed in terms TAL, indicating uncertainty. There appeared to be a gap in teacher knowledge relating to the lesser-recognised traits of autism often exhibited by autistic females, for example,

increased social motivation, good verbal communication, use of non-verbal communication, engagement in controlling behaviour. A large proportion of responses were inconsistent with the literature in relation to special interests. Only 26.5% of respondents recognised that autistic girls often demonstrate similar interests to their neurotypical peers with their special interests more likely to differ in terms of intensity rather than topic. Interestingly, 71% of respondents identified 'copying the behaviour of others' as a characteristic of the female profile of autism. The concept of masking is widely associated with and discussed in the context of the female presentation of autism. These finding may indicate that there is a growing recognition of a different profile of autism, but that the many nuances of this presentation are not yet understood.

Table 13: Breakdown of Responses by Certainty Levels

		TAL (D) ✖				TAL (A) ✓			
		Very Certain	Relatively Certain	Uncertain	Total	Uncertain	Relatively Certain	Very Certain	Total
	n	n%	n%	n%	n%	n%	n%	n%	n%
Response to Statements	262	1.51	12.06	26.23	39.81	31.23	25.27	3.69	60.19

Table 14: Descriptive Statistics of Characteristic Identification

Descriptive Statistics									
	N Statistic	Min. Statistic	Max. Statistic	Mean Statistic	Std. Deviation Statistic	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Characteristic Identification	262	63	113	91.18	8.228	-0.101	0.15	0.129	0.3
Valid N (listwise)	262								

Having met the assumption of homogeneity of variance as well as additional necessary assumptions (Appendix KKK), to facilitate further analysis of responses dependent on demographic information, inferential analysis was employed. Independent-samples t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to answer the following questions.

- → *Is there a significant difference in the amount of characteristics identified among teachers with a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education and those without?*
- → *Is there a significant difference in the amount of characteristics identified between male and female teachers?*
- → *Is there a significant difference in the amount of characteristics identified dependent on years teaching; school context; experience teaching an autistic girl?*

Table 14 provides a basic summary of the descriptive information on the continuous variable of characteristic identification, including the mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis. The Bonferroni correction was applied (p =.01) in order to reduce the chance of a Type 1 error across multiple comparisons. There was no statistically significant difference in the amount of characteristics identified, among teachers with (M = 91.31, SD = 8.57) and without (M = 91.13, SD = 8.12; t(260) = .161, p = .87, two tailed) a postgraduate qualification; between males (M = 89.24, SD = 7.89) and females (M = 91.84, SD = 8.19; t(257) = -2.14, p = .03, two tailed); dependent on years teaching (F(3, 258) = .195, p = .90); by school context (F(2, 259) = .496, p = .61) or dependent on previous experience teaching an autistic girl (F(2, 258) = 5.1, p = .01).

It is of interest to note that despite teachers with a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education self-reporting higher levels of knowledge/understanding and confidence in relation to autism than their colleagues without such qualifications, there was no significant difference in the number of characteristics they identified. This may indicate that teachers believed that their training in this area was valuable, supported their practice and thus increased self-belief, however, they may not be adequately equipped to identify the subtle differences of autism in girls.

4.5.1 Additional Characteristics: Qualitative Data

In addition to the statements posed to evaluate teacher knowledge/understanding of specific characteristics that may be more reflective of a female profile of autism, participants were also given the chance to share other characteristics that they thought autistic girls may present with through an open-ended response question in the

questionnaire. Only 35% of teachers (*n*=93) provided responses for this question. This could be attributed to limited knowledge of the presentation of autism in girls or other factors such as time constraints, lack of interest, etc at time of survey completion. *Table 15* presents an overview of the main categories of characteristics following analysis of the data.

Table 15: Characteristics associated with autism in girls (Qualitative Data)

Category	Examples from the Category	% Response Rate (n=93)
Generic Autism Characteristics	Special Interests, Difficulties with Social Interaction, Executive Functions (organising, planning, task initiation), Preference for Routine, Difficulty coping with Change, Emotional Regulation, Sensory Processing	54%
Well-Being/Mental Health	Anxiety, Self-Esteem, Emotional Exhaustion, Co-Occurring (OCD/ ED/ Depression), Isolation	38%
Masking	Hiding differences, mirroring others, trying to fit in, more socially aware, imitate peers	35%
Other	Perfectionist nature, need for control, vulnerable, difficulty coping with changes around puberty, gender identity	24%
Friendships	Difficulties understanding changing relationships, difficulty making friends, friend groups (1 or small), desire friendships, complexity of friendships as age increases	12%
Autistic Strengths	Strong sense of self, strong sense of justice, loyal, inquisitive, deep thinkers, focused, diligent	10%

The majority of the responses reiterated some of the broader characteristics of autism that relate the diagnostic criteria in terms of differences in social communication and interaction, special interests, flexibility, emotional regulation, sensory processing. Others addressed more specific characteristics that would be typical of information shared in introductory autism trainings, for example; the need for explicit information *('needs work to be laid out and very clear')*, desire for routine and predictability *('they need to know what is happening and why in a classroom')*, differences in attention and processing *('cannot process information in the same way as the rest of the class')*, difficulty understanding different perspectives *('rigid in thinking and unwilling to see others point of view')* and difficulties with organisation, transitions, switching activities, all of which fall under the broader remit of Executive Functions. Unfortunately, there was some evidence of outdated language and medical model understandings with some respondents mentioning a *'lack of empathy and emotion'* and *'aloof'* behaviour.

On the other hand, some respondents were aware of characteristics that are more commonly linked to autism in girl. Almost 40% of responses recognised that autistic girls may experience anxiety and other mental health difficulties. Some participants linked anxiety with social interactions and expectations (*'anxiety and fatigue from trying to fit in with peers')* as well as the exhaustive impact of masking *('added fatigue because of the exhaustion of masking – emotional exhaustion')*, while a small number of responses alluded to the transition from primary to post-primary and the impact of this in terms of anxiety *('anxiety usually kicks in after first year transition – coping mechanisms have been okay in primary school but the transition and development socially can be very hard')*. Other responses mentioned low self-esteem, self-consciousness, insecurity and isolation. More specifically, some teachers recognised that autistic females, like autistic males, may experience co-occurring diagnoses such as depression, with OCD and eating disorders specifically identified.

Similarly, masking was recognised as a common characteristic of autism in girls. Most responses simply identified masking as a characteristic, however, some responses provided further detail. Some respondents reported that autistic girls were able to mask/hide their autistic characteristics *('In my experience, the autistic females that I have met tend to be better at masking and hiding their differences than males on the spectrum')*, and their difficulties in the classroom *('My experience has shown me that the girls are very good at masking and 'coping' in school, but communication from home often tells a different story in how much these girls are struggling in mainstream classes')*. Some of the contributions highlighted that autistic girls were more socially aware and that girls often imitate or copy others to support their social interaction and communication *('Girls are socially different from boys. They are more tuned into the people around them and will imitate their peers if they believe they could be seen to be different')*. Masking was perceived as a compensatory strategy that autistic girls use to 'fit in' with their neurotypical peers. It was noted that engagement in masking has impacted some teachers' confidence in recognising autism in girls *('girls tend to be quieter and choose not to display their authentic self in the classroom more than boys with autism, in my experience. Therefore, I am far less confident recognising autism in girls than I am with boys')*.

It was recognised by a small number of participants that autistic girls may experience challenges around friendships. The responses acknowledge a desire for friendship among autistic girls but recognised the difficulties that may accompany these friendships *('As the girl aged, she became more distant from her peers. Her difficulty around compromise*

and her honest comments were not appreciated or understood by her peers'). It was noted that autistic female students may have one good friend or have a small network of peers. Some comments were related to the challenges that occur when friendships from primary school drift away and the individual is required to initiate new friendships in the post-primary school *('former friends drift off and they cannot make new friends easily – they find it difficult to find their 'tribe")*. Some respondents spoke about difficulties managing the changing nature of friendships between the sexes, while the complexity of adolescent female friendships was also recognised *('struggle to understand changing relationships with peers as a teen, especially boys')*. Concern was raised in relation to isolation, masking to fit into peer groups or engagement in reckless behaviour to be accepted into a group.

A few respondents referred to autistic strengths, while more specific characteristics were also identified by a small number of respondents. Autistic girls were described as having a *'strong sense of self'* and a *'strong sense of justice'*. Some teachers described them as *'deep thinkers'* and used adjectives such as loyal, inquisitive, focused and diligent. A small number of responses shared specific characteristics that they believed were characteristic of autism in females, including perfectionism and a *'need for control' ('in some cases they can be perfectionists and struggle with perceived failures')*. It was also expressed that autistic girls were potential more vulnerable and less *'streetwise'*. Difficulties coping with changes during puberty, the impact of sensory differences in relation to menstruation and personal hygiene were acknowledged by some respondents. Finally, it was highlighted that some autistic females may be exploring their gender identity.

Others responded that the autistic experience is highly individualised *('they are each unique' / 'I would say each female with autism presents in their own way, and we need to accommodate them as we find them' / 'autism presents differently in every individual')*. While this is extremely important in terms of adopting a person-centred approach and working with each individual, it is also important to recognise that there exists some common characteristics. This is necessary in terms of initial identification for supports and referral for diagnosis as teachers are often the first port of call in building a case for the need for assessment and the provision of supports.

Despite the inclusion of pertinent and accurate and information, particularly in terms of recognition of masking, anxiety and mental health and friendship differences, it is important to recognise that only 35% (n=93) of teachers engaged with this question. This

must be taken into consideration in relation to understanding the response rate percentage presented for these findings in comparison to the overall sample of the study.

4.6 Embedded Question 2(ii)

What support do teachers put in place for female students with a diagnosis of autism and is this support cognisant of gender differences in autism?

An open-ended response question provided respondents with an opportunity to contribute ideas on the support that they would implement for a female student diagnosed with autism in their setting. This question had a 67% response rate (*n*=176). It must be questioned whether those who did not answer were unsure of the type of support they would provide. *Table 16* details the different categories of support that were identified and the response percentage.

Table 16: Support Provision (Qualitative Data)

Categories	Examples	% Response Rate (n=176)
General Autism Supports	Structure, routine, direct instructions, visual supports, organisation supports, seating plans, wait time, smaller class sizes, social skills, social groups, capitalising on student interests.	74%
Sensory Environment & Self-Regulation	Sensory/Movement breaks, Sensory Environment, System for Breaks/Withdrawal, Safe/Quiet Space, Access to Autism Class/Sensory Room, Alternative Spaces available during lunchtime	57%
Support by Personnel	SNA Access, Designated Adult, Peer Mentors/Buddy System, Support from other Professionals	38%
Individualised Support	Dependent on individual needs, dependent on report, dependent on information elicited from parents, child voice	23%
Academic Support	Curricular Load/Modified Timetable, Short-Term Interventions, Differentiated Teaching, Embedding UDL approaches (facilitating different methods to present information, assess information, technology)	18%
Self-Awareness/Anxiety	Teaching them about triggers, Training in Self-Awareness, Teaching about diagnosis, Anxiety management, Support in relation to self-esteem	8%

A number of themes arose in the data including general autism supports, sensory environments and self-regulation, personnel support, individualised support, academic support, support for self-awareness and anxiety, and other types of support. There were

some examples of good practice in terms of support provision for autistic girls, demonstrating an understanding of the unique profile associated with autism in girls, however, on the other hand, many responses were generic in nature and were largely reflective of a more stereotypical understanding of autism.

The majority of responses referred to general autism supports pertinent to the core areas of difference. Respondents emphasised the importance of providing structure and routine to increase predictability *('have a predictable routine in class' / 'clear expectations, unambiguous language, structure in the classroom')*. Direct instructions, additional prompting, visual supports, wait time and supportive feedback were recurrent in the data set. Support for organisation skills was a common response *('general help with organising, folders, lockers, colour coded timetables')*. A large number of responses mentioned seating plans, controlling group work and the need for small class sizes. A few respondents referred to special interests and the capitalising on them to support the individual *('find out their interests and try to integrate that into their work / support that would encourage and support special interests')*. The need to support social interaction and communication was reiterated by many respondents, however, many of the contributions were very broad and did not demonstrate a thorough understanding of the nuances of the female presentation in this domain. Responses mentioned *'social skills'*, *'social groups'*, *'social skills programmes'*, *'group work to help social skills'*, along with specific social skills programmes. A minority of responses recognised the need for a more neuroaffirmative approach focusing on acceptance of difference and understanding of neurodiversity at whole class/school level *('making sure the class understand that everyone learns differently and to respect that' / 'general education around difference' / 'Create an atmosphere that everyone is different and that is a good thing')*.

Over half of responses addressed the need to support sensory processing and self-regulation differences. It was positive that many of responses recognised the importance of providing opportunities for students to be able to withdraw or exit an environment that was causing them discomfort or anxiety with mechanisms such as *'exit'* or '*break'* cards. Similarly, the need to provide a *'safe'* or *'quiet'* space was emphasised in the data. Respondents recognised that having a place to go was important for some students to be able to decompress and self-regulate *('A designated space, not necessarily a sensory room, for quiet time and a chance to process what is happening' / 'A room for them to go to when they need to calm themselves, where they can listen to music or read a book, whatever they need')*. Few responses detailed the process involved in accessing these

spaces therefore it was unclear whether students' ability to avail of the quiet space is scheduled or whether there is flexibility based on the individual needs of the student. Some respondents recognised that break/lunchtime may also be a period that may be challenging for some and noted that provision of alternative spaces was necessary *('option to avail of an alternative break room – to avoid the big crowds in the canteen' / 'provide a safe space for lunch time')*. In a similar vein, a few respondents mentioned that some students may need support with self-regulation and techniques and sensory toys may be useful supports for these individuals *('help facilitate self-regulation techniques' / 'support their need to regulate/stim' / 'facilitate opportunities for sensory input, often discrete if necessary')*. Very few respondents mentioned the need to consider the individual's sensory profile with a large proportion of responses generally citing *'movement breaks'*, *'sensory room'*, *'sensory breaks'* and *'access to the autism class'* as supports they would put in place. Only a very small minority of respondents recognised the importance of considering the sensory environment of their class/school as a support. Those who did recognise the impact of the sensory environment mentioned the importance of carrying out a sensory environment audit and monitoring and reducing sensory stimuli where necessary *('Carry out a sensory and issues assessment' / 'reduce excess stimuli' / 'have an awareness of the sensory environment and minimise difficulties')*.

Many responses included reference to various personnel as critical aspects of support provision for autistic female students. The most common form of personnel support mentioned was *'SNA Access'*. The importance of a designated adult was also emphasised. The role of this designated adult varied and responses identified them as a *'link'* person, a *'check & connect'* person, *'a point of contact'*, and a *'supportive adult'* who has awareness, understanding and knowledge on how to help. *'Peer Mentors'* and *'Buddy Systems'* were also identified from a peer support perspective. Lastly, support from other professionals was deemed necessary by a few with counsellors and therapeutic specialists, e.g. play therapists, identified.

The need for individualised support was recognised by some respondents. A number of teachers stated that they could not comment on provision of support as support should always be dependent on the individual needs of individual students *('It is difficult to know as I feel like it varies with each girl with a diagnosis' / 'it would depend on their needs' / 'Support needs to be individualised')*. Responses referred to the need to observe and assess to elicit individual areas for support (*'Support varies hugely from student to student*

so would need to see what their needs were in order to meet them'). Others stated that support would be dependent on the report received from relevant professionals *('We tailor our supports to each individual student's needs, especially in relation to recommendations on psychological reports')*. A very small number of responses referred to tailoring support based on information elicited from parents *('Meeting with parents for detailed information about their child and her specific needs – parents know the child best' / 'having frequent and clear communication with parent/guardian' / 'get to know the person from the 24-hour perspective, how do they react/behave when they go home')*. While it was positive that respondents understood the importance of individualised and tailored support, only two responses mentioned the need to elicit the voice of the individual when developing support *('I would be mindful to talk and listen to the student; to speak openly and honestly with them' / 'It is impossible to say without consulting the young person first')*. The importance of including the individual in the planning of support is critical, particularly in the context of autistic females where a more internal presentation of autism is common and camouflaging and anxiety are extremely prevalent.

A number of responses focused on support provision in terms of academic support. Contributions in this category were quite broad. Some respondents merely stated that they would provide *'academic support'*, perhaps indicating an inadequate understanding of autism. Others reported that they would consider reducing curricular load or modify the student's timetable, while a few mentioned that they would run short term interventions, however, no detail was provided. Some responses referred to the need to *'differentiate'* teaching but did not elaborate. Other, more comprehensive responses presented an understanding and appreciation of Universal Design for Learning and its potential in supporting autistic learners. Respondents mentioned presenting information in different ways, providing opportunities for learners to complete their work in different ways and present their learning in a way that suits them *('provide different methods to access the curriculum and an option to present homework in different ways' / 'awareness when doing group work, may need to give option to work solo' / 'some kind of forum for them to be able to ask questions in private')*. Assistive technology was also offered as a mechanism for supporting the learning *('Having homework available on Google Classroom' / 'Allow them to pre-record the audio in PowerPoint for their slides for CBAs')*. The overarching message in contributions related to UDL was the need to be flexible and cognisant of the characteristics of autism and how they can impact engagement and participation in the classroom context.

The final category identified by teachers in relation to supportive autistic female students was in relation to anxiety and wellbeing. Contributions highlighted the importance of teaching girls how to recognise their triggers and providing them with strategies to support anxiety management *('Help them understand and be aware of their triggers that lead to anxiety' / 'training in self-awareness and ability to rate anxiety levels')*. Some respondents noted the value of supporting girls to develop self-awareness and the importance of teaching them about autism *('teach the student about their diagnosis, so they have a better understanding of themselves')*. Other broader comments related to supporting *'self-esteem'* were also evident in the data.

The qualitative data collected in relation to support provision was broad and varied in nature, however, it offered some valuable insights. The vast majority of responses referred to very generic autism supports that are synonymous with best practice approaches for supporting autistic learners in the school context. These supports are grounded in the characteristics of autism as per the dyad of difference. However, the supports mentioned relating to the social domain were not consistent with the developments in understanding of social differences, better explained by the double empathy problem. Respondents recognised the inextricable link between sensory processing and autism. Furthermore, the need for individualised support was identified by some respondents. Support in the form of personnel and academic support were also addressed. Only a small number of respondents recognised the need to provide support in the area of anxiety. Similarly, there were only a few examples of contributions that demonstrated how support may be tailored to autistic girls based on an understanding of the female presentation of autism.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the results from the secondary study conducted with mainstream post-primary teachers. While the majority of teachers indicated that they were aware autism may present differently in girls and over half were aware of disparities in prevalence rates between genders, other data revealed gaps in knowledge surrounding sex/gender differences in autism. Self-report data indicated a bias in autism knowledge with teachers reporting their knowledge of autism as greater than their knowledge of autism in girls more specifically. Contrary to expectation, despite increased self-reported knowledge of autism and autism in girls overall, this result is also prominent among participants with a further postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education. This potential bias was also implied in the analysis of characteristic identification with participants less likely to identify characteristics that did not correspond with the

stereotypical understandings of autism. Similarly, the qualitative responses collected presented a somewhat limited understanding of gender differences in autism. Differences between teachers with and without a postgraduate qualification was also apparent in relation to confidence. While, moderate levels of confidence were self-reported by teachers overall, teachers with a postgraduate qualification reporting significantly greater levels of confidence. This data, together with self-reported knowledge data may imply that teachers who have completed a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education may have a stronger sense of self-efficacy compared to their colleagues without such qualifications.

Exploratory in nature and grounded within the researcher's engagement and interpretation of literature on sex/gender differences in autism, this study sought to gain an insight into teachers' knowledge pertaining to autism and girls and also provide a springboard for further research in this area. Considered collectively, the results from this study suggest that most mainstream teachers have a comprehensive understanding of autism more generally, but that many do not have an adequate understanding of the nuances of the internal presentation of autism more commonly associated with females.

Chapter 5 Primary Study Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings emerging from the research conducted with autistic girls and their parents. The findings endeavour to provide an account which presents a phenomenological and interpretative narrative of the data, while also appreciating the ideographic nature of the IPA study. In keeping with the intention to prioritise the voice of the autistic girls in this study, the first three GETs, are underpinned by the phenomenological concept of 'being' in an effort to exemplify the embodied nature of autism. These three GETs were generated from data collected with autistic girls. The final GET drew solely from the parents, appreciating that they provided a unique insight into their daughters' school experiences from an alternative perspective. In an effort to support tracking, pseudonyms in each dyad begin with the same first initial and quotations from the girls are presented in purple font while quotations from their parents are presented in green. The across-group GETs for this multiperspectival study are as follows: *Being Autistic in a Neurotypical School System; Being in the School Environment; Being with Others,* and *Parent Perspectives.* Each GET and its embedded sub-themes are presented and discussed in turn. While GETs and their embedded sub-themes have been presented as isolated themes for the purpose of writing up the findings, it is important to emphasise that many of them are related, and connections can be drawn across themes. The GETs and their corresponding sub-themes are presented in *figure 16*.

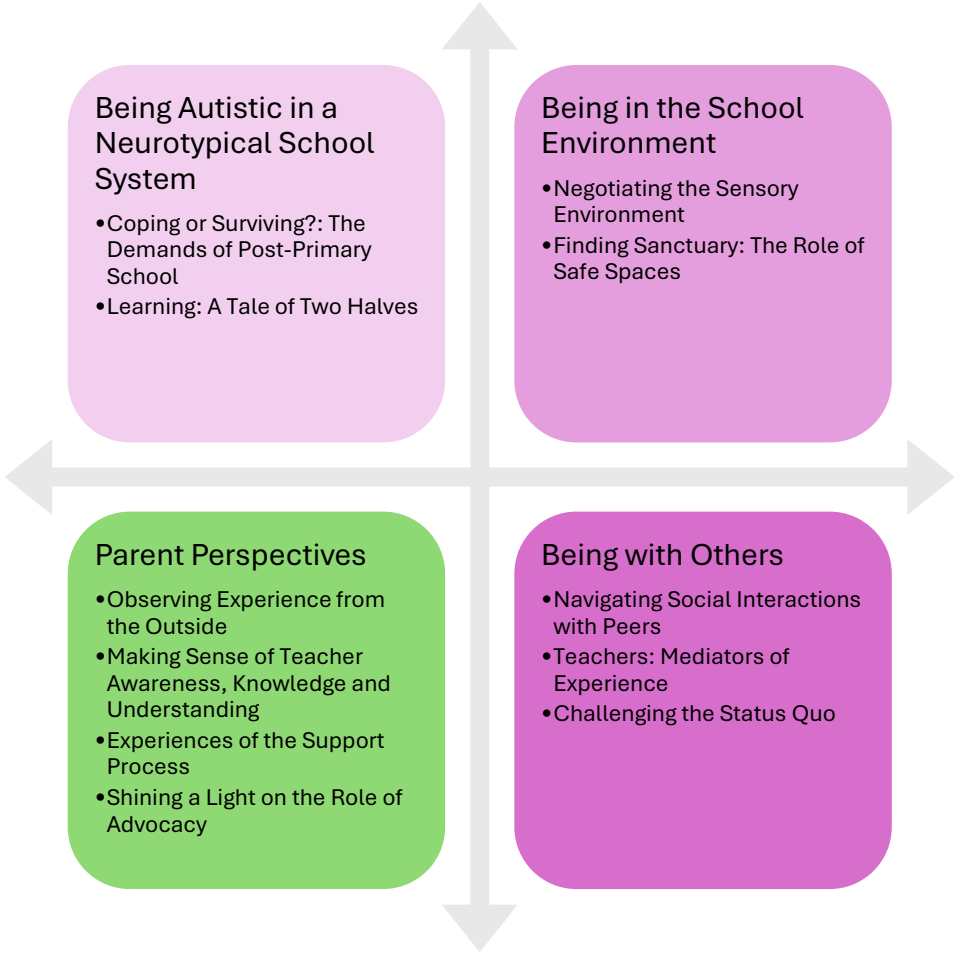


Figure 16: Across Group Experiential Themes and Sub-Themes

5.2 Introducing the Participants

Prior to delving into the final themes, brief paragraphs introducing the autistic girls are presented below to provide relevant contextual information[19] within which their experiences can be grounded. Furthermore, where Dixit Card(s) were selected to assist the girls in describing their experiences as an autistic individual in the school context, they will be introduced at this point and then later referred to in its relevant theme

5.2.1 Ava

Ava is 14 years old, a third-year student and attends a mixed post-primary school. Ava was diagnosed in the summer preceding data collection (Summer 2023). Ava's diagnosis followed the diagnosis of her older brother. The decision to pursue an autism assessment was not prompted at all by teacher insights. In fact, when Ava's mother, Arlene, informed some of her teachers that they were engaged in the assessment process, she said they did not believe that Ava would receive a diagnosis. Ava selected three Dixit cards (*fig.17)* that help to describe her experiences of being autistic in school.



Figure 17: Ava's Dixit Cards

5.2.2 Bella

Bella is 15 years old, a third-year student and attends a mixed post-primary school. Bella was diagnosed in 2nd year of post-primary school. Bella's mother, Bronagh, shared that she had noticed various things over the years. Bronagh felt that Bella fell through the gaps

[19] Information provided is accurate to time of data collection

because her primary school teachers believed that because she was ‘mixing’ and had friends, there were no issues. Bronagh shared that Bella was aware of her differences and when the world opened up through her phone and she saw herself in what others were describing, this prompted discussion. This discussion, combined with Bella’s difficulties coping with change prompted the journey to diagnosis. Bella selected two Dixit cards *(fig.18)* that best describe her experiences of being autistic in school.



Figure 18: Bella's Dixit Cards

5.2.3 Ciara

Ciara is 14 years old, a third-year student and attends a mixed post-primary school. Ciara was diagnosed early in her first year of post-primary school. Ciara has a co-occurring diagnosis of selective mutism. Caitriona, Ciara’s mother, identified that the lack of and disruption to routine during the Covid-19 pandemic coincided with behaviours being displayed by Ciara, that as a family, they were concerned about. Ciara’s journey to diagnosis was prompted when the play therapist advised her parents to seek an assessment. Caitriona disclosed that this was not something they were expecting, despite their son already having an autism diagnosis. Ciara opted not to choose a Dixit Card.

5.2.4 Danielle

Danielle is 14 years old, a third-year student and attends a mixed post-primary school. Danielle was diagnosed in first year of post-primary school. Deirdre, Danielle’s mother, revealed that she was aware from a very young age that Danielle experienced the world differently, compared to her siblings. Deirdre reported that, in the lead up to Danielle’s autism assessment, the staff at the primary school she was attending were dismissive, both

of the assessment and of her needs. Danielle chose two Dixit cards *(fig.19)* during data collection to assist in her explanation of what being autistic in school is like for her.



Figure 19: Danielle's Dixit Cards

5.2.5 Emma

Emma is 15 years old, a third-year student and attends a mixed post-primary school. Emma was diagnosed with autism in second class in primary school, however, Emma's mother Eimear shared that they noted early signs when Emma was about three in Montessori. Emma has a co-occurring gifted diagnosis. Emma's parents were actively discussing the potential of seeking an autism assessment (due to having familial experiences already), when the primary school requested them to come into school to discuss Emma's progress. The school instead encouraged them to pursue a diagnosis of giftedness; however, they were prompted to consider autism again by the Educational Psychologist. Emma selected two Dixit cards *(fig.20)* to support her narrative on being autistic in the school context.



Figure 20: Emma's Dixit Cards

5.2.6 Freya

Freya is 13 years old, a first-year student and attends a single-sex, all-girls post-primary school. Freya was diagnosed with autism in September of her final year in primary school. Fiona, Freya's mother, shared that she always had concerns and alluded to Freya's persistent sensory differences. Despite Fiona raising her concerns with the school, they did not see what she was seeing and did not recognise the presentation of characteristics in Freya. However, the school eventually accepted Fiona's concerns as valued and initiated the assessment process on the school side by preparing a referral leading to a preliminary assessment and finally a full assessment. Freya used two Dixit cards *(fig.21)* to describe her experiences of being autistic in school.



Figure 21: Freya's Dixit Cards

5.3 Being Autistic in a Neurotypical School System

The theme 'Being Autistic in a Neurotypical School System' captures the complexity of being an autistic individual in a school system that is designed for neurotypical individuals. The challenges of keeping up with the unspoken everyday demands and academic expectations of the mainstream post-primary context are highlighted, while the nuances of navigating support to meet the demands within this setting are negotiated. Countering the challenges, positive findings emerged in relation to the variety of subjects on offer at post-primary level.

5.3.1 Coping or Surviving? The Demands of Post-Primary School

Most of the girls discussed the demands of *being* in the mainstream post-primary context. These demands were varied in nature but often represented the taken-for-granted aspects of school life. The range of demands spanned to include the pre-requisites of coping in mainstream *e.g.* organisation of materials and self, demands on attention during mainstream classes, as well as acknowledging the demands that extended beyond the school day.

Appreciation of the contrast between the primary and post-primary context is perhaps one of the most significant considerations to better understand the girls' ability to cope with the demands of post-primary. While the transition from primary to post-primary was discussed in greater depth by the girls' parents (*Section 5.6.1*), Ava's insight captures the essence of this experience effectively from a student perspective.

> *I had, we had a lot less things in primary school and the primary school I went to, it was really, really small, so everyone knew everyone like in our class and stuff. It was like, a lot easier to, like know "oh the teacher has this" and then my stuff was like in my box under my desk and I don't have to like, go out to my locker to get stuff, come back to the classes or do any of that, it was just, everything you own was in this one classroom.*
>
> (Ava, 19,6-24)

Ava and Freya highlighted the organisational demands in the post-primary context. They both spoke about the foresight required to be appropriately equipped for every class in terms of managing their locker and bringing the correct books and materials, navigating the timetable and the pressure to do all this without being late to class. Ava encapsulated the many variables that are at play here.

> *It's difficult to like, know how to organise yourself. Like each year we get new timetables and new classrooms and stuff, and it definitely takes a while to like understand, like, how to organise yourself for all these classes, understand what all the different teachers want you to like bring to their class, to every class. It can take a bit of getting used to, it's like reorganising everything that you've like just gotten settled into from the previous year.*
>
> (Ava, 18,9-17)

The demands follow through into the classroom context with the girls alluding to the implications of autistic processing and how this impacted their ability to keep up in the classroom. Danielle, Emma and Ava discussed their struggles with attention and focus. Danielle emphasised that she doesn't have any problems with particular subjects but rather experienced difficulties focusing: *'it's just like trying to focus and like understand what [I'm] doing'* (41,2-5). Similar experiences were recounted by Ava and Emma when they talked about how the classroom environment is distracting for them. For Emma this impacts her ability to focus on the question, the answer or the essay that requires her attention in that moment. Ava furthered this by describing the pervasive nature of the impact of the distractions; *'I kind of just try to ignore everything but then in trying to ignore everything, I ignore too much and then just don't know what's going on'* (20,7-10).

The sense of feeling lost is also apparent for Freya and Emma who tried to make sense of the constant battle to keep up with the rest of the class. Freya shared her feelings of overwhelm in the classroom when she doesn't understand something. This same sense of overwhelm was accurately depicted by Emma when she said:

> *I feel a bit like "What? I don't understand this", but they've already moved on, so I'm just gonna keep moving on with everyone, just pretend I know what's been going on. It's like playing catch up, but the catch up doesn't exist. So yeah, it's moving on without catching up.*
>
> (Emma, 40,1-4)

The demands of school life unfortunately don't end when the school day ends for the girls. Homework was perceived as a burden with the girls identifying it as an unnecessary evil, something that encroaches on their personal time, and adds undue stress. Succinctly put, Ciara said *'I don't do homework, ever. Homework is not important to me'* (3). Similarly, Emma acknowledged that homework is not something that she prioritises, she shared that generally, she forgets to do it, other times she forgets that she has done it and sometimes it just stresses her out and she can't do it. For Freya, homework is something that interrupts her down time, it places another demand on her after the school day has ended.

> *I feel relieved when school ends. I feel relieved because, well except if I have a bunch of homework. If I have a bunch of homework, then, yeah, I don't know. But if I have no homework, I'm just happy to go home and just chill.*
>
> (Freya, 31,1-5)

Ultimately, the extent to which these demands impact and influence the girls' experiences are articulated expertly by the girls themselves when they drew on their selected Dixit cards to express their experiences. In some instances, a sense of surrendering to the

confusion and difficulties of being autistic in the school context prevails. With reference to her first Dixit Card (*fig.19)*, Danielle's description of her school experience implies an inherent exhaustion at constantly trying to make sense of a neurotypical system and neurotypical ways which are at odds with her embodied experience of autism.

> *in one way it's trying to concentrate on something that just isn't there and then in another way, it is kind of trying to understand things that don't make any sense, because sometimes I'm able to kind of figure out what people mean, even if I don't immediately understand, but then other times it's like I have no idea what that meant.*
>
> (Danielle, 45,1-10)

A similar thread is found in Emma's narrative, where feelings of aimlessness are brought to the fore. Using her first Dixit Card (*fig.20)*, Emma portrayed her struggle of trying to navigate school as a constant unknowingness. A sense of unease, isolation, and lack of control is evident in her description of her efforts to cope with what the school day brings. *'They look like they're tumbling, which kind of sometimes feels like, it's kind of just going, just kind of like not knowing what to do, kind of going everywhere or trying everything to see does it work'* (39,10-14).

Freya compared the scene in her second selected Dixit Card (*fig.21)* to the uphill battle of negotiating the organisational demands placed on her in school. Freya shared that the scene resonated with her, and she often feels '*really frustrated'* trying to manage these demands.

> *Well, he kind of looks stressed, like everything is out of order. Everything is like all over the place and it looks like he's trying to get it all in order. He's just like me when I'm in school because I like to keep my things in order but then I feel, like, out of place when they're not in order.*
>
> (Freya, 33,1-7)

Feelings of frustration are also evident in Bella's experience. Using her second Dixit *(fig.18)*, Bella attempted to negotiate her feelings around being disadvantaged in the school context as a result of being autistic. Bella argued that there is an unequal footing between non-autistic and autistic students within the school system, a system that fails to appreciate neurodiversity.

> *I feel more at a disadvantage sometimes, like there's a lot more going on for me. Like things that they find easy are really hard for me. And, I have to deal with all the other things before I can get to the same starting point. This is hard when you get overwhelmed by things, more often than other people.*
>
> (Bella, 40,8-14)

Ava also alluded to the challenge of managing the implications of autistic processing in school, but in comparison to Danielle, Emma and Bella, she placed an emphasis on

recognising and accepting these difficulties but persisting with them. '*So, it can be kind of easy to fall into like a rabbit hole of like "I can't do this because I'm autistic" when you can do it, but you just need to find a different way to do it'* (48,4-7). However, when describing her experiences more broadly, Ava's experience was not wholly dissimilar to Danielle, Emma and Freya's. Ava described school as similar to having a *'tornado in your hand' (fig.17).* This comparison implies a definite intensity and alludes to an experience that is complex in nature and at risk of getting out of control. However, Ava indicated that the tornado is only an issue at school and once she leaves this environment, it is no longer a concern.

> *the tornado is like the complete stress and stuff of school, but it's in your hand so you're like this is not that big and I can just kind of put it in my pocket when I go home so I don't have to think about it and then when I'm at school, it's in my hand.*
>
> (Ava, 46,11-16)

The girls eloquently expressed the impact of the build-up of these demands from their perspective. Their perspectives present the need to understand the cumulative effect of the everyday demands that are placed on autistic girls. Their insights highlight the varied nature of demands and while commonalities exist among the girls' experiences, there is diversity among the experiences dependent on the individual and embodied nature of autism and the contexts within which the experiences occur. Freya captures the essence of the complexity of *being autistic* in school describing it to be '*like a maze*' where '*there's so many twists and turns that there's no possible way of knowing which way it'll go'* (34, 12-14).

5.3.2 Learning: A Tale of Two Halves

A duality of learning experience emerged from the data. The autonomy to choose subjects at post-primary level positively influenced experiences, particularly for Ava and Freya. The broader array of subjects on offer was also significant for some of the other girls but the relevance of subjects was questioned in some instances. While subject choice positively mediated experience, the very nature of learning within a system was controversial. A sense of discontent was apparent in relation to some of the teaching and assessment practices used in school. There was a sense that these practices reduced learning to a requirement of the system rather than valuing learning as intrinsically motivating and important.

For Ava and Freya, choice subjects appeared to be particularly important in mediating their daily experience. Interestingly, when prompted to visit a place they liked in school during the walk-and-talk session, they selected places linked to their favourite choice

subjects. Both the woodwork room and technology room were identified as important places within the school for Ava and Freya respectively. The practical nature of the subjects appeared to be particularly appealing to the girls, and there is a sense that these classes placed reduced demands on them. For Ava, there is an inherent freedom associated with the practical class, evident as she reflected: *'it's very easy for me to just, do my own thing in it'*(2,5-6). Ava contrasted her experience in construction studies with that of other subjects emphasising its less restrictive nature.

> *So, construction studies is one of my option subjects. It's a very hands-on subject, where you can like kind of, there are no, like you can kind of do what you want with it, like the projects and stuff and like it's nice because you can do your own stuff and my teacher for it, he's really nice as well and it's just good as opposed to other classes where you have to like stress about doing homework and like writing a bunch of stuff down, you can just take a break and like try and make something.*
>
> (Ava, 32,1-8)

A similar sentiment is offered by Freya, but distinction can be drawn from Ava's experience, in that for Freya while the practical aspect facilitates her love of making things, she also appreciates the theory component of the subject because *'it's all method, it's all set in stone, it's like all measurements and already written notes'* (2,1-4). She repeats the phrase *'it's just fun'* when describing the more procedural aspects of the class, implying an intrinsic enjoyment of the topic, emphasising the significance of interest-driven learning in the school context. This idea of interest-driven learning is prioritised further by Danielle and Emma. Emma captured the essence of this when she said *'Well, I mean, if I like the subject it's gonna make me want to learn it'* (13,1-3) while Danielle highlighted the implications of learning not appealing to her interests when she stated the repercussions of disengagement. *'My classwork being based around my interests is very important, otherwise I would be, like, yelled at a lot for not paying attention'*(19,1-4).

While it is evident that learning guided by interests was positive, the relevance of content was also deemed important by the girls. Ava and Danielle both acknowledged that they were more likely to engage if they were aware of the use or benefits of what they were learning. Danielle prioritised engagement based on her future needs *'umm like I probably wouldn't try as hard at maths if I didn't think I was going to need it'* (42,13-16), while Ava expressed a desire for more relevant curriculum content that would support her in being independent in the future *'I would change the stuff we learn to be stuff we would use, like more in everyday life and stuff... it would be better to like explain what it would be like living on your own and stuff'* (41,4-12). Taken together, these findings have

implications for the classroom in terms of using interests to support engagement and participation and highlighting real life application in the teaching of content.

Ciara was the only participant that did not express a strong subject preference. Ciara expressed a dislike of a number of different subjects but also engagement with learning more broadly *'I don't like learning things. I don't like having to memorise'* (Ciara, 5). While this outright rejection of learning was brought to the fore by Ciara, a more nuanced critique of the academic side of school emerged from experiences of the other girls, particularly Danielle and Emma. While the girls enjoyed learning for the most part, aspects of learning in the school context were deemed incompatible with their autistic processing. A rejection of traditional approaches and a sense of being limited by narrow assessment procedures point toward an overall experience of being constrained within the boundaries of a system designed for neurotypicality.

A reliance on traditional, didactic or *'old fashioned'* (Danielle, 24,1) teaching and assessment methods was questioned by Danielle and Emma. Emma praised teachers who tried new things and called out the less flexible teachers saying '*sometimes, the older ways don't work as well'* (36,17). The expectation that students need to be constantly looking at the teacher to learn was also challenged with Danielle arguing that this demand might *'stress people out'* (24,4). These viewpoints were further supported by the girls when they spoke about their own experiences of learning. Danielle provided a clear defence against the expectation to look at the teacher, *'Well, ahm, I'm probably not paying attention if I am looking at them. I'm more likely to be paying attention if I'm, like drawing or something'* (20,1-4). She furthered this by sharing that *'a good way to measure my concentration is how much drawings are in my book because if I'm really, really trying hard to focus and it's like hard to, then there will be a lot of drawings in my book'* (41, 8-13). Meanwhile, Emma recognised her need for a diverse range of approaches to be used to support her engagement '*Em, I prefer drawing or something creative or even projects rather than just watching'* (3,11-12). The need for flexibility in the learning and expectations is concisely captured by Emma as she negotiated the important role autism plays in the learning process; *'Sometimes I like doing projects alone rather than in groups. Sometimes I might just need a break, but they won't, if they don't understand autism, they probably wouldn't understand that'* (9,8-11).

For Emma, the sense of dissatisfaction extended into assessment practices. Emma emphasised the pressure associated with tests, it *'does exist, and it is there, prominently'* (10,3-4). The words *'stressful'* and *'pressure'* permeated Emma's account when

discussing tests. She battled with the paradoxical messages being shared by teachers where on one hand they tell the students to do their best, yet she feels that there is an unspoken emphasis on achieving high marks. *'I'm pretty sure they don't really mean try your best'* (14,2-5). However, in identifying the flaws of the current system, Emma was able to advocate what would work for her. She deemed project-based work, and CBAs[20] a better format of assessment, removing the time pressures of an exam and providing more flexibility for how the learning could be demonstrated. However, choice was ultimately prioritised by Emma: *'It would work great if they could just let us choose'* (14,7-11).

The experiences shared by Danielle and Emma demonstrate the pressure placed on neurotypical learners to conform to neurotypical expectations, failing to recognise the constellation of characteristics that underpin their autistic experience.

5.4 Being in the School Environment

Appreciating the sensory and perceptual differences experienced by autistic individuals, the theme 'Being Autistic in the School Environment' attempts to capture the experiences of the autistic girls in relation to navigating the physical school environment and its inherent sensory ecosystem. Recognition is afforded to the diversity of sensory experiences, and the role safe spaces play for some of the girls.

5.4.1 Negotiating the Sensory Environment

Almost all the girls experienced feelings of discomfort within the school environment. The girls attempted to articulate the inappropriateness of the sensory environment for them with a sense of overwhelm being a predominant outcome as they negotiated the environment. In most instances, noise levels assaulted the girls' auditory systems, with the busyness of the physical environment adding to sensory stress. Moreover, the school uniform also caused distress for some of the girls.

Ava, Danielle and Freya were unhappy with the loudness of the school environment. There was repeated use of the adverb *'very'* in the girls' accounts when describing the noise levels, implying an intensity beyond what is bearable (Ava, 5,12; Danielle, 34,14; Freya, 15,11). Interestingly, during the walk-and-talk session the places that were identified as areas least preferred were often associated with increased sensory distress *e.g.* general-purpose areas/lunchtime locations. There was a commonality in the accounts of Ava and Danielle who alluded to the need to avoid or escape environments that are too

[20] Classroom Based Assessments: A form of continuous assessment that contribute to the Junior Cycle.

noisy. Ava identified a specific stairwell in the school building that is particularly overwhelming but essentially unavoidable.

> *It's like I know I have to go through that stairwell, like no matter what, there's going to be parts of the day where I have to go there because it's the quickest way to get to a classroom, but I also just really don't wanna go into the stairwell because of how big and loud it is.*

(Ava, 26, 10-15)

Meanwhile, Danielle portrayed feelings of apprehension with the use of the words *'like'* and *'just'*, implying a certain level of endurance was required to survive the inappropriateness of the environment. *'So that I feel a bit overwhelmed, like, there's like a lot going on and it's loud and then I also feel like, wincing, I don't know, it's about just trying to get through'* (36,14-15).

For Danielle and Ava, the auditory input in their school environment was further exacerbated by echoes (Ava, 6,4; 12,8 and Danielle, 11,14; 40,4). So not only was it *'very loud'* it was *'like loudness with people talking and then loudness with it echoing'* (Ava, 6,3-5). As echoes can be somewhat controlled, it could be argued that the physical environment has not been afforded due attention by the school management, in turn further amplifying the sensory experiences of the students.

Alongside the onslaught of the 'everyday' noise levels, Freya spoke about the unnecessary addition of music in the canteen on Wednesdays stating *'Yeah, I wouldn't wanna be the person sitting next to it'* (15,14-15). Similarly, the school bell was perceived to be an additional noise that Danielle had to mediate as she moved around the school environment.

> *I try to get to my next class as quickly as I can. So, I try not to take notice, but sometimes when I'm like not in class, if I'm like in the library the classroom or something I kind of have to cover my ears, it's very loud.*

(Danielle, 34,10-14)

Danielle did, however, highlight that *'Sometimes, it [sensory experience of an environment], kind of depends. It depends on how I'm feeling'* (13,1). This insight emphasised the need to contextualise sensory experience by recognising the internal and external factors that influence experiences and more so, understanding the cumulative effect.

In addition to the above, it was apparent that human noise also mediated sensory experiences. The sheer volume of people in larger post-primary schools can be an assault on the senses for autistic individuals. *'Well, it's loud. There's lots of people and it's kind*

of chaotic...' (Danielle, 6,3-4). For Freya the fact that there are *'people everywhere'* (9,7) not only increased the noise levels but also increased her anxiety as she navigated the physical space, intensifying the demands involved in moving from class to class and during her lunch time. Furthermore, phrases used by Freya such as *'that kind of worries me'* and *'I get stressed'* (9,8; 11,5) capture the emotive aspect of being overwhelmed by sensory input.

It is important to recognise that it is not only large groups of people that can cause too much noise, but rather each individual needs to reflect on their role in creating suitable sensory environments. Danielle articulated the significance of individual responsibility, highlighting quite strongly the implications of a lack of individual awareness; '*Teachers that yell a lot are not good, I know a lot of people who like hate teachers just because they, like, they talk really loudly'* (23,14-16).

In stark contrast, Ciara, disregarded environments that were too quiet. Specific reference was made to the activities/sensory room, with Ciara stating *'I don't like going in here... I don't like it here because it's quiet and there's no messing going on in here. I have looked in here but don't want to go in'* (1,4), thus highlighting the individuality of sensory experiences. However, recalling Ciara's social desires, it may also be that quieter environments restricted Ciara and perhaps made her feel more vulnerable.

In addition to auditory input, brief mention was afforded to school uniforms as a disconcerting tactile input. While this was only discussed by Ava and Freya's mother, Fiona, it is nonetheless noteworthy. Discontent with the uniform was expressed for similar but somewhat different reasons, both underpinned by an understanding of the uniform as restrictive. For Ava, wearing her uniform was all encompassing, which had implications for her ability to distribute her attention resources. *'It's [the uniform] really, really uncomfortable and when all you can feel is a really uncomfortable uniform, it makes focusing on everything else a lot more difficult'* (52,3-5).

Although not a universal experience the insight shared by Ava provided food for thought in relation to the uniform requirement in the post-primary school context. Similarly, although sensitivity to auditory input was the overarching experience among the participants, Ciara's alternate dislike of quiet environments again highlights the variability in sensory perception among autistic individuals, emphasising the need for a person-centred approach.

5.4.2 Finding Sanctuary: The Role of Safe Spaces

The inappropriateness of some environments within the school context is underscored by the significance of safe spaces. During the walk-and-talk session, all the girls identified a place that they liked and/or another significant place. Upon discussion these places served a clear purpose for the girls; they were portrayed as places to escape the hustle and bustle of the busy school environment, places to regulate, and/or places to reset. There were some commonalities in the places identified with the specific classrooms, the library and particular lunch locations all identified by two or more girls, while an outlier of the bathroom was selected by Ciara.

For Ciara, the bathroom appeared to serve the purpose of a place to prepare oneself for the day ahead. Anticipating the demands of the context, Ciara shared her everyday morning routine; *'Most mornings I am late for school, so class has started when I get there. Sometimes before classes I visit the bathroom just to have five minutes'* (4). To the outsider, the acknowledgement of her tendency to be late suggests a certain hesitancy to begin the school day. This idea is further embedded when no second thought is given to spending the five additional minutes in the bathroom, despite an awareness of already being late. There is a sense that Ciara's visit to the bathroom goes beyond a disregard for the rules and is in fact a necessary routine, a routine that endeavours to provide initial equilibrium in advance of commencing the school day. In a similar vein, Bella also acknowledged the significance of starting the day from the right place. Contrary to Ciara's experience of embedding personal support mechanisms, Bella's school, once alerted to her needs, supported Bella to withdraw from morning assembly, appreciating the distress that this part of the day caused. Bella shared that *'going to the [autism classroom] instead of assembly is a lot easier, it's a lot less stressful. It helps me start the day in a better place when I don't have to go somewhere that makes me feel overwhelmed'* (36,13-16). The insights shared illustrate a common experience with both girls requiring time to prepare for the day, however, they also emphasise a divergence in that experience with Ciara implementing her own coping mechanisms while Bella's needs were facilitated by the school.

Similar efforts in seeking out a specific space is evidenced in other accounts. Emma and Bella talked about specific classrooms that were important to them. Both girls identified their art classrooms as preferred spaces, valuing the freedom to engage with a subject they love. More specifically, Bella appreciated the reduced demands placed on her in the art classroom: *'the art room is important to me. I just like being able to go in and do art. Like*

I don't have anyone there to chat to, but I just like being able to go in and do art' (38,1-4), while Emma also alluded to the physical and interactional environments: *'The art room, it's warm and I get to be creative here…there's also like a nicer, because, because it's one of the choice subjects the class is even smaller again, so it is more of a, just a better vibe'* (2,2). While Bella shifted the focus away from the social element of art class, it was clear that this was something that Emma valued and later alluded to again with reference to her Irish classroom: *'it's a supportive place. It's just a supportive, really positive environment'* (5,10-11). A sense of closeness and community emanated from Emma's description of her preferred space, while the art room for Bella almost acted as an escapism from busyness of school life.

Meanwhile, Ava, Danielle and Freya all identified the library as a preferred space that facilitated a sense of calmness. Where Ciara's visit to the bathroom had become a morning routine, preparatory in nature, the library appeared to be viewed as a sanctuary, somewhere that was enjoyable to visit but not necessarily a regularity. The library was described as a *'quiet'* space (Ava, 4,15; Danielle, 1,8), something that appealed to all three girls, and appeared to support regulation. While all three girls appreciated the library as a calming place, with the added benefit of access to books, Ava (4,3-5) also appreciated the opportunity to be actively involved in the library. Alongside the quietness, the methodical nature of the duties that Ava was involved in with the library was valued.

> *So, I help out with the library tokens and stuff. It's a very quiet place so I like that. Aswell, like we're currently, we're like cataloguing all the books. So, like putting the stickers on them and stuff. It's really calming, really soothing.*
>
> (Ava, 4,1-5)

However, the appealing nature of the library was not ubiquitous. Danielle shared that she wouldn't go to the library at lunchtime because *'it can get busy'* (26,11), something that perhaps indicates a need for increased quiet spaces within the school building. Interestingly, although the library was clearly a significant place for the girls and appeared to be sought out by the girls as it enabled them to feel *'content'* (Danielle, 35,12) and *'relaxed'* (Freya, 3,12), there were limitations tied to its use. For Ava, her access was restricted to lunchtimes as she was *'not really allowed to go at other times in the day'* (21,14). Similarly, Freya acknowledged that lunchtime was the main time you could avail of the library, but access is not a given because *'sometimes the library is closed because they're like organising textbooks or like there was a grandparent's day and they were having like tea and stuff in the library'* (3,1-5). Initially, a more open policy appeared to be in place in Danielle's school as she stated that *'you can normally come here at any*

stage' (2,8-9), however, at different points when Danielle was speaking a range of caveats from *'if it's free and if, ehm, I'm not... feeling well'* (2,5) to *'you have to check and make sure there's no class here or sometimes there are like, TYs in here and it's used for like clubs and things'* (2,8-12) to *'well, not at any stage'* (2,15) emerged. It could be posited that in the absence of sufficient quiet spaces within the school, the library was informally perceived to be the safe space by students, however, without recognition of this by schools, a bounded concept of inclusion could be perceived to be in existence.

In addition to the above, all the girls, with the exception of Emma, drew attention to specific locations where they spent their lunchtimes. While different, the locations were all characterised by spaces that were somewhat away from the main lunchtime social spaces. The locations were in quieter, less popular areas of the school building and grounds and the girls exhibited a prominent sense of ownership over their lunchtime spaces: *'it's always been this area'* (Ava, 7,11), *'we started sitting here one day and now we always sit here'* (Danielle, 7,8-9), *'my favourite place is like outside, outside there's a little courtyard things and me and my friends usually go over, we go over to this bench, it's just behind this bush'* (Freya, 2,7-11). Moreover, Ava, Danielle and Freya all discussed their lunchtime spaces with reference to their friends and the notion that during this time they could just *'chill'* (Ava, 7,13; Freya, 2,14). On the other hand, while Ciara and Bella both liked their lunch spaces (Ciara, 1,2; Bella, 35,14), the experience was not inextricably linked to friendship. Ciara went to her lunch space with *'others'* while Bella played Uno with *'some girls'* in the lunchroom (35,9-11). Despite the somewhat different experiences shared in relation to navigating lunchtime, the girls expressed a preference as to where they wanted to spend this time.

This theme has attempted to capture the complex range of sensory experiences that the girls navigate daily in the school environment and the impact of these experiences for them. The inappropriateness of some aspects of the school environment is contextualised by comparison to spaces that have been identified as havens by the girls, spaces that allow them to relax, regulate and reset before being once again immersed in a stimuli rich environment. The insights shared reveal an aspect of school life often left unconsidered by schools, one which can have profound implications for autistic individuals.

5.5 Being with Others

In recognising the characteristic differences in communication and social interaction associated with autism, the theme 'Being with Others' endeavours to unveil the diversity of social interactions that occur within the school environment. The social demands of

mainstream schooling are contrasted with positive social experiences, the significance of teachers as mediators of experience is brought to the fore, before an emphasis is placed on the need for change in others' perceptions and knowledge of autism.

5.5.1 Navigating Social Interactions with Peers

The social experiences of the girls in this research are nuanced, with distinctions made between the experience of being among others versus being with friends. In both instances, the discussion lies within the context of being in a social collective. There was a sense that the girls were merely 'among' others when in the broader school or class context, coping with and navigating the social demands being placed on them. Meanwhile, there was a more prominent sense of being 'with' others when discussing friendships. It was apparent that, where they existed, friendships offered an inherent sense of belonging to the social collective.

Ava, Emma and Freya provided insight into the day-to-day interactions with other students. In all instances, the girls did not share any particular negative experiences but rather their insights captured the diversity of social interactional experiences that occur in neurodiverse contexts. Ava sometimes found the actions of others confusing stating that '*there can be times when I'm like "why are you doing this, why?", like, they [other students] can be kind of...interesting'* (44,8-10) while Freya expressed feelings of awkwardness at the thought of being forward in social interactions '*It's fine, I just, I just get a bit nervous about like asking someone "hey, can I sit here" cause it's like awkward'* (23,2-5). Meanwhile, Emma's comments appeared to be focused on the personality and maturity of her peers rather than differences arising from their neurotype. In relation to other students, Emma acknowledged that '*most of them are fine*' with '*some nicer than others*' (23,14-15), however, she provided a clear description of less favoured interactions.

> *Some people are, it's just kind of clashing personalities for the most part, they can make some weird jokes, more offensive jokes. It's mostly their personalities. Like, the jokes aren't aimed at me or the autism thing, they're just generally, just teenage boys' kind of thing.*
>
> (Emma, 24,4-12)

For Freya and Emma, it was also apparent that they were concerned about how others in the school environment perceived them, which in turn had an impact on how they interacted with those around them. Freya reflected on her own interaction style, worried that others may misperceive her. She repeatedly urged that she never intends to be '*rude*' (8,10;11;15) or '*mean*' (8,15) but that sometimes she says the wrong thing without

realising. While Freya is concerned that others may interpret her interactions differently to what she intended and seeks compassion, Emma's narrative is somewhat more complex. Aware of her differences, Emma perhaps wishes to avoid any misjudgement in the first instance by masking. Referring to her first Dixit Card, Emma stated;

> *This reflects masking and the way I mask in school, like pretending, not showing who I really am. Like trying to make, trying to feel better about things rather than just be honest and say things are like actually "this is hard" or whatever or feeling sometimes you have to go like "oh yes, I'm fine" when I'm very clearly crying.*
>
> (Emma, 38,5-11)

Emma's description of masking suggests that her engagement with it goes beyond the idea of being misperceived by others. She expresses that she masks because she doesn't want to '*bother people with negatives*' (38,15). Emma views it necessary to present herself in a way in which she believes others would want her to be, perhaps indicating a desire to fit in without prejudice. However, circling back to her earlier quotation where she attributes the behaviour of her peers to personality rather than neurotype, it could be argued that Emma is doing the same here. Emma may be masking to actively influence how she is perceived by others, preferring that to be on the grounds of personality rather than neurotype, potentially implying an uncoupling of personality and diagnosis in self-identity. The insights by the girls somewhat imply a narrative of 'me' versus 'them' with the girls viewing themselves as individuals among the broader school community rather than as individuals within the school community.

The complexity of the social environment is often amplified during unstructured times of the school day, with lunchtime being one such period. Three of the girls, Ciara, Danielle and Freya shared that they typically met with their friends in a given location at lunchtime. The other three girls, Ava, Bella and Emma revealed more varied lunchtime routines. These girls engaged with structured lunchtime groups/activities on various days, each sharing a varied perspective on their experiences. The organised lunchtime meet-ups were largely positive, however, for some the experience was more nuanced. Ava spoke about an informal approach whereby she and a wider friend group avail of a lunchtime club two days a week where they can eat their lunch and watch Netflix, describing it as *'just a nice environment'* (32,17). Meanwhile, Emma listed a variety of lunchtime clubs that she attended on different days, adding that *'having thing to do at lunches makes the lunches less boring'* (10,15-16). Emma shared that she attends the clubs by herself, with other students and when there is no club on, she hangs out with her friends. Emma viewed social interaction as an important and necessary aspects of school, and it appeared that

attending the various clubs helped Emma to fulfil the requirement of being sociable in school. '*My biggest source of worry is other students. Well, it's not other students necessarily. It's kind of just, as a whole, socially, like making sure I have a social life with the other students*' (23,4-6). While both Ava and Emma made references to friends, either attending groups with them or having the option to be with friends if not attending a lunchtime group, Bella attended lunchtime groups in an effort to make friends, to not have to be alone at lunchtime. Bella indicated a desire to be with other students but shared the challenges of doing so and the implications of not achieving this. *'Like with other students, sometimes I get kind of embarrassed, I find it hard to get along with other students. So, it's just very, you know, you're very alone'* (32,9-11). One lunchtime activity Bella mentioned was a chess club. The online format of the chess club situated it as a low-demand activity that facilitated social opportunities, with Bella emphasising that '*not many people are talking or looking at each other, but we still socialise, you know'* (21,1-6). Bella's desire for social connectedness was more apparent when speaking about attending an Uno group. While Bella acknowledged that the Uno group were not close friends of hers and admitted that she found the interactions sometimes challenging, she expressed contentedness at the opportunity to be with them and was hopeful that attending the group would help her to become more confident interacting with others.

> *I play Uno at lunch time. It's not like an "organised social group", it's just like some girls play Uno in the lunchroom every day and the SNA encouraged me to join them. So, she [SNA] introduced me to them. They're all in second year [year below] and yeah, I like that. So basically, like the Uno group is fun, like it is, but it can also be kind of overwhelming and embarrassing because I don't really chat to them much because I don't really know how to, but I still wanna do it like, because maybe I'll get better at that slowly if I stay with them.*
>
> (Bella, 35,9-16)

It is apparent from the insights shared by Ava, Bella and Emma that attending organised lunchtime events/groups can effectively bridge the experience of being 'among' others and being 'a part of' a social collective. Meanwhile, as alluded to previously, for Ciara, Danielle and Freya, the social landscape required somewhat less negotiation as they were already 'a part of' a social collective, in that they had established a network of friends or peers within the school environment that they could spend time with.

Expanding further on the idea of being 'a part of' a social collective, friendship experiences varied vastly among the girls. Ava, Danielle and Freya acknowledged that seeing their friends was not only an aspect of school that they enjoyed but also offered somewhat of a safety network for them, with Freya sharing that *'it's [school is] kind of easy to, easier to have, like a friend to like chat to'* (6,9-10). The girls' current friendship

network emerged upon starting in post-primary school, with former friendships from primary school alluded to in the context of something from the past. It was apparent that the girls valued their friends immensely. Freya identified having friends at school as the single most important thing for her, emphasising the significance of having someone to be with *'Ehm, the most important one for me is having friends at school… I can have someone to talk to and, and to hang out with and talk about, like, the day with'* (5,3-7). Ava recognised the role of her friendship group in terms of co-regulation, sharing that *'it's like we go there, and we like just kind of decompress…We just mess around and like joke around with each other and it's just very chill, very nice and there's no pressure'* (24,1-4). Meanwhile, it was clear that Danielle appreciated the way in which her friends understand her. *'Sometimes they just like understand that I don't want to talk or anything and I can like say that*' (26,7-9). Friendship was discussed to a lesser extent by Emma who made reference to having '*one good friend*' (21,6) who she '*just clicked*' with (21,16) one day when they were assigned a job to do in school. She also speaks about having a couple of '*casual friends, maybe, good acquaintances*' (21,7), emphasising that she generally spends time with the same people in school.

On the other hand, Bella's experiences of friendship contrast sharply to those of Ava, Danielle, Emma and Freya. Bella expressed a strong desire for friendship, stating that *'friends are the most important, and like it's really more for life and like I don't really have any…it's kinda lonely'* (19,1-3/13). Bella reminisced on her primary school experience sharing that *'it was easier, definitely at primary school… I would say I was extraverted, but more, like crazy and like bubbly. And then like, in secondary school… I like, became way more, like quiet'*(28,12-17). There is a sense that the increasing demands of the post-primary context, along with the complexity of adolescent interactions impacted Bella's social experiences. Feelings of rejection and inferiority emanated as Bella reflected on the drifting of her primary school friend group and how she '*wasn't as good at making friends as they were'* (24,12). The extent of these feelings is even more starkly laid out as she critiqued her own character in light of what she perceived to be the opinions of others.

> *I suppose because I was really bubbly it made sense because I just wanted to fit in with them, but as I got older in secondary school, it kind of became more embarrassing and they didn't really like me, well like, maybe they liked me, but I could tell I was getting a bit 'too much'.*
>
> (Bella, 29,3-9)

In contrast to all the above, Ciara's experience of friendship was slightly different and could be described as more transient in nature. While Ciara shared that she spent her lunchtime outside with her friends, on a number of occasions she made reference to making new friends in the girls' toilet; *'The girls' toilets is another place I go. You can meet a friend here. You can meet people you know or don't know here. You can meet anyone here, you can make new friends here'* (1,9). On one hand, it could be speculated that Ciara is an extravert and has a wide social network within the school, however, taking my interactions with Ciara, insights from her mother and Ciara's diagnosis of Selective Mutism into account, these interactions may be more nuanced. There is a sense that these 'friendships' are fleeting with emphasis often placed on meeting and making new friends with little discussion afforded to specific individuals or interactions that occurred with friends. One hypothesis is that the interactions potentially enable Ciara to make conversation with others without the pressure or expectation that accompanies friendship maintenance. Alternatively, the bathroom friendships could also indicate an immense desire for friendship and a certain vulnerability in social interactions, whereby Ciara may mischaracterise the extent of the relationship she has with the people who she speaks to in the bathroom.

The girls' narratives afford us the opportunity to walk alongside them as they seek to make sense of their interactions with the peers that surround them in the school environment. The girls don't explicitly address their social experiences with reference to their autistic identity, which may imply the extent of their engagement with masking.

5.5.2 Teachers: Mediators of Experience

Teachers played a significant role in the girls' school experiences. Their role positioned them as mediators of experience, in some instances for the better and in other instances with negative outcomes.

Both positive and negative experiences fell into two categories; academic impact and relational impact. From a learning perspective it was apparent that where a teacher was well-received by the student this positively influenced their engagement and response to a given subject. Ava identified her English teacher's evident passion for his subject as significant *'like he loves English, and you can tell, so you can, and he like, I don't know, I don't know he just makes me feel like yeah, I can do this English, right?'* (34,4-10). Meanwhile, for Danielle (38,12-14) and Emma their favourite subject was inextricably linked to their favourite teacher. Emma embraced her experiences in the Irish class, drawing particular attention to the role of the teacher in mediating these experiences.

> *The Irish classroom is an important place for me. I like it as a subject, I like the way the teacher teaches it. So, you just, I feel like, the vibe she gives when she is teaching makes me want to actively learn the subject.*
>
> (Emma, 30,3-7)

On the flip side, Ava and Emma highlighted examples of inadequate teacher understanding. Ava (37,4-8) shared an instance whereby instead of the teacher going back over a test and explaining errors made, he shouted at the class and moved on. It was apparent that this experience left Ava feeling dissatisfied and frustrated, unable to address the issues due to the teacher's response. A similar sentiment was portrayed by Emma as she negotiated teachers' perceptions of her autistic processing. '*I think teachers should know that sometimes my brain just stops working. I don't know why, it just does, but some teachers kind of just take that as a 'doesn't want to work' type of thing, which it isn't.'* (35,10-14). It was implied that Emma felt misunderstood, and disappointed at the way in which processing differences are dismissed or minimised by some teachers.

Going beyond the influence of teachers at an academic level, the relational aspect of teaching played a significant, perhaps more scoping, role in the girls' experiences. It was evident that the girls valued when teachers made an effort to ensure they were being supported in the classroom. Ava and Freya shared the practical steps their teachers undertook to support them, while Bella and Emma reflected on the nature of a teacher. Drawing attention to the inclusive and flexible nature of technology Ava shared; *'my Home Ec teacher, she puts up like everything that we did in the class like on the Google Classroom so if you didn't understand something, or you missed the day, it's all there so you can go and see what you missed'* (42,8-12), while Freya (26, 5-10) reported that her German teacher sends her the notes digitally, set up a class Microsoft Teams group and ensures she is able to complete the tasks on her laptop. Meanwhile, Emma valued the willingness of teachers who recognised when they could help and teachers who offered their time to support. She observed that *'that teacher…is able to notice what's wrong and give some suggestions as to what could help the problem, rather than just asking the SNA to help'* (27,7-11). Emma conceptualised inclusion as everybody's responsibility, placing onus on all teachers to see all students. Similarly, Bella also appreciated when teachers were proactive in their support but urged a distinction between supporting and patronising.

> *I suppose, they are the teachers that do good, like they help me out a lot, but they don't baby me like. They don't talk to me like a baby. They, like they help me, they check in on me in case like I was having a hard time.*
>
> (Bella, 25,101-4)

This sentiment was reiterated by Danielle who strongly rejected *'patronising'* teachers (29,15-17) and challenged the inappropriate behaviour of teachers.

> *Well, I don't like being patronized, which I think happens sometimes with people, especially like teachers that know I'm autistic will be like, they kind of speak to me in a higher pitch or say things slowly which is annoying*
>
> (Danielle, 22, 11-15)

These findings emphasise the importance of balance and subtlety in support offered by teachers. Bella further extended on this by discussing the concept of care, noting *'some teachers, they just don't really care. Like, if the SNA tells them about accommodations or something, they don't really pay much attention to that, or they might do something that day and then just forget about it again'* (22,10-14). Adding to this she argues that *'they [teachers] definitely need to know more'* (Bella, 24,12-15). Bella's insights highlight the importance of consistency, knowledge and follow through when offering support in the school context.

While the specific experiences shared by the girls were extremely valuable, exploring the concept of the 'good' and 'bad' teacher facilitated a somewhat broader, more universal perspective to emerge. Using this hypothetical lens potentially enabled the girls to distance themselves from their current context and speak more freely about their hopes and needs of teachers. However, similar to when speaking about their own experiences, the girls' insights could be largely split into academic and personal impact.

Danielle emphasised that *'it depends on perspective, so how a teacher treats a student'* (23,8-10). This personal focus is also woven into the narratives of Freya, Bella, Emma and Ciara. Freya characterised a good teacher as *'someone who can, like, help you through problems'* (25,10-11), while Bella emphasised the need for teacher understanding; *'a teacher who understands me, as a person, like someone who helps me'*(22,1-2). Similarly, Emma also focused on the importance of person-oriented understanding, sharing that; *'It's important that my teacher understands me for who I am. It's important so if they know me as a person, so you know if something bad happened, or you know something unusual, they'd understand'* (8,7-9). She further extended this by pressing the need for teachers to be proactive and emphasised that if a student is struggling the teacher should be *'able to understand that the student is struggling **and** can find a way or try to find a way to help them'* (32, 7-10). Somewhat differently, Ciara, prioritised autonomy and reduced demands; *'they [teacher] would let me go to the bathroom. They don't yell. They don't ask me to do any homework. They are nice to the students. A bad teacher stops me going to the toilet. Everything is wrong with them'* (4). It was evident that Ciara has very

specific preferences, potentially underpinned by her own experiences of being supported or limited in the school context.

An alternative focus was highlighted by Ava, Freya and Danielle who discussed the role of the teacher in the context of teaching and learning. Ava and Danielle highlighted the importance of the teacher creating an environment conducive to success. For them, it was important that there was a balance between routine and predictability, as well as a more relaxed element. Ava articulated this balance as;

> *A good teacher is a teacher that, like, is strict enough that the students listen but isn't so strict that it just is annoying to be in that class. Someone that can like control the class but also make it a fun class.*
>
> (Ava, 33,9-13)

Danielle expressed a similar preference, but discussed from an outcome-oriented perspective, alluding to the restricted current education system.

> *So, I guess, maybe a teacher who isn't like too stressed, because sometimes a stressed teacher means a stressed class…like a teacher who's relaxed, but not too relaxed, but will stress about the exam, like you know we get the work done, but like it's not like intensive.*
>
> (Danielle, 38,15-17)

Teachers' abilities to explain ideas and offer support were the other prominent factors deemed important for consideration by the girls. Ava acknowledged this from a positive perspective that a good teacher is *'someone that can break things down really easily to a really easy level so you can like process it and then put it back together'* (33,13-15), while Freya provided the alternate example that *'bad teachers refuse to like explain things in like an easier way, they'd just like point blank explain it in a difficult way. And um, they wouldn't really give help'* (27,11-14). Both perspectives, while offering similar sentiments may reflect the experiences of the girls within their given contexts. Similarly, when considered as a whole, this subtheme reflects the individual interactions that occur between the girls and their teachers, however, it also reveals some of the commonalities in terms of what is valued or indeed rejected by the girls.

5.5.3 Challenging the Status Quo

With contributions from five out of six of the girls, the findings in this sub-theme build on the former insights shared relating to the everyday interactions that occur in the school environment. This sub-theme emphasises an immense need for increased knowledge and understanding of the diversity of autism and alludes to a desire for change to occur to improve the experiences of others going forward.

Four of the girls spoke more generally about the need for greater understanding of autism in the school environment. Danielle was the only participant who specifically highlighted the need for peer knowledge. She noted that although they may not desire to know more, it is important that they have a basic understanding as this may make them reflect on inappropriate slurs often heard in the post-primary context.

> *I think they [peers in school] should know some things, like I think most people probably wouldn't be interested, but like I think they should like have like baseline knowledge rather than just like, because people say it all the time, "like, ohh, you're so autistic" and they should kind of know what they're saying, even if they're gonna say anyway.*
>
> (Danielle, 49,4-11)

While Danielle focused on what students [shouldn't] say, Ava, Bella and Emma focused on what teachers [don't] do. The girls spoke about how important it is that teachers *'know about autism'* (Ava, 38,15; Bella, 31,3) so that they can make adaptations to better support autistic students in the class. Ava wished teachers had a better knowledge of autism so they were aware of how to recognise *'if someone is really struggling with autism in the classroom'* (39,9-11), while Bella linked knowledge of autism with increased likelihood of receiving the necessary supports; *'I think it's really important that teachers know about autism, like some teachers just don't and some teachers do, they just are focused on the education bit of school and they don't think about the accommodations'* (Bella, 31,3-7). Meanwhile, Emma argued that in order to understand how to support autistic individuals in the classroom, teachers need to first understand, *'try to understand, not judge'* (8,15), autism. She contextualised this with reference to herself saying, *'Well, if they don't understand that [autism], then they're not going to understand quite a bit of things that, the way I like to do things'* (9,5-17). Adding to this, Emma recommended that teachers should avail of training as this may prevent them from relying on what they think they know which may be grounded in *'the bigger stereotypes type of thing'* (34,15). This nod towards outdated teacher knowledge was also brought to the fore by Danielle who used a distressing simile to capture her perceptions of a wholly inadequate and inappropriate knowledge base among some teachers; *'like if a teacher is being told that a particular student has autism, it doesn't mean that they're like, an alien, you know, they're still, still like, a person'* (19,11-14). The insights shared by the girls not only highlight insufficient awareness and knowledge of autism more broadly, but also spotlight the need for more holistic, neuroaffirmative training for teachers.

In addition to the need for increased understanding of autism more generally, other insights shared by the girls referring to the diversity of autism highlight a further gap in

the knowledge base of teachers. Freya, Emma and Ava challenged the oneness of autism, emphasising the different profile of *'strengths and interests…abilities and disabilities and accommodations'* (Freya, 37,6-8) unique to each autistic person. Ava emphasised that not all autistic people *'experience autism in the exact same way'* and while it can be similar but *'it can lead to different outcomes for different people'* (38,13-16). Meanwhile, Freya urged that '*autistic people can come in like any shape or form, any type of person. They may mask well or not mask at all'* (38,13-16). Lastly, Emma succinctly captured the need for broader understandings of autism when she stated that *'People need to know that we're not just the stereotypes...on a much simpler level, autism does exist and it's not all the same. It would be helpful if people did understand that sometimes'* (41,3-10).

While the girls clearly articulated their understanding of the diversity of autism, and in turn highlighted the need for a greater awareness of this among others, Bella extended on this. She emphasised the importance of adopting a person-centred approach when supporting autistic individuals to truly understand the needs of the individual rather than basing support on an assumed knowledge.

> *I think people need to know that we're [autism community] different, because they don't, I think they think that autistic people are only one way. There's not really a good representation of people like me in the media, so they think we're all the one way, and that's not how it is. People judge too quickly, and they don't think to ask me for my experience.*
>
> (Bella, 41,6-13)

The need for a person-centred approach was also captured in the narratives of Ava, Danielle and Emma as they considered necessary features of supportive provision. They acknowledged the busy nature of school life, and the demands placed on teachers, however, they urged those around them to take some time to check in with students. Danielle recommended *'paying attention to the students as well as like teaching them'* (39,10-11), while Ava suggested an informal check-in opportunity; '*I think, if they notice, and like obviously it would be hard to notice when there's a full class, but I think they should check in, like, maybe once a month'* (51,7-11). Extending this, Emma urged that more was required and that teachers actually had to take proactive measures based on what students tell them rather than just doing the act of checking in as a duty. Emma stated that *'teachers need to listen to individual students when they say what they need or when they say what works and doesn't work and not just acknowledge what they say and keep teaching their way'* (35,3-6)

While all the girls wished for more from teachers, it was interesting to note the girls' level of awareness of the school context and their understanding of the challenges faced by teachers in meeting the needs of all students. Their acknowledgement of these factors only accentuates further the essential nature of their request for what could be considered 'small asks'. This subtheme highlighted the pressing need to challenge the status quo to improve the educational experiences of autistic girls. To conclude, when asked about their wishes for who the findings of this study need to reach, the girls specifically identified people involved in Education, people in schools, teachers and peers as the essential audience for dissemination. Eloquent and concise, Freya surmised the importance of including autistic voices and sharing autistic experiences in research, a core tenet of the current study.

> *This research can make autistic people, like me, feel more understood and more accommodated for. Teachers, boards of management and the Minister for Education need to hear what school is like for us, from our perspective.*

(Freya, 39,5-13)

5.6 Parental Perspectives

The theme 'Parental Perspectives' draws only from data gathered from the girls' parents. Parent voices were not elicited to corroborate the girls' narratives, instead this theme has been included in an effort to acknowledge the value and depth of the insights offered by parents in the data collection process. While the first subtheme provides an overview of parents' insights into their daughter's experiences, the remainder of the theme focuses primarily on the parents' experiences. The findings highlight parents' concerns relating to teacher knowledge, their varying experiences navigating school systems of support, before finally turning the spotlight on the role of advocacy in the support process.

5.6.1 Observing Experience from the Outside

The autistic girls who took part in this study are the experts of their own experience. However, the parents who participated in this research also belong to the lived-world of the autistic girls navigating the experience, i.e. mainstream education provision, and therefore their outsider insights can also be useful in extending our understanding of the girls' experiences. It is important to emphasise that the parents' perspectives were not included to validate the girls' contributions, instead, their voices provided a supplementary viewpoint on the core aspects of experience as depicted in the three themes generated from data collated from the autistic girls before providing insight on the implications of their daughters 'being' in a school system not designed for them.

5.6.1.1 *Recognising the Role of Systems, Environments and Social Demands*

In line with the experiences shared by the girls, the parents perceived the system, the environment and the social aspect of school as influential in determining their daughters' experiences. Interestingly, the parents often contextualised their daughter's school experiences using change as a frame of reference. Managing the changes that occur within the school day and negotiating change in the form of the transition from primary to post-primary underpinned the manner in which the parents spoke about their daughter's experience. While not all change was perceived as negative (interest-directed learning opportunities), parents were concerned that many changes placed additional demands on the girls. Bronagh captured the essence of managing change for autistic individuals with reference to Bella when she stated *'it's just, Bella takes a long time to get used to things, and I think by the time she's really used to secondary school, it'll be time to move on to college.* (28,16-17).

Commencing with a positive aspect of the post-primary context, and as discussed by the girls in Section 5.3.2, parents also viewed interest-driven learning as powerful in mediating their daughter's experiences. Eimear's snappy narrative demonstrates her enthusiasm for the element of choice embedded in the post-primary system in relation to subjects. There is a clear sense of gratitude for this, a sense of knowing that this will allow her daughter to thrive.

> *Without a doubt, subject choices are a positive thing in PP. Like, now she can do art, and she loves art. She is fantastic at art, not just drawing and painting, but all the media. She's extremely creative... and maths, maths is another one of her loves, but she can't do languages. She's not interested.*
>
> (Eimear, 13,5-14).

This energy is also prominent as Fiona discussed what she believed were the implications for Freya in relation to being able to choose subjects at post-primary level.

> *She learned that she loves the new subjects like history and geography and technology. Freya is a real engineer head. She loves making things and building these wooden 3D puzzle type things, and she wants to be an engineer, and she picked technology, and she loves technology and she's like on a high on a Wednesday and Thursday cause they're her tech days and it's like she's buzzing around the place, she's so hyper and like she enjoys learning.*
>
> (Fiona, 25,1-9)

However, while the opportunities presented in terms of subject choice were praised, demonstration of learning within subjects was sometimes confined by system structures. Eimear supported her daughter's request for more flexible assessment approaches sharing that '*her science teacher said that at the parent/teacher meeting that if there was a way that she could present her junior cert in a different way, she'd ace it'* (40,7-17). Eimear

articulated the significance of providing these alternatives with an example from Emma's experience.

> *They have five or six different CBA formats and there was one on a video, it was a history project and the others were all writing and I said "is there any way, she could do it through video?" and he said "well, okay", like this was most interesting, and she did the most amazing video, like castles, she built castles, [castle name] and she had her friends in it and she had narrated it beautifully and got above expectations, whatever the highest one is, because she was allowed to do it in a different way.*
>
> (Eimear, 39,10-17)

This idea of choice within assessment was earlier spotlighted by Emma and its significance is reinforced by Bronagh, Bella's mother when she discussed Bella's dislike of CBAs.

> *She doesn't like getting up and doing the CBAs, and she thinks they're a disgrace and how dare they the government bring them in and, I'm like but do you know there's your sister and she'd prefer not to do exams, she'd prefer to have three words written on the page and go up and talk for 20 minutes, so I said they have to try and, like these came about because of the children who weren't good on paper but were able to present something well and she'd be like 'oh well we shouldn't all have to do them', so you know.*
>
> (Bronagh, 24,2-12)

Aside from subjects and assessment of subjects, parents also the discussed personal and environmental demands of the post-primary context. Eimear, Bronagh and Deirdre acknowledged the various changes that occur in the post-primary context such as changes in teachers, split classes, organising oneself for changing classes and how these factors can place additional demands on the girls. Both Deirdre and Bronagh focused on the need for increased independence in the post-primary context and the perceived implications of this in terms of increased stress and anxiety for their daughters. Deirdre reported that although Danielle was looking forward to going to post-primary there was almost a *'subconscious fear of change'* (13,7-17) and while the adrenaline initially supported the transition, when *'the reality of day-to-day set in, then it became hard and then all of sudden, it's too loud, there's too many people, you know, I don't like this, I can't do that, you know'* (Deirdre, 28,15-17). In a similar vein, Bronagh shared the preparatory efforts (zippy folders, colour coding, etc) they undertook in an attempt to ameliorate the demands on Bella when she transitioned to post-primary, however, Bella remained overwhelmed. The stark reality of Bella's difficulty coping with the demands of post-primary is captured by Bronagh in an evocative simile.

> *We had all that planned out but then we'd find her on the bedroom floor, absolutely balling her eyes out as though somebody had died, and she was saying, "I can't believe I have to do this every day, I can't believe I have to do this every day". It was literally like we were sending her to war every single day.*

(Bronagh, 14,11-16)

Parents also considered the impact of the sensory demands of the school context. Fiona reported the implications for her daughter in terms of being in an inappropriate environment *'Freya could become overstimulated or ehm, "spaced out" as she calls it, so, at times she could be completely overstimulated and not able to cope with situations or noisy situations'* (5,12-16). Meanwhile, Deirdre reiterated some of the points made by the girls in *Section 5.4.1* in relation to noise levels and people, but also extended our understanding by comparing the girls' current experiences to the perhaps, more appropriate environments that emerged during the Covid-19 restrictions.

> *They were coming out of Covid, but they still had, you know, longer breaks and stuff, but it was actually not as busy as it is now when everything is back to normal. Yeah, there was more classes, there was more spaces between desks, there was staggered break times, there was staggered leaving times, whereas now it's full on and she's in a very big school.*

(Deirdre, 29,12-16)

The idea of safe spaces also arose in some of the conversations with the girls' mothers. Arlene and Bronagh both acknowledged the significance of the girls' safe spaces in the school environment. Arlene recognised the role of the library for Ava, not only because of the physical space it provided for her but also recognising the social element of it and the librarian as a facilitator of the space.

> *Like the library has been a refuge, like breaktimes, you know the days that [teacher name] is in, she's not in the five, she's only in three days, but those days. Like she, she'd have them there all day, so, I think it's settling, and there's other people who are involved in that and they would be very similar to her. Does that make sense?*

(Arlene, 18,5-12)

Similarly, Bronagh appreciated the flexibility afforded by the school in terms of Bella's access to the autism classroom. The autism classroom was granted as a specific space for Bella to go instead of attending PE, assembly and the lunchroom, but more importantly also acted as a safety net for her to avail of as necessary when she was attending her mainstream classes. '*They kind of let her do mainstream but just go into [autism class] to kind of decompress, you know. So, she, if there's a class that's too overwhelming, she'll go down there'* (Bronagh, 35,10-12). Fiona, on the other hand, felt immense frustration at Freya's school and the lack of safe spaces that would be useful for Freya to regulate in the school environment.

> *There are no supports for her sensory difficulties, there is nothing. They said if she wants quiet space, she can go to library at lunchtime. That's what I was told, she wasn't told that. Ehm, so she goes outside at break times because it gets too noisy. Yeah, there is no sensory environment whatsoever for her. They don't offer her movement breaks. They don't offer her anything. No, there's nothing.*
>
> (Fiona, 27,10-17)

As parents, Arlene and Bronagh expressed an immense appreciation for the spaces their daughters had access to, perhaps aware that this is not always the case, as illustrated by Fiona's experience seeking support for Freya. For Fiona, her daughter's experience was yet another example of being denied necessary supports due to an ineffective system. Repeated use of negative words *'no'*, *'nothing'*, *'wasn't'*, *'don't'* conveyed Fiona's sense of disappointment with the system, a system which she is also familiar with in a professional capacity.

Finally, parents provided insight into the social experiences of their daughters. While friendships were reported as a positive aspect of school life for Ava, Danielle, Emma and Freya in *Section 5.5.1*, the girls' parents shared that friendships were not without their challenges. Parents alluded to periods of turbulence in relation to friendships and difficulties understanding the actions of others. It appeared that all the girls experienced a state of friendship flux around the time of transitioning from primary to post-primary. Eimear shared that Emma entered post-primary school without her primary school friendship group, something which *'hurt her a little bit'* (9,15), but that they made an effort to stay in contact and still regularly meet. Meanwhile, Fiona reported that while Freya did move to post-primary with two friends that she had from pre-school through to primary they *'decided to go their own separate ways and she made a new friend group eventually'* (21,2-4). Deirdre also referred to Danielle's primary school friendships but, in contrast to Emma's experience, the move to post-primary and the chance to establish new friendships was very much anticipated by Danielle, having experienced bullying and exclusion in the primary setting. Somewhat differently, Arlene shared that it was '*quite difficult*' for Ava when her good friend moved to another school to repeat first year. She proceeded to acknowledge that while Ava did not yet have *'solid, solid friendships'* (15,16), she could see that she was beginning to find *'like people'* (13,4) and was developing an awareness of who she wanted to be around.

While the girls experienced developments in realm of friendships in the post-primary context, their parents revealed that some of the difficulties are being continually negotiated. Difficulties initiating, navigating and understanding the nuances of certain interactions arose as areas of challenge by the girls' parents. Eimear and Fiona both noted

that their daughters found it difficult to recognise opportunities for friendship and interaction. Eimear identified Emma's difficulties with *'group entry'* (10,11) based on her preconceptions of what others may think of her, while Fiona acknowledged the behind the scenes work to support Freya in developing friendships.

> *We had to go through about recognizing when someone's trying to be your friend and recognizing social cues and social situations, and we had to have talks about that and acknowledging that when people want to be your friend, because she just thought they were weird when they were asking her questions about herself, you know.*
>
> (Fiona, 21,10-14)

Deirdre addressed the complexity of interactions that occur in adolescent friendships but emphasised that they are complex by their very nature even without considering neurodiversity. She shared Danielle's concerns around the relentless pursuit of understanding the nuances of the interactions that occur within a social group.

> *She's getting more perceptive about the whole relationships and friendship groups and everything, there's loads of things that go on that are confusing for her but honestly like, she tells me about them, and they confuse me because I don't have a clue what's going on.*
>
> (Deirdre, 26,13-17)

Meanwhile, Bronagh provided additional insights into the breakdown of Bella's primary school friendships. She revealed how the reaction of Bella's peers to her diagnosis disappointed her.

> *Like when I think about her diagnosis, like she was so excited and I think it really disappointed her when her friends were all like, you know they were like 'oh okay yeah', like they didn't, not that they didn't want to bow down to her or anything like that but they either went one way to talk to her like a baby or the other way to not know what to say to her at all and she was like 'it's still me', and I think that kind of broke her heart a bit, you know.*
>
> (Bronagh, 33,15-17)

Bronagh also acknowledged the widening of the social gap upon return to school following Covid-19: *'I think she kind of felt like, you know, because they were all so apart that the girls had outgrown her, her peers, teenagers…'* (4,2-4). Almost pre-emptive of the challenges that lay ahead and in acknowledging Bella's limited in-school interactions, Bronagh highlighted her efforts to maintain social opportunities explaining how Bella's meetups [autism group] have become increasingly important to her as she becomes more conscious of her small social network.

Somewhat different to Bronagh's experience supporting Bella, Caitriona was also attempting to understand her daughter's social experiences. On one hand Caitriona demonstrated a sense of graciousness, happy that her daughter Ciara was experiencing

social interactions; *'I think with Ciara, every person that she says hello to is a friend, like she comes home and says she made a friend today and I love hearing that'* (8,14-16). However, despite Caitriona's enthusiasm there was also an underlying sense of concern surrounding Ciara's social endeavours. This concern appears not only to be in terms of her vulnerability in the social world but also concern in relation to her achievement in school and the knock-on impact of that for life.

> *I mean academically, I'd love for Ciara to reach her full potentially…I mean, it's up to Ciara at the end of the day really, like I think she is concentrating on the social, well that's the idea I'm getting, that she's putting all her energy into the social and I'm glad she, I'm delighted that she's sociable, sociable but at the same time, you know…*
>
> (Caitriona, 33,7-16)

The insights from Caitriona, Bronagh, Arlene, Deirdre, Eimear and Fiona undeniably add to our understanding of the girls' relationships with others. More broadly, this theme and the parent voices included within it provide a supplemental perspective on the girls' experiences navigating the post-primary school system. While there were many similarities in the topics discussed by both the girls and their parents, a unique 'behind-the-scenes' perspective emerged in the data collected from parents. Parents shared insight into the supports they felt their daughters required and the supports that they provided, particularly in relation to supporting the transition from primary to post-primary and in the realm of social interactions. Moreover, it was interesting to note that the parent narratives tended to contextualise the daughters' experiences with reference to their diagnosis, providing another lens from which their experiences can be understood from an outsider perspective.

5.6.1.2 *School Experiences Beyond the School Building*

Insights garnered from the girls' mothers also detailed the wider impact of meeting the demands of the post-primary school experience from a home perspective. All mothers, except one, addressed the fall-out of keeping up with demands during the school day. The mothers portray an understanding that their daughters try exceptionally hard to meet the demands of school throughout the day while also holding in the resulting stress and anxiety to keep up appearances, something that Arlene depicts extremely effectively in her statement *'when she comes home she's just tired, she's done, she's hit her limit and yeah it's just a complete crash'* (Arlene, 6,5-6). The narratives from the mothers indicate that it is only when the girls arrive home can they take the time to process the demands and self-regulate. While this period of collapse and regulation is common to the girls, it presents differently. Catriona shared that for Ciara that period of regulation may entail going to her cousins' house, asking to go for a drive or going up to her room to sleep, all

of which *'seem to relax her'* (Caitriona, 10,5-11). For Emma, Eimear describes this period of regulation as a more solo endeavour, but something that requires the cooperation of the rest of the family.

> *She comes home, she sits in the kitchen, and we're not allowed in the kitchen for an hour. Now, that's fine because we generally don't need to be in the kitchen for that hour, but she will sit there with her music and her drawing and eating something and that's it. And, if she doesn't get that time, there are explosions. I get that it's a safe space, but sometimes the safe space is a horrible place to be.*
>
> (Eimear, 25,5-16).

The knock-on impact of an education system that is not designed for autistic individuals is starkly laid out by Eimear in the above statement. While the home is a safe space for Emma to regulate after her day, it can have implications for the rest of the family. Another example of familial impact is portrayed by Fiona when she shared that she had to change her work schedule to support Freya's regulation needs after a day at school.

> *She's coming home in the evenings and having the meltdowns and taking three and four hours to do her homework because you know she's spacing out or she's overwhelmed from the day, depending on which day it is and which subjects she has. And I'm the one, and I actually went 9-5 this year, ehm., to support that and because I know I need to be home for her because she's not getting the support in school.*
>
> (Fiona, 16,9-17)

For Bella, the time spent regulating after school appears to have decreased. While Bronagh is unsure of the reason for this, she emphasised that the need for regulation never boils down to one factor but rather is a result of the build-up of coping with all the little things during the day.

> *She doesn't seem to need as much regulation time after school any more, like once, she used to fire her schoolbag onto the floor in her room upstairs, and it might be something like the teacher gave them ten minutes of something to write...but it wasn't that the homework was the problem, it was all the other little things and that was just that one thing then.*
>
> (Bronagh, 37,1-17)

The extent of burnout from school is further reinforced by Fiona as she recognised that while the school week ends on a Friday, for Freya processing the demands of a system designed for non-autistic individuals extends into the weekend.

> *On a Friday evening, she is completely burnt out… Initially, it was every Saturday, it was burn out time and she'd just like, snap and she'd just cry and everything and she just needed her space. Ehm, and that can be difficult. It's pure exhaustion. Pure exhaustion for her.*
>
> (Fiona, 7,1-11)

The excerpts presented in relation to the after-school collapse indicate a significant failing in meeting the needs of autistic girls. The impact of keeping up is having an apparent

negative influence on their personal lives. The girls in this study are supported by their families and have homes where they can decompress. It appears that the perception of the home as a 'safe space' underpins the notion of after-school restraint collapse. This could also hold true in the context of school avoidance/refusal. While after-school restraint collapse was experienced in almost all instances, fortunately school avoidance/refusal was not a common occurrence. Two parents, Caitriona and Fiona, alluded to occasions of hesitancy around attending school among their daughters. These could be understood as temporary responses to frustration and disillusionment in school experiences. There is a clear sense of relief when the mothers are discussing their experiences, illustrated through words such as '*thankfully*' (Catriona, 9,5) and '*luckily*' (Fiona, 29,17), which indicates an awareness and acknowledgement that this can be a significant issue for some families.

Two parents, Deirdre and Eimear, had experienced supporting their daughters with school refusal. Deirdre reflected on the stress she experienced when Danielle was struggling to attend in primary school: *'Like I literally went through probably the whole week of primary school with a knot in my stomach wondering whether she'd go to school in the morning for me'* (9,10-17). In both instances, stories of refusal were primarily focused on the primary context and interestingly had lessened at post-primary. Deirdre demonstrated an increased understanding of the complexity of attending school and recognises that refusing is a last resort for Danielle '*again any of the days that she does refuse now, refuse, I don't like that, it's a terrible term, like she's not, it's just that she hasn't the capacity to go in'* (21,3-6). Similarly, Emma's mother, Eimear, recognised the challenge of refusal but embraced the improvement since starting in post-primary school.

> *I think there are days that she comes home, and she just hates school. Now she's only said that she "hates" school twice since she went to [secondary school], she hated it every day when she went to primary. So, I see that as progress. She will go, you know, she's not refusing to go, it was awful when she was refusing.*
>
> (Eimear, 14,10-17)

The parent voice in this theme has offered a perspective which illuminates the extent of the cumulative effect of the everyday demands that are placed on autistic girls. While the autistic girls themselves discussed what it was like to be autistic in school and shared their after-school routines, the insights garnered from the parents extend our understanding of the exhaustive impact of inadequate support and unsuitable environments. Combined, the insights shared by the parents in this study present the need to recognise that school experiences often are not restricted to the school environment and indeed can influence life beyond the school grounds. The parent narratives emphasise the importance of

viewing school experiences from a holistic perspective, considering responses and reactions to school (after-school restraint collapse and school refusal) as well as eliciting insights on the day-to-day experiences within the school context.

5.6.2 Making Sense of Teacher Awareness, Knowledge and Understanding

All the parents raised concerns about teacher knowledge and understanding of autism. While some of the parents acknowledged instances where teachers demonstrated a strong understanding of autism, the consensus reflected disappointment and frustration. Broadly speaking, parents believed the knowledge levels of teachers to be inadequate. Deirdre felt that there wasn't an *'adequate understanding…across the board'* (45,9) while Arlene believed there to be *'gaps'* in teacher knowledge (32,6), however, both acknowledged a certain level of variability among teachers. Moreover, Arlene expressed her surprise at the persisting nature of this lack of knowledge, raising concern that this issue has not been addressed with newer graduates.

> *Even with like, younger teachers coming in, I would have had a misconception with them maybe, that they would have more of an understanding, but I'm noticing that that's not the case. And it's not for them not wanting to, like.*
>
> (Arlene, 43,3-10)

Furthermore, parents specifically questioned awareness of the diversity of autism presentations, also alluding to a gender-biased knowledge base among education professionals. Arlene, Eimear and Fiona particularised the lack of knowledge relating to autism in girls. Arlene described awareness of autism in girls across the board as *'pretty poor'* (29,11), a view supported by Fiona who noted that *'people don't understand that girls might be different, in the school, the healthcare sector, everything, ehm, they're not recognizing Freya's needs and recognizing what she requires to thrive'* (4,11-15). Eimear shared a similar experience as Fiona, reporting that *'they [teachers] don't know enough, to be honest, and when they are presented with girls, they don't know what to do'* (45,3-5). Meanwhile, Bronagh added another perspective to this by drawing on her professional experience as a primary school teacher. She added that *'boys nearly do themselves a favour because they are so, out there, but girls hold it in'* (19,4-6). While Bronagh is aware of the diversity of autism and presentational differences due to her personal experiences of supporting Bella, her comment raises the issue of the stereotyped understandings of autism. If teachers are not aware of the varied presentations of autism, the under recognition and support of autistic girls may persist.

Both Fiona and Bronagh provided examples that clearly illustrate an inadequate or incomplete understanding of autism in girls in the school context. They both referred to

the fact that their daughters were not perceived to be experiencing any difficulties. Fiona spoke about an instance when she went to the school to seek support for Freya only to be told that no teachers were concerned, almost implying Freya's needs were not a priority for the school at that time.

> *I was told at the last meeting, "but no teachers are coming to me saying that Freya has issues, amd there's plenty of people who are coming to me who have issues", so in their eyes Freya was fine, but she's masking so much and doing so well and she is doing well, in the majority of her subjects she's doing extremely well, but it's her masking.*
>
> (Fiona, 16,1-8)

Similarly, Bronagh, when reflecting on Bella's diagnosis, shared that nowhere along the way in her school journey had autism ever been discussed as a possibility.

> *No teachers ever mentioned autism but then like she would say herself, "I was masking". She would say "I was putting up this front of being goofy and joking around", she has said that she was crumbling inside, that was not her at all, that was her just doing what she thought she should have been doing.*
>
> (Bronagh, 7,1-6)

Both Fiona and Bronagh mention masking, a behaviour commonly associated with autism in girls. The examples they provided suggest an inherent lack of knowledge around differing presentations of autism as well as failure to recognise masking, a core characteristic of the presentation of autism in girls. As a result, Freya and Bella were disadvantaged, Freya in the context of receiving necessary support and Bella in terms of accessing a timely diagnosis.

As indicated by Bronagh, inadequate teacher knowledge has an impact even prior to diagnosis. If teachers are not alert to potential presentation differences, girls may be disadvantaged in terms of teacher referrals for assessment. This was an issue also raised in some of the other parent interviews with Caitriona, Arlene and Fiona all mentioning the school's role, or lack of, in the diagnostic journey. Caitriona shared that Ciara's teachers in primary school *'never noticed anything'* (4,7), while Fiona felt that despite her best efforts, Freya's school were not attuned to the nuances of varied autism presentations which resulted in her concerns being somewhat dismissed.

> *During COVID I would have pushed those concerns, just asking at parent/teacher meetings, etcetera, going "you know, she's quite OCD about things. Are you seeing this in school? You know, are you seeing that she's not able to regulate at times?" And I support working in the disability sector myself, I could see it. They weren't seeing it.*
>
> (Fiona, 2,1-7)

Arlene shared a similar but again somewhat different experience. She acknowledged that the decision to seek an assessment for Ava stemmed from their other child's diagnosis, however, she spoke of the teachers' reactions to their decision to pursue the diagnosis.

> *The decision to go down the assessment route wasn't informed by a teacher's perspective, funnily enough. A lot of the teachers, like I would have chatted to them in the run up to it, and even the ones like, her year head and one of her teachers that she'd be kind of like, connected quite well with and they, neither of them were like, they kind of didn't really think she would be.*
>
> (Arlene, 4,15-17)

It appeared Arlene was somewhat disappointed with their responses, that there was a sense that they didn't believe Ava could be autistic. While the above experiences are all somewhat different, the lack of an up-to-date knowledge base of autism and the implications of this binds them in commonality.

Unfortunately, the impact of inadequate teacher knowledge and understanding extend beyond recognition and identification of autism and ultimately influences the day-to-day experiences of autistic girls. In an effort to highlight the implications of the lack of knowledge and understanding, Fiona, Deirdre and Eimear provided examples that demonstrated this in practice. These insights highlighted the importance of parental involvement and strong home-school collaboration efforts. Fiona shared that *'They [teachers] have no understanding of Freya's needs, whatsoever. They have never offered her a quiet space. They've never brought her aside. Freya doesn't know who the SEN teacher is. She doesn't know who to go to'* (14,2-6), while Deirdre illustrated a similar situation providing a number of examples where Danielle's autistic processing style was discounted or ignored. Deirdre spoke about uncommunicated changes in test dates (3,4-5), being singled out in class (48,1-7), being prevented from doodling and using a fidget to concentrate, to name a few. Similarly, Eimear also raised the idea of autistic processing and acknowledged that it can challenge teachers if they are not adequately equipped with the correct knowledge to understand it.

> *She'll sit there with her earphones on, and she'll have one on and one off and she's doodling, but that's what she does, that's her stim, is to doodle. And sometimes the teachers don't get that, and they can be quite hard on that. So, that came up in the meeting…I'm like there's no need to take those earphones away, please don't, because it will cause you more harm than good.*
>
> (Eimear, 21,12-17)

A particular example of inadequate teacher knowledge of autistic processing was highlighted by Deirdre in relation to a situation experienced by Danielle.

> *She [teacher] told her to move all the stuff off her desk so she could see what she was doing with her hands, after specifically being asked was it okay if she had a fidget toy in the class because really with Danielle, if she's fidgeting, she's listening. But no, she made a whole production and then the whole class knew that she wanted to see what she had in her hands, and she was one of the support teachers like.*
>
> (Deirdre, 1,10-17)

Deirdre was particularly disillusioned with this event, emphasising that this was something that had already been brought to the teacher's attention and the use of a fidget clarified. This disillusionment was further exacerbated by the fact that this teacher was part of the support team. Deirdre was, however, not the only parent who was surprised by 'specialist' teachers' knowledge. It appeared that there was a certain perception among the parents that teachers assigned to the role of specialist or support teachers would have a greater level of knowledge and understanding pertaining to autism than mainstream class teachers. Arlene assumed that support teachers were guaranteed to have additional training to be placed in their role; *'obviously if you're looking at the SEN department or the guidance, they will have had some deeper knowledge of it somewhere else, like through their training'* (32, 9-13) – however, this is not the case in every SEN department and is very much dependent on individual school and their values and policies, as established by Fiona;

> *There is no understanding of autism, never mind in girls. When it, well, if the SEN teacher doesn't have an understanding of autism, how are the other teachers in the in the school supposed to have an understanding of autism? That's the way I see it.*
>
> Fiona (13,12-16)

Also unsatisfied with the knowledge of teachers, Eimear negotiated this in the context of training opportunities. She referenced the inconsistency of knowledge, challenging the requirements and scope of training and more specifically Initial Teacher Education. Eimear tried to make sense of the idea that engagement in training is very much a personal endeavour and teacher knowledge is very much dependent on personal interest and motivation.

> *I would say teacher knowledge is very low. They've admitted that they don't have much training. They did have a staff member who was doing a masters in autism and I was like 'oh this is great', but she left the school and now they don't have anyone. And I do get the impression that they haven't had much training in their initial training, and I believe that it's not compulsory and it's very much voluntary that if you want to follow it up, go ahead. But I do think in their initial training, it's just not there.*
>
> (Eimear,17,12-17)

In acknowledging that *'it's different for different teachers'* (Deirdre, 45,9), Deirdre shared that Danielle's Spanish teacher had a strong understanding of autism due to personal experience of supporting an autistic individual in her family. While this personal

knowledge is valuable, it raises a bigger question as this knowledge is not guaranteed to be universal. Its limitations lie in the fact that not all teachers have personal experience and for those who have personal experience the nature of that knowledge may vary distinctly. Acknowledging the flaws of the current system and the inadequacies of teacher knowledge, Arlene and Fiona raised the importance of formal, mandatory training as a matter of urgency. Arlene contextualised the need for formal training with reference to the policy shift towards a model of full inclusion, claiming that the responsibility should not fall back on the teacher to self-research, nor should it be expected of people just because they have personal experience.

> *I do think if you work with kids, like there should be formal training around certain things and like, I mean autism is one of them and if we're expecting inclusion and full inclusion, I think the training has to go with it. Like you can't just expect people, people will not, unless they have an experience of their own around it, they're not going to go off and do a huge amount of research.*
>
> (Arlene, 33,1-8)

For Arlene, it is the responsibility of the Department of Education to provide appropriate training for all teachers to ensure all teachers are equipped with the required knowledge. She consolidated her argument saying that *'if people don't know what's going on with an individual, how are they supposed to provide an optimal learning space for them?'* (Arlene, 42,11-13). Meanwhile, Fiona firmly grounded the issue within the autism landscape, drawing attention to the major developments in autism discourse with specific reference to female diagnosis.

> *It is so very important that teachers have the right knowledge. Like think about the amount of people who are being diagnosed with autism now and women that are being diagnosed with autism now, it is a thing of the future that we need to address…they're people with disabilities, they have the right to the same rights as anybody else, but they're not receiving those rights that they deserve and are entitled to.*
>
> (Fiona, 38,1-10)

As this theme draws to a close, it is useful to highlight the rights-based lens adopted by Fiona in the previous quote. Fiona expressed her concerns about the denial of rights of people with disabilities. While the insights and examples offered by the girls' parents in this theme only offer a snapshot into their experiences, it could be assumed that the girls were disadvantaged at various other junctures of their school journey also, due to gaps in teacher knowledge.

5.6.3 Experiences of the Support Process

This subtheme revealed the varied experiences of the girls' parents as they navigated the support process for their daughters. Despite the recognised lack of teacher knowledge, in

most instances, parents credited the schools for their efforts, praising their willingness to support and the proactive nature that they adopted upon being alerted to diagnosis. Arlene, Bronagh, Caitriona, Danielle and Eimear all acknowledged efforts made to varying extents, of the schools their daughters attended. Unfortunately, Fiona's experience negotiating the system for support in Freya's school was not as positive and provided a stark contrast to the other parents.

Three of the parents explicitly addressed their satisfaction with their daughters' schools and their experiences of navigating the support systems. It was apparent that Caitriona and Eimear were content with their overall experience of the school. Caitriona shared that; '*I just feel like, I keep feeling like it's the right place for her, that she couldn't be in a better place'* (31,16-17), while Eimear was attuned to the importance of the strong leadership in place in mediating her and Emma's experiences with the support system.

> *The principal is actually quite hands on, she is relatively new to the school, but she's brought it on leaps and bounds, very tuned in to different children with additional needs, very, very supportive and I think at some level Emma appreciates that.*
>
> (Eimear, 12,2-8)

More specifically, Bronagh highlighted the efficiency of Bella's school in supporting her as soon as initial concerns were raised; *'You know, on the school side of things, they kicked stuff straight off, just as soon as we mentioned we were getting her assessed, they were always on board, they've been amazing'* (8,8-11). However, in acknowledging the positives, Bronagh also emphasised the need for support to be a whole-school system with all staff working in tandem to support the students; *'The school are definitely trying…But there was a few times last year where I had to email and say "look, will ya let this teacher know…"'* (26,3-7).

Interestingly, based on insights from Arlene, Caitriona and Eimear, open communication facilitated a more positive experience of the support process. While Arlene spoke about the importance of her meeting with the SEN team to go through the report (26,9-12), for Caitriona and Eimear communication was more frequent and responsive to the needs that arise. Caitriona shared that there's *'constant communication…a lot of communication overall, kind of constantly back and forth'* (33,2-6) while Eimear reported that she regularly had meetings with the Head of the SEN department in the school. From the insights shared by both Caitriona and Eimear, it is apparent that this open line of communication is not only valuable for the sharing of information and issues that may arise but also for the sharing of knowledge. Caitriona spoke about the importance of communication between home and school in addressing issues that arose in Ciara's school

journey relating to teachers, and her phone usage. Caitriona shared that linking in with the school and involving Ciara, where possible, ensured a more successful resolution to the problem.

> *I think the more, like if she feels that she has a say and is listened to, like they're open to that and changing things if they need to be changed and to be honest, that's just brilliant. They're able to find a way.*

(Caitriona, 17,1-5)

The theme of willingness to engage and support also emerged when Eimear (19,5) acknowledged the *'receptiveness'* and openness demonstrated by the school to listen to her ideas and to trial new strategies to meet Emma's needs.

> *They are open to anything like, anything to do with, like if she comes home and says something, I can email [head of SEN] and tell her that this is what happened today, here's what I would have done, you know.*

(Eimear, 31,8-12)

While Eimear expressed her gratitude for this open line of communication and noted her fortunate circumstances; '*I'm delighted that she's in that school because I'm not sure I'd get it anywhere else'* (19,7-9), Fiona identified the unfortunate, alternate perspective. For Fiona, it appeared that, despite her best efforts, the school were not committed to opening up a conversation.

> *It's all negative, ehm, everything, like I've gone in twice now to the school asking and I've had to send multiple emails to get even to talk to someone. So, there is no support. There's no links with me. There's nothing. I'm not getting any feedback back*

(Fiona, 15,13-17)

Akin to her experiences of communicating with the school, Fiona's experience of navigating the system provided a stark juxtaposition to the experiences of other parents. Fiona expressed her frustration at the unfulfilled promises of support offered upon enrolment, sharing that '*before she* [Freya] *entered, I was told, you know, all the supports that she'd get, she's got no supports!'* (11,7-9). She proceeded to question her school-choice decision, lamenting whether she placed Freya at a disadvantage by not enrolling her in a school where there was an autism class. While she noted Freya did not need to avail of the autism class, it is clear that Fiona questioned whether a school with an autism class would demonstrate greater awareness and understanding of the needs of autistic students. This dissatisfaction is further embedded when contrasting the primary school experience to the post-primary experience.

> *Secondary school is completely different to primary school…it's a really, ehm, high achieving school where they just expect the best and everyone to do the same and you know, conform to what's meant to be and they don't have a lot of services for people with disabilities, and they don't acknowledge people's disabilities in that way.*

(Fiona,10,6-14)

It is clear that Fiona felt that Freya was being marginalised, and her needs not being met. However, although Fiona questioned herself and her role in the situation, she also questioned the ethos of the school, deeming it inappropriate from a right-based perspective. Fiona's description of her experience portrays a school that places limitations on those who are not the neuro-majority.

Similar to their experiences dealing with schools and the systems of support, parental insights also highlight the mixed nature of support being received by the girls. Somewhat unsurprisingly, Freya's access to support was limited. Fiona expressed frustration at the school's failure to recognise and attend to Freya's needs.

> *So, she hasn't got any support, no support. They just want her to conform and link in with the school and do everything that she has to do, and everything will be fine. That's what they want, and that's not always possible for Freya.*

(Fiona, 18,13-17)

It is also interesting to note formal support was not being overtly offered to Ava either. Instead, Arlene highlighted the personal accommodations she was employing to replace formal supports. Arlene shared that Ava was using 'loop' earplugs at breaktime to reduce auditory input (24,4) and self-withdrew from the classroom setting to regulate by visiting the bathroom.

> *Had she the opportunity or whatever to take time out, she would, but she has said she does go to the bathroom a bit just to get a break and that's fine, you know, she's not a messer or whatever, she's not getting into trouble for any of that.*

(Arlene, 21,14-17)

While the use of personal accommodations was not specifically raised as an issue by Arlene, she discussed Ava's lack of formal support within a temporal lens acknowledging that Ava is currently *'managing'*, and they haven't sought official breaks *'yet'* (24,4-8). Similarly, Fiona noted that while Freya doesn't exhibit any *'behaviours'* or *'anything like that'*, she expressed concern that '*it will come to a head if things aren't in place for her…you know it becomes more and more pressurised and I don't know if she'll be able to handle that if she doesn't have support in place*' (19,1-9). Furthermore, although not as pervasive, inconsistencies in support were also discussed by Bronagh and Danielle. They highlighted that even in schools where appropriate supports are in place for the most part, the actions of some teachers can dampen the efforts of the wider school community. Bronagh reported that *'some people would be a bit of like, you know, talking to her like she was a baby, others just clearly didn't read the email, and others didn't give two hoots*

about her supports' (26,13-16). Meanwhile, with discomfort Deirdre shared how she encouraged Danielle to adjust her behaviour to appease a challenging teacher.

> *I said to Danielle "just in the off chance that you are missing things, just make sure to look up every now and again, just to keep her happy", I said. Just in case there was something that she was missing, that she mightn't be 100% wrong, or she may have to, like if she's doing a problem on the board and Danielle is doodling, like she's listening but she's not watching.*
>
> (Deirdre, 5,5-13)

Deirdre was deeply dissatisfied having to essentially promote the use of masking to ensure Danielle was not further targeted for her autistic processing differences. All of these instances reflect a model whereby the student is having to adjust to the environment rather than the school adjusting the environment to meet their needs. These examples raise concerns in relation schools' preparedness to support autistic individuals in a neuroaffirmative manner.

Fortunately, there were also several examples where schools provided appropriate supports that assisted the girls in their day-to-day school experiences. From a broad perspective Caitriona emphasised that '*she [Ciara] doesn't realise the huge support that she's getting now, but I think the huge support is massively helping'* (16,10-12). For Deirdre and Bronagh, it was a deep appreciation for the small changes that schools implemented for their daughters that was significant. Deirdre urged the significance of *'the small things'* as powerful determiners of experience.

> *I understand that teachers don't have time to do that for every single student, but if they read her file and they read that there were just two or three small things that if you do this, you could be the cause of her going home and missing school, small things! It's small things… all of these little things for one class might be fine, but if it happened three or four times in the day, she'll have to leave and miss a whole day in school.*
>
> (Deirdre, 50,11-17)

Reinforcing this idea, the parents shared examples of good practice. While Deirdre did raise concern about the lack of regulation spaces available in the school, she acknowledged the effort made by the school and the procedures they put in place to enable Danielle to take time out when she gets overwhelmed rather than having to be collected from school due to overstimulation (31,1-17). Furthermore, she recognised and appreciated the flexibility of some teachers to meet Danielle's unique needs. Deirdre specifically expressed her gratitude for the PE teacher in facilitating Danielle to attend the library or GP to read her book at that time and for the Spanish teacher for providing additional opportunities to practice the listening exercises in a more suitable environment. Similarly, Bronagh discussed Bella's difficulty negotiating her locker in school and

relayed Bella's delight at being offered a locker in the autism classroom. Bronagh emphasised how this support *'was something so small'* but *'made her year'* (17,6-17). Meanwhile, Fiona highlighted how even these minor supports were not forthcoming for Freya and were something that she had to seek herself; *'She had anxiety around her locker, that she had to go ask them can she use a lock instead of the twisty locks. She had to ask, fortunately she was able to advocate for herself asking in that way'* (14,10-14).

Lastly, the need for support to be subtle was explicitly emphasised by three of the girls' parents. While the parents valued any and all support offered, they raised the issue of appropriate and responsive support. Caitriona, Eimear and Bronagh all highlighted their daughters' rejection of overt support with reference to SNA support. Caitriona and Eimear shared how Ciara and Emma both rejected SNA support because it further illuminating their differences. For Ciara, Caitriona believed that she felt SNA support encroached on her independence, noting that *'she doesn't like sometimes when it's a bit too much support, if you know what I mean'* (16,4-5). Similarly, Eimear felt that Emma was concerned about being stereotyped if she availed of SNA support.

> *They have an SNA on hand, which she doesn't like, ehm, I think it's because there's an awareness there that the SNA is there for children with additional needs and Emma is aware that people are watching that, you know, like she's nearly sixteen and she's kind of like "do I need this?"*
>
> (Eimear, 29,3-10)

In both instances, it was apparent that SNA access was accompanied with a certain stigma and needed to be navigated with care and subtlety. This issue was reiterated by Bronagh in relation to Bella's experience, however, Bella's SNA expertly negotiated it, recognising her concerns and responding accordingly.

> *So, the SNA copped on that like that her coming in and saying "Hiya Bella, do you wanna..." was not working so she started emailing her and telling her she was outside the room if she wanted to come out…So yeah, that was good…Bella was delighted that she saw, like, do you know. So yeah, it was making it more obvious for her.*
>
> (Bronagh, 28,4-12)

The insights shared by Caitriona and Eimear and the example above provided by Bronagh illustrates the importance of support provision being attuned to the individual in receipt of it. Arlene attempts to further capture the need for this nuanced approach in support provision for autistic girls;

> *I know it's really difficult, but like if they need to get up and walk out of the classroom, they need to do that like and that they feel that they're not going to get stopped or questioned about it, that they think they can just do that.*
>
> (Arlene, 39,14-17)

It is apparent that schools need to be flexible and recognise that they may need to make changes to increase the success of support in place. From the range of insights offered by the parents in this subtheme, while there are many examples of good practice, high quality, appropriate support is not a given. Instead, the knowledge and understanding of individual teachers in individual schools is hugely influential in the support received by the autistic girls. Highlighting the stark reality of experience as mediated by schools, a statement from Fiona is apt to draw this subtheme to a close, *'unfortunately it seems that support is dependent on the school. That's really sad, because everyone should have the right to the same education'* (36,11-13).

5.6.4 Shining a Light on the Role of Advocacy

The final theme, although less comprehensive, adds an important consideration to the discussion of autistic girls' school experiences and has implications going forward in terms of improving support systems in schools. While the importance of open communication between parents and schools was identified as important in the previous theme, it is often parents' persisting advocacy that results in actions being taken to improve the school experiences of the autistic individual.

The role of advocacy and the significance of being an advocate was alluded to by some of the girls' parents when discussing the support process. Arlene, in recognising the demands placed on teachers, discussed taking any informal opportunities to advocate for Ava and share her knowledge with the teachers in the school.

> *I'm certainly not being negative about teachers because they have enough to do like, obviously. But they're genuinely interested whenever I've had conversations with them and I find that highlighting something and they're like, 'oh, right, I didn't think of it like that', like and I just think, OK, so there's an opening there.*
>
> (Arlene, 34,3-11)

Eimear shared how the frequent meetings she had with the SEN coordinator afforded her the opportunity to advocate for Emma.

> *There're regularly meetings there this year between myself and the head of SEN, and Emma was there for the last one, we were just really telling her [head of SEN], what the therapist had told us to do. And I suppose, it's kind of me telling them what to do, sharing that knowledge with the teacher can be beneficial.*
>
> (Eimear,18,8-12)

In this instance, it is apparent that Eimear acts as an interprofessional bridge, sharing the information and learnings they have gained from working with Emma's therapist with the school to better equip them to meet Emma's needs. However, while Eimear's efforts were

positively received by the school, Fiona's experience appeared to be a constant uphill battle. As expressed in previous subthemes, Fiona was distinctly dissatisfied with the support offered by Freya's school and their lack of open communication. However, she continually reiterated her commitment to ensuring Freya's autism diagnosis is recognised first and foremost, but also to ensure her needs are adequately supported to enable her to succeed.

> *Luckily, I have a parent teacher meeting next month and I can advocate for her there again and I will and I'll tell each and every one of her teachers that she does have autism because I feel that it's very important for each and every one of them to know and to recognize…to enable her to have the best education that she can have, so that she can do what she wants to do in life and has the skills to do that.*
>
> (Fiona, 33,4-14)

While Fiona's use of the word *'luckily'* implies that she views herself to be in a privileged position where she can advocate for Freya, the reality of her tireless efforts was captured when she shared that; '*It's very difficult. Advocating is hard, and I do it on a daily basis as my job, but it's really hard when it's your daughter and nobody's listening'* (4,15-17).

In addition to parental advocacy, the need for student self-advocacy was also raised by some of the parents. Bronagh eloquently captured the importance of supporting self-advocacy when she said, *'So, like I believe you have to prepare the world for the child but at the same time you have to prepare the child for the world, because otherwise...'* (45,8-11). Arlene and Caitriona both stressed the importance of the girls being involved in and afforded the opportunity to have their voices heard in the support process. Caitriona felt that being involved in the process reduced Ciara's anxiety; '*I think that's so important for her that she feels that we're listening to her. And to be honest, I think she doesn't get as stressed when she feels like she has an input'* (27,4-7). Meanwhile Arlene encouraged self-advocacy for independence. She shared that they set up a meeting for Ava to meet with the guidance team as a way of letting her know there were people ready to listen if needed. There was a clear understanding that being able to self-advocate is part of a larger process of self-discovery and self-understanding, but when nurtured is invaluable.

> *Yes, it's so important that she gets a say, and I think as well, it might take time for those things to come out with Ava because she's kept them in for so long and managed them herself for so long and been able to just do it…But they will just come to light as time goes forward and she gets a bit more confident in her own diagnosis and in her own self and knowing actually I don't need to do this on my own.*
>
> (Arlene, 28,6-17)

The idea of self-advocacy as a journey is further illustrated by examples from Eimear and Fiona demonstrating two different stages on the journey. In deliberating Emma's efforts

to self-advocate, Eimear revealed the importance of teachers creating a safe space for advocacy. There is a sense that Emma can self-advocate but perhaps due to inappropriate or inadequate responses in the past she now questions its value.

> *I don't know is it a confidence thing or is it a 'can't be bothered, you're not going to listen to me' thing. You know sometimes she feels, and I think I've said it before, she feels that people have perceptions and react in a certain way because I think they're gonna react that way, rather than trying it and seeing what happens.*
>
> (Eimear, 24,12-16)

Lastly, perhaps further along the journey again is Freya. Fiona reported that Freya is *'a great advocate for herself'* and that *'she's very aware of herself and her environment',* however, she also recognised that *'anxiety holds her back'* (8,5-9), particularly *'when she's in new environments it can be difficult'* (10,4-5). Despite the various levels of engagement, the girls' parents recognise the value of self-advocacy and its critical role for empowerment.

When considered in conjunction with the supplementary information offered by the girls' parents in the first three themes, it is undeniable that parents can offer a unique insight and additional perspectives that may support schools in planning for support or addressing issues that may arise. This could be considered particularly pertinent in the context of autistic girls who may, as evidenced in the findings in this chapter, present differently in the school and home contexts and therefore may be missed due to narrow conceptualisations of autism. Finally, as revealed in this sub-theme, although parents play an important role in advocating for their children in the school context, there is an inherent need to equip autistic girls with the skillset to support their ability to self-advocate. Considering the embodied nature of autism, the internal presentation associated with autism and girls and the gaps in knowledge and understanding of such presentation, along with being at the stage of impending adulthood, it is imperative that autistic girls can, in so far as possible, self-advocate to have their needs met.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the four main findings generated from the data collected with autistic girls and their parents; *Being Autistic in a Neurotypical School System; Being in the School Environment; Being with Others,* and *Parent Perspectives*. In recognising phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography as the three key tenets of IPA, this chapter endeavoured to prioritise the lived experience of autistic girls, illustrate the sense making journey of those experiences while also revealing where commonalities and differences within those experiences exist. The multiperspectival element of the study recognised that

others, *i.e.* their parents, live that experience alongside them and can offer valuable additional insights. It is hoped that this presentation of findings provided insight into the school experiences of the six autistic girls in this study while also capturing the nuances of their autistic experience.

Chapter 6 Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This study set out to better understand the educational experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream education settings at post-primary level. This chapter will contextualise the findings of both the primary and secondary studies with the extant literature examined in Chapter 2. Considering the Embedded Mixed Methods design of the research and the methodological decisions presented in Chapter 3, the discussion will be primarily contextualised within the themes arising from the research conducted with the girls and their parents[21], with the results from the study carried out with teachers interwoven throughout. A final section will briefly attend to the most significant findings from the teacher study in its own right.

6.2 Theme 1: Being Autistic in a Neurotypical School System

The theme 'Being Autistic in a Neurotypical School System' revealed the taken-for-granted aspects of participating in the mainstream context as well as capturing the varied responses to the learning process for the autistic girls in this study. Of note was the cumulative impact of the girls' experiences of keeping up with the varied demands of the mainstream context. This theme illuminates the significance of the 'bio' aspect in Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 2005) bioecological systems theory, recognising the interplay between the individual differences arising from being autistic and the environment. This interaction can cause challenges for autistic individuals, therefore the role of individuals within the girls' immediate microsystem cannot be understated (Rose and Tudge, 2013).

6.2.1 Coping or Surviving? The Demands of Post-Primary School

'There's so many twists and turns that there's no possible way of knowing which way it'll go'

 Freya

Some of the girls acknowledged the burden placed on them to meet the taken-for-granted expectations of being in the mainstream setting. Consistent with other research conducted with autistic girls in the school context, organisation of materials and self appeared to require substantial effort and acted as a barrier to success in the mainstream context

[21] Recognising the interconnected nature of the topics discussed by parents in Subtheme 1 in Theme 4 (Observing Experience from the Outside) and the topics discussed by the girls in Themes 1-3, Subtheme 1 in Theme 4 will be discussed throughout Themes 1-3, where relevant connections can be made.

(Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015). The girls in this study drew attention to the challenges of using the timetable, ensuring they have the correct books and materials, and completing these activities in a timely manner. Experiences such as the above can be better understood with reference to the cognitive theory of Executive Function (EF) (Ozonoff *et al*., 1991; 1997) which identifies planning, working memory and self-monitoring as potential areas where differences can occur (Bezeer, 2025). Pellicano (2012) suggest that these skills play a key role in readiness for learning, something which is further supported by research with autistic young people (Pellicano *et al*., 2020; Kenny *et al*., 2024) and acknowledged in literature as having significant implications in the classroom context (Droney and Verbiest, 2022; Tschida and Yerys, 2022). However, while the challenges arising from differences in EF may be common among autistic individuals, in the context of autistic girls, they may go unnoticed by teachers if girls internalise the challenges they are experiencing, particularly if their social networks are protective in nature and facilitate compensatory behaviours.

Extending into the classroom itself, autistic processing also appeared to have implications for engagement. It was apparent that substantive effort was required to navigate the implications of autistic processing with the girls sharing their challenges keeping up with work, maintaining focus and directing attention. Challenges processing information (Honeybourne, 2015) and staying on task (Moyse and Porter, 2015) have been identified in other research with autistic girls. Furthermore, in line with the findings of Honeybourne (2015) and Sproston *et al.* (2017), the girls in this study also noted the distracting nature of the classroom and how difficulties filtering information and shifting attention can result in ignoring the wrong thing and being further disadvantaged. The theory of monotropism (Murray *et al.*, 2005) provides an anchor from which these experiences can be discussed. The experiences of the girls suggest monotropic tendencies, meaning that they may distribute their attentional resources differently to their non-autistic peers. The busyness of the classroom environment and the activities that happen in this setting are biased towards a polytropic tendency which allows attentional resources to be broadly distributed. The insights shared by the girls correspond with literature which recognises that directing and shifting attention can be difficult and can have implications for an individual and for learning (Murray *et al.*, 2005; Lawson, 2011; Tschida and Yerys, 2022). The implications of such for the girls in this study were not dissimilar to other research which highlights feelings of stress and anxiety among autistic girls in relation to the academic demands of mainstream, such as task completion, falling behind, uncertainty

around tasks, among others (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs *et al*., 2020). Unfortunately, by their very nature, feelings of stress and anxiety are internally experienced and unless externalised, something that does not appear common among autistic girls (Solomon *et al*., 2012), may fail to be recognised by teachers.

Understanding transitions has the potential to further contextualise the challenges experienced by the girls in the current research. Consistent with literature, the girls' parents recognised the significance of transitions (Nuske *et al.*, 2019) and attributed their daughters' difficulties to change and transitions within and across settings. This finding was further reinforced by the autistic girls themselves who, as per literature, recognised that there was an increased need for independence in the post-primary context and less support was provided to assist this (Ashburner *et al.*, 2010; Fleury *et al.*, 2014; Gray *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, parallels can be drawn with research by Tomlinson *et al.* (2021) whereby like the current study, autistic girls drew attention to their difficulties with transitions in the school context, highlighting its demands in terms of the physical process of changing classes as well as the cognitive demands required to switch focus between lessons.

While research highlights that failure to prepare can have implications in determining the success of managing changes (Hebron *et al*., 2019), parents in this study reported that despite parental support, managing the demands of post-primary was challenging for the girls and when the adrenaline of the transition dissipated, the realisation of the requirements was more profound (Cridland *et al*., 2014). Parents suggested that the additional demands arising from the transition to the post-primary context was potentially adding to the day-to-day burden of demands which the girls were required to navigate. These findings, combined with the masking and internalising tendencies of autistic girls (Solomon *et al.,* 2012; Wassell and Burke, 2022), may highlight the significance of a collaborative, staged and prolonged approach to transition support to facilitate success in the post-primary context (Peters and Brooks, 2016; Hebron, 2019). Furthermore, given the literature on the experiences of autistic young women preparing to transition beyond the post-primary context (Essex and Melham, 2019; Matthews *et al*., 2019), it appears that transition challenges are enduring, something which is also recognised in Irish policy (DoE, 2024a). Support for transition in the school context should therefore not only exist as students transition into the post-primary context but should also be considered as students prepare to transition out of the school context. Such support should focus on equipping autistic girls with strategies for managing transitions across the lifespan.

Responses from the teacher questionnaire yielded some interesting data to consider in conjunction with the girls' experiences. Some teachers identified differences in EF and managing changes as potential characteristics among autistic girls, however, little attention was afforded to processing differences in terms of attention and engagement. As many of the challenges discussed by the girls were consistent with the broader profile of potential areas for support associated with autism in the post-primary school context (Fluery *et al.*, 2014) and also reflected the post-primary experiences of autistic students across genders (Horgan *et al*, 2022), it was unsurprising that when prompted to consider support for autistic girls, a large number of teachers focused on general autism strategies that may rely on difficulties being externally presented. While, identification of these strategies demonstrates teacher awareness of potential challenges, the findings in the primary study suggest that little support was offered to the girls in these areas. This may indicate that unless challenges are observable, support is not put in place. More broadly, these findings raise concerns as to whether teachers see autism as a set of behavioural characteristics rather than understanding it as a different processing style.

These findings could suggest that teachers may have a theoretical knowledge base of evidence-based practices but may struggle to implement this knowledge in practice (see also Cook and Odom, 2013; Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022) and has been evidenced in the Irish context (Barry *et al.*, 2022). This may be explained by inadequate training at ITE, lack of mentoring and collaboration within schools, and/or barriers preventing access to high quality TPL post-qualification, all of which may be exacerbated by the release of policy guidance documents without appropriate accompanying training. Alternatively, consistent with the model of support in place in Ireland currently (DoE, 2024b), the girls' schools may have been under resourced and therefore not in a position to support their needs. Moreover, adopting an intersectional lens to explore the girls' experiences, it could be suggested that their teachers may have been unaware of the difficulties they were experiencing due to internalising of difficulties or engagement in masking, both of which have previously been cited as barriers to support for autistic females (Baldwin and Costley, 2016; Bargiela *et al.,* 2016; Milner *et al*., 2019; Wassell and Burke, 2022). A final consideration acknowledges that only a proportion of respondents engaged with the qualitative question in the teacher questionnaire and therefore it could be argued that perhaps the girls' teachers were unaware of these difficulties as areas requiring support among autistic students and/or did not have the skillset to know how to support these areas.

Considering the challenges identified by the girls themselves, parents' perspectives on these difficulties and a potential knowledge gap among teachers, it is perhaps unsurprising that engaging with the mainstream setting had significant implications for the girls. The Dixit cards narratives (*Section 5.3.1*) portrayed this impact in terms of feelings of aimlessness, frustration, exhaustion, along with resigned acceptance in the feat of survival. Homework appeared to extend these feelings beyond the school context. The girls' dislike of homework could be understood in terms of its exhaustive nature, its interference with regulation or as suggested by Ayirebi and Thomas (2024) may be explained by the need to separate home and school. However, although the girls in this study articulated the impact of the school day, expressed a strong disapproval of homework and identified their post-school routine as important for regulation, they did not draw explicit connections between these experiences. This is something that also appears to be missing from the literature with autistic adolescent girls. While there is a significant and growing body of research exploring 'autistic burnout' from the perspective of autistic adults (Raymaker *et al.*, 2020), it appears to be an underdiscussed area with autistic adolescents. This may suggest an emerging autistic identity and a need for greater self-understanding among autistic girls, a process of development deemed imperative by autistic women for better understanding their needs (Milner *et al*., 2019).

Interestingly, in this theme there existed an explicit divergence in the way the challenges experienced were discussed by the autistic girls and their parents. In research, autistic females often allude to the demands of being an autistic female and the exhaustive impact of this (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Seers and Hogg, 2021). The autistic girls in this research largely discussed their challenges without reference to their diagnosis, while the girls' parents used the diagnosis as a way to contextualise the girls' experiences. This may further support the idea of an emerging autistic identity among autistic adolescent girls, with girls recognising their challenges but not connecting them to their diagnosis or potentially discussing their challenges out of context as a mechanism to distance themselves from their diagnosis (Josefsson and Johansson, 2024).

While not fore fronted by the girls themselves, an explicit link between the demands of school and an afterschool collapse was addressed by the girls' parents. This need to seek refuge and regulate after school has, however, been discussed by autistic women reflecting on their school experiences (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Baldwin and Costley, 2016; Milner, 2019) and parents of autistic girls (Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). In this study, the girls' parents recognised that their daughters were in

survival mode during the school day in an attempt to meet the demands and keep up appearances, emphasising the fallout of this upon returning home. Despite this, data from the questionnaire suggested that only a small number of teachers identified anxiety and other mental health difficulties as additional characteristics to consider in terms of autism and girls, with minimal awareness that these can be exacerbated by the demands of school life.

Sharing their experiences, autistic women in research by Bargiela *et al.* (2016) contrasted their passive and compliant behaviour at school with their meltdowns upon arrival home as they navigated the self-regulation process. For the girls in the present study, home was their safe place where they could process the day and employ various mechanisms to support self-regulation. However, parents also stressed that in some cases recovery extended into the weekend and did have implications for family life more generally (Anderson *et al.*, 2020). It is interesting to note that the impact of school and the perception of home as a safe space for regulation to occur, while potentially more common, is not restricted to autistic girls and has been evidenced in research with autistic adolescents (Mesa and Hamilton, 2022) and parents of autistic young people more generally (Peters and Brooks, 2016). Overall, this suggests discrepancies between the school environment and the needs of autistic students. However, adopting a sex/gender differences analytic lens, the insights shared by the girls and their parents may imply that autistic girls place increased demands on themselves to blend in with others in the school environment. Therefore, the importance of supporting the development of a positive autistic identity and creating a safe and accepting environment within the school context where autistic girls can be their authentic selves, should not be underestimated. Combining these actions may facilitate a reduction in masking and increased opportunities for self-regulation throughout the school day rather than keeping it all inside until arriving home.

The above findings underscore the importance of communication and collaboration between home and school when supporting autistic learners to navigate the demands of the school context (Lindsay *et al*., 2014; Shultz *et al*., 2016). However, research suggests that autistic females face additional demands given the lack of awareness of the internal presentation of autism, increased engagement in masking, along with gendered expectations within society (Milner *et al.*, 2019; Hull *et al.*, 2020; Seers and Hogg, 2021; Grove *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, in accordance with Tutt (2019), it could be argued that these relationships become even more pressing in the context of autistic girls where less

is often known by professionals and presentations may differ between home and school. This is reflected in the current research which revealed a minority understanding of internalising among autistic girls in data collected from teachers along with imperative parental insights pertaining to the girls post school collapse.

6.2.2 Learning: A Tale of Two Halves

'It would work great if they could just let us choose'

 Emma

Moving beyond the non-academic demands of being in the mainstream context, the current research also revealed varied experiences of the learning process among the autistic girls. A primarily positive response to learning prevailed, with the girls' interests playing a mediating role, however, some challenges were also identified. Both the girls and their parents discussed the value of interest-directed learning in the school context highlighting the enjoyment factor it adds to learning but also recognising that it is easier to learn if the material is of interest and/or its relevance outlined. The significance of interests in learning, as highlighted by the girls and their parents in this study, corresponds with a key tenet of the theory of monotropism which posits that those with a monotropic processing style are more likely to perform better when they are allowed to focus their attention on fewer tasks, particularly those that are of interest to them (Murray *et al.*, 2005). This finding not only reflects broader literature which recognises the benefit of embracing and incorporating autistic students' interests in the school context (Fleury *et al.*, 2014; Tutt, 2019; Wood, 2019; Sewell and Park, 2021; Wood, 2021) but also coincides with the principle of engagement within the Universal Design for Learning framework which recognises the importance of the why of learning (Carrington *et al.*, 2020; Cast.org, 2025). Furthermore, consistent with findings from Hebron and Bond (2021), subject options at post-primary school were praised as they facilitated this interest-driven learning process.

While the role of interests in learning did not appear specifically in a review of the literature of autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education, the importance of interests was prominent in accounts from autistic women, particularly for their role in fostering a positive self-identity. Engaging with interests was fulfilling and stimulating and supported personal wellbeing and achievement (Bargiela *et al*., 2016; Stagg and Belcher, 2019). The research, combined with the findings from autistic girls and their parents, emphasise the importance of validating and supporting autistic interests in the

school context. However, findings from the teacher component of the research raise some concerns that teacher knowledge in this area may be limited. Some responses referred to the potential of capitalising on student interests when supporting autistic girls, however, when identifying characteristics of autism in girls it was noteworthy that only approximately a quarter of teachers recognised that autistic girls may demonstrate similar interests to their non-autistic peers, something that may have implications in terms of recognising and supporting in this area. This finding is consistent with research carried out with SENCos by Gray *et al.* (2021) and demonstrates a distinct gap in knowledge pertaining to the sex/gender differences outlined in autism literature (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023).

While the enhanced subject choices were positively received by the majority of students and supported their engagement with the academic aspect of school, the experience of one student provided a stark contrast where no particular subjects were preferred, and a dislike of learning more broadly was expressed. One potential explanation, discussed by Wagner (2019), is that the evolving complexity of academic work at post-primary may increase anxiety and result in withdrawal. It is noted that this issue can be further exacerbated by a reluctance to ask for help, which considering the co-occurring diagnosis of Selective Mutism (APA, 2013) in this case may also hold weight. However, this experience was further contextualised by parental insight whereby there were concerns that social success was being prioritised over academic success. While unique in this study, this finding draws parallels with research carried out by Halsall *et al.* (2021) who drew attention to the impact of anxiety and camouflaging in terms of underachieving among autistic girls in the mainstream setting due to preoccupation, exhaustion and eventually avoidance.

The final component of this theme highlighted a broader systemic issue in relation to the education system and the limiting nature of the system for autistic individuals. The girls and their parents raised concerns that neuro-normative expectations and traditional processes of the system were sometimes incompatible with autistic processing, thus impacting engagement with the academic aspect of mainstream education. This issue has been raised in research with autistic individuals (Roberts and Simpson, 2016; Horgan *et al.*, 2022) as well as in broader research pertaining to neurodiversity in the education context (McKeon, 2020; Sewell and Park, 2021). However, data from the questionnaire conducted with teachers did not situate academic needs as a priority area of support for autistic girls with only 18% of the total 176 responses (67% of sample) identifying

support linked with academics. In the first instance, this raises questions in relation to teachers understanding of autism as a different processing style (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019) and supports the belief that there are misconceptions relating to academic ability and success in the mainstream context (Morewood *et al.*, 2011). However, from a sex/gender perspective, it may also serve to illuminate the competency of autistic girls in disguising their challenges in the classroom context, arguably further facilitated by large class sizes in busy mainstream settings.

The use of traditional teaching approaches and expectations grounded in a neuro-normative processing framework was critiqued by some of the girls. Recognising the implications of their autistic processing in the classroom, the girls and their parents shared examples of their difficulties which were deemed to be inconsistent with teachers' expectations in the classroom. Similar to other research with autistic girls (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Jacobs *et al.*, 2021), the need to facilitate flexible ways to engage with the learning process was highlighted. Not having to look at the teacher all of the time and being able to doodle to support concentration were examples of their wishes in relation to how their autistic processing could be validated in the classroom. Options for drawing or doing projects rather than just watching/taking notes, alongside a flexible approach to individual and group work activities were also deemed important, something which can be understood in the context of the varied preferences expressed by autistic girls in other research (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015). In a similar vein, barriers in relation to assessment in the post-primary context were also identified. Consistent with the experiences of girls in research by Tomlinson *et al.* (2022), the pressure of engaging in structured assessment and the pressure to do well was raised in this study. This also corresponds with research which explored the experiences of autistic girls excluded from the mainstream context (Sproston *et al.*, 2017). Parents in this research discussed the pressure of academic achievement in mainstream while the girls discussed their experiences of performance anxiety. These experiences of intense pressure could be contextualised by reports of perfectionist tendencies sometimes associated with autistic girls (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Lai *et al*., 2015). In addition to the feelings surrounding assessment and similar to Jacobs *et al.* (2020), the types of assessment used in the post-primary context were also questioned. While some of the girls recognised that project-based work and CBAs reduced demands and afforded them greater flexibility, this approach was deemed pressurising by another with a preference for more traditional methods indicated. Considered together, these findings underscore the importance of

choice in assessment. Approaching assessment from a flexible and strengths-based perspective will facilitate individuals to demonstrate their capabilities in a way more suited to their processing style.

The suggestions made by the girls in relation to supporting their learning appear reflective of UDL (Cast.org, 2025). The role of interests in learning for the girls draws parallels with principle of Multiple Means of Engagement, while the preferences they expressed in relation to accessing and engaging with learning and their desire for a more inclusive approach to assessment are reflective of Multiple Means of Representation and Multiple Means of Action and Expression, respectively (Cast.org, 2025). These suggestions correspond with some of the UDL practices identified by autistic students in higher education as facilitative of learning (Barrera Ciurana and Moliner García, 2024), thus highlighting the importance of recognising the implications of autistic processing on learning, regardless of age or stage. Furthermore, as UDL is grounded within the concept of support for all (Cast.org, 2025), it may hold immense potential for those who remain undiagnosed, particularly pertinent given the prominence of late diagnosis among autistic females (Kanfiszer *et al.*, 2017).

While the UDL framework was mentioned, it did not feature prominently in the qualitative responses of teachers on how best to support autistic girls in the classroom. This is perhaps unsurprising as research into the use of UDL in the post-primary context is emerging but slow, compared to its application in other educational stages (Bray *et al.*, 2024; Phelan *et al.*, 2025). It is noteworthy to highlight that other suggestions for support provided by the teachers did map onto the principles of multiple means of engagement, representation and action and expression. This pattern of results is also identified by Phelan *et al.* (2025) and reflected in research carried out with teachers of autistic students by Carrington *et al.* (2020). Despite this, consistent with Phelan *et al.* (2025) and in light of the insights shared by the girls, there is a need to increase awareness of UDL as an inclusive pedagogical framework among educators at post-primary level.

Taken together, the discussion of Theme 1 highlights the importance of understanding autism beyond its external behavioural presentation and appreciate it as a different processing style. Recognition should be afforded that autistic processing may cause difficulties when misunderstood within the broader education system constructed by and for the dominant neurotype. From an intersectional feminist standpoint, the experiences shared by the autistic girls in this study emphasise the impact of the internal presentation of autism in terms of their difficulties being acknowledged and supported, reinforcing the

need for a holistic and rounded knowledge base of those in the girls' microsystem. The potential of UDL as a framework to support the academic inclusion and success of autistic girls in the mainstream post-primary context is outlined. The findings also highlight the importance of specific knowledge and teacher training pertaining to autism. In recognising the role of teachers as pivotal providers of support within the girls' microsystem, specific professional development in the area of autism should equip teachers with the knowledge to better understand the interaction between the constellation of autistic traits and autistic processing in the classroom context.

6.3 Theme 2: Being in the School Environment

Being in the School Environment was characterised by diverse, largely negative sensory experiences and the role of safe spaces in a sensory-rich school environment. The complex, individualised and sometimes contradictory nature of sensory experiences was illuminated in the girls' accounts.

6.3.1 Negotiating the Sensory Environment

'What would I change? Well, probably everything!'

 Danielle

Consistent with research with autistic women (Milner *et al.*, 2019) and autistic girls (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019), the findings from the current research reiterate the negative implications of inappropriate sensory environments on wellbeing. Many of the negative sensory experiences shared by the girls related to periods of transition in the school day or general-purpose spaces, which is consistent with the experiences of girls in research (Rainsberry, 2017; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2022) but also reflected in the broader research with autistic students more generally (Goodall, 2018; Horgan *et al.*, 2022). Attention was also drawn to echoes in the physical environment, this is not something that has arisen in literature but may be associated with newer school buildings and highlights an issue to be considered at design stage or something to be mediated by school management.

Noise levels within the mainstream setting appeared to present the most significant challenge for the majority of the girls in this research. Auditory stimuli in the school environment have been consistently reported as distressing among autistic young people more broadly (Saggers, 2015; Goodall, 2018; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Wood, 2019). However, this finding may also provide support for emerging sex/gender research that suggests autistic females may be more likely to experience higher levels of auditory

sensitivity than autistic males (Osório *et al.*, 2021; Lane *et al.*, 2022). While one of the girls rejected quiet environments, places with intense auditory input were disliked by most which may correspond with research by Osório *et al* (2021) that autistic females may be more likely to be distracted by sounds that others do not notice. This finding reinforces the varied nature of sensory processing differences among autistic individuals, something that has been documented in research previously (McCann, 2019). In addition to this, one of the girls shared that her sensory experiences in the school environment were also influenced by how she was feeling. The idea of sensory experiences being context or environment dependent has also been raised by autistic adults (Robledo *et al.*, 2012) and emphasises the importance of recognising that both internal and external factors can influence sensory experiences and that these factors may be cumulative rather than singular (Bogdashina, 2016; Wood, 2019).

In keeping with the diversity of sensory experiences, one of the girls shared that intense auditory input was distressing, despite having earlier identified the woodwork room as a preferred place and a preferred subject. This is interesting given the sensory environment of a woodwork room at post-primary, often associated with increased noise levels compared to the typical theory-based classroom. The contradictory and sometimes paradoxical nature of sensory experiences is, however, discussed by autistic individuals in autobiographical literature (Grandin, 2006), highlighting the importance of understanding sensory processing as an individual experience.

The importance of affording due consideration to the sensory environment at school level is amplified in research where autistic girls have withdrawn from the mainstream context and cite inappropriate sensory environments as one significant contributory factor (Sproston *et al.*, 2017). The significance of this consideration is amplified in the current research where the girls perceived inappropriate sensory environments as environments to be endured. The association between inappropriate environments and endurance raises potential concerns in relation to the impact of that endurance. Droney and Verbiest (2022) raise awareness of the 'passive behavioural response' whereby individuals may be experiencing significant sensory distress but rather than projecting that outward, the implications may be constant increased anxiety or a delayed impact, which may correspond with post-school collapse discussed in *Section 6.2.1*.

6.3.2 Finding Sanctuary: The Role of Safe Spaces

'It helps me start the day in a better place when I don't have to go somewhere that makes me feel overwhelmed'

 Bella

Despite reference to endurance, the seeking out and use of safe spaces was also identified by the girls (see also Goodall, 2020a; Hummerstone and Parsons, 2022). Different places and a diversity of experience was evident in the girls' narratives, however, these were bound by the commonality of accessing places that supported regulation. Engagement with safe spaces appeared to be a combination of routine and non-routine attendance and were primarily self-facilitated rather than school supported. For most of the girls, safe spaces, often the library, were accessed sporadically when the girls needed to escape the sensory rich environment and access a quieter environment. However, for one girl attending the bathroom, her identified space, every morning before attending class was proactive and preparatory in nature. In both instances, it could be argued that the girls recognised the need to regulate in order for them to better engage with the school day, which correlates with research which highlights the importance of being in a 'calm alert state' for engagement in learning, activities and interactions (Yack *et al.*, 2015: 28; Feeney, 2018; McCann, 2019). It was also apparent that for some, being in their preferred subject classroom supported regulation, with the opportunity to engage with interests identified as calming (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, one student spoke about the sense of community in one of her classes which appeared to create a positive association between attendance and wellbeing.

Aside from seeking out safe spaces for regulation purposes, the girls also appeared to avoid spaces that they deemed stressful, this was particularly evident in relation to their preferred lunchtime locations. Consistent with research with autistic girls (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019), the girls appeared to reject school canteens and General-Purpose[22] areas in preference for quieter, less populated areas of the school building during lunchtime. In contrast to the above personal approaches to tackling sensory stress, a more systematic approach was facilitated by one school. One of the girls was supported to attend the special class instead of morning assembly to enable a more

[22] General Purpose areas are accessed by the whole school and/or broader community for social components of the school day, *e.g. lunchtime, school assemblies, plays.*

positive experience at the start of the school day. This option is consistent with the benefits of a model of resourced provision discussed by Hebron and Bond (2017).

It is noteworthy to highlight that many of the mechanisms adopted by the girls for managing unsuitable sensory environments were personal routines, with few being school-supported structures. Furthermore, where personal adjustments were made, they were often limited. Withdrawing from distressing environments was often impeded by school rules, access to spaces was restricted and not always available and in one case recognition of sensory processing difficulties was denied entirely. Given that the educational inclusion of autistic students is inextricably linked to acknowledgment of their sensory dispositions and fulfilment of their sensory needs (Wood, 2019; Hummerstone and Parsons, 2020), these findings raise questions in relation to schools' understanding of inclusion more broadly.

Positively, in the current study with teachers, the vast majority of respondents recognised sensory processing differences as a characteristic associated with autism in girls, demonstrating an awareness of sensory processing as a core component of the dyad of difference in autism diagnosis more broadly (APA, 2013). However, while teachers may be aware of sensory processing among autistic individuals, accounts from autistic students suggest they often fail to understand and support sensory processing in the school context (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Hummerstone and Parsons, 2020; Hummerstone and Parson, 2022). When prompted to consider support for autistic girls, the qualitative comments in the secondary study offered food for thought. While teachers cited some examples of best practice approaches such as facilitating access to 'safe' or 'quiet' spaces and providing students with 'exit' or 'break' cards (Droney and Verbiest, 2022), most of the suggestions were related to providing movement breaks, granting access to a sensory room or autism class, more generally. Very few considered addressing the environment, a finding which is concerning in light of a shift away from a medical model approach to a more holistic bio-psychosocial approach (DoE, 2024a).

Similarly, there was a distinct lack of acknowledgement of the need to work from an individual's sensory profile which, given the impact and variability of sensory experiences among the girls in this study and the evidence in research, should be identified as a priority (Feeney, 2018; Droney and Verbiest, 2022). These findings raise questions in relation to the knowledge of teachers in the domain of sensory processing. However, they also raise concerns in relation to the extent of which access to and collaboration with external professionals, *e.g.* OTs, is occurring, a process which has been

deemed imperative in supporting the sensory needs of autistic students in the classroom context (Dynia *et al.*, 2023). While there has been a recent shift towards a capacity building model in the Irish context (NCSE, 2019; NCSE, 2024), the data collated from the teacher study combined with the insights from the girls may indicate a need to further investigate and address gaps in sensory processing knowledge, something which should be considered by ITE providers. Furthermore, enhanced opportunities for TPL in this area should be made available to qualified teachers to ensure they are better equipped to meet the needs of autistic individuals, an approach suggested by Ruttledge and Cathcart (2019) as potentially beneficial.

While individual teacher knowledge is important for supporting the inclusion of autistic learners in the mainstream setting, the insights shared by the girls also reveal broader systemic issues. Failure to consider provisions and structures to support sensory needs at a leadership and policy level has implications at both a microlevel and an individual level, therefore a whole school approach is necessary. Completing sensory environmental audits can enable schools to identify, modify and adapt potential issues in the school environment (Critchley, 2019; Morewood *et al.*, 2019; Droney and Verbiest, 2022). Some issues may require minor adjustments within the school building (*e.g.* removing visual clutter, identifying and assigning potential safe spaces) while others may require more significant work (*e.g.* request for additional space), as a result involvement of both teachers and school leadership is imperative (Critchley, 2019; Wood 2019). However, by their very nature, sensory experiences are embodied experiences and unless distress arising from inappropriate experiences or environments is externally communicated, difficulties often remain invisible to others. Given the tendency of internalising among autistic females (Mandy *et al.*, 2012; Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Wassell and Burke, 2022), this may place autistic girls at a distinct disadvantage in the education context. Considering the above in conjunction with the insights from the girls in this study relating to sensory differences, endurance and the use of personal accommodations, it could be concluded that where sensory discomfort is not obviously externalised it may appear that girls are coping when they are not and therefore may not be considered as an area requiring support by teachers. This emphasises the importance of collaboration with parents and external professionals to better understand the sensory profile of the autistic young person. However, due to the embodied, fluctuating nature of sensory experiences, the importance of supporting self-advocacy, valuing student voice and the lived experience, and having supportive systems in place in the event of sensory overload is paramount.

6.4 Theme 3: Being with Others

The school context is inherently interactional in nature, something that is demonstrated in the theme 'Being with Others'. This theme revealed the variability of social experiences within the girls' microsystems and identified the key players as peers, friends and teachers. In some instances, social interactions and endeavours were negotiated and tolerated while in other instances they were protective and encouraging.

6.4.1 Navigating Social Interactions with Peers

'My biggest source of worry is other students. Well, it's not other students necessarily. It's kind of just, as a whole, socially, like making sure I have a social life with the other students'

 Emma

At the most surface level, social interactions were discussed in the context of understanding the behaviours of others and negotiating autistic processing and interaction in a predominantly non-autistic landscape. Feeling confused at the behaviours of others and overthinking entrances to social situations were reported in the current study and in research with autistic girls and their parents (Honeybourne, 2015, Moyse and Porter, 2015; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017). These concerns also reflect the wider literature on sex/gender differences in autism which identifies difficulties interpreting the subtleties of social interaction and communication among autistic girls (Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Kreiser and White, 2014; Dean *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the research posits that these challenges may result in autistic girls remaining on the periphery of social contexts (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Milner *et al.*, 2019), which based on the narratives of the particular girls in question may hold weight. Unfortunately, these challenges could be further amplified by the girls' tendencies to worry about how others perceive them, expressing concern that they may be misunderstood or their words/actions misperceived. Concern of misjudgement was extended further in one instance where one of the girls discusses her engagement in masking as a response to avoid misjudgement. While this is in line with the theory of masking as a protective strategy (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Leedham *et al.*, 2020), the conscious engagement raises concerns in terms of the difficulties and emotions being suppressed, something which may have more serious consequences in the long-term (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Lai *et al.*, 2011).

Worryingly, the girls' narratives appear to position the challenges experienced as theirs alone, however, these experiences can be more compassionately understood using the

Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012a) as a theoretical lens. These findings serve as a reminder to reiterate the importance of understanding interaction and communication as being two-way processes but also highlight the potential need to raise awareness of this among autistic girls. While some research with autistic girls praised the role of diagnosis in understanding differences, particularly social differences (Salter, 2019; Josefsson and Johansson, 2024), the findings in this research may suggest that diagnosis alone is not enough. Given that shifting internalised difficulties to an external reference point supported autistic women's self-perception (Seers and Hogg, 2023), providing autistic girls opportunities to explore what the diagnosis may mean for them should be supported. The where and how of this support requires negotiation but given the dissatisfaction with formal post-diagnostic supports or lack thereof (Crane *et al.*, 2018) and in light of the autonomy afforded to post-primary schools in terms of allocating support (DoE, 2024a), the school context may be one potential option where this could happen. Autistic girls should be provided with age-appropriate, neuro-affirmative information about autism and the autistic experience. This could be facilitated through exploration of carefully selected material from reputable sources, engagement with autobiographical accounts from autistic individuals and a curated selection of books for self-exploration. Alternatively, a more general programme such as NeuroBears (Pandas Online, 2022-2025) could be adopted in school or at home or potentially as a home-school collaborative effort.

The social element of school was largely discussed in the context of unstructured parts of the day, namely lunchtime periods. The girls' experiences revolved around spending time with friends and/or attending structured and unstructured social groups. It was apparent that social groups were availed of more frequently where social networks were smaller or friendship groups less established, which appeared to be the case for three of the girls in this study. In contrast to research identifying challenges with group engagement among autistic girls (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015), the girls in this research largely valued the structured group opportunities available to them at lunchtime. Insights from the girls positioned the group opportunities as relaxing and engaging and they appeared to bridge the gap of merely being among others to being a part of a social collective. While some of the groups appeared to align with the girls' interests, this was not a given nor was it specified in any instance whether these groups were established for neurodivergent students. This is interesting given the emphasis on these components as facilitators of social interaction and support for autistic individuals in research (Wood, 2021; Crompton *et al.*, 2023; Chan *et al.*, 2023; Crompton *et al.*, 2024b; Lizon *et al.*,

2024), however, it could be that like-minded, neurodivergent students were availing of the groups. Alternatively, it may imply that there existed a positive ethos within the school more generally or it could simply be serendipitous that the girls were fortunate in their experiences of these groups. Nonetheless, it could be hypothesised that these structured activities provided a sense of calm and purpose during the unstructured parts of the day, potentially allowing girls to reduce their engagement in masking and be their authentic selves.

Somewhat different from prevailing discourse in literature (Cook *et al.*, 2018; Halsall *et al.*, 2021), largely positive experiences of friendship were shared by a majority of the girls in this study. Where friendships were reported as positive, they were often contextualised with reference to their protective role, mutual understanding or shared interests, all of which are consistent with broader research on conceptualisations of friendship among autistic individuals (Black *et al.*, 2024). In line with research with autistic children (Lam *et al.*, 2020) and autistic girls (Salter, 2019; Sedgewick *et al.*, 2019; Ryan *et al*., 2021), quality friendships were characterised by a small circle of supportive friends. Interestingly, all of the girls acknowledged that their current friendships were formed in post-primary school. This may be a nod towards friendship maintenance difficulties among autistic girls (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Morewood *et al.*, 2019) or may simply be a matter of finding their 'tribe' in post-primary school (Crompton *et al.*, 2023; Crompton *et al.*, 2024b).

Furthermore, literature suggests that successful autistic friendships are often formed with people similar to themselves (Black *et al.*, 2024) and in the case of autistic girls it was often reported that other members of the friendship group have additional needs or are different in some way (Rainsberry, 2017; Cook *et al.*, 2018). While this was mentioned in passing by two girls and one mother in the present research, it did not emerge as a dominant finding. It may that the friendship was purely based on shared connection, however, it may also be the case that there were undisclosed diagnoses and/or unidentified diagnoses among friendship group members. Nonetheless, positive friendships in this study were specifically appreciated with reference to companionship at lunchtime. The girls viewed friendship as a protective factor at lunchtime and meeting with their friends offered them a reprieve of the demands of the school day. It appeared that secure friendships enabled the girls to self-regulate or co-regulate. This social support role is consistent with other research with autistic girls (Myles *et al.*, 2019; Sedgewick *et al.,*

2019) and reiterates the importance of unstructured times for autistic girls as noted by Ayirebi and Thomas (2024)

While many of the girls had established strong friendships with like-minded peers that were built on foundations of acceptance, it is important to address that less secure relationships were apparent in other narratives. These experiences were not attributed to lack of desire as, in line with research, in these instances the girls expressed an eagerness for friendship and social engagement (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Cook *et al.*, 2018; Sedgewick *et al.*, 2019). One of the girls made continual references to 'meeting friends', 'making friends', 'meeting people', however, it was unclear as to the extent of these interactions. It could be taken that she had a wide-reaching social network, but the girl's narrative did not provide any detail on these interactions. However, when combined with insights from her mother and taking into consideration her diagnosis of Selective Mutism, a more nuanced understanding of these experiences emerged. Combined, the findings suggest that in this case difficulties lay in friendship maintenance and while the girl appeared to be continually seeking out and initiating interactions, this could be positioned as a compensatory mechanism to access social experiences.

Furthermore, while it was clear that the girl's mother was grateful that she was maximising opportunities for social interactions, she expressed concern that these interactions may not be as she perceived. Differences in perceptions of social interactions was also raised in research (Cook *et al.*, 2018; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021) whereby there was a mismatch between how the autistic girls perceived their interactions and relationships compared to how others viewed them. This finding may raise concerns about the vulnerability of autistic girls in the social domain, something which has been highlighted by autistic women reflecting on their previous social experiences (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Milner *et al.*, 2019; Seers and Hogg, 2021). This experience, when considered in conjunction with the literature on the concealment of difficulties offered by the nature of female social groups (Kreiser and White, 2014; Dean *et al.,* 2017) and the preponderance of internalising among autistic females (Solomon *et al.*, 2012; Wassell and Burke, 2022), has potentially significant implications for schools, and also parents/guardians, in terms of how they can put in place supports to safeguard autistic girls.

In another instance, immense challenges in making friends in the post-primary context were reported. One of the girls experienced mixed emotions in relation to her social opportunities in the school context. Consistent with existing research, she perceived

friendship to be the most difficult aspect of school (Honeybourne, 2015; Milner *et al.*, 2019). The desire and pursuit for friendship was expressed, but experiences of social exclusion and loneliness dominated the narrative. This experience corresponds with a body of research which highlights social exclusion among autistic girls (Cook *et al.*, 2018; Salter, 2019; Tomlinson *et al*., 2021). While an autistic girl in research by Cridland *et al.* (2014) shared that peers did not befriend her because of her disability, in this case withdrawal of friendship was experienced upon receipt of her diagnosis. Mirroring findings presented in Tomlinson *et al.* (2021), friends from primary school distanced themselves from the girl in question which she attributed to her differences and personality. This insight illustrated a growing self-awareness of difference (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021) and is reflective of other research where autistic girls believed that peers were judgemental of their disability, and this influenced friendship development (Sproston *et al.*, 2017; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019).

Furthermore, like autistic adults in research by Elmose (2020), drawing together insights from the girl and her mother, her experiences of loneliness can be contextualised using 'being autistic' as a frame of reference. The girl's mother highlighted her daughter's excitement to share her diagnosis with her friends only to be extremely disappointed by their reaction, of which only served to extend the distance between them. This is consistent with the research base with different treatment, loss of friendship, stigma and bullying all highlighted as issues among autistic adolescents in the school context (Mesa and Hamilton, 2022; Josefsson and Johansson, 2024). This experience could have implications in terms of how she interacts with her diagnosis with some research indicating that autistic girls may distance themselves from their diagnosis where it is perceived to be burdensome (Josefsson and Johansson, 2024).

Recognising that her experiences of loneliness were further exacerbated by her difficulties making friends, the girl shared how she was encouraged to attend structured chess sessions and a more informal Uno[23] group at lunchtime in an effort to make friends. She did not appear to be passionate about either of the groups, however, she appreciated them as a way to be 'social' and develop relationships in the school context. It was also known from parental insights that out-of-school autistic group meet ups were valued as these afforded her the opportunity to interact with like-minded individuals. These findings may suggest the need for schools to identify and monitor supportive structures for interaction during less structured periods (*e.g.* lunch). While it is important to accept the varied social

[23] Uno is a popular, international card game.

preferences of autistic individuals and consider these in light of the context in which interactions occur (Elmose, 2020; Chan *et al.*, 2023), recent research also suggests that within neurotype interaction and communication are more effective and fulfilling than cross neurotype engagement (Crompton *et al.*, 2020; Foster *et al.*, 2025).

The distressing experience of friendship challenges raised by one of the girls in the current study, her positive experience with autistic social groups outside of school, combined with the research on autistic social experiences, may position initiatives such as Neurodivergent peer Support Toolkit (NEST; Crompton *et al.*, 2024a) as a potential framework for schools to explore. There is evidence that NEST, and other similar autistic peer support programmes can increase opportunities for autistic and neurodivergent students to engage in authentic interactions in a safe space within the school (Crompton *et al.*, 2023; Crompton *et al.*, 2024b). Furthermore, it could be argued that approaches such as the above provide a more neuroaffirmative approach to social support (Crompton *et al.*, 2022) and may foster caring, safe spaces in schools (Rajotte *et al.*, 2024) compared to approaches such as peer mentoring or social skills programmes used in the past (Milton, 2014b; Bottema-Beutel *et al*., 2018).

The inclusion of parental voices in this study was particularly fruitful in terms of broadening understanding of the girls' experiences, particularly in relation to the social domain. While the girls demonstrated appreciation for both the structured groups available to them and their friendships groups, in line with literature insights from some of their parents emphasise that these social endeavours were not without their challenges and had required support (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Cook *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, drawing on the previously discussed post-school collapse highlighted by the girls' parents, it could be questioned whether masking is occurring within friendships that the girls identified as positive (Cook *et al.*, 2018). Differing perspectives between autistic girls and their parents has been reported in other research (Cook *et al.*, 2018) and is worth spotlighting as in its own right may suggest high levels of internalising of difficulties among the girls in this research. The girls potentially did not disclose the full extent of their challenges to me. Alternatively, it could be suggested that the girls may be potentially distancing from their autistic identity, whereas their parents recognise their challenges through the lens of their autistic identity. This may hold significance in terms of reflecting on how autistic girls are supported to understand their differences and communicate their experiences in the school context.

Attention was drawn to some of the challenges experienced by girls that were supported by parents, for example, recognising efforts to initiate friendship, awareness of social cues and group entry (see also Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Cook *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, and perhaps more specific to autistic girls' experiences, the complexity and nuances of adolescent female friendship identified in literature was discussed in the current research (Cridland *et al.*, 2014). As found in previous research (Wood, 2019) specific skills and opportunities to discuss interactions were deemed useful by parents for the initiation and maintenance of friendships in the school context, however, the teaching of social skills grounded in neurotypical norms has been contested with the rise of the neurodiversity paradigm (Bottema-Beutel *et al.*, 2018; Keates *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, it has been argued that teaching and encouraging the use of social skills may be cognitively demanding and may only serve to further promote engagement in masking (Hull *et al.*, 2017; Monahan *et al.*, 2023). However, girls in previous research have emphasised the value of support in the social domain with examples of positive support including, support from staff and a specialised speech and language therapy group intervention focusing on support with peer relationships (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). These suggestions may highlight a distinct approach to supporting autistic girls in the area of social interaction and may indicate that when social support is neuroaffirmative, provided by a trusted adult and perceived to improve social outcomes for the girls, it is worthwhile and valued. Cognisant of this, those supporting autistic girls should have an understanding of masking along with a knowledge of autistic processing and its potential role in social situations (Milton, 2012a), thus underscoring the importance of professional learning incorporating input on sex/gender differences in autism and autism theories.

It was apparent that despite positive friendships and social experiences in many instances, insights provided by some of the girls raised concerns in relation to the development and maintenance of friendships. As with examples in research (Hiller *et al.,* 2014; Lai *et al.*, 2017), and based on the scenarios shared by the girls, to the onlooker it may appear that the girls are being socially included. However, eliciting the lived-experience of these scenarios unveils a more nuanced understanding of those social encounters. Combined with the research on vulnerability among autistic females (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Milner *et al.*, 2019), the current research accentuates the importance of school staff being aware of differences in presentation in girls and being hypervigilant in terms of the social inclusion of autistic girls in the school context. Programmes such as those mentioned in this discussion (LEANS, NEST, NeuroBears) may provide a starting point for schools to

consider approaches to social support. However, the need for the provision of social support informed by sex/gender differences is advocated for in some research (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Dean *et al.*, 2017) and may reflect the needs of the girls in this research. It remains unaddressed as to what that support would look like and how it would be operationalised but given the examples relating to difficulties with interactions such as group entry, reciprocity, gossiping, exclusion, betrayal of trust, cited in literature and by the parents in this study, these may be areas beneficial to explicitly explore.

6.4.2 Teachers: Mediators of Experience

'It's important that my teacher understands me for who I am'

 Emma

Teachers were clearly identified as playing a significant role in mediating school experiences for the autistic girls in this research. Beyond objectively defined levels of teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism, this subtheme centred the individuality of relationships between teachers and autistic girls.

Perhaps unsurprising, a systematic review conducted by Horgan *et al.* (2022) revealed that strong relationships with teachers were identified as foundational for inclusive practice by autistic young people. This was equally apparent in the current study with positive academic and relational experiences linked with inclusive teachers. Consistent with Tomlinson *et al.* (2021), and indeed in line with Irish policy (DES, 2017a; DoE, 2024a), the girls praised the positive qualities of individual teachers and valued those who made a concerted effort to support them in the classroom and viewed inclusion as everyone's responsibility. The examples of positive supports signified the potential of technology in embedding UDL and inclusive practices in the post-primary context (Bray *et al.*, 2023). However, beyond tangible supports, the girls highlighted the importance of teachers making time for them, emphasising the inextricably relational element of teaching. Where teachers were positively regarded by the girls, it appeared to have a knock-on affirming effect on the girls' academic experiences with increased engagement and confidence relating to their subject reported.

The insights shared by the girls about the relational aspect of their experiences with teachers reiterates the work of Falkmer *et al.* (2015) and emphasises that regardless of school policies and procedures, it is often individual teachers and the actions that they undertake that determine inclusive experiences. This may explain variability of experiences within settings bound by the same macro structures. Furthermore, in light of

this, it could be suggested that policy at any level is insufficient if not underpinned by strong leadership, professional learning for teachers and the creation of an inclusive whole-school ethos which promotes, embodies and exemplifies inclusive practices.

As discussed in previous literature, inconsistencies and variability in staff awareness and knowledge existed within individual school contexts (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). The research with autistic girls (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021), and autistic young people more broadly (Goodall, 2018), highlighted the importance of individual supports beyond whole-class teaching practices and appropriate teacher expectations. This was mirrored in the current research but further contextualised with reference to autistic processing. The girls were dissatisfied and frustrated with teachers who failed to see and understand them as autistic individuals (see also Honeybourne, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019). They reported that their difficulties were sometimes minimised or dismissed which resulted in them feeling misunderstood. O'Byrne (2018) posit that the enactment of supportive strategies and approaches is largely dependent on teachers' awareness, understanding and knowledge of autism, however, it could be argued that further nuances are at play in the context of supporting autistic girls. As suggested in the secondary study, the presentation of autism in girls may be inconsistent with teachers' existing perceptions of autism (Whitlock *et al.*, 2020; Ward *et al.*, 2021), however, it is also crucial to acknowledge that masking and internalising tendencies among autistic girls (Hull *et al.*, 2022; Wassell and Burke, 2022) may make it more difficult for teachers to recognise the difficulties being experienced by girls compared to autistic boys who may externalise these challenges through their behaviour. These findings, taken with the literature, suggest not only a need for a greater knowledge of autism among teachers but also indicate the need for the subtleties of sex/gender differences to be explored and contextualised in relation to the classroom context and raise the significance of accessing an internal account of experience.

Aside from experiences of inadequate support, an alternative perspective was also provided by some of the girls in relation to support experienced. Some of the girls called out teachers who they believed treated them differently due to their autism diagnosis, this parallels findings by Josefsson and Johansson (2024). Additionally, the girls in this study raised the importance of drawing distinction between being supportive and being overbearing and challenged patronising behaviours. While the idea of support drawing unwanted attention was explicitly addressed by girls in research by Tomlinson *et al.* (2021), it was implied in the girls' narratives in the current study and later reinforced by

their parents (*Section 5.6.3*). The importance of balance and subtlety in support provision is raised in this discussion and appears to be of significance particularly in the context of autistic girls, and potentially more significant in the case where autistic identity is insecure or perhaps emerging with girls not wanting to be viewed as different. This brings into question how support is operationalised in the post-primary context in Ireland and emphasises the importance of student voice being elicited and considered in this process.

While relationships and bonds are totally dependent on connections made between individuals, and sometimes it is inevitable that there exists a disconnect between some teachers and students, the findings spotlight the potential of positive relationships and highlight the significance of autistic girls having one-good-adult that they can seek out when necessary. This is something that was identified by some teachers as one mechanism for supporting autistic girls in the secondary study questionnaire, but little detail was provided in terms of how this has been operationalised by schools. Further exploration of this may be beneficial given the importance of trusted staff-student relationships highlighted in literature (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). The significance of this is further reinforced as autistic girls note the importance of teacher awareness and positive relationships as supportive factors in reducing anxiety (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs *et al.*, 2020).

6.4.3 Challenging the Status Quo

'I think it's important that people know that not all of us experience autism in the exact same way'

 Ava

Arising from their interactional experiences, the autistic girls in this research identified an inherent need to challenge the status quo of autism knowledge. Consistent with the views of autistic female voices in existing research, the girls in this study identified the need for increased knowledge of autism more generally and emphasised the importance of increased awareness of the diversity of autism (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Hull *et al.*, 2017; Milner *et al.*, 2019; Harmens *et al.*, 2022).

Social participation is an area of significance in the school lives of autistic individuals (Horgan *et al.*, 2022) with peer ignorance of autism identified as having implications for the inclusion of autistic individuals and their acceptance of their autistic identity in mainstream settings (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Josefsson and Johansson, 2024). Despite all the girls sharing difficulties navigating social interactions in the school

context, only one of the girls explicitly highlighted the need for increased peer knowledge. Consistent with research with autistic adolescent girls by Josefsson and Johansson (2024), concern about the misconceptions of peers was raised with the use of slurs challenged and the need to have a baseline knowledge identified as imperative. These findings demonstrate the need to educate non-autistic students in the school context about autism, and neurodiversity more broadly. The importance of this is further emphasised in literature with Rajotte *et al.* (2024) reporting the importance of people in the school environment celebrating neurodiversity. Using neuro-affirming programmes at a whole school level offer potential, with one such programme, Learning About Neurodiversity at School (LEANS; Alcorn *et al*., 2022), demonstrating success in supporting students to learn about neurodiversity and foster positive attitudes (Alcorn *et al.*, 2024; Zahir *et al.*, 2024). Consistent with the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012a) this approach attributes responsibility on others to improve their knowledge and challenge their preconceptions. Furthermore, it could be argued that addressing gaps in knowledge at school level will create more welcoming schools, may challenge the dominant stereotype perspective and in turn make for a more inclusive society.

More common, however, was the need for improvements in teacher understandings of autism. Like other research (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Goodall, 2020a), the girls spoke broadly about the importance of general awareness of autism among teachers in order to recognise when students need support and how to support them. Emphasis was placed on the need to go beyond awareness and basic knowledge and prioritise understanding. It appeared that understanding of autism in the context of the individual was deemed most significant by the girls in determining the success of support offered. The significance of combined theory and practice knowledge for teachers is promoted here, as the one-size-fits-all approach was deemed inadequate by the girls. Drawing from a suggestion made by Evans (2025) in the context of mental health professionals, this finding emphasises the importance of teachers learning about autism, rather than merely collecting a bank of strategies or techniques for working with autistic individuals. Broadening knowledge of autism more generally will facilitate techniques and strategies to be adapted for, and with, the autistic individual being supported (Evans, 2025). This perspective also supports the argument for autism specific training for teachers (Jordan, 2008; Ravet, 2011), a debate highly contested by proponents of inclusive pedagogy (Florian *et al.*, 2011).

While the above concerns are perhaps relevant in the context of all autistic students, the girls also raised the issue of a stereotyped knowledge base among teachers. Stereotyped knowledge has potential implications for autistic individuals marginalised by their intersecting identities and/or for those who present with an internal presentation of autism (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023), making it particularly relevant in the context of this research. The insights from the girls suggest that there is a persisting narrative of outdated, stereotyped understandings of autism. Consistent with research where autistic women feel conflicted by and rejected the stereotyped, male, medicalised conceptualisations of autism (Seers and Hogg, 2021; 2023), the girls impressed the need for teachers to know beyond the stereotypes. They challenged the 'oneness' of autism and expressed a desire for its diversity and variability to be recognised. They highlighted that autism has different implications for different people and noted that some may mask, and others may note. Unfortunately, the girls' concerns about outdated perceptions of autism were evidenced, albeit in a small minority of responses, in the open-ended questionnaire data from teachers with outdated language and medical model understandings presented.

The girls also contextualised their concerns around a lack of appreciation of the diversity of autism with reference to its implications for support. Aligning with findings from Hummerstone and Parsons (2020) which highlighted teachers' inadequacies in attending to individual needs, the girls expressed a belief that support should be based on an individual's profile rather than assumed knowledge of autism. The significance of this recommendation from the girls can be grounded in research with Hull *et al.*, (2017) highlighting that inadequate and gender-biased knowledge may result in difficulties remaining hidden while findings from research with autistic women revealing that stereotyped perceptions resulted in experiences being misunderstood in the school context (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016). The suggestions made by the girls on addressing this issue prioritise a person-centred approach and emphasise the significance of listening to the individual themselves. Advancements in autism research have witnessed the lived experience being increasingly valued. The girls' aspirations in relation to support at school are very much in line with these emerging philosophies of participatory research and emphasise the importance of bridging the developments in research and practice.

Lastly, a somewhat different perspective relating to challenging the status quo of teacher responsibilities also emerged. Concern was raised that some teachers only see the academic aspect of school and don't think about the supports that some students may need to succeed. This is something that has been evidenced in research with teachers, whereby

mainstream teachers expressed ownership of their subject and positioned Special Education Teachers (SETs) as the knowledge holders in relation to autism and special educational needs more broadly (Daly *et al.*, 2016; Rodden *et al.*, 2019). This may be contextualised with reference to McKeon (2020) who draws attention to the academic ethos that may permeate some post-primary schools in terms of state examination results and transfers to higher education. Insights from the girls in the current study supports the need for knowledge for all, not just specialist teachers, which may position Communities of Practice as a potential model within the school context to capitalise on the benefits of collaboration between mainstream and specialist teachers (Daly *et al.*, 2016; Fitzgerald, 2018). However, recognising the role of the exo- and macro-system in inclusion, the need for school leaders to foster and promote inclusive culture in schools whereby inclusion is everybody's responsibility is brought to the fore (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010; Shevlin *et al.*, 2013). Appreciating the value of professional learning and supporting the embedding of inclusive structures may support a more inclusive ethos, deemed an important component of inclusive education by Goodall (2015) for challenging stereotypes.

This theme brought to the fore the significance of others in the school environment and their role in determining the experiences of autistic girls. While it is apparent that those in the girls' microsystem, particularly teachers and peers, play a significant role in determining experiences, they are often influenced by the broader contexts in which they exist. A commitment to inclusive education must be established at a macro level within the school and underpin the decisions made in the school context. Embedding whole-school neuroaffirmative approaches may have positive outcomes in terms of ethos and relationships within the school context, however, there remains an inherent need to increase teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism. Lastly, in recognising the role of others in influencing experience, it is also important to return to the autistic girls themselves and consider how they can be supported to better understand their experiences. The autonomy afforded to Irish schools in terms of support provision (DoE, 2024b) offers a unique opportunity to support autistic identity development for autistic girls and equip them with the skills to advocate for their needs in the school context, both areas of which based on the findings of the current study, if supported, could have a significant impact on the experiences of autistic girls in the post-primary context.

6.5 Theme 4: Parent Perspectives

While the previous themes centred the voices of autistic girls, the theme 'Parent Perspectives' demonstrates the valuable perspectives that the girls' parents had to offer in relation to their daughters' educational experiences. Parents shared their perceptions of the status of teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism in girls in Irish post-primary schools. They also shared their experiences of navigating the system to seek support before drawing attention to their role in their daughters' educational journey.

6.5.1 Making Sense of Teacher Awareness, Knowledge and Understanding

'they [teachers] don't know enough, to be honest, and when they are presented with girls, they don't know what to do'

 Fiona

An overarching concern pertaining to the extent of teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding of current research on autism in girls permeated parents' narratives. Consistent with the broader literature on parents' experiences of raising girls with autism (Hopkins *et al.*, 2023), the parents in the current study raised concerns in relation to professionals' knowledge of autism in girls. Although concerns were not limited to education professionals, the inadequacy of teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding was addressed to the greatest extent.

In some instances, parents praised developments in the awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism in school more generally. This could be understood through the lens of research by Daly *et al*. (2016) who reported a promising shift in the trajectory of autism knowledge and understanding, however, it was those in specialist roles who markedly outperformed those in mainstream roles. Therefore, it may have been the case in the current study that positive experiences may have been mediated by individual teachers rather than a collective increase in teacher knowledge of autism. Despite some positive experiences, it was reported that knowledge of autism remains insufficient and in line with research it is apparent that gaps in teacher knowledge persist (Young *et al.*, 2017). This concern was amplified where the pattern persisted even among newer graduates, where parents expected to see improvements. It is somewhat worrying that this issue still dominates narratives despite teacher knowledge of autism being first raised as an issue by the Task Force on Autism (DESc, 2001) and subsequently highlighted over the years (Travers, 2010; Rose *et al.*, 2015; Bond *et al.*, 2016; Daly *et al.*, 2016). Nonetheless, it was acknowledged by parents that based on their interactions they

believed teachers want to support students to ensure positive experiences but have not been adequately prepared. This is consistent with the beliefs of teachers themselves who, in research conducted by Rodden *et al.* (2019), reported low levels of self-efficacy but demonstrated a strong desire to include and support autistic students. While this highlights a bigger picture issue in terms of the preparatory training received by teachers which should equip them with the skills to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse classrooms in Ireland, it may also point toward inadequate resourcing and opportunities for inter-professional collaboration.

According to the girls' parents, the lack of knowledge and understanding of autism more generally came into play in the everyday experiences of the girls. Inadequate knowledge and understanding determined provision of accommodations, or lack thereof, and supports in the general school context such as access to safe spaces and personnel support. It also played a role in the classroom context in terms of a failure to understand the implications of autistic processing on the learning process. These findings highlight an issue broader than sex/gender differences and suggests a lack of teacher knowledge and understanding of autism more generally among mainstream teachers in particular (McGillicuddy and O'Donnell, 2014; Daly *et al.*, 2016; Roberts and Simpson. 2016; Anglim *et al.*, 2018).

In the first instance, these findings may highlight a need to more comprehensively address input on autism at ITE level. However, they may also suggest the need for greater support in translating theory to practice (Cook and Odom, 2013; Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022). Given the impact of additional qualifications and/or experience, this support could be facilitated through the development of and engagement with the communities of practice model (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2018), or the Professional Learning Communities model, an approach which has had success among teachers of autistic students in the UK (Ver Loren Van Themaat, 2019) and may offer potential in the Irish context. While it is anecdotally known that groups of this nature do exist and are being facilitated by some Education Support Centres across Ireland, there may be need to further promote their benefits and/or promote the establishment at CoP or PLC at and across school level.

However, the concerns expressed by parents surrounding inadequate knowledge of autism more generally and its implications for support could also be explained by lack of teacher awareness and understanding of key aspects of the autistic female experience such as masking and internalising. This distinct lack of awareness, knowledge and understanding

of autism in girls was specifically addressed by parents. Given the findings from the teacher study which revealed that regardless of additional qualifications, teachers held lower levels of self-reported knowledge of autism in girls compared to their knowledge of autism more generally, and the preponderance of this suggestion in literature (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Gray *et al.*, 2021), it is perhaps unsurprising that parents raised this concern.

Parents felt that teachers had a lack of awareness of diverse presentations of autism, with particular attention drawn to the lack of knowledge about the presentation of autism in girls and its implications for identification and support. Consistent with narratives in the literature, the girls' parents believed that teachers didn't know about autism and girls and weren't aware that girls may present differently to boys (Anderson *et al.*, 2020). This is at odds with findings from the teacher study with just over 80% of teachers indicating an awareness that autism can present differently in males and females, a figure which parallels with research conducted with SENCos in the UK (Gray *et al.*, 2021). However, it can be argued that there is a distinct difference between awareness and knowledge and understanding. Therefore, as hypothesised by Ward *et al.* (2022) while teachers may be aware of recent literature publications and media insights on autism in girls, they may not have engaged with this content in great depth and may fail to understand the nuances of that presentation.

The above discussion highlights the implications of the research to practice gap (Barrett and Prendergast, 2025a) and the importance of bridging that gap in the education context for improved outcomes for autistic girls. Two potential actions which could be considered to ameliorate the negative impact of this may be the development of Research Learning Communities in schools as proposed by Mintz *et al.* (2021) or Communities of Practice between academics and practitioners to support staff in becoming research-informed in their efforts to work with autistic pupils (Guldberg, 2016), both of which may be reasonably manageable in terms of additional demands.

The lack of awareness and knowledge of a varied autism presentation was first discussed in the context of identification with some parents sharing that no teachers ever suggested autism as a possibility along their daughters' school journey. Similarly, even when raised by parents, concerns and/or pursual of autism diagnosis was dismissed by teachers. Parents attributed these experiences to a lack of knowledge of the nuances of varied presentations and a failure to understand that autism may manifest differently. Awareness and knowledge of the characteristics associated with a female presentation of autism has

been questioned by parents in previous studies (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Gray *et al.*, 2021) and can be further reinforced with reference to the current teacher study.

Firstly, teachers self-reported only moderate levels of confidence in terms of recognising autism in girls. This is something that could be contextualised with reference to insights provided by one parent involved in the study who also happened to be a primary school teacher. She drew on her experience as a teacher to highlight the issue of stereotyped or gender-biased knowledge within the teaching profession, an issue evidenced in research by Whitlock *et al.* (2022). As suggested in literature, she admitted that the externalising tendencies of boys support their identification (Hiller *et al.*, 2016) while the girls who don't match this stereotypical presentation are disadvantaged, unless teachers have personal experiences or particular interests in this area. Furthering this, findings from the secondary study suggest that teachers may be less familiar with characteristics that are perhaps more aligned with the profile of autism commonly experienced by autistic girls diagnosed at Level 1, compared to characteristics associated with a more traditional profile of autism. (Gray *et al.,* 2021). Therefore, where these characteristics present, teachers may be less likely to identify autism in girls which undeniably will have implications in terms of referrals and timely identification.

Secondly, gaps in teacher knowledge and understanding were discussed in the context of school support for autistic girls. Parents felt that when presented with autistic girls, teachers didn't have enough knowledge, and this had implications in terms of support provision for their daughters. Furthermore, as suggested in literature, concern about the potential of a gender-biased knowledge base among teachers was raised by parents (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Whitlock *et al.*, 2020). While teachers in the secondary study reported higher-levels of confidence supporting autistic girls compared to their confidence recognising them, analysis of the open-ended qualitative data suggested that the type of support they would provide was guided by best-practice approaches for supporting autistic students more generally (74% of suggestions met this criteria). The examples were grounded in supporting the characteristics of autism as per the dyad of difference (APA, 2013), however, it could be argued that they were informed by a stereotyped, potentially gender-biased knowledge base (Lockwood-Estrin *et al.*, 2021; Gray *et al.*, 2021), as suggestions for support did not reflect the nuances of the presentation often experienced by autistic girls.

Restricted teacher knowledge, combined with the invisibility of autism (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021) and the tendencies for girls to internalise (Wassell and Burke, 2022) and mask (Lai *et al*., 2017; Hull *et al*., 2020) were identified by parents as potential barriers that prevented their daughters receiving support in the school context. However, rather than their needs being simply missed, requests for support had also been dismissed as needs weren't outwardly visible to teachers. These experiences highlight the significance of not only having awareness and knowledge, but also the need to understand the autistic experience. These findings correspond with the recommendations in literature which stress the need for educational practitioners to receive specific training in this area to provide meaningful and appropriate supports (Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Gray *et al.*, 2021), however, the current study also highlights the importance of teachers making a concerted effort to understand the autistic experience from the individual's lived perspective. Failure to externalise difficulties should not minimise the extent of the challenges faced by the girls nor should it further disadvantage autistic girls in accessing support. Therefore, gaps in awareness and knowledge relating to sex/gender differences in autism undeniably need to be attended to, but professional learning for teachers also needs to emphasise the individual nature of autistic experience and emphasise the significance of the Double Empathy Problem between autistic and non-autistic individuals to promote more inclusive understanding.

Unsurprisingly, parents called for increased professional learning to improve teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding. They expressed frustration at the inconsistencies and an overall dissatisfaction with teacher knowledge. While the personal motivation of teachers who sought specific training was acknowledged, parents argued that this approach is inadequate and professional learning in this area needs to be mandatory. The need for TPL in this area was also addressed by teachers themselves in the secondary study. Teachers prioritised TPL focused on 'specific training on strategies and interventions to support girls with a diagnosis of autism' as most important for them. However, while information on practical strategies is important, providing only this information may continue to disadvantage autistic girls. Without a knowledge of autistic processing and sex/gender differences more broadly, these strategies may be inflexible and general rather than individualised and thus offer limited benefit (Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022). Unfortunately, less than 20% of teachers deemed training on the identification of autism in girls as helpful. This is somewhat concerning considering that teachers are often the first port of call for referrals (Wood-Downie *et al.,* 2020) and we

know from the findings from girls in this study that they are often not targeted for support because teachers are unaware of their presentation.

In addition to the overall need for training, it was apparent that parents expected those involved in SEN provision in the school to have increased knowledge, perhaps in line with parents in research by Sproston *et al.* (2017) who emphasised the need for at least one person in the school to be knowledgeable in the area. It is noteworthy that teachers are not required to have a professional SEN qualification to work as a part of the SET team in Ireland, but schools are encouraged to deploy teachers with the most relevant experience to provide special education teaching support (DoE, 2024a). The extent to which this is happening on the ground is unknown. While research suggests that specialist teachers have increased knowledge in the area of SEN compared to their mainstream counterparts (Daly *et al.*, 2016; Roberts and Simpson, 2016), parents in the current study reported that this was not the case in their experiences in terms of increased knowledge of autism in girls, again highlighting the potential research-practice gap. This experience can be supported with reference to the findings of the teacher study whereby completion of a postgraduate programme in special/inclusive education positively impacted overall self-reported knowledge of autism and autism in girls and indeed self-reported confidence levels, however, it failed to bridge the knowledge levels and did not increase knowledge of autism in girls to the same levels as knowledge of autism more generally.

Taken together these findings suggest a need to address professional learning for teachers in relation to autism more generally but specifically autism in girls. Due to the emergent nature of research on sex/gender differences in autism, it could be taken that practising teachers did not receive input during their ITE or indeed in postgraduate programmes. Therefore, unless they have undertaken additional specific TPL in this area in their personal time, they may not have been exposed to information arising from developments in sex/gender research. Based on the above a two-fold approach to addressing this issue should be considered. Providers of ITE programmes should ensure input on autism draws from an up-to-date evidence base and addresses research on sex/gender differences. A department-led, school-wide approach to TPL in this area may also be important to consider ensuring all in-service teachers are supported in this area. It is critical that all teachers, regardless of their responsibility, receive high-quality TPL which addresses developments in research relating to sex/gender differences in autism. Furthermore, the potential of establishing CoP and RLC within and across schools and between schools and third level institutions should be highlighted as possible solutions for bridging the

theory-to-practice and research-to-practice gaps in the education landscape. Combined, these approaches may support all teachers to better equipped to meet the needs of all students.

6.5.2 Experiences of the Support Process

'It seems that support is dependent on the school. That's really sad, because everyone should have the right to the same education'

 Fiona

A whole school approach guided by strong leadership (Fitzgerald, 2018) and effective communication (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010), particularly home-school communication (Lindsay *et al.*, 2014; Schultz *et al.*, 2016), have been identified in the literature as significant factors in influencing the success of inclusive education. The findings from the current study corroborate the existing research with parents drawing specific attention to these elements in their narratives. Overall, parents were largely content with their experiences. They did, however, acknowledge these factors as variable depending on school context. Recognition was also afforded to the importance of situating inclusion as a process within the whole-school context, going beyond individual teachers. Separately parents praised principals, SENCos, SEN Departments and SNAs in addition to individual teachers. This is a theme which emerged in the extant literature with the role of the teacher as a facilitator for inclusion acknowledged but recognised as only one component within the broader system in which they exist (Bond and Hebron, 2016; Roberts and Webster, 2020), corresponding with the bio-ecological systems theory underpinning the current research (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Mirroring the broader literature on effective inclusion for autistic students (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013; 2014; Bond and Hebron, 2016; Roberts and Webster, 2020), the parents in the current study identified open communication between home and school as an integral element for navigating the support process in school. This was also supported, albeit in a small minority of responses, within the secondary study of this research with some teachers acknowledging parental voice as important in the provision of appropriate support (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013; 2014). Parents emphasised that having an open line of communication facilitated more positive experiences, however, perceptions and experiences of what that looked like varied. At the most basic level it involved the sharing of information, *e.g.* meeting with the SEN team to raise initial concerns, go through the report upon diagnosis and/or general bi-directional communication to share

information/issues. For example, one parent praised the proactive nature of the school once initial concerns were raised by them. While appearing minimal in some ways, the very action of voicing concerns required the school to be open to communication while their response demonstrated a willingness and receptiveness to process and act on those concerns. In other instances, home-school communication was characterised as a more prolonged, collaborative effort to promote inclusive educational experiences for the girls that were responsive, individualised and sustainable. For example, similar to experiences raised in research, one parent delved into the positive relationship that she had formed with the SEN lead that enabled her to share her parental insights of what worked or didn't work, along with strategies that had been recommended by external professionals (Lindsay *et al.*, 2014; Jarman and Rayner, 2015). This promoted a more consistent and holistic approach to support for her daughter. Although differing experiences were presented in relation to the extent of communication, it was apparent that they were all deemed beneficial in their own right.

It is interesting to note that the majority of examples of home-school communication efforts were between parents and a principal, SENCo or member of the SEN team, rather than with mainstream teachers themselves, despite most of the girls not receiving formal support provision beyond Stage 1 of the continuum of support (DoE, 2024a). This may be a nod towards the adoption of the unformalised SENCo role in Ireland (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2022), however, it also serves to highlight the many interacting systems at play in mediating the experiences of autistic girls in the school context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bond and Hebron, 2017). This finding further stresses the importance of internal communication between those with specified responsibility in SEN and mainstream class teachers and emphasises the importance of collaborative practice between those key players in schools. It has been acknowledged that mainstream teachers often rely on teachers in specialist positions or with specialist qualifications, positioning them as the experts (Daly *et al.*, 2016; Rodden *et al.* 2019). While collaboration between specialist and mainstream teachers can undeniably strengthen capacity, it is imperative to ensure that all teachers acknowledge and accept their responsibility in facilitating Inclusive Education, as set out in Irish policy (DES, 2017a; DoE, 2024a), and it is not viewed only as the responsibility of those in SEN positions, something which was explicitly addressed by the girls themselves in the current study. This is of particular relevance in respect of autistic girls attending mainstream provision because as indicated in the current research many of the supports they may require will fall within the remit of the mainstream teacher.

Therefore, at a minimum it is imperative that mainstream teachers have access to review and discuss information provided by parents and collated by the SENCo or SEN team. Beyond that, it would be anticipated that mainstream teachers develop an awareness of the diversity of autism, recognise characteristics associated with autism in girls and provide appropriate support in line with the individual profiles presenting.

Despite this, literature has revealed that these parent-professional partnerships are not always easy to establish, nor do they always exist (Lindsay *et al.*, 2013; Critchley *et al.*, 2019), something which was unfortunately experienced by one parent in the current study. Contrasting starkly with the experience of the majority of parents in this research, but more consistent with literature relating to the experiences of parents of autistic girls (Jarman and Rayner, 2014; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Cook *et al.*, 2018; Gray *et al.*, 2021), a negative experience prevailed for one parent. They spoke about the immense challenges faced when trying to obtain support for their daughter. Like the experiences of other parents, this parent felt that her concerns were not valued (Cook *et al.*, 2018) and ultimately dismissed by the school (Jarman and Rayner, 2015). Where a body of research highlights discrepancies between parent and school perspectives in terms of the support provided for autistic girls (Moyse and Porter, 2015; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2019; Gray *et al.*, 2021), in this instance there appeared to be no opportunity to attempt to negotiate these discrepancies. Despite promises of support provision upon enrolment, no support had been granted and parental efforts to request support and develop a working relationship with the school were rejected and/or ignored. Similar experiences are reflected in research by Jarman and Rayner (2015) where some parents experienced disregard for their daughters' difficulties and an unwillingness to help when navigating the school system. It is interesting to note that the school attended by the girl in question was an all-girls school (the only single-sex school in this study) and was described as an academic, high-achieving school. The inclusive nature of the school was questioned by the parent and the emphasis on academic success and conformity raised questions in relation to the link between the underpinning ethos and values of a school, and the experiences of autistic girls and more broadly neurodivergent students. This has been considered previously by McKeon (2020) in relation to students with SEN more broadly, highlighting the influence of the academic ethos within the Irish post-primary school context on the fostering of authentic inclusion. However, given the conceptual framework underpinning the current study, it may also be worthwhile to consider whether societal gender stereotypes

combined with stereotyped understandings of autism further amplify this issue for autistic girls attending single-sex girls' schools at post-primary level in Ireland.

While the girl at the centre of this experience was denied access to support, examples shared by other parents in this research highlighted instances where formal support was not being provided. Parents acknowledged that the girls were employing personal measures to manage the mainstream setting, something which was also observed in research by Moyse and Porter (2015). While parents felt this was not an issue currently, they raised concerns about future needs, particularly as the demands increased in line with the perceived academic ethos of post-primary schools in the Irish education system (McKeon, 2020). The lack of formal support can be contextualised in relation to the principles underpinning the special education teaching model at post-primary level in that support should be needs based and may change over time (DoE, 2024a). However, given autistic girls' tendencies to hold it together in school and then collapse when they return home (Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021), it is imperative that communication lines remain open and parental voices are valued by schools in the event that needs increase beyond what is currently being addressed through personal adaptations. The importance of this is further amplified by Moyse (2022) who highlights the implications of incomplete knowledge and assumptions among school staff in relation to needs and relative supports provided. In addition to this, it could be argued that turning a blind eye to the use of personal adaptations encourages masking, which given the literature highlighting the consequences of masking (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Hull *et al.*, 2017) may have implications in terms of the girls' wellbeing. Lastly, it could be argued that these experiences reflect a system that prioritise making the school's life easier rather than supporting the student's needs (Rose, 2022).

In cases where the girls did receive support, parent perceptions of that support were generally positive with some areas for improvement highlighted. Many parents recognised and praised efforts made by the school in relation to support provision. Support for regulation and the flexibility of teachers were commended, with the significance of the role of minor adaptations emphasised. This is reassuring for the Irish context given that positive experiences of support is not a popular trend within the existing research landscape, with the exception of research by Tomlinson *et al.* (2021) which was undertaken in a school context recognised for good autism practice. The most common issue raised by parents in relation to support received by their daughters was

related to the manner in which support was provided. While this was alluded to by the girls themselves in *Section 5.5.2*, it was further expanded on by the girls' parents. Various examples of overt support were discussed with parental reports indicating a dislike among the girls for support that was obvious in nature, be it from teachers or SNAs. It was reported that this form of support encroached on their independence and increased their anxiety in relation to being stereotyped or stigmatised and resulted in rejection of the support. Positively, one parent shared how her daughter's SNA recognised her concerns and navigated the issue expertly and adapted their routines to reduce concerns around accessing support, again highlighting the importance of a relational approach to support with the autistic individual at the centre (Chapman and Botha, 2022; McGreevey *et al.*, 2024; Rose, 2025).

While this issue doesn't appear to be commonly reported in the existing literature with autistic girls, a similar concern was expressed by girls in research by Rainsberry (2017) who emphasised the importance of support not being imposed on them. Although not prominent in the literature, given that autistic girls attribute their experiences of bullying to their autistic differences (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Salter, 2019), it is understandable that they may not wish to draw further attention to their differences in terms of support received. Furthermore, the research suggests that insecure autistic identity may result in autistic students, and indeed autistic girls, distancing themselves from their diagnosis in the school context (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021; Mesa and Hamilton, 2022; Josefsson and Johansson, 2024), something which could also be considered as a factor in the experiences of the girls in the current study. The findings when taken with the research literature elucidate the importance of being appropriate and flexible but also responsive to the needs and preferences of the individual being supported. Schools may need to reflect on their practices and consider how subtle support can be implemented while also remaining effective in its original goals. Perhaps one solution to this problem is to ensure autistic girls themselves are involved in the process of planning support provision. Adopting an experience sensitive approach (McGreevy *et al.* 2024) and valuing the lived experiences of autistic individuals (Pavlopoulou and Dimitriou, 2019; Chapman and Botha, 2022; Rose, 2025) may facilitate a more person-centred approach to support, beneficial to all but perhaps imperative in the instance of autistic girls. The inclusion of student voice in the support planning process has permeated policy in Ireland (DES, 2007; DES 2017a; DoE, 2024), however, it is unclear to what extent this is enacted in practice,

with research suggesting that the voice of the child is often missing from such plans (Mannion, 2024).

Finally, returning to the concept of ethos to bring this section to a close, even in instances where parents discussed positive experiences, some concerns were raised in relation to whether a whole-school approach was thoroughly embedded, with the (in)actions of some overshadowing the commitment of others. While positive attitudes have been identified as an implicit permeating aspect of what makes schools work for autistic students (Roberts and Webster, 2020), the findings of this research raise concern in relation to persisting negative attitudes. Considering the extant literature with the insights shared by parents above and the influential role of others in the school environment as identified by the girls themselves in previous sections, it could be argued that more needs to be done in the Irish context to increase awareness, knowledge and more significantly, understanding of autism, more generally and in girls, among stakeholders within education. While recent developments at a macro level have seen the publication of the Autism Innovation Strategy (GOI, 2024) and more specifically the Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools (GOI, 2022), it could be questioned whether the content of these has been disseminated to individuals beyond those with explicit responsibilities in this area. It may be necessary to consider, particularly in relation to the guidance document for schools, whether publication alone is sufficient or if supportive training is necessary and/or the provision of opportunities to explore the documents at school level required. Moreover, it is imperative to highlight that while these publications make some references to sex/gender differences in autism, these differences are not contextualised throughout the documents. When viewed through an intersectional feminist lens it could be argued that the failure to embed these differences within the broader narrative of the document may serve to further marginalise autistic females and potentially minimise or reduce the significance of these differences to lay-readers.

In summary, the nuances of girls' presentations meant that the support process often had to be activated by their parents rather than their difficulties being identified and supported by education professionals. In light of the above discussion and as suggested in literature (Tutt, 2019; Moyse, 2022), it could be argued that positive home-school relationships underpinned by effective communication and collaboration is perhaps even more significant in the context of supporting autistic girls who internalise their difficulties and may not obviously present as experiencing challenges in the school context. These findings suggest that may currently exists an unequal burden of responsibility on parents

of autistic girls as a result of inadequate awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism in girls but also negative attitudes relating to autism and inclusion more generally in the Irish context.

6.5.3 Shining a Light on the Role of Advocacy

'Advocating is hard'

 Fiona

While parents' experiences navigating the support system to obtain support for their daughters were relatively positive, it was apparent that the system was somewhat flawed and required persistent parental advocacy. Arising from their experiences of the system, parents identified the importance of autistic girls being supported to develop self-advocacy skills.

Some of the parents drew specific attention to their role as parent advocates in improving their daughters' school experience. One parent described to their unique opportunity to advocate given their professional circumstances. She capitalised on informal opportunities throughout the day to advocate for her daughter and autistic individuals more generally by engaging with teachers and offering a parental insight into support. Meanwhile, another parent reported that having meetings with the SENCo afforded her the opportunity to share her parental insights alongside supports from external professionals. These instances contrast with previous research which revealed a lack of attention being afforded to the knowledge of parents (Moyse and Porter, 2015). Despite this, there was an implied sense that the need to advocate was a given for the betterment of their daughter's education (see also Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler *et al.*, 2021; Freeman and Paradis, 2023), however, not all parents may have the tools to advocate.

Parents experienced variable degrees of success in advocacy, and in some instances even the most persistent efforts were not rewarded. This was explicitly addressed by one parent. Characteristic of research with parents of autistic girls, experiences of being a parent advocate were characterised by frustration and negative responses for one parent (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021; Freeman and Paradis, 2023). She highlighted the persistence involved in ensuring her daughter's diagnosis was recognised and her needs attended to in the school context to allow her to succeed and indeed flourish. Persistence, however, is not unique to the one experience shared in this research (see also Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021; Freeman and Paradis, 2023).

Considering this, there is an inherent need to reflect on the wider systems of interaction at play within the school context but also the broader societal context in relation to meeting the needs of autistic girls.

The findings of this research suggest that advocating for an autistic girl can be immensely challenging for parents and may have potentially negative impacts on their wellbeing (Smith-Young *et al.*, 2022). Autistic girls' engagement in masking and their less visible needs may lead to parents' requests being misunderstood and/or denied (Gray *et al.*, 2021; Moyse, 2022). This assertion has been highlighted in a systematic review of parental experiences of raising autistic girls (Hopkins *et al.*, 2023) and can be further supported with reference to Zamora *et al.*, (2014) who report increased levels of parental distress among parents of autistic girls compared to parents of autistic boys. At this point, it is noteworthy to attend to one parent's use of the word 'luckily' when discussing her capacity to advocate. This parent is aware that she has the capacity and skills to advocate for her daughter, however, she emphasises the emotional nature of advocacy and urges that it is increasingly challenging when advocating for a daughter, particularly when nobody is listening. While these feelings are consistent with the extant literature (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021; Freeman and Paradis, 2023), they should not be minimised. They rightfully expose systems as inadequate and arguably unethical and emphasise the need for change.

The need for student self-advocacy was also raised by parents. Consistent with research (Schena II *et al.*, 2023), the girls' parents recognised the potential of self-advocacy in navigating the education system. While two of the parents reported their daughters' emerging ability to self-advocate, they also recognised gaps that would need to be supported. Parents primarily emphasised the importance of self-advocacy from an inclusion perspective in terms of the girls being involved in the support process and ensuring they feel that they are being heard, a perspective which is embedded in policy (DoE, 2024a). Moreover, the importance of self-advocacy in terms of its potential for empowerment beyond the school context was also considered. Parents identified the need to promote independence and equip girls with the skills required for life, emphasising that self-advocacy skills may support the girls in realising that they do not have to struggle in isolation and can seek support. This is something that has been highlighted in research with autistic adults, indicating that supporting autistic individuals in the areas of self-identity and self-advocacy may assist with the asserting of needs (Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Seers and Hogg, 2021; Smith and Mueller, 2022). It could be argued that being able to

self-advocate may offer immense benefits to autistic women and girls. Considering the girls experiences discussed in previous sections, self-advocacy may have supported them to voice their challenges and request support (Zuber and Webber, 2019; Schena II *et al.*, 2023), something which may positively influence their school experiences but may also prove an invaluable life skill as they transition into adulthood. As indicated by parents of autistic girls in this study, there may be merit in providing autistic girls with opportunities to develop self-advocacy in the school context (Rabbitte *et al.*, 2017), with the role of safe spaces for advocacy and the importance of listening to advocacy efforts also prioritised by parents.

Interestingly, while the importance of supporting the girls to be able to advocate for themselves was strongly expressed by parents, it did not feature strongly in teachers' suggestions for support provision in the secondary study, potentially highlighting differing perceptions of needs and experiences (Moyse, 2022). Although self-advocacy was not explicitly addressed, suggestions for support related to supporting self-awareness, teaching about diagnosis, and support in relation to self-esteem. However, suggestions in these areas only accumulated to 8% of total responses. This may suggest that teachers do not perceive this aspect of skill development to fall within their remit (Wood, 2019) or it may simply indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of these skills for autistic girls.

Regardless, it can be argued that the delivery of support in this area may be extremely fruitful and is both justified in research (Egerton *et al.*, 2019; Urbaniak and D'Amico 2024) and supported by policy in the Irish education context (GOI, 2022; DoE, 2024). While the word advocacy itself does not appear in the Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools, this document emphasises the importance of holistic support with advocacy arguably considered as a key area for development in terms of 'independence, daily living skills and self-care' (DoE, 2024a: 45). Addressing self-advocacy in the school context can be further supported with reference to the Autism Good Practice Guidelines which specifically recognises this skill as appropriate for consideration in the development of support plans (GOI, 2022).

Furthermore, as suggested by parents it is important to recognise self-advocacy as one part of a larger journey in which self-discovery and self-understanding play a crucial role. While the provision of individualised support in these areas may be beneficial, the use of programmes such as NeuroBears, LEANS and PEERS as discussed earlier may also prove invaluable in the development of self-advocacy skills in the school context, unfortunately none are signposted as potential frameworks for support in Irish policy. However,

regardless of the frameworks used in developing these skills, recognising the diversity of autism, its embodied nature and the potential challenges of cross-neurotype interactions must be fore fronted. Teacher efforts in the provision of such support must be grounded in a neuroaffirmative approach and informed by the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012a; Crompton *et al.*, 2021; Milton *et al.*, 2022). While some attention is afforded to these areas within the Autism Good Practice Guidelines (GOI, 2022), greater examination at school level may be warranted to counteract potential research-to-practice and theory-to-practice gaps.

Autistic girls and their parents provide insights into the challenges experienced in the mainstream education context. Combining these insights with the data from the qualitative component of the teacher study suggest that in some instances teachers may be aware of common difficulties experienced by autistic individuals, however, the prevalence of internalising and masking among autistic girls may mean they teachers remain unaware of the challenges being experienced. The findings discussed within this theme highlights the importance of increasing teacher knowledge, awareness and understanding of autism in girls, the significance of fostering positive home-school relationships, and need to support the development of self-advocacy. Furthermore, these findings indicate the need for schools to reflect on their values for support provision and consider whether these values reflect a provision which is holistic in nature and reflective of individual needs.

6.6 Teachers: A Critical Component in the Ecological-System

It is apparent from the findings presented above, and in line with extant literature, that teachers play an influential role in mediating the experiences of autistic girls included in mainstream settings. Teachers are a critical component in an autistic girl's ecological system and play a significant role in many of the interactions that occur within the girl's microsystem. While many of the findings from the secondary study with mainstream post-primary teachers have been interspersed throughout this discussion, the following section intends to extricate the most significant results and briefly discuss these in their own right.

Focusing first on teachers' perceptions of their own levels of knowledge and confidence, self-report data revealed some important findings. While a review of international research reveals a prominence of low or medium levels of knowledge of autism among teachers (Gómez-Marí *et al.*, 2021), positively, approximately half of teachers in the current study rated their knowledge of autism as being quite high or high. While it must

be acknowledged that the data in the current study is limited by its self-report nature, the finding is broadly consistent with research in the Irish context which indicates high levels of autism knowledge among post-primary teachers (Young *et al.*, 2017).

However, consistent with research (Gray *et al.*, 2021), data indicated that teachers rated their knowledge of autism higher than their knowledge of autism in girls, with only one third of teachers reporting their knowledge to be in the higher categories when evaluating their knowledge of autism in girls. While this is higher than SENCo reported knowledge in a similar study conducted by Gray *et al.* (2021), it remains inadequate, perhaps unsurprising given that research into sex/gender differences in autism is relatively emergent (Mandy and Lai, 2017). Furthermore, given that it is widely accepted that the translation of research to practice is often slow moving (Barrett and Prendergast, 2025a), it could be argued that research has not yet permeated practice on the ground. However, the magnitude of disparity persisted among teachers who had obtained a postgraduate qualification in special/inclusive education. While those with postgraduate qualification self-reported higher levels of perceived knowledge overall, additional qualification(s) did not close the gap between knowledge of autism and knowledge of autism in girls. To a certain extent, the findings support existing research that professional learning positively influences teacher knowledge of autism (Gómez-Marí *et al.*, 2021) and can have result in significant improvements on staff outlook and use of inclusive practices (Nolan and Hannah, 2019), however, they also raise concerns in relation to the dissemination of the emerging research into sex/gender differences in autism at an institutional level. Nonetheless, given that those with a postgraduate qualification reported higher levels of autism in girls compared to those without such qualification, it could be postulated that completing a programme of further specialised study may influence teacher self-efficacy more broadly.

The above suggestion may also be beneficial in understanding teachers self-reported levels of confidence. While overall, teachers reported moderate levels of confidence both in terms of recognising autism in girls and supporting autistic girls, a similar pattern of results to above emerged with a statistically significant difference between the confidence of those with a postgraduate qualification and those without. Moreover, like the findings from Gray *et al*. (2021) teachers were more assured in their confidence supporting autistic girls compared to recognising them. This may imply that teachers perceive their existing knowledge of autism and practical strategies to be directly transferrable in the case of autistic girls, something which is further reinforced in the qualitative data collated from

the questionnaire. While such knowledge and strategies may be useful in some instances, the need for support informed by sex/gender research has been deemed important by parents of autistic girls (Gray *et al.*, 2021; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021) and in broader sex/gender research literature (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Dean *et al.*, 2017) to meet the unique needs of autistic females. Perhaps more concerning, however, is the lower levels of self-reported confidence recognising autism in girls in the first instance. It is recognised that teachers play a significant role in the identification process for autistic students in terms of initial recognition and referral for diagnosis (O'Byrne, 2018; Wood-Downie *et al.,* 2020) and while Ward *et al.* (2022) reported that gender did not influence teacher's identification of autism, they acknowledged that the vignettes used in their study may have depicted a more male-typical, externalising presentation. It is therefore imperative that teachers are not only aware of the diversity of autism but have a developed awareness of the characteristics associated with the internal presentation of autism often experienced by girls (Carpenter *et al.*, 2019; Wassell and Burke, 2022). As without a comprehensive knowledge to recognise autism in girls, teachers perceived confidence in their ability to support autistic girls is less significant.

However, despite reporting lower levels of knowledge of autism in girls and only moderate levels of confidence, some positive finding emerged from the data in relation to general knowledge levels. Mirroring figures in research conducted with SENCos in the UK by Gray *et al.* (2021), over 80% of teachers who participated in the secondary study of this research recognised that autism can present differently in males and females. Meanwhile, almost two-thirds (63.4%) of teachers were aware that the reported prevalence of autism is not the same in males and females. While most recent estimates suggest a prevalence of 3:1 (Loomes *et al.*, 2017) other research suggests that the prevalence may indeed be relatively equal (Matheis *et al.*, 2019). The developing nature of this issue, combined with the data on teacher awareness of prevalence collected in this study highlights the need for ongoing research and moreover the dissemination of that research to equip members of the public with up-to-date information pertaining to autism. While 71% of teachers recognised masking as a likely characteristic of autism in girls, analysis of characteristic identification suggested that the nuances of that presentation were not wholly understood.

The data yielded interesting insights into teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of autism in girls. On average, participants responded to 60.19% of the statements in line with the theoretical literature base. However, 31.23% of these responses, although

aligned, were in the uncertain range of the 10-point scale. While the statistics for the theoretically aligned responses are promising, the certainty levels may suggest that participants may have guessed or lacked confidence in their response, concerns which are supported by earlier self-report ratings of knowledge and confidence among teachers. Furthermore, given the diversity of autism, it could also be considered that teachers responded to the characteristic identification based on their previous professional experiences, rather than a holistic knowledge of the profile more generally. Regardless, it is apparent that a more solid foundation is required in this area.

This need for a stronger knowledge base is further reinforced upon interrogation of the individual responses. Teachers were more likely to identify characteristics that reflected a more traditional profile of autism, with a broader spectrum of responses recorded in relation to statements reflective of the presentation of autism in females, perhaps indicating uncertainty among teachers. While this is positive in that it demonstrates a good knowledge of the characteristics of autism more generally in the Irish context (Goméz-Marí *et al.*, 2021), it also reinforces the idea that teachers hold a stereotyped knowledge of autism, an issue revealed in other research carried out with teachers by Whitlock *et al.* (2020). This finding complements the other finding which suggested that teachers had a greater level of knowledge in autism compared to knowledge of autism in girls. While it could be argued that knowledge of a specific subcategory may be lower than a more general one, the fact that teacher knowledge of the diagnostic criteria is more reflective of the 'traditional' or 'male' presentation argues against this. This supports the idea that knowledge of autism to date can be regarded as knowledge of male autism, as discussed in *Section 1.1*, and knowledge of autism in girls is relatively less well known.

Moreover, while a large proportion of teachers recognised masking as a characteristic of autism in girls, 'increased social motivation', 'good verbal communication', and 'use of non-verbal communication' were less frequently identified, all of which are arguably linked with the concept of masking (Pearson and Rose, 2021). This may indicate an incomplete understanding of the potential social profile of autistic girls, something which may have implications for both identification and support in the school context (Milner *et al.*, 2019; Gray *et al.*, 2021), and in turn potentially exacerbate the negative impacts of engagement in masking (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Hull *et al.*, 2017).

It is also interesting to consider the impact of dominant discourse on teacher knowledge. The term 'special interest' is often inextricably linked with autism and is often associated

with interests that may be perceived as 'unusual' or at odds with an individual's chronological age (Winter-Messiers, 2007). However, autistic girls disrupt this narrative and often demonstrate interests in line with their non-autistic peers, although perhaps differing in intensity (Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Lai *et al.*, 2015; Hiller *et al.*, 2016). Like findings from Gray *et al.* (2021), the data in this study would suggest that mainstream post-primary teachers in Ireland are not aware of the different manifestation of interests among autistic girls with only 26.5% of teachers recognising this in the characteristic identification. This raises concerns in the instance that teachers are using 'special interests' as a behavioural marker for identifying autism in the classroom context. It is important to note that analysis of the identification of characteristics should be considered tentatively given the exploratory nature of the study and the design of the data collection tool. However, these findings serve to further reiterate the views of the parents in this study that teachers are often not aware of the presentation or experiential differences in autism among girls.

Overall, the findings relating to teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism in girls are mixed. While positive baseline awareness was evident, gaps existed in relation to the nuances of the presentation. This is problematic given the aim that school staff should have the appropriate 'knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence' to support all autistic students in the school context (GOI, 2022). The findings are similar to those presented by Gray *et al.* (2021) however, it is important to consider the samples involved. The participants in the referenced research were identified as SENCos with specialist responsibility in the area of SEN, while the participants in this research were mainstream class teachers. It was perhaps expected that SENCos would have demonstrated greater levels of awareness, knowledge and understanding compared to the mainstream class teachers in this study, however, this was not necessarily the case. Despite this, the findings raise some minor concerns in relation to the speed of which developments in research are filtering into practice contexts. The research by Gray *et al.* (2021) was conducted at least three years ago prior to data collection for the current study, yet the same misconceptions appear to be present.

Therefore, the findings of the current research when taken with the existing literature highlight inadequate knowledge and understanding of the internal presentation of autism commonly associated with girls, something which can potentially be attributed to stereotyped and gender-biased knowledge among teachers. The issue of stereotyped and gender-biased knowledge has been consistently cited as a factor in the marginalisation of autistic females (Lai *et al.*, 2011; Gould, 2017; Hull *et al.*, 2017; Saxe, 2017; O'Hagan

and Bond, 2019; Lockwood-Estrin *et al.*, 2021; Wassell and Burke, 2022), limited not to the education context (Whitlock *et al.*, 2020; Ward *et al.*, 2022), but also permeating the diagnostic and post-diagnostic experiences of autistic women and girls (Jones *et al.,* 2014; Bargiela *et al.*, 2016; Kelly *et al.*, 2024; Tien *et al.*, 2025). Drawing the existing and current secondary research together, there is a need to enhance awareness and understanding of the diversity of autism and educate teachers in relation to the presentation of autism in girls. This is further reinforced upon reflection of the significance of the role of the teacher as a mediator of their experiences expressed within the girls' narratives in *Section 5.5.2*. However, recognising the interactions that occur within and the influence of the various systems within an autistic girl's ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), accurate information is also imperative for all stakeholders involved in the education of autistic girls. Although beyond the scope of this research, it is also apparent and important to acknowledge that stereotyped and gender-biased knowledge is a persistent issue extending beyond the education context with implications for autistic females more broadly.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter incorporated the findings from both the primary and secondary studies within this PhD research to present a comprehensive discussion on the educational experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream provision at post-primary level. The four main findings of the primary study; *Being Autistic in a Neurotypical System; Being in the School Environment; Being with Others* and *Parent Perspectives* were discussed with reference to the existing evidence base and where appropriate the secondary study with mainstream post-primary teachers. Given the significance of teachers within the narratives of the girls and their parents, the final section; *Teachers: A Critical Component in the Ecological-System,* attends specifically to the findings of the secondary study of this research, recognising its original contribution to the field. Considered as a whole, this chapter illustrates the complexity of school experiences for autistic girls and, in line with its theoretical underpinning highlights the various interacting systems at play in determining these experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). At the very core, this research highlighted that one must recognise the constellation of autistic traits and the interplay between autism and the school environment. Furthermore, the experiences of autistic girls are further influenced by the interacting systems within their broader ecological system. Teachers, peers, parents and school staff have a significant role in mediating experiences,

however the narratives put forth by the girls and their parents indicate also the role of school ethos and policies, societal attitudes and policies at macro-level.

On the surface, many of the girls' experiences within the school context may draw parallels with the experiences of their male counterparts, but looking through the lens of intersectional feminism, it is apparent that these experiences are distinct in terms of how they are perceived by others, with the girls challenges often misunderstood, dismissed or missed altogether. Contextualised within the secondary study of this research, the girls' experiences are perhaps unsurprising with findings suggesting that mainstream post-primary teachers in the Republic of Ireland do not feel adequately equipped to recognise and support autistic girls and may not understand the nuances of the internal presentation of autism more commonly associated with females. The impact of such is profoundly experienced by autistic girls themselves and witnessed, navigated and supported by their parents. Such data, when considered together and with reference to the extant literature, may support the development of future Inclusive Education and Autism policies and inform practice in the school context, in Ireland and beyond.

To conclude, this study, by incorporating the voices of three main stakeholders, autistic girls, their parents and mainstream post-primary teachers, contributes to an evolving understanding of autistic girls' experiences of mainstream provision on an international level. It is groundbreaking in its effort to better understand autistic girls' experiences within the Irish education context, not only unveiling the lived experience of autistic girls and insights from their parents but also establishing a tentative national baseline of teacher awareness, knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to autism and girls. The findings highlight pockets of good practice happening in schools but also illuminate practices that continue to marginalise autistic girls.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

Informed by the findings discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the final chapter presents the main conclusions that can be drawn from this PhD research to provide a greater insight into the mainstream educational experiences of autistic girls. This chapter first revisits the underpinning rationale for the current research, before re-introducing the research questions set out at the beginning of the study and summarising the empirical data in each instance. The collective insights emerging from the findings and the implications of the research for the current inclusive education landscape, and specifically the Irish context are highlighted. The limitations of the research are presented and recommendations for policy, practice and future research considered.

7.2 Research Rationale

Recognising the absence of published research on the educational experiences of autistic girls in the Irish context, along with the historic marginalisation of autistic females and importance of eliciting the lived perspective of autistic individuals in an inclusive manner, the significance of the study is apparent. The framework of intersectional feminism impresses the importance of affording individuals marginalised because of intersecting identities the opportunity to share their narrative. Therefore, this study sought to illuminate the experiences of autistic girls in their own right, and not for comparative purposes. Furthermore, appreciating the complex nature of school experiences and the various interacting and influential systems at play, collecting data from parents and teachers was warranted for a more in-depth and comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon.

7.3 Research Questions

Acknowledging the multi-faceted nature of this PhD project, one overarching research question underpinned the entire research process.

- How can the mainstream educational experiences of autistic female students be better understood through examination of student, parent/guardian and teacher perspectives?

For refinement purposes, five specific research questions were posed to support the process of attending to the overarching question. The answers to these questions work in tandem to allow a comprehensive response to the larger question underpinning this research. For the purposes of clarity, each question is introduced and responded to in

isolation below before the collective insights and implications of the research are considered.

1. *How do autistic girls experience mainstream education provision at post-primary level?*

Autistic girls presented unique insights into their experiences of mainstream education provision. In line with the idiographic commitment of IPA, a concerted effort was made to retain the nuances of the diverse participant experiences in the initial presentation of findings in Chapter 5. However, at a group level, the findings suggested that autistic girls made sense of their school experiences with reference to the system, the environment and the people in which they embodied these experiences. At a system level, the girls discussed the demands of the system and their learning experiences. The sensory environment was often identified as a challenge for the girls and the need for safe spaces reported. Lastly, the interactions that occurred within the post-primary context were positioned as influential in determining experiences, with the girls discussing peer interactions, friendships, teachers and the overall impact of stereotyped perceptions of autism.

2. *How do girls interact with their autistic identity with reference to the school context?*

The girls' interaction with their autistic identity in this research was complex. When asked directly about their experiences of being an autistic girl in school in the Dixit Card activity (*Section 3.10.5.2.3*), the girls recognized, articulated and discussed their autistic identity with reference to its implications in school and beyond. The girls spoke about the challenges they faced, feeling disadvantaged by the neuro-normative system and the exhaustion associated with being autistic within this system. They also demonstrated an emerging self-awareness in relation to what they needed to navigate and experience success in the school context in relation to their academic, sensory and social needs. Furthermore, the girls recognised that their presentation of autism is not the stereotype, and they wanted people to see them and to be recognised as autistic. However, at the same time the girls appeared reticent to discuss their experiences with reference to their diagnosis. Experiences and experiences of being were sometimes discussed as parallel to their non-autistic peers or as quirks of 'personality'. Taken together, this may capture the emergent nature of their autistic identity and/or may reflect the extent to which masking is a part of the female profile of autism.

3. *What are parents/guardians' perspectives on their daughters' experiences in mainstream settings?*

The parents in this research provided valuable insight into their daughters' experiences in mainstream settings and also shared their own experiences of navigating the school system. Parents shared their perspectives on their daughters' experiences in terms of positives of post-primary school, challenges faced and the broader impact of those challenges. Parents expressed concern in relation to the awareness, knowledge and understanding of teachers in relation to autism and girls, but also autism more broadly. They highlighted how the gaps in teacher capacity had implications initially in terms of their daughters' identification but also in terms of support. Parents reported that their daughters' needs were frequently missed and, in some cases, dismissed, requiring parental advocacy. The demands of advocacy were starkly presented by parents; however, it was viewed as a non-negotiable parental duty to ensure their daughters' needs were met. In most instances, parents believed schools were receptive to providing support once needs were highlighted. Unfortunately, some negative experiences were also reported.

4. *How do mainstream class teachers evaluate their knowledge of autism (generally and in girls); their confidence recognising autism in girls and supporting autistic girls in the education context, and their professional development needs?*

Teachers largely reported high to quite high levels of knowledge relating to autism in general. However, they reported lower levels of knowledge in relation to autism in girls. Completion of a postgraduate programme positively impacted self-report data; however, it failed to bridge the gap between knowledge of autism and knowledge of autism in girls. Teachers reported moderate levels of confidence both in terms of recognising autism in girls and supporting autistic girls, but they appeared to be marginally more confident in their capacity to provide support rather than recognise the characteristics of autism in girls. Like their self-reported knowledge levels, engagement with a postgraduate qualification positively influenced confidence. Finally, teachers expressed a desire for professional development. Specific training on strategies and interventions was identified as the most helpful form of TPL, followed by TPL on identification of autism in girls and workshops on the topic of women and girls with autism.

5. *Are teachers aware of gender differences in autism?*

Results from the teacher component of this research suggest that teachers may be somewhat aware of gender differences in autism. A large proportion of teachers were aware that autism could present different in males and females and over half of teachers

identified that current reported prevalence of autism is not the same in males and females. Furthermore, masking was readily identified as a characteristic associated with autism in girls. However, the data suggested that teachers were more *au fait* with characteristics associated with a more traditional or stereotypical, male-biased presentation of autism. Teachers less frequently identified characteristics that are reflective of the presentation of autism in girls as presented in research literature.

7.4 Collective Insights and Implications of Research

While there exists an emerging body of research which explores the school experiences of autistic girls, this is primarily UK based and ranges across school settings. This research is the first to explore the experiences of autistic girls within the Irish education system, focused within the mainstream context at post-primary level. This study adds to the research landscape but perhaps more significantly, provides a starting point from which an evidence-base relating to autistic girls' experiences of education can be developed upon in Ireland. In an effort to highlight the implications of this multi-informant, mixed methods research, Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model will be used to present the collective insights drawn.

7.4.1 Individual Level

It was apparent that the constellation of autistic characteristics experienced by the autistic girls in this study inherently influenced their school experiences in varied ways to varying extents. Consistent with extant literature on autistic girls' school experiences (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2019; Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024), the interplay between autistic processing and the school environment had implications for the girls in terms of self-management, the learning process, the sensory environment and social interactions. Given the embodied nature of autism, some challenges are inherently experiential (Milton 2014; Kourti, 2021), *e.g.* sensory differences, and therefore may be difficult for non-autistic individuals to fully understand (Milton, 2012a). However, of particular significance in this research is how the challenges experienced by girls in these domains were presented in the school context. It was apparent from the narratives presented by the girls and their parents that the autistic girls both explicitly and implicitly masked their challenges and internalised potential feelings of distress arising from these challenges in the school context. Therefore, while the girls experienced challenges in areas similar to their male counterparts, their struggles were often missed or misunderstood by others (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Dean *et al.*, 2017).

Similar to research by Mannion (2024), the current research demonstrated the capacity of the girls to articulate their experiences, to identify their areas of strengths and preferences and share information about challenges and worries. However, the insights from parents and girls suggested that the girls often do not voice their challenges in the school context. Parents reported some instances where their daughter was involved in decision making for support; however, it appeared that the needs of the girls were often not considered a priority in school support systems.

Taken together these findings have implications for individual schools and at system level. Appreciating the embodied nature of autism (Milton, 2014a; Kourti, 2021), along with the autistic girls' tendency to mask and internalise their challenges (Wassell and Burke, 2022; Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023), the importance of promoting student voice must not be underestimated in the school context (Pavlopoulou and Dimitriou, 2019; Mannion, 2024; McGreevey *et al.*, 2024). In line with the flexibility of SETAM (DoE, 2024b) and in recognition of holistic support (DoE, 2024a), supporting self-understanding and teaching self-advocacy skills may bridge the gap between the internal presentation of autism often experienced by girls and gaps in support provision (Critchley and Critchley, 2019; Egerton *et al.*, 2019; Mullally *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, this research demonstrates the need for schools to consider how individualised and person-centred approaches to support can be operationalised. The challenges of this approach within the confines of the current model are recognised (DoE, 2024b), however, if valued at school level and invested in at macro level, this model would better appreciate the diversity among autistic students and thus, provide a more holistic and experience sensitive approach (McGreevey *et al.)* to support for autistic girls, and the broader autistic school community.

7.4.2 Microsystem

Teachers were revealed as the most influential component of the girls' microsystems and were viewed as mediators of experience (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2019; Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024). Where relationships were formed and interactions were characterised by care and effort, they had the power to positively influence experiences. However, in other instances, inadequate awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism in girls and autism more generally impacted the girls' experiences negatively. Gaps in teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding were also recorded in data collected from teachers themselves, emphasising the need to address this issue at a macro level.

This research demonstrated the potential of UDL (CAST.org, 2025) as an inclusive pedagogy in supporting learning but highlighted the value of and need for more

individualised, specialist support in the areas of self-management, sensory needs and social support. In some instances, appropriate support was provided and in other instances it wasn't. Where support needs were not met, this had significant implications in the home context in the form of an after-school collapse. More positively, contextualised through the lens of monotropism (Murray *et al.*, 2005), the significance of interest-driven learning for the girls in this study must be highlighted. However, as discussed at the individual level, it is important to recognise the impact of masking and internalising tendencies at this point. While teachers may have had an inadequate knowledge base as has been suggested in research (Gray *et al.*, 2021; Whitlock *et al.*, 2020) and the findings of the secondary study, it is important to acknowledge that they may also have been unaware of specific challenges being experienced by the girls if this was not communicated to them, thus, impacting support received.

These findings highlight issues in terms of awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism in girls. They also indicate the need for increased knowledge of autism more generally with reference to autism theory, particularly in terms of understanding autistic processing, and the interplay between it and environments designed for the neuro-majority (Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019; Chapman, 2023). Understanding autistic differences in the education context through theory may support teachers to conceptualise autism as a different processing style and may afford teachers a more flexible knowledge base when supporting autistic students (Lawson, 2011; Milton, 2012a; Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019). The insights garnered in relation to interest-driven learning support the adoption of a strengths-based approach when supporting autistic girls (Wood, 2019; 2021; White *et al.*, 2023). Lastly, the potential of both universal and specialist supports was emphasised in this research. So, while there is an inherent need to increase awareness of and enact UDL in the post-primary classroom as evidenced in literature (Bray *et al.*, 2024; Phelan *et al.*, 2025), contrary to the debate on Inclusive Pedagogy (Florian *et al.*, 2011; Florian and Beaton, 2018), the findings of this research endorse an integrative stance valuing neurodiversity but also acknowledging the need for teachers to have a foundational knowledge of autism and evidence-based practices (Ravet, 2011).

7.4.3 Mesosystem

The significance of the mesosystem in the education context is amplified in this research. The collective insights from autistic girls and their parents offered a more holistic understanding of the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream education provision. While the autistic girls shared their experiences, they frequently discussed

these without reference to their autism diagnosis. The exception to this was the Dixit Card activity. This is addressed in *Section 7.3* above. In contrast, the parents often contextualised their daughters' experiences through the lens of autism. Furthermore, consistent with the literature, parents shared knowledge of presentations across contexts and provided a unique perspective on the impact of unmet needs by detailing the after-school collapse experiences of the autistic girls (Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). Parents discussed how their daughters' journey to diagnosis was often met with disbelief and/or dismissal and how access to support was a constant battle requiring their advocacy.

The shared experiences of parents who have navigated the system to obtain recognition and support for their daughters reveal outdated attitudes and knowledge and a system not fit for purpose. This research demonstrates the importance of valuing insights offered by parent advocates, at a school level, and beyond. While girls may not externalise their distress in the school context, parents often observe their daughters' presentation across contexts, gaining a more comprehensive insight into their profile of autism. They also witness first-hand the implications of inappropriate environments when the girls return home to their safe space. Additionally, in some instances strong parent-daughter relationships may support enhanced understanding of girls' experiences for parents. Parental involvement may facilitate problem solving and strategy sharing. Therefore, knowledge held by parents may be extremely valuable for school staff in terms of better understanding the presentation and experiences of autistic girls (Moyse, 2022).

7.4.4 Exosystem

Teacher professional learning, school ethos and inter-professional collaboration emerged as important elements to consider in the educational experiences of autistic girls. This research has demonstrated that autistic girls can and do present differently compared to autistic boys in the school context (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023). It is therefore unsurprising that the need for TPL was illustrated throughout this research and was addressed by the autistic girls and their parents, as well as teachers themselves. Positively, engagement in a formal qualification in special and inclusive education influenced self-reported knowledge of autism and autism in girls overall, however, lower levels of self-reported knowledge of autism in girls persisted. Next, although not specifically addressed, elements of ethos were implicitly discussed in the narratives of both autistic girls and their parents. The girls often described their classroom experiences with reference to classroom culture and the attitude of the teacher. The manner in which support was enacted, and in

some case bound by limitations, was also discussed. From a parent perspective the school's ethos played a significant role in how they experienced navigating the system to obtain support for their daughters. Finally, inter-professional collaboration to support the girls appeared non-existent in this research, a finding in itself and worthy of consideration.

These findings provide a unique insight the influences of the exosystem on the girls' experiences and offer considerations for provision moving forward. The findings signify an inherent need for training among mainstream class teachers. It could be argued that ITE programmes and TPL courses are not adequately preparing teachers to recognise and support autism in girls and may not be providing the most up-to-date research and understandings of autism. However, in recognising the complexity of professional practice, it is important to recognise that a theory-to-practice gap may influence the enactment of inclusive practices. Additionally, acknowledging that sex/gender differences in autism is a developing area of research, a research-to-practice gap may explain the limited awareness, knowledge and understanding of teachers in relation to autism in girls. The findings in this research raise concerns about a theory-to-practice and a research-to-practice gap and therefore warrant consideration as to how these issues may be addressed in practice.

Recognising the aforementioned gaps in teacher capacity to recognise and support girls, and in acknowledgement of the limited inter-professional collaboration reported in the current study, there may be merit in the provision of formalised processes to capitalise on the specific knowledge of external professionals. Consistent with recommendations in extant literature, and upon consideration of the experiences of autistic girls in this research, OTs could assist teachers in meeting the sensory needs of autistic girls (Mills and Chapparo, 2018; Ruttledge and Cathcart, 2019; Dynia *et al.*, 2022) while Educational Psychologists, psychiatrists or counsellors may be best placed to support the social and emotional needs of autistic girls (Gray *et al.*, 2021; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021; O'Hagan *et al.*, 2024). While acknowledging the capacity building model currently being trialled in Ireland (NCSE, 2019; NCSE, 2024), recognising the time constraints of mainstream teachers and the resourcing constraints that may arise in SETAM (Mills and Chapparo, 2018; DoE, 2024), there may also be merit in direct therapeutic support for girls from these stakeholders as well as a more holistic approach to support where allied professionals may act as an interprofessional bridge working with parents, teachers and students directly to better meet the needs of autistic girls in the school context. These considerations have broader implications for supporting the school ethos. As presented in

literature, a school wide inclusive ethos is important in the educational experiences of autistic students (Morewood *et al*., 2011; Goodall, 2018). The experiences of the girls and parents in this research suggest that ethos can determine the use of inclusive practices and feelings of inclusion.

7.4.5 Macrosystem

This research has raised macro-level considerations for policy and societal values and attitudes. In terms of policy, responses from girls, parents and teachers illustrate the complexity of the enactment of inclusive education policies in practice. Tensions existed between the right to support as per national policy and the provision of support for those whose needs may not be as obviously visible. Beyond policy, it was apparent that the girls' experiences of school were hugely influenced by the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of others. The girls and their parents spoke of the preconceptions and misconceptions help by both teachers and students in relation to autism and addressed the implications of this for support.

While these findings indicate gaps in teacher knowledge and challenges at school level, it is important to emphasise that the aim is not to blame or attribute these issues to individual teachers or schools but rather to encourage critical examination and reflection at the broader systems influencing the micro-level interactions. Firstly, the variability of experiences outlined in this research in relation to teacher awareness, knowledge and understanding suggests that this issue needs to be addressed at system level. Rather than relying on individual teacher motivation and capacity, all teachers must be supported to avail of high quality TPL to ensure they can meet the needs of autistic girls in the school context. Furthermore, it is important to recognise the other constraints that may influence the enactment of inclusive policy in practice such as resourcing (pupil-teacher ratio/school, space/time), funding and the reported academic ethos permeating post-primary education.

Secondly, there are implications in terms of the effective enactment of SETAM. The findings raise questions about the appropriateness of resourcing in the school context and asks the question of what is being prioritised. While SETAM affords autonomy to schools to deploy resources based on need (DoE, 2024b) and the guidelines recognise holistic needs (DoE, 2024a), it must be questioned whether autistic girls are being provided with the same opportunities to access appropriate supports compared to other students who perhaps externalise their difficulties. Finally, this research implies an inherent need to address stereotyped and gender-biased knowledge of autism among teachers and students

to ensure more inclusive schools (Whitlock *et al.*, 2020; Gray *et al.*, 2021; Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023). However, recognising that this is a macro-level issue, broader dissemination of the changing conceptualisation of autism is required among the general public to promote greater awareness of masking and the internal presentation of autism (Crane *et al.*, 2016; Dillon *et al.*, 2023).

7.4.6 Chronosystem

This research with autistic girls and their parents took place represent a snapshot in time. Change over time was not a core aim of the research. However, the autistic girls and their parents did allude to periods of transition, with data suggesting that these presented challenges for the girls, particularly in terms of friendships and the increasing demands but positive aspects of post-primary school compared to primary school. These findings point towards the challenge of transitions across contexts, which may be amplified by the developmental stage of adolescence and as well as autistic identity.

7.4.7 A Bioecological System Understanding

Collectively, the findings of this research suggest that there appears to exist a research-to-practice gap in the area of sex/gender differences in autism. While a growing body of research has emerged in recent years on sex/gender differences in autism, the findings of this study suggest that developments in this area have not translated into policy and practice in the education landscape. The findings suggest that the developing research is perhaps not reaching stakeholders involved in education, specifically teachers, which has implications for the identification and support of autistic girls in the school context. While many of the experiences shared by the girls are not dissimilar to the research conducted with autistic students more generally, it is clear that there are many nuances in terms of how their experiences are recognised and understood in the school context as a result of their visibility to others.

7.5 Limitations

Engagement with reflection throughout and following the research process highlighted several limitations pertaining to both the primary and secondary study.

7.5.1 Primary Study Limitations

The adoption of participatory research in autism studies is becoming increasingly encouraged. This research is consistent with the research priorities of the autistic community (Pellicano *et al.*, 2014) and while I have included and endeavoured to amplify the voices of autistic girls in this research, it cannot be described as truly participatory (Crane *et al.*, 2020; Parsons *et al.*, 2020). It was only through attending the EERA Summer School in year two of my PhD that I developed a comprehensive understanding of participatory research. At this point, I had a clear roadmap in place for my research. Following much deliberation and critical evaluation of my proposed research at that stage, I recognised that it could not be positioned as participatory research. Therefore, in accordance with Fletcher-Watson *et al.* (2021), this research was informed by and developed with reference to a six-pillar model of Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research.

Research has called for the inclusion of members of the autistic community who are underrepresented in literature (Saxe, 2017; Cascio *et al*., 2021; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021). My research specifically attended to autistic females as an underrepresented cohort. The sample in this research comprised of six white females and their white parents, therefore this research does not provide representation from non-white autistic individuals, nor did it specifically attend to those who fall outside the gender-binary, both cohorts which have been identified as particularly marginalised in autism research (Lovelace *et al.*, 2022; Rea *et al.,* 2024). Also, the inclusion criteria specified autistic females diagnosed at Level 1, attending mainstream provision. This focus excluded those who may be non-speaking or have co-occurring intellectual disability and perhaps have more significant support needs, of which would result in a differing experience again and warrant exploration in their own right (Russell *et al.*, 2019; Lebenhagen, 2020; Cascio *et al*., 2021).

Lastly, I argue that these are not limitations, however, I believe it is important to highlight two key considerations arising from the IPA approach adopted in the primary study. Firstly, consistent with the hermeneutic underpinnings, specifically the double hermeneutic component, of IPA (Smith *et al*., 2022), the findings represent my interpretations of the data collected from autistic girls and their parents. Secondly, the

sample size of 12 participants, six girl-parent dyads, could be deemed relatively small. However, an IPA study does not seek generalisability (Noon, 2018; Smith *et al.*, 2022). The idiographic nature of IPA enables the illumination of individual experiences (Howard *et al.*, 2019) which adds to the broader literature on experiences resulting in a gradual accumulation of IPA studies in a given area, facilitating the development of more general claims (Smith and Osbourne, 2003; Noon, 2018)

7.5.2 Secondary Study Limitations

The questionnaire utilised in the secondary study was a researcher-generated, non-standardised measure which had implications for its internal consistency. The questionnaire was guided by and adapted from Gray *et al.* (2021). Assessment of knowledge and confidence levels were limited by self-report data, which by their nature are subjective. Furthermore, data on these concepts was collected using single-item measures. While single-item measures are statistically not invalid (Allen *et al.*, 2022), it may be argued that purpose-developed and validated psychometric scales may enable the collection of data at a more granular level. Secondly, the section focused on characteristic identification was developed in accordance with the emerging literature on the presentation of autism in girls. This component of the questionnaire positioned characteristics as either reflecting or not reflecting the presentation of autism in girls, as per literature. I recognise that the characteristics of autism cannot be reduced to a dichotomous scale and that this approach does not credit the individuality of autistic experience, however, given the exploratory nature of the research and the current dearth of research in this area, I believe this will provide a springboard for future research.

7.6 Recommendations

The findings of this research contribute to a growing understanding of the presentation of autism in girls and the autistic female experience and provide insights that can inform, improve and develop policy, practice and future research.

7.6.1 Policy

This research has demonstrated how autistic girls can and do present differently to autistic boys. This has implications for initial recognition, diagnosis and support. As demonstrated in the published paper (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023), autistic girls may meet the diagnostic criteria in a more nuanced way compared to autistic boys which may result in them being missed or diagnosed later (Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Gould, 2017; Rutherford *et al.*, 2016; Lai *et al.*, 2017; Wassell and Burke, 2022). I recommend the reviewal and updating of the diagnostic criteria and accompanying screening and

diagnostic tools to better recognize the presentation of autism in females. Examples of the nuances of the internal presentation as presented in Munroe and Dunleavy (2023) may signpost clinicians and teachers as to what to look out for, beyond the stereotypical presentation.

Appreciating that recognition precedes diagnosis (Driver and Chester, 2021). Provisions need to be made at macro level to support **all** teachers to avail of high-quality, up-to-date training on autism in girls at a whole-school level. Like the approach taken to new curriculum training days, I propose that all schools across Ireland receive mandatory training in this area.

The findings suggest that girls are not receiving adequate levels of support. In the first instance, increased funding and resourcing may support schools to better meet the needs of all students. Secondly, I recommend reconsidering the removal of complex needs as a criterion for support allocation. Basing the 'unified allocation' solely on the literacy and numeracy profile of the school (DoE, 2024c) is discriminatory and increases the risk of further marginalising some students by failing to account for the diversity of needs presenting in the school context. Furthermore, it undermines the promotion of holistic support as encouraged in current guidance (NEPS, 2007a; GOI, 2022; DoE, 2024a).

7.6.2 Practice

Recognising the emergent and developing nature of this area of research, teachers must be supported to access and disseminate research. In an effort to bridge the research-to-practice gap, I recommend that researchers work with and within school communities, informed by the Research Learning Communities (RLC) model (Mintz *et al.*, 2021). This could be focused on the sharing of knowledge and/or being a facilitator or a conductor of research with students in schools which can then be presented to school communities.

Teachers must be aware of the internal presentation and must be adequately equipped with the knowledge and understanding required to recognise and support autistic girls in the classroom context. The findings from this research suggest the need for increased awareness, knowledge and understanding among teachers. I present two recommendations for consideration in this area.

- To ensure a foundational understanding of autism in girls for all teachers, I propose that schools avail of in-school TPL opportunities. Schools should also come together as a community to interrogate peer-reviewed research in this area. Adopting the Communities of Practice (CoP) or Professional Learning

Communities (PLC) models may assist schools in establishing a more long-term commitment to evidence-informed practices in the school context, while also supporting the potential theory-to-practice gap (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2018; Ver Loren Van Themaat, 2019; Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist, 2022)

- In terms of existing training opportunities, ITE providers and TPL facilitators should review their training material to ensure it is inclusive of the internal presentation of autism, commonly associated with girls and attend to the implications of this in the classroom context. Content should be underpinned by the neurodiversity paradigm and address the diversity of autistic experiences.

Even where awareness and knowledge exist, the findings suggest that teachers may be unaware of the challenges faced by autistic girls due a potentially more passive presentation, a lack of externalizing behaviours, masking of autistic characteristics and internalizing distress. In light of this, I make the following two suggestions.

- There is an inherent need to promote authentic parent-school partnerships. This research highlighted the value of home-school communication and collaboration. In line with existing research (Moyse, 2022), I believe that these partnerships are even more important in the context of autistic girls. Autistic girls often present differently in the home and school context. Parents see and support their daughters across contexts and can provide valuable information to the school, and individual teachers, to inform the provision of support.
- The embodied nature of autism (Milton, 2014a; Kourti, 2021) along with the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a; 2012b) mean that the autistic experience may not be truly understood by those supporting the autistic individual. Arguably, this is even more pressing in the context of autistic girls who tend to mask their characteristics and internalize their distress. Therefore, I recommend, in line with current policy (DoE, 2024a), that the voices of autistic girls are elicited in the support process and that support plans are co-constructed with autistic girls, insofar as possible.

Finally, in terms of support provision, three recommendations can be made based on the findings from this research.

- There is an inherent need to support self-understanding and teach self-advocacy skills in the context of autistic girls. It was apparent in this research that girls

interacted with their autistic identity to varying extents, which had implications in terms of their wellbeing, school experiences and the support process. Furthermore, while parents advocated on their daughter's behalf, they recognized the need for their daughters to develop self-advocacy skills. Current policy encourages addressing the holistic needs of students (DoE, 2024a) with self-advocacy specifically addressed (GOI, 2022). While self-understanding and self-advocacy are inextricably linked, I believe self-understanding must first be supported for effective self-advocacy. Schools need to embrace the flexibility of the current support model and meet the needs of autistic girls, even when these needs may appear less obvious compared to the more externalizing needs of some students.

- This research has highlighted the potential of UDL in meeting the learning needs of autistic girls in a subtle but supportive manner, capitalizing on individual strengths. I stand with Phelan *et al.* (2025) and recommend the need for increased training on and engagement with the UDL framework in the post-primary context.
- Recognising the positive aspects of school as identified by the girls, the power of interests and interest-driven learning is apparent. A strengths-based approach should be adopted in the school context to support the engagement and success of autistic girls.

7.6.3 Future Research

Similar to this study, much of the existing research also focuses on the post-primary setting, therefore, it would be important for future research to capture the voices of younger autistic girls attending the primary school context. Moreover, to better capture the developmental trajectories of autistic girls and their influences on experiences, longitudinal research spanning across the transition from primary to post-primary would hold merit.

This research was carried out with a small, homogenous sample. Eliciting the voices of more autistic girls who may have additional intersecting identities other than gender and diagnosis may offer greater insight, increase representation in the research body and reveal more diverse experiences. Furthermore, this research focused solely on amplifying the voices of autistic girls, a comparative study between the school experiences of autistic girls and boys may be useful. Lastly, while looking across smaller-scale qualitative research for convergences and divergences is valuable, a larger quantitative study may

offer a more comprehensive overview in terms of identifying facilitators of and barriers to inclusive educational experiences among the broader autism community.

The current research body focuses primarily on experiences of the education context. However, the findings from this research and previous research highlight issues in terms of post-diagnostic support and support in the school context. Future research should focus on exploring these areas in greater detail with the intention to inform post-diagnostic and in-school support for autistic girls

I believe that the alternative approaches that supported data collection in this research (*Section 3.10.5*) facilitated a more inclusive process and provided autistic girls with the chance to share their experiences (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, I encourage the use of alternative and creative approaches to elicit autistic voices in research and endorse previous calls for researchers to use, document and reflect on their use of varied approaches (Scott-Barrett *et al.*, 2023; Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2024).

Lastly, the secondary study in this research was limited by the non-standardised, non-validated measure used. I recommend developing this component of the research by attending to this limitation. To increase reliability, I recommend the development of a multi-item measure which may better capture the complexities and multifaceted nature of the concepts examined and enable more nuanced distinctions between individual responses (Allen *et al.*, 2022). To increase the validity of this measure and to stand over that it measures what it sets out to measure (Cohen *et al.*, 2018), I recommend reviewal of the tool by an expert panel to gain consensus on the items included. This would enable data analysis to establish concordance of knowledge of autism in girls between teachers and those with expertise in this area. I would recommend the expert panel to include an autistic female advocate, an individual with research experience in this area, an individual with practice experience working with autistic girls and an experienced educational psychologist.

7.7 Conclusion

This study set out to better understand the school experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream provision at post-primary level in the Republic of Ireland. Underpinned by a pragmatic-interpretivist paradigm, this study adopted an embedded mixed methods design to facilitate exploration of the research topic from a multi-informant perspective. The primary study, qualitative in nature, elicited the voices of autistic girls and their parents guided by a multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis design.

The secondary study collected both quantitative and qualitative data using a researcher-designed questionnaire to gain insight into mainstream post-primary teachers' awareness, knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to autism and girls.

This research does not claim to present universal truths in relation to the educational experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream provision. The rigorous examination of this phenomenon from multiple perspectives offers an original contribution to the research landscape and highlights the multiple, dynamic systems at play in school experiences. Given the minoritised identities of autistic females and the dearth of research relating to autistic girls' experiences of education, the current research, informed by the theory of intersectional feminism, demonstrates an effort to refute the androcentric bias related to autism and amplify the voices of a doubly marginalised community, autistic girls. Lastly, this timely study addresses a gap in the Irish research landscape by providing a novel exploration of an under-researched area, of which offers several key considerations for progress in the Irish context.

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Appendices

Appendix A: International Inclusive Education Policy Timeline

Policy	Overview
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989)	The UNCRC exists to protect the rights of children. It defined the term 'child', it set out the rights of children and highlighted the responsibilities of governments to ensure these rights are protected. Article 12 outlined the right of children to express their views and have their voice heard. Article 13 outlined the right of children to share their thoughts freely in a variety of ways. Article 23 stated that every child with a disability should enjoy the best possible life in society and that governments should remove all barriers that may impede this right. Article 28 stated the right of children to an education. Article 29 emphasised that education should help children to fully develop their **personalities, talents** and **abilities**.
The World Declaration on Education for All (1990)	Reiterated the right of all people to have access to education. Recognised that some individuals faced barriers to learning. Highlighted the need for national and international structures to meet the basic learning needs of all students. The learning needs of individuals with disabilities were brought to the fore and identified for prioritisation.
The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994)	Sought to extend the objective of Education for All. Considered the policy shift required to promote the approach of inclusive education. Recognised the educational rights of children and young people with disabilities. Placed the onus on schools to serve all children, particularly those identified as having special educational needs. It positioned *'regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation'* as the *'most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all'* (UNESCO, 1994: ix).
United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) 2006	The UNCRPD exists to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal experience of all human rights by all individuals with disabilities. In terms of education rights (Article 24), the Convention committed to ending segregation* within educational settings. Education systems were encouraged to provide inclusive classroom teaching, in accessible learning environments with appropriate support. An individualised/personalised approach was supported whereby systems must meet the needs of the student rather than expecting the student to fit into the system. *Segregation/non-inclusion is defined as the education of students with disabilities in separate environments (i.e. special schools or special classes).
United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (2015)	Commitments were made to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4 addressed the need for *'inclusive and equitable quality education for all'* (UN, 2015)

Appendix B: National Inclusive Education (and Autism) Policy Timeline

Policy	Overview
Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (1993)	Supported a Continuum of Provision Underpinned by seven principles; right of all learners with SEN to an appropriate education, important role of parents, continuum of provision, access to local mainstream schools, provision of adequate services and resources to achieve the principles set out in the review.
White Paper on Education (1995)	Set out a framework for the development of education, mindful of the evolving nature of society. Supported a Continuum of Provision – which was viewed as appropriate practice to cater for the needs of students with SEN.
Education Act (1998)	Right to an appropriate education.
Equal Status Act (2000)	Right to equality of opportunity for all. It prohibits discrimination on the nine grounds of **gender**, marital status, family status, age, **disability**, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community. Also set out the responsibility of those providing a service (education) to provide reasonable accommodation where without such accommodation a person with a disability would find it extremely difficult or impossible to avail of the service.
Report of the Task Force on Autism (2001)	Made recommendations regarding the policies and practices for the educational provision of children with autism. Acknowledged the Continuum of Provision but proposed that children with autism should have attend the mainstream context where possible. Recommended training for all staff, parent-school partnerships, and multidisciplinary partnerships.
Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004)	Established a vision of an inclusive model of education. Children with SEN to be educated alongside their peers in an inclusive environment unless to do so would not be in their best interests or the best interests of their peers. Education should assist children with disabilities to leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity in activities of society and to live independent and fulfilling lives. The definition of disability used in this Act was markedly different to the medical definition of disability used in the Education Act. This Act encouraged involvement of parents and established the NCSE.

	The EPSEN Act has not been fully implemented and is currently under review.
Disability Act (2005)	Aimed to advance and underpin the participation of individuals with disabilities in society. Supported the provision of disability specific services and called for improvements in access to mainstream public services. Right to apply for an independent **Assessment of Need**.
General Allocation Model (GAM) (Circular 02/05)	General Allocation Model Specified High Incidence needs and Low Incidence needs. **Autism** identified as Low Incidence.
Special Education Teaching Allocation Model (SETAM) (Circular 0013/2017)	Special Education Teaching Allocation Model replaced the General Allocation Model. This model represented a shift from a diagnosis informed model to a **needs-based** model. A 'single unified allocation' for special educational support based on a school's individual educational profile. Schools afforded **autonomy** in the deployment of resources. Students with the greatest level of need should be provided with the greatest level of support. School's educational profile took into account; number of pupils with complex needs enrolled to the school, the learning support needs as evidenced by standardised test results, the social context of the school – including disadvantage and gender.
Special Education Teaching Allocation Model (SETAM – Revised) (Circular 0003/2024; Circular 0064/2024).	Criteria informing the development of a school's educational profile were changed. Revisions saw the **removal of gender and complex needs** as criteria. Educational profile is now based solely on the literacy and numeracy standardised test results and educational disadvantage.
Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools – Supporting Children and Young People (& accompanying Indicators of Effective Practice) (2022).	Guidance document developed at system level to assist schools in supporting the **wellbeing, learning and participation of autistic children** and young people in education. Guidance informed by national and international research and practice. Provides information and support across eight key areas of practice; *learning environment, language and communication development, social development, emotional development, sensory processing, functional skills for daily living, academic development and behavioural development*. A companion resource 'Indicators of Effective Practice' was published alongside the guidance to facilitate schools to engage in a whole-school reflective process to review aspects of provision.
Autism Innovation Strategy (2024)	The Autism Innovation Strategy sought to highlight the challenges and barriers faced by

	autistic individuals within society. It aims to improve understanding of autism. It outlined a number of actions that will be undertaken at government level to provide better support for autistic people and their families. The strategy addresses four key pillars; *autism-affirming society, **equality of access to public services**, accessible, inclusive communities, and, building capacity*.

Appendix C: Overview of Inclusive Guidance Documents

Guidance Document	Overview
Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process (NCSE, 2006)	Developed following the passing of the EPSEN Act 2004. Guide to good practice in relation to the preparation, implementation and review of Individualised Education Plans. ▪ Presented a checklist of the essential elements of an IEP and a series of worked exemplars. ▪ Acknowledged the IEP as a **process** rather than a written document. ▪ Emphasised that the IEP should record parent, **student**, and teacher professional views.
A Continuum of Support for Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Teachers/ Resource Pack for Teachers (NEPS, 2007a; 2007b)	Introduced the Continuum of Support. Guidelines and Resource Pack designed to assist teachers to identify needs and to develop and evaluate interventions to meet those needs. Guidelines to be used in conjunction with Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process.
Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools (NCSE, 2013)	Informed by consultations with parents, SNAs, students, teachers, principals, NEPS, SENOs, HSE professionals, school management bodies, voluntary bodies and advocacy groups. Reiterated support for an inclusive education system. Calls for the implementation of the EPSEN Act. Advice presented in the guidance informed by six principles; **Principle 1:** All children are welcome to enrol in their local school. **Principle 2:** Educational supports are allocated equitably in line with the educational needs of students. **Principle 3:** Students have access to available educational supports in line with their needs. **Principle 4:** Students have an individualised assessment which informs teaching and learning and forms one part of an ongoing and cyclical process of assessment, intervention and review of outcomes. **Principle 5:** Available resources should be sued effectively to support improved outcomes for children. **Principle 6:** Parents' role as the natural and primary educators of the child is respected. ▪ Acknowledged the Continuum of Provision system in place. ▪ Makes a number of recommendations in relation to the professional development of teachers (ITE; Continuous Professional Development; training for teachers in specialist roles; training for principals and deputy principals.

	▪ Presents a summary of potential support needs and the type of support that may be required.
Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (DES, 2017)	Guidelines released in light of the revised model for allocating special education teaching resources (SETAM). Recognised the autonomy of schools to allocate teaching resources flexibly under the new mode. ▪ Emphasised the shift from diagnosis-based model to a needs-based model. ▪ Introduced 'Principles to guide the implementation process' *e.g.* supports should be based on identified needs and informed by regular reviews of progress; subject teacher has primary responsibility for the progress and care of all students in the classroom, including those with SEN; teaching supports **cannot** be used to reduce student-teacher ratio; **students with the greatest level of need should have access to the greatest level of support**; school should establish and maintain a core team of teachers to meet the needs of students with SEN (members should have the necessary experience and access to professional development). ▪ Set out a three-step process to guide identification, intervention and monitoring of outcomes. ▪ Introduced the **problem-solving process.**
Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools: A Guide to Establishing a Team or Reviewing an Existing Team (DoE, 2021)	Guidelines designed to assist schools in their establishment and development of student support teams. Defined Student Support Team as 'a central part of the student support system in a school. It is the overarching team concerned with the progressing of actions for the welfare and wellbeing of all students'. The team should bring coherence to the support system by coordinating the valuable work of departments, teams or groups (i.e. Special Education Needs (SEN) department.
Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Young People with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes (DoE, 2024)	Guidelines replace the 2017 Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools. **Key Messages:** ▪ ***Students with the greatest level of need should have access to the greatest level of support*** ▪ Special education resources are allocated for the **sole purpose** of providing additional teaching support to young people with SEN. ▪ Support is underpinned by eight key principles. ▪ Defines roles and responsibilities in relation to Special Education provision. ▪ Identifies **Continuum of Support** as guiding framework.

	▪ Emphasises the importance of recording and monitoring of support at each stage of the Continuum. ▪ Identifies the **problem-solving process** as the mechanism for which supports are identified, supported and reviewed. ▪ Recognises the provision of support as a **collaborative** and **holistic** process involving young people, parents/guardians, teachers and other professionals. ▪ Acknowledges the **young person** as central to the process. Their views, wishes and **voice** must be heard. ▪ Deployment of support is recorded and monitored at school level and overseen by the board/school management.

Appendix D: Overview of Evaluations of Education Provision

Evaluation	Overview
An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder – A Report by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science (DESc, 2006)	Five categories of educational provision were evaluated; centres using ABA approaches, Autism-dedicated special schools, special schools, autism classes and mainstream schools. Recommendations: ▪ Individuals implementing teaching and learning programmes for children with autism should have a recognised teacher qualification; should attend an autism specific course; should have access to courses on approaches such as TEACCH, ABA, PECSs. ▪ Risk assessments that address the sensory and perceptual sensitivities of the children should be carried out. ▪ All staff should have a deep understanding of autism and co-occurring diagnosis. ▪ Teachers should be aware of the strengths of autistic learners and capitalise on these. ▪ The role of parents in the education of children with autism should be acknowledged in policy and planning documents. ▪ Schools should have a school plan considering core elements of provision for children with autism. ▪ Training should emphasise the development of collaborative practice in the compiling, implementing and review of individualised plans. ▪ A continuum of assessment should be employed and a daily/near daily monitoring and recording of achievement of short-term objectives and of the development of individual skills is necessary. ▪ ICT should be used to facilitate engagement with all areas of the curriculum. ▪ The promotion of *social* and *functional* inclusion should be addressed in policy and practice in all educational provision settings. ▪ Children with autism should have access to an 'adequate, systematic and coordinated multidisciplinary support structure'.
Understanding Special Class Provision in Ireland: Findings from a National Survey of Schools – NCSE Research Report No.16 (McCoy *et al.*, 2014)	Report on special classes, more broadly, in mainstream schools. Stakeholders had positive perceptions of special classes as an important part of the continuum of provision. Pupil-teacher ratio and flexibility in teaching and curriculum were praised. Concerns were raised in relation to teacher qualifications, students staying in the special class for the entire day, a lack of continuity between primary and post-primary school and the increased use of the special class model, particularly for students with **autism**.
An Evaluation of Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Ireland – NCSE Research Report No.21 (Daly *et al.*, 2016)	Provision evaluated against a framework of principles and indicators based on identified good practice in education provision for autistic students. The framework was developed by NCSE in collaboration with Middletown Centre for Autism. The research was conducted by a team of researchers from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

	Evidence was collected from 24 sites from early intervention to post-primary, mainstream settings, special classes, special schools as well as Home Tuition and July Education Programme. Data was collected from principals, teachers, SNAs, children, parents, documents and observations. Four core areas emerged as significant; teaching and learning, inclusive school culture, school management and staff development. ▪ Teaching and Learning: More holistic approach to and use of assessments and assessment data required. Individualised planning process could be improved. Transition planning could be enhanced. Access to and collaboration with external professionals is necessary. ▪ Inclusive School Culture: Need for enhanced home-school communication procedures in policy and practice. Greater use of visuals in the school environment may improve the experiences of autistic students. Consideration must be afforded to the policies and practices in place in relation to supporting students' wellbeing. ▪ School Management: Importance of training for principal's leading autism provision settings was highlighted. Rotation of staff in delivering autism provision was outlined as important. Importance of recruiting the most suitable candidate for appointment to deliver special class provision. Frequent reviews of policy and practice in terms of strengths and weaknesses should be facilitated. ▪ Staff Development: Need for targeted professional learning was identified by most sites. Involvement in professional organisations and attendance at professional conferences may support the development of communities of practice.
Educational Provision for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes attached to Mainstream Schools in Ireland - Department of Education Inspectorate (DoE Inspectorate, 2020)	Evidence collected from 65 special classes in primary schools and 20 classes in post-primary schools. **Post-Primary:** ▪ Enrolment Policy: Clear and appropriate in half of the settings. Some schools prioritised students who could easily integrate into mainstream. Students with complex needs may be denied placement. ▪ In approximately two-thirds of schools, concerns were raised in relation to the misplacement of students either in the special class setting or in the mainstream setting. ▪ In less than half of the setting parents were meaningfully consulted in the individualised planning process. Desire for increased involvement, collaboration and communication. ▪ Need for increased training in the area of assessment. Suitable autism-specific assessments were used in less than one third of classes. ▪ Need for increased training in the area of autism-specific teaching approaches. Less than half of teachers effectively used autism-specific teaching approaches.

	▪ Observations revealed that most students enjoyed their learning, were motivated to learn and expected to achieve as learners. However, scope for higher expectations from teachers in school settings. ▪ Students required more support to develop self-regulation skills. ▪ Almost half of students were not enabled to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the curriculum due to lack of autism-specific teaching interventions. ▪ Scope to improve record keeping to ensure student progress is monitored and recorded accurately in their Student Support File.
Towards High-Quality Learning Experiences for All: Provision for children and young people with special educational needs in primary and post-primary schools - Department of Education Inspectorate (DoE, 2024)	Report presents findings from inspections of provision for children and young people with special educational needs in 2023. Inspections conducted in 17 primary schools and 12 post-primary schools. **Post-Primary:** ▪ Timetabling issues highlighted ▪ Scope for information in Student Support Files to be used more effectively in the planning and delivery of appropriately individualised programmes of work for children and young people with SEN. **Autism:** ▪ In most classes inspected at post-primary level, teachers used autism-specific methodologies and active learning approaches. Learning was not always sufficiently challenging. ▪ Lack of consistency in how teachers used autism-specific approaches (i.e. visual schedules, communication supports). The need for a whole-school approach was highlighted.

Appendix E: Published Paper (Munroe and Dunleavy, 2023)



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Recognising autism in girls within the education context: reflecting on the internal presentation and the diagnostic criteria

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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Recognising autism in girls within the education context: reflecting on the internal presentation and the diagnostic criteria

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ABSTRACT

It is widely acknowledged that girls are less likely to receive an autism diagnosis compared to boys (Gould, J. 2017. "Towards Understanding the Under-Recognition of Girls and Women on the Autism Spectrum." *Autism* 21 (6): 703–705), with growing recognition that girls are underserved by the current clinical diagnostic criteria, potentially due to differences in presentation (Duvekot, J., J. van der Ende, F. C. Verhulst, G. Slappendel, E. van Daalen, A. Maras, and K. Greaves-Lord. 2017. "Factors Influencing the Probability of a Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Girls Versus Boys." *Autism* 21 (6): 646–658). Lack of awareness of the female profile of autism among teachers and other professionals can have implications in terms of recognition, diagnostic referrals, formal identification and support. A narrative review approach was adopted to review extant literature pertinent to sex differences in autism, using the diagnostic criteria outlined in DSM-5 as a framework (American Psychiatric Association. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed. Washington: American Psychiatric Association). The aim of this paper is to raise awareness of the varied presentation exhibited by some autistic girls. The findings reveal differences in the presentation of autism characteristics among girls with a more internal presentation apparent. The findings of the review indicate the need for revisions to diagnostic tools to reflect the more nuanced female presentation, increased training and guidance for professionals working with autistic girls and continued research. It is hoped that this review will further knowledge in this area to support the recognition of autism in females and mitigate the risk of females being missed, misdiagnosed or diagnosed later in life.

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder[1], henceforth autism, is characterised by differences in social communication and interaction and restricted interests and repetitive behaviours (APA 2013). Historically, autism was perceived as a 'male disorder' (Estrin et al. 2021) and up until recently it could be argued that the production of knowledge about autism could be regarded as the production of knowledge about male autism (Moore et al. 2022; Saxe 2017). This perspective has been challenged of late with attention drawn to the androcentrism of the diagnostic criteria (Kopp and Gillberg 1992) and the sampling bias in research (Kirkovski, Enticott, and Fitzgerald 2013).

Sex[2] differences in the prevalence of autism have been evident since the seminal reports into autism were published and the initial conceptualisations of autism were largely informed by research on male dominated samples (Asperger 1944; Kanner 1943). This has ultimately influenced the development of an autism profile based on male presentations. It is this profile that has informed the diagnostic criteria and screening tools used today (Carpenter, Happé, and Egerton 2019), however, it has been suggested that some autistic females do not fit this profile of autism (Wing 1981). As a result, it has been noted that the diagnostic process may lack validity in the identification of autistic girls (Cheslack-Postava and Jordan-Young 2012). It can be argued that a gender disparity exists in autism diagnosis with a review of epidemiological studies (Fombonne 2005) indicating male to female ratios ranging from 1.4:1 to 15.7:1, with 4:1 often cited (Fombonne 2009). More recent statistics estimate that the gender ratio may be closer to 3:1 (Loomes, Hull, and Mandy 2017). It is reported that girls with a co-occurring intellectual disability are more likely to be diagnosed with the ratio reducing to 2:1 (Fombonne 2003). Meanwhile, those with an average to higher IQ or with no language delays may go unidentified (APA 2013) with a more pronounced gender gap evident for this cohort of girls (Fombonne 1999; Fombonne 2009; Pisula et al. 2017; Tierney, Burns, and Kilbey 2016).

It is apparent that there exists a gender bias in autism diagnosis with autistic females being missed, misdiagnosed or diagnosed later in life (Carpenter, Happé, and Egerton 2019; Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011). There is evidence to suggest that the disparity in diagnosis places the individual at risk of not getting access to the necessary support (Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011), and can have significant implications for development and life outcomes (Taylor and DaWalt 2020). This paper will consider the gender bias in autism with reference to the education context. While a diagnosis is ultimately made by multidisciplinary teams, teachers play an important role in identifying children for a referral for a diagnosis (Farmer et al. 2003; O'Byrne 2018). Research states that autistic boys are referred for diagnosis 10 times more often than autistic girls (Wilkinson 2008). The aforementioned raises questions in relation to teacher awareness of how autism may present in girls. It is necessary to reflect on whether gaps in teacher knowledge and understanding are playing a role in the under identification of autistic girls.

There has been a positive shift in autism research to include a focus on sex/gender differences in autism in recent times (Mandy and Lai 2017). This research has enabled the development of a more comprehensive profile of autism in females (Wassell and Burke 2022), a profile that is not currently reflected in the DSM-5 or ICD-11 criteria.

This may be one reason why girls remain under researched, under-identified and under-supported (Haney and Cullen 2017). Furthermore, it could be argued that there exists a discrepancy between developments in research and practice on the ground, which may account for inconsistencies in teacher knowledge.

This paper focuses on exploring an internal presentation of autism often linked to females diagnosed at Level 1 (APA 2013), who may display average to higher IQ with no language delays. The purpose of refining the discussion with reference to this cohort is that it is typically reflective of those who are educated in mainstream education settings. The overarching aim is to demonstrate the ways in which this internal presentation can be mapped onto the diagnostic criteria to better support educators recognise and support autistic girls in the education context.

Methodology

A narrative review approach was employed for the current paper as it was deemed appropriate to synthesise the extant literature on gender differences in autism and more specifically the presentation of autism in females (West and Martin 2023). It is hoped that this review could provide clarity for professionals, and researchers alike, in relation to how the female presentation of autism maps onto the diagnostic criteria.

The narrative review approach facilitated the inclusion of a broad range of literature types including research studies, literature reviews papers, theoretical and discussion papers, books and book chapters (Coughlan and Cronin 2021). An initial literature search was conducted for articles discussing sex/gender differences in autism and the female presentation of autism. Key terms included in the search were 'Autism', 'Autism Spectrum Disorder', 'Autism Spectrum', 'girls', 'women', 'female phenotype', 'autism diagnosis', 'sex/gender differences'. Additional articles were identified through snowballing (Wohlin 2014) and consultation with other researchers. In keeping with a narrative review design, the authors did not apply strict eligibility criteria (Ferrari 2015), with the search and selection phase focused on the relevance of the articles (West and Martin 2023). Relevant content from books was included and autobiographical accounts for autistic individuals in books and/or book chapters were cited to ensure the inclusion of the autistic voice.

Findings

The literature search identified a body of research describing sex/gender differences in autism. The following will discuss the concept of a female profile of autism and the implications of gender-biased knowledge in relation to this. The body of the review will then explore the characteristics of autism in girls with reference to the diagnostic criteria.

Autism and girls: a different presentation

There is some debate around the notion of whether there exists a female phenotype of autism or are the differences in presentation due to the socialisation of females compared to males (Kreiser and White 2014). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this debate, it is apparent that autistic girls can exhibit a different presentation of autism

compared to autistic boys (Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011; Lai et al. 2011). It has been posited that some autistic girls experience a more internal presentation of autism whereby their autistic traits are more inconspicuous compared to a more 'stereotypical' presentation (Kirkovski, Enticott, and Fitzgerald 2013; Rivet and Matson 2011; Wassell and Burke 2022). In addition to this, there is also evidence to suggest that autistic girls engage with camouflaging or masking to hide their autistic traits and/or use compensatory behaviours to fulfil neurotypical social 'norms' (Attwood 2007; Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011). While this practice is not exclusive to autistic females, it has been reported as more prevalent in females compared to autistic males (Hull et al. 2017).

The characteristics associated with the internal presentation of autism and engagement with camouflaging undeniably plays a role in the ability of others to recognise and support autistic girls (Carpenter, Happé, and Egerton 2019), which may increase the likelihood of autistic girls being diagnosed later or in some cases missed altogether (Gould 2017) These concerns are grounded in research with reports highlighting that autistic females are consistently diagnosed later than their male counterparts (Begeer et al. 2012; Happé et al. 2016; Russell et al. 2022), and that more autistic women are being referred for diagnosis as adults compared to autistic men (Giarelli et al. 2010). It is worthwhile to reflect on these findings with reference to the education context, considering the role of educators in recognising autism in girls, gender-biased knowledge and its implications.

Gender biased knowledge in the education context

Recognition precedes diagnosis (Driver and Chester 2021) and as previously discussed, teachers play a significant role in recognising and referring students for autism diagnoses. Research examining teacher knowledge in relation to recognising autism in girls is sparse, however, two studies, both adopting a vignette method, aimed to investigate whether teachers could identify autism in girls (Ward, Curtis, and Seehagen 2022; Whitlock et al. 2020). Contradictory findings presented, however, the limitation of one study may account for the differences. A United Kingdom study by Whitlock et al. (2020) suggests that primary school educational staff were more likely to identify autism in males than females and appeared to demonstrate greater awareness of the male presentation. Moreover, the results indicated that the participants were better able to identify autistic girls displaying a male-based, traditional profile of autism compared to girls with an internal presentation. Interestingly, a second study based on a cohort of teachers in New Zealand suggested that the perceived gender of the child did not influence the identification of autism, indicating that teacher knowledge was not gender biased (Ward, Curtis, and Seehagen 2022). However, it was noted that the inclusion of externalising behaviours, typically associated with the male-based profile, in the vignettes may have skewed the results. These studies imply that while teachers may have some understanding of autism, their knowledge is somewhat influenced by a gendered profile of autism, and they may be less aware of the internal presentation of autism and lack knowledge of how autistic girls can meet the diagnostic profile in a different way to autistic boys. A third study conducted by Gray et al. (2021) used a self-report questionnaire to gather the views of SENCos[3] in the United Kingdom on their knowledge of the presentation of autism in girls and their

ability to recognise autism in girls and support their needs. The majority of SENCos were aware that autism presented differently in males and females, however, when detailing the characteristics they associated with autism in girls, a gendered knowledge base became apparent (Gray et al. 2021).

If educators are unable to recognise autistic girls who experience an internal presentation of autism, disparities in referral rates will persist and girls will continue be marginalised in terms of accessing a diagnosis and in turn, post-diagnostic supports. Moreover, a lack of teacher knowledge and understanding in relation to autism in girls may result in inadequate or non-existent support provision which may have negative implications in terms of opportunity to benefit from, experience success in and thrive in their education. These concerns are reflected in research conducted with autistic girls in relation to their educational experiences. Difficulties accessing the curriculum, transitions across and within settings, the interactional and sensory environments and feelings of anxiety are consistently reported in literature (Cridland et al. 2014; Goodall and MacKenzie 2019; Jarman and Rayner 2015; Moyse and Porter 2015; Sproston, Sedgewick, and Crane 2017; Tomlinson, Bond, and Hebron 2021). Moreover, the significance of teacher knowledge and understanding in relation to autism in girls was identified as a significant factor influencing school experiences (Tomlinson, Bond, and Hebron 2020), consistent with the concerns of the author and the aforementioned research.

Taken together, these findings indicate that gaps in teacher knowledge impact autistic girls' school experiences in terms of recognition of characteristics, understanding of needs and the provision of support. The author concludes that specific guidance in terms of how the characteristics of autism present for autistic girls is required for teachers to ensure equitable and appropriate provision for autistic girls.

Interrogating the dyad of difference in autism diagnosis

Autism is diagnosed from observation of specific behaviours as detailed in the diagnostic criteria.[4] These 'behaviours' exist in two core domains[5], namely differences in social communication and interaction and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (RRBI).

Despite the disparity between the sexes in the prevalence of autism, it is only in recent years that research has placed a specific focus on sex/gender differences in autism (Lai et al. 2015). This research has revealed differences in the clinical presentation of autism between the sexes (Bond and Hebron 2019; Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011; Lai et al. 2015). However, there is no consideration afforded to these potential differences in the diagnostic criteria (Giarelli et al. 2010; Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011). It is clear that the historical male bias in autism knowledge together with the lack of consideration of sex differences in presentation in the DSM-5, have hugely influenced the diagnostic process for autistic females (Estrin et al. 2021; Mandy and Lai 2017). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that some professionals, in both clinical and education contexts, are unaware of how autism may present in autistic girls compared to their male counterparts (Estrin et al. 2021; Gray et al. 2021; Kopp and Gillberg 1992; Ward, Curtis, and Seehagen 2022; Whitlock et al. 2020), adding a further barrier for autistic girls in terms of referral and diagnosis.

The following section will explore the way in which autistic girls can meet the different criterion within the two core domains of difference, as identified in the DSM-5 (APA 2013) to support recognition and identification of autism in girls.

Social communication and interaction

Social Communication and Interaction is the first domain of difference and individuals must experience differences in all three diagnostic criteria (Table 1 – Supplementary Material). There is a body of evidence to support the differences in social communication and interaction between autistic males and females, however, there are some conflicting findings (Andersson, Gillberg, and Miniscalco 2012; Kirkovski, Enticott, and Fitzgerald 2013; Rivet and Matson 2011; Van Wijngaarden-Cremers et al. 2014). The criteria within this domain will now be discussed individually with reference to extant literature on gender differences in autism.

Social and emotional reciprocity. Reciprocity refers to the back-and-forth action between communication partners required for social communication and interaction. A review of gender differences in autism carried out by Rivet and Matson (2011) claimed that autistic girls exhibit fewer difficulties with reciprocal interaction than boys, while a systematic review and meta-analysis by Van Wijngaarden-Cremers et al. (2014) found no significant differences in terms of social interactions and communication. However, considering that autistic girls with an average IQ are diagnosed at a later stage/misdiagnosed, it was suggested by the authors that the studies included in the meta-analysis may have missed this cohort and therefore a true conclusion could be that females with ASD show better social communication and social behaviour than males with autism (Van Wijngaarden-Cremers et al. 2014). This was also alluded to in another study of pre-school autistic children where it was suggested that perhaps girls with a higher IQ, better language and superficially better social skills will only be identified later in life (Andersson, Gillberg, and Miniscalco 2012). This theory has been supported more recently by findings from other researchers (Dean, Harwood, and Kasari 2017; Lai et al. 2017). A study by Dean, Harwood, and Kasari (2017) posited that the social challenges of girls appeared less obvious than those of boys, stating that autistic girls 'looked like' typically developing girls from the outside. It is worthwhile considering this idea with reference to the work of Lai et al. (2017) and their conceptualisation of camouflaging as a discrepancy between the 'external' behavioural presentation and the individual's internal status. This emphasises the importance of professionals communicating with autistic girls and learning more about how they feel in relation to social situations rather than observations alone. Therefore, despite the difficulties of autistic girls being less obvious, the social domain is identified as a core area of difficulty for autistic girls (Gould 2017). These finding allude to the ability of autistic girls to mask their difficulties with social communication and interaction which may result in them being less likely to be identified by professionals, in turn leading to underdiagnosis in this population (Lai et al. 2017). Furthermore, as autistic girls are often able to hide their difficulties with social reciprocity to onlookers, the importance of teachers being aware of the difference in the way boys and girls meet this criterion differently is significant (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014).

It is widely reported that autistic girls are more socially motivated than autistic boys (Lai et al. 2015) and have demonstrated a greater ability to engage in reciprocal conversation (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014). Girls may experience greater success in conversation as they are more likely to engage with interest sharing (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014). Autistic females also appear to communicate well and can make good eye contact and engage with appropriate body language (Lawson 2017). This outward appearance of 'good communication' is grounded in neurotypical expectations and may not come naturally or automatically to autistic girls (Mandy and Lai 2017). However, it has been noted that autistic girls are at an advantage to boys here as they are experts in observing and copying what they think/feel they should be doing (Mandy and Lai 2017; Wassell and Burke 2022). Reflections provided by autistic female adults indicated that they demonstrated an ability to 'learn' the social rules of neurotypical interaction and 'mimic' the expected social behaviours (Milner et al. 2019). This ability to engage with social imitation is evidenced in the accounts of many autistic female adults as they reflect on their experience pre- and post-diagnosis (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Bargiela, Steward, and Mandy 2016; Tierney, Burns, and Kilbey 2016), while insights shared by autistic girls (Buckingham 2019; Salter 2019) detail the processes involved in meeting social expectations.

As with non-autistic individuals, natural personality differences also need to be considered in this domain appreciating that while some girls can be quite sociable and enjoy chatting, others may be passive and shy (Gillberg 2019; Wassell and Burke 2022). However, it is more widely reported that autistic girls often do not engage in meaningless chatting and often experience difficulties engaging with social niceties (Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011). The complexity of masking, engagement in social imitation and individual preferences emphasise the importance of moving past surface-level observation and eliciting autistic girls' inner experiences in order to understand differences in these areas. This, in turn, will help teachers to recognise and provide tailored support appropriate to the needs of autistic girls.

Developing and maintaining friendships. It has been acknowledged that autistic young people experience difficulties with developing and maintaining friendships (Carrington, Templeton, and Papinczak 2003). Given that gender differences in neurotypical friendships are well established with female friendships centred around emotional sharing and male friendships based on shared activities (Aukett, Ritchie, and Mill 1988), it is interesting to reflect on whether these gender differences play a role in how autistic individuals experience friendships. This criterion is extremely pertinent in the education context in terms of friendships within the classroom and the more unstructured period of lunchtime.

It is reported that autistic girls displayed significant difficulties in areas such as friendships, reciprocal interaction and group play but had fewer difficulties in communication compared to boys (Kirkovski, Enticott, and Fitzgerald 2013; Rivet and Matson 2011). It also appears that girls present with a different manifestation of friendship problems to boys (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014). When taken together these findings indicate that while the ability to mask/imitate can facilitate the appearance of successful communication, the complexity of interactions involved in friendship, particularly female friendships, are significantly more challenging to navigate.

A study examining the social networks of school-aged children with and without autism, discovered that while boys were more overtly excluded, autistic girls appeared to be overlooked and not specifically accepted or rejected in social networks, raising concern in terms of the development of friendships (Dean et al. 2014). The above findings indicate that it may be easier to identify challenges in friendship in autistic boys compared to autistic girls, a point supported by further research by Dean, Harwood, and Kasari (2017). The social landscape of female friendships could be described as a protective factor with literature highlighting that the nature of these social groups concealed autistic girls by enabling them to float on the periphery (Dean, Harwood, and Kasari 2017; Kreiser and White 2014; Wassell and Burke 2022). Autistic girls tend to stay in close proximity to these social groups, something that may result in their difficulties going unnoticed by observers, particularly teachers in busy classrooms. This contrasts sharply with the social landscape of male social groups whereby researchers more easily identified boys with autism as they tended to wander alone separate from structured games or groups (Dean, Harwood, and Kasari 2017). This finding is significant in the education context as the class teacher may not always be the observer on yard and therefore it requires all teachers to be attuned to the more subtle challenges experienced by autistic girls.

While autistic girls' experiences of friendship groups may go unnoticed by adults, their differences may not be hidden from their non-autistic peers (Dean, Harwood, and Kasari 2017). Analysis of time spent in joint engagement versus solitary, indicates that autistic girls stay near the social group and gain access to these groups through masking their social challenges. However, they do not appear to be able to maintain engagement with their typically developing peers, perhaps due to their difficulties with recognising and interpreting the social cues. This idea is reinforced by research conducted with autistic adults reflecting on their social experiences as adolescents who discussed the complexity of social rules and their implications for maintaining friendships (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Bargiela, Steward, and Mandy 2016). Despite this, research has clearly indicated that autistic girls' desire friendship (Sedgewick et al. 2016; Sedgewick et al. 2019).

The above findings support the idea that autistic girls are more likely to be able to initiate interaction and indeed friendship than autistic boys (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014). However, their difficulties appear to lie most substantially in the maintenance of these friendships (Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011; Morewood, Tomlinson, and Bond 2019). While difficulties may not appear to be as obvious in the earlier years of the girls' life, they become more apparent in adolescence as the nature of female friendships change throughout the school years (Attwood and Garnett 2019). Difficulties with friendship maintenance has been attributed to autistic girls' needs for control over play, a challenge that is probably more prevalent in earlier childhood friendships (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014). Additionally, non-autistic girls reach more complex social and linguistic stages earlier than boys (Barbu, Cabanes, and Le Maner-Idrissi 2011; Bond and Hebron 2019), and therefore it can be expected that the complexity of their friendships increases in line with this. This can have significant implications for autistic girls as they attempt to navigate these complex interactions. Complex interactions such as gossiping, exclusion and betrayal of trust are common in adolescent girls' friendships, however, autistic girls experience more difficulties in relation to understanding and managing these interactions (Sedgewick et al. 2016). Further research by Sedgewick et al. (2019)

revealed that autistic girls experienced more conflict than neurotypical girls and both autistic and non-autistic boys and this in turn resulted in anxiety for the girls, a finding that is echoed in first-hand accounts given by autistic females (Buckingham 2019; Milner et al. 2019). The demands of maintaining friendships are reinforced by autistic females who described having one or two close friends, acknowledging that friendships are arduous (Milner et al. 2019). This is consistent with observations from other researchers (Attwood and Garnett 2019; Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011; Horlock 2019), and could be best explained by the Double Empathy theory (Milton 2012; Milton, Gurbuz, and López 2022).

Another consideration within the context of friendship is that of play differences and how they vary in autistic girls. It is reported that some girls demonstrate more appropriate play behaviour compared to boys, something that may be influenced by the presentation of RRBIs and/or their communicative abilities (Dean, Harwood, and Kasari 2017; Kirkovski, Enticott, and Fitzgerald 2013). However, other research reported that some autistic girls may prefer to play with boys as their play can be simpler and more logical (Attwood and Garnett 2019).

The concept of friendship is inextricable with education settings, and it is therefore imperative that teachers are alert to the varied profile exhibited by autistic girls in order to recognise difficulties that may be occurring in the social realm of the classroom and provide appropriate, contextually sensitive support.

Non-verbal communication. Differences reported in nonverbal communication correlate with the premise that girls experience a more internal presentation of autism (Wassell and Burke 2022), compared to the more overt behavioural presentation in boys (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014). Results from one study by Hiller, Young, and Weber (2014) revealed that the skill of being able to integrate nonverbal and verbal gestures was predictive of being female and over one-third of girls in the study exhibited no difficulties in this area. Attwood and Garnett (2019) attends to this strength in autistic girls and attributes it to their capacity to imitate non-verbal actions in order to blend in with non-autistic individuals. This need to assimilate is often most prominent in friendship networks and therefore it has been reported that autistic girls can be more animated with their peers compared to when they are with family. This is probably done in an attempt to achieve social success.

Even though girls demonstrate a better use of social gestures, they experience similar difficulties in understanding and interpreting non-verbal behaviours as their male counterparts (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014). Interpreting the subtleties in facial expression, voice intonation and reading body language were identified as potential difficulties in non-verbal communication for autistic girls (Kreiser and White 2014). Moreover, it was posited that difficulties in the area of non-verbal communication make it harder for autistic girls to interpret more subtle interactions such as eye-rolling, shared glances and giggling all of which are inextricably linked to adolescent female friendship groups (Dean, Harwood, and Kasari 2017). Understandably, these challenges may lead to social confusion which can support understanding of autistic girls' difficulties with social interaction and more specifically maintaining friendships. Knowledge and understanding of these are important for teachers to assist in the identification and referral of students for diagnosis.

Insight from autistic individuals can help conceptualise the complexity of social interaction and communication differences. Autistic author, Holliday Willey (1999) juxtaposes her strengths in public speaking with her dislike of more intimate social situations, highlighting the sheer complexity of the domain of social interaction and communication and more specifically the stress associated with understanding and interpreting body language. In order to support girls, it is important that teachers are aware of the challenges autistic girls have in the area of social interaction and communication and understand the complexity of these differences for some individuals.

Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities

The second domain of difference refers to RRBIs. Specific information in relation to the criteria in this domain can be found in Table 2 in Supplementary Material. Interestingly, research has reported that the most consistent difference in presentation between genders occur in this domain (Duvekot et al. 2017; Knutsen et al. 2019; Kreiser and White 2014; Sipes et al. 2011; Van Wijngaarden-Cremers et al. 2014) with females displaying quantitatively reduced RRBIs overall (Allely 2019; Kirkovski, Enticott, and Fitzgerald 2013; Lai et al. 2015; Van Wijngaarden-Cremers et al. 2014). It is argued that RRBIs are more easily identified than difficulties in the domain of social interaction and communication (Allely 2019). However, the identification of characteristics in this domain is largely influenced by gender bias and the RRBIs of autistic girls are often not reflective of the traditional male-based presentation (Nowell, Jones, and Harrop 2019).

It should be considered that a milder presentation in this domain may in fact be mediated by the developmental quotient of the individual with those with an average developmental quotient exhibiting the least restricted, repetitive behaviours (Sipes et al. 2011). In light of this, an alternative perspective relating to the camouflaging hypothesis can be considered (Hull et al. 2017; Knutsen et al. 2019). Knutsen et al. (2019) examined sex differences in the RRBI domain between age- and intelligence quotient-matched female and male children diagnosed with autism using the largest known sample. This study revealed more similarities rather than differences between males and females. However, decreased repetitive interests and stereotyped behaviours were observed in younger females with lower support needs. This offers support for the phenomenon that females with an average-higher IQ are more motivated/effective at camouflaging their autistic traits (Attwood 2007; Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011). This idea is further alluded to in the work of Hull et al. (2017) which noted that adults with no co-occurring intellectual disability can use compensatory strategies to camouflage their restricted, repetitive behaviours. However, the complexity and sophistication of this technique was acknowledged in that it requires high levels of self-awareness for individuals to recognise their RRBIs, develop a strategy to conceal them and finally perform the compensatory behaviours in the appropriate environments. Nevertheless, this offers a unique insight into the cohort relevant to this study. The latter debate questions whether the diagnostic instruments are sensitive to the varied presentation of repetitive behaviours in girls (Gould 2017). These findings, when taken together, raise concerns with regards to the identification and support of autistic girls and may go some way in explaining the under recognition of this group of individuals by teachers and other professionals. In light of this, a discussion of each criterion in the RRBI domain will follow.

Repetitive behaviours. There exists a body of research indicating that females demonstrate less unusual stereotyped and repetitive behaviours[6] (Kreiser and White 2014; Rivet and Matson 2011; Van Wijngaarden-Cremers et al. 2014). This is further supported by findings of a study that considered the factors influencing the probability of a diagnosis of ASD in girls versus boys and found that restricted, repetitive behaviours were less strongly associated with autism in girls than boys (Duvekot et al. 2017). The aforementioned raises questions in relation to the awareness of professionals working with autistic girls and their ability to recognise what constitutes repetitive behaviours in this cohort.

Research by Hiller, Young, and Weber (2014) revealed that 27% of girls in their study did not meet this criterion compared to only 6% of boys. A further study surveyed clinicians involved in diagnosis and found that perceived sex-related differences were predominantly in the area of repetitive behaviours (Jamison et al. 2017). An emerging pattern between diagnosis age and the RRBI domain was also noted with clinicians reporting that females exhibit less 'severe' behaviours in relation to stereotyped or repetitive motor movements during the school-age/adolescent period (Jamison et al. 2017). Other research reflects on the diagnostic process proposing that it is the more passive, non-problematic behaviours observed in autistic girls compared to the overt behaviours exhibited by autistic boys that may lead to reduced rates of referral for diagnostic assessments by teachers (Kreiser and White 2014). This observation only further accentuates the importance of supporting teachers to recognise the varied autism profile associated with girls. These findings question whether the presentation of restricted, repetitive behaviours in girls is qualitatively different compared to boys, a hypothesis supported by observational clinician accounts (Attwood 2007; Bond and Hebron 2019; Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011).

It has been noted that the repetitive behaviours of autistic girls may look very different to the stereotypical presentation associated with autistic boys *i.e.* lining up toys and engaging with echolalia (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014; Wassell and Burke 2022). Instead, some autistic girls may engage in more inconspicuous repetitive behaviours for example re-reading the same book, re-watching the same film or re-doing homework. All of these behaviours can fulfil a role of comfort and predictability, both of which are associated with engagement in repetitive behaviours (Bond and Hebron 2019) and are supported by the detailed autobiographical accounts of autistic girls (Salter 2019).

The above discussion highlights the potential varied presentation and emphasises the importance of widening teacher knowledge to enable them to look beyond the stereotyped repetitive behaviours associated with autism. It is necessary for teachers to first appreciate the function of repetitive behaviours before then recognising behaviours which may fulfil this function for autistic girls.

Inflexibility. Inflexibility is also discussed in the context of a preference for or insistence on sameness. It is reflected in this domain through a demonstration of a strong preference for environments and behaviours that are predictable for the individual and a resistance to change (Boucher 2017). An early study into autism alluded to the 'aggressive' and 'domineering' behaviours that may be exhibited by autistic boys in demonstrating their insistence on sameness, meeting this criterion in a more obvious manner (Kopp and Gillberg 1992). It was indicated that this behavioural style was not evident in the sample of autistic girls in the study and as a result it was acknowledged that the difficulties that

some girls experience in this area may go unnoticed. Differences in presentation of behaviour are also discussed in the context of the externalising behaviours of boys compared to girls' tendencies to internalise their difficulties (Bond and Hebron 2019). These differences have resulted in teachers reporting fewer concerns about autistic girls as they do not outwardly express their difficulties (Bond and Hebron 2019). However, it is important to recognise that while an outward demonstration of this criterion may not be as explicit in girls, that is not to say that autistic girls do meet this criterion.

Insight from an autistic female author Cook O'Toole (2018) emphasised that taking a more holistic view of the criteria is required to appreciate that the outward presentation may differ between males and females. Regardless, the function of these behaviours may be the same. She reflected on the way order and facts provided security and predictability to her life, contrasting this with the unpredictable and changeable nature of social interactions. Inflexibility can influence the manner in which autistic girls play with their peers and can be evidenced through a tendency to be overly dominant or controlling, a nod towards the need to control the play (Attwood and Garnett 2019). Controlling behaviour is also referenced in relation to interactions with peers, so moving from play activities into interactions more broadly (Bond and Hebron 2019; Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011). In addition to this, it is reported that autistic girls may tend to be perfectionistic (Lai et al. 2015). When taken together and considered outside of the stereotypical connotations associated with this criterion, these traits can demonstrate a clear preference for sameness and a resistance to change. Autistic girls who exhibit a different profile of traits in relation to these criteria may still require the support of their teachers despite the lack of an outward presentation, therefore highlighting the importance of an awareness of the internal presentation of autism.

Interests. Research has acknowledged that the manifestation of restricted interests is characteristically different in girls compared to boys (Hiller, Young, and Weber 2014). These interest differences may be more difficult for professionals to identify and have been suggested as a reason for the under-identification of autistic girls (Attwood 2007). In a controlled study conducted by Solomon et al. (2012), marginally significant differences were identified with boys presenting with more 'obvious' restricted interests than girls. The use of the word obvious refers to interests that were more typically associated with the 'male as norm' presentation of autism. This finding endorsed the findings of another review paper; however, it was acknowledged that the choices available on the parent report forms could have been a limitation of this study (Rivet and Matson 2011). A further study by Hiller, Young, and Weber (2014) revealed that the interests of girls were most commonly reported as being in the 'seemingly random' category. It is noteworthy to reflect on the category label of 'seemingly random' (examples: animals, rocks) as it appears that the interests of girls were categorised under this label as they did not reflect the other categories which could be argued as being stereotypical of male based interests. These findings correlate with other research which has revealed that the restricted interests of autistic boys are often object based and technical whereas the interests of autistic girls are often people/animal oriented (Lai et al. 2015).

The interests of autistic girls are often viewed as more 'typical' and are described as similar to those of their non-autistic peers, for example interests in animals, books, celebrities (Gould and Ashtown-Smith 2011; Winter-Messiers 2007). However, the interests of

autistic girls differ from their peers in terms of their intensity and the time they engage with them (Attwood 2007). This is a subtle difference and could go unnoticed by teachers due to lack of awareness and knowledge of the female profile of autism. Narrative descriptions from an autistic girl (Salter 2019) provide useful lens into a more female perspective whereby music was identified as a 'restricted interest' with examples provided from early years to young adulthood to support this. Insights from an autistic perspective emphasises a varied presentation where the interest was perhaps less obvious than typically associated with autism. It is apparent that although qualitatively different from autistic boys, autistic girls demonstrate equally passionate interests. Alerting teachers to the subtle differences in the interests of autistic girls and autistic boys may better equip them to focus their professional observations.

Sensory differences. The final consideration in the RRBI domain is that of sensory processing. Limited research examines the sensory differences and experiences of autistic girls and women and therefore little is known in relation to whether gender differences exist in this domain. In an investigation carried out by Lai et al. (2011) of the similarities and differences between the sexes in age- and IQ-matched adults with autism, it was found that females experienced more lifetime sensory symptoms, however, it was advised that this result should be viewed as preliminary as the Autism Diagnostic Interview-Revised (ADI-R), a standardised, semi-structured interview schedule based on the DSM-IV and ICD-10 diagnostic concepts was not designed to be specifically sensitive to sensory symptoms and merely provides summary information. More recently, in a study by Duvekot et al. (2017) examining whether behavioural characteristics influenced the probability of an autism diagnosis in a sample of children aged 2.5-10 years old, findings acknowledged that sensory symptoms were positively associated with an autism diagnosis in both boys and girls. Moreover, it was suggested that the presentation of RRBIs did not largely contribute to a diagnosis in girls (Duvekot et al. 2017).

Despite the inconsistent findings and limited research in this area, it is important to appreciate that sensory differences appear to be an important feature of autism for autistic individuals and are commonly reported among autistic women (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Bargiela, Steward, and Mandy 2016; Tierney, Burns, and Kilbey 2016). Research has acknowledged that schools can be challenging sensory environments for autistic girls (Goodall and MacKenzie 2019; Milner et al. 2019; Moyse and Porter 2015), therefore necessitating teachers to work with autistic girls to support their sensory needs. In addition, further research is needed to ascertain gender differences in relation to this criterion to enhance understanding and create more inclusive sensory environments.

Future directions

This narrative review has examined literature pertinent to the sex/gender differences in autism and more specifically explored the female profile of autism. The diagnostic criteria for autism as identified in the DSM-5 (APA 2013) was used as a framework for interrogation. The findings have indicated differences in the presentation of autism between the sexes. The research points towards a more internal presentation of autism in girls with their characteristics less obvious compared to their male counterparts. The findings of this review have significant implications for policy, practice and research in terms of

recognition of and support for autistic girls and developments in autism research to improve the outcomes of autistic females.

Awareness of a varied presentation of autism is imperative for accurate identification of and support for females. In light of this, the information presented in this review requires action on behalf of policy makers in terms of the diagnostic process and post-diagnostic supports. It is accepted that the diagnostic criteria outlined in DSM-5 (APA 2013) are broad, however, it could be argued that their application to the varied and perhaps more nuanced female presentation could be restricted by the knowledge of professionals involved in the diagnostic process. An expert knowledge base in the presentation of autism in females along with the ability to see beyond the androcentrism of the diagnostic process and accompanying screening tools is necessary in the current context to identify of autistic girls. As a result, there is an inherent need to provide clarity with regards to how the characteristics of autistic girls meet the diagnostic criteria. While there is an emerging body of research on the female profile of autism being published, it is important this material is being disseminated and used to advance the diagnostic process. It is recommended that this research should be used to inform revisions on the current diagnostic criteria and screening tools used in the identification of autism. In addition, it is also necessary to consider the important role of the education context in identification and support of autistic girls. There is a need for guidance documents to be issued to educational contexts to ensure the needs of autistic girls are being attended to. While 2022 saw the publication of the Autism Good Practice Guideline in the Republic of Ireland, minimal information was presented in relation to the varied presentation of autism in girls. It is important that guidance appreciates the diversity of autism and its presentation in order to challenge male-biased perceptions of autism.

Teachers and school staff are critical stakeholders in terms of the identification of autism and will often be involved in the referral process. Moreover, they play a significant role in supporting the individual post-diagnosis. This review highlighted the variable knowledge of professionals in relation to autism in girls. It is apparent that there is a lack of knowledge on the presentation of autism in females among professionals with a gendered-knowledge base evident. This review revealed a varied autism profile and highlighted the subtleties of the internal presentation in girls. As a result, it is of critical importance that professionals are aware of the sex differences in autism to improve the recognition of and support for autistic girls. In summary, the findings of this review emphasise the need for training for teachers and other school staff. It is imperative that providers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) review course content to ensure input is provided in relation to the female profile of autism. Considering the significance of this issue, it is necessary to go beyond ITE and ensure all in-service teachers are provided with the necessary knowledge to competently support autistic girls. It is important that individuals and training bodies facilitating professional development for teachers on the topic of autism update their training to ensure it is inclusive of the female presentation of autism. Furthermore, it is believed that there is a need for all school contexts to receive some input which specifically addresses the female autism profile. It is hoped that the findings presented in this paper will raise awareness of how autism may present for girls so that practitioners can be supported to identify individuals who experience a more 'internal' presentation of autism, facilitate appropriate support and improve outcomes for autistic individuals.

Finally, this review supports the need for further research. While there exists a growing body of research that examines sex differences in autism, there is need for ongoing research exploring how autism presents and is experienced differently in females. Furthermore, there is potential for further empirical research to examine the current diagnostic criteria and process through the lens of gender. It could be argued that much of the current research is limited due to its reliance on diagnosed samples, who, by definition meet the current criteria for autism. However, as discussed, the androcentrism of the current diagnostic criteria are perceived to be a barrier for autistic females in obtaining a diagnosis (Duvekot et al. 2017). Considering this, the use of population-based samples in research could prove powerful in furthering knowledge of the female profile of autism. Lastly, valuable learning could be garnered from research with female-specific samples and from larger research studies with balanced sex samples.

Conclusion

While there is a growing body of research in the area of sex/gender differences in autism, there continues to be a lack of awareness of the female presentation of autism. The lack of clarity in relation to how autistic girls may meet the current diagnostic criteria has resulted in persistent under-identification of autistic girls. It is important to acknowledge that recognition precedes diagnosis and teachers are commonly one of the first professionals involved in this process. Despite this, research suggests that teachers are not equipped with the knowledge base to recognise autism in girls, resulting in autistic girls going unrecognised and unsupported. The author concludes that it is imperative that the internal presentation of autism, commonly associated with autistic girls, is acknowledged as an alternative profile to the traditional profile of autism which is grounded in a male-dominated research base.

This paper endeavoured to bring together insights garnered from both a quantitative and qualitative research perspective in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the presentation of autism in girls and detail how the profile of characteristics can be viewed with reference to the diagnostic criteria. It is accepted that the narrative review methodology adopted for this paper has its limitations. Broad details are provided in relation to the search strategy, however, this paper did not follow an official method for searching and retrieving the literature, a common criticism of the narrative review approach (Coughlan and Cronin 2021; Paré et al. 2015). Moreover, as with any narrative review, the sources used were selected based on perceived relevance and a systematic and comprehensive search of *all* literature was not carried out nor were sources given equal weight (Paré et al. 2015; West and Martin 2023). Nonetheless, it is hoped that this review will provide education practitioners and allied professionals, as well as researchers with a foundational understanding of the presentation of autism in girls.

Notes

1. The adoption of neurodiversity affirmative language is preferred by the author and used where possible, however, due to the nature of the review topic, less preferred terminology will be presented, particularly in relation to the diagnostic criteria, for the purpose of clarity in the discussion between how the characteristics experienced by autistic girls may meet the criteria as identified in DSM-5 [1].

2. Sex/gender is used interchangeably to refer to the inter-related concepts of sex (biological) and gender (sociocultural).
3. SENCo stands for Special Educational Needs Coordinator. SENCo's are school staff members with specific responsibilities in special education provision.
4. For the purpose of this paper, diagnostic criteria as outlined in DSM-5 [1] will be adopted, however, The International Classification of Diseases (ICD) criteria are comparable to those of DSM.
5. In order to obtain a diagnosis, it is necessary that differences exist in all three areas of the social communication and interaction domain and in at least two out of four criteria outlined in the RRBI domain (See Tables 1 & 2), have a negative impact of daily life and must be present in early childhood (although they may not become fully evident until the social demands exceed the individual's capacity).
6. Repetitive behaviours refer to any repetitive or unusual speech, movements or use of objects. Typical examples include motor stereotypies (rhythmic, fixed movements such as hand flapping), lining up of toys, organisation of objects in a fixed manner or according to pattern, use of repetitive phrases, echolalia, scripted language, noise making, repeated engagement in an activity, etc.

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Appendix F: Summary of Literature Reviewed: Educational Experiences of Autistic Girls

Author(s) & Location	Focus	Participants	Study Method/Design	Summary of Findings
Halsall *et al.* (2021) UK	Camouflaging by adolescent autistic girls in mainstream and specialist resource provision	8 Autistic Adolescent Girls (aged-12-15) Parents of the girls (8) (all mothers) School Staff (6 Teaching assistants/aides and one senior staff member)	Qualitative Semi-structured interviews	Various levels of camouflaging employed – simple to complex – consistent with other literature. Girls used camouflaging in both mainstream and resource provision to hide their learning challenges and autistic characteristics (perhaps to a greater extend in mainstream). Struggle with where they 'belong' - desire for friendships but remove themselves from peer interactions within the resource class. Attempts to camouflage were often ineffective or inconsistent. Mothers and educators attributed the increased camouflaging in mainstream to increased social expectations. The vicious cycle: commitment to conceal learning challenges = missed learning, teacher unawareness, underachievement.
Ryan *et al.* (2021) Ireland	Autistic girls' perceptions of friendship *has implications for experiences in mainstream education	10 Autistic Girls	Qualitative Focus Groups	Friendship was identified as being of high importance. Shared interests were identified as a gateway for establishing friendships. Girls acknowledged the importance of maintenance in friendship. Strong emotions surround the idea of friendship including fear. The girls were happy with the size and quantity of their friendships. There was some discussion on conflict in and loss of friendships; girls identified gradual withdrawal or relational aggression as factors in this. Fear and worry permeated this narrative on friendship loss. Online friendships were identified as easier but real-life friendships preferred.

Tomlinson *et al.* (2021) UK	Mainstream experiences of adolescent autistic girls	3 Autistic Girls Parents of the girls (3) (all mothers) School Psychotherapist	Qualitative Multiple-case Design Semi-structured interviews with supporting alternative methods (photo-elicitation, diary accounts-detailed notes)	Overarching themes presented from analysis of the girls' data: personal challenges, facilitators, self-identity, social interactions, school environment. Note: School recognised for good autism practice. For the most part, perspectives between the girls and the adults were similar, however, there were discrepancies in relation to anxiety, where the adults underestimated the difficulties experienced by girls. Deals with masking: girls' ability to mask difficulties, impact of diagnosis on masking.
Gray *et al.* (2021) UK	Parental & SENCo views to explore disparity in understanding sex-specific characteristics and identifying educational and therapeutic needs of autistic girls/women	53 SENCos 3 Parents	Mixed Methods SENCos: Questionnaire Parents of autistic girls (all mothers): Group Interview	Misconceptions about characteristics of autism in girls may exist in educational settings. Despite SENCos expressing moderate to high levels of confidence in recognising and supporting autistic girls, SENCos may have more male-based understanding of autism. Clear gaps in SENCo knowledge Support provided to autistic girls may not be in line with their needs. Disparity between parental views of what their daughters' need and the support they are receiving. Parental reports that girls experienced more internalising difficulties. Lack of and need for appropriate training for education staff.
Jacobs *et al.* (2020) Australia	Autistic girls' experiences of learning and academic	5 Autistic Girls	Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods	Academic progress was discussed with all girls feeling they were generally achieving well.

	success in mainstream secondary school	Mothers of the autistic girls (5)	Online survey Semi-structured interviews with girls and mothers	Explored the girls' feelings about school with mixed views among the girls. Highlights the negative impact of sensory, communication and social difficulties on learning and academic success. The influence of anxiety and differences in executive functioning were identified as other significant challenges. Many facilitators of learning were identified by the girls: help, organisation and time-management support, accommodations such as additional time, verbal explanation of written tasks, written explanations of verbal tasks, pre-teaching and alterations to presentation of task/activity.
Goodall and MacKenzie (2019) UK	Mainstream experiences of autistic young girls	2 Autistic Girls *Part of a wider study of 12 autistic young people aged 11-17	Qualitative Semi-structured interviews with supporting participatory (alternative) methods (Beans and Pots activity, diamond ranking, 'good teacher bad teacher' – outline figures, drawing 'Me at School'.	Key themes: Educational experiences – negative, impact on wellbeing, bullying and friendships, compensatory behaviours, conceptualising inclusion - emphasis on the 'ethos'. Neither of the girls felt 'included' and neither believed in the efficacy of mainstream provision for young people with disabilities. Findings highlighted the importance of the 'relational aspects of education'
Cook *et al.* (2018) UK	Autistic girls' experiences of learning, friendships and bullying	11 Autistic Girls (aged-11-17) 11 Parents (of the autistic girls)	Qualitative Semi-structured interviews	Girls were motivated to have friends (wanted friends and would like to fit in) but this was impacted by limited social skills and diverging expectations of friendship. Girls experienced social isolation and bullying. These negative experiences often resulted in absenteeism.

				Girls engaged with masking. Parents reported that their daughters could successfully hide their autistic traits. Masking appeared to offer a solution to social difficulties – awareness of problems associated with masking.
Dean *et al.* (2017) USA	Gender differences in the social behaviours of autistic girls and boys. Exploration of masking in autistic girls. *not first person experiences but insightful.	96 children – elementary school (1st to 5th grade) Divided into 4 groups: 24 autistic girls, 24 TD girls. 24 autistic boys, 24 TD boys. *TD and autistic children were matched according to sex, age, city of residence *All autistic females included from previous study included and other participants randomly selected from study (Kasari *et al.*, 2011)	Mixed Methods: ANOVA Secondary data analysis of observational data collected using *Playground Observation of Peer Engagement (POPE)* from previous study.	Autistic girls use compensatory behaviours to gain access into peer groups; staying close to peers, mask social difficulties – however they upon closer observations it is suggested that autistic girls don't have the required skills to use their opportunities for successful interaction with peers. Autistic girls displayed a certain sensitivity to socially constructed gender expectations. Social challenges of autistic boys are more obvious The female social landscape supports the camouflage hypothesis as the fluidity of female social interactions has the capacity to conceal autistic girls and their difficulties. Due to the presentation of their social interactions, girls may be less likely to receive support than boys.
Sproston *et al.* (2017) UK	Autistic girls and school exclusion	8 parent-daughter dyads (7 mothers and 1 father) (aged-11-18)	Qualitative Semi-structured interviews	Participants had to have had experienced exclusion from mainstream secondary school. Reflection was focused on the experiences of exclusion. Mainstream experiences were contrasted with their experience of Public Referral Units (PRUs) (7 out of 8 were in PRUs at time of study, 1 was awaiting placement in alternative provision). Experiences of mainstream provision were characterised by inappropriate school

				environments (sensory environment, classroom peers, alternative opportunities, pressures in mainstream), tensions in school relationships (staff relationships, peer relationships, communication) and problems with staff responses (lack of understanding, school support, parent battles).
Jarman and Rayner (2015) Australia	Examination of the school experiences of females with autism. Mixture of reflections for autistic adult females and perspectives of parents whose autistic daughters are currently in education.	30 Autistic Adults 15 Parents	Qualitative Surveys	Lack of teacher understanding of autism: characteristics and challenges. Concern of a stereotyped understanding of autism among teachers. Lack of understanding about presentation of autism in females Extent of difficulties experienced by autistic girls not recognised/appreciated. Autistic girls not receiving appropriate support. Examples of difficulties experienced by autistic females in education context. Need for appropriate training for teachers Acknowledgement of good teachers and the qualities they possess.
Moyse and Porter (2015) UK	Experience of the 'hidden curriculum' for autistic girls in mainstream primary	3 Autistic Girls & mothers/class teachers and school SENCo	Qualitative Multiple-case design (ethnographic) Observations, semi-interviews, drawing, photographs and sorting activities	Key areas of difficulty that permeated the findings were: class rules; working collaboratively; completing tasks; and interactions with peers. Observations revealed some modifications and strategies that the girls employed to mask difficulties. Significant differences were revealed between the perspectives of the girls, their parents and their teachers, raising concern in terms of the support needed versus supported offered.

Honeybourne (2015) UK	Experiences of autistic girls/women in the classroom	67 Autistic Girls/Women (ages 14-50+)	Qualitative Face-to-face interviews, email, online surveys and Facebook groups.	Difficulties were identified in the area of friendship, communication, learning, interpreting the world of school, feeling misunderstood. Some positive comments in relation to individual experiences of the school were recorded.
Cridland *et al.* (2014) Australia	Autistic adolescent girls' experiences during adolescence *Implications for educational experiences	3 mother-daughter dyads and 2 additional mothers	Qualitative –IPA Mutiple-case design Semi-structured interviews	Challenges were identified in the area of school encompassing social, physical and academic difficulties. Lack of teacher knowledge of autism in girls was identified as a problem. The complexities of adolescent female relationships were discussed. Additionally, concerns were raised around puberty and sexual relationships. Authors highlighted the similarities of some of the findings with boys while other findings were of more particular relevance to girls specifically.
Dean *et al.* (2014) USA	Peer relationships of elementary school children. A comparison of autistic girls' relationships with boys and girls with/without autism *not first-person experiences but insightful	100 children – elementary school (1st to 5th grade) Divided into 4 groups: 25 autistic girls, 25 TD girls. 25 autistic boys, 25 TD boys. *Autistic children were matched by age, gender and IQ with a TD child. *Data for autistic girls were selected from previous studies (Kasari *et al.*, 2011; AIR-B, 2012).	Quantitative –ANOVA and regression analysis. Secondary data analysis. Peer nomination data from *The Friendship Survey* used in the two other studies was analysed.	Autistic girls and boys both socialise primarily with their same-sex classmates. TD girls receive a greater proportion of female friend nominations that all other groups. The friendship patterns of autistic girls are influenced by both gender and diagnosis. Autistic girls were listed as a friend less frequently than their TD counterparts. Autistic girls perceived themselves as having fewer friendships. Autistic children had fewer regular playmates and were more likely to be on the social periphery. However, autistic girls appeared to be neither accepted or rejected but rather overlooked or ignored. In contrast, autistic boys were rejected

	more frequently – their exclusion may be easier to detect that the exclusion of autistic girls. Social demands placed on boys are different to those placed on girls (analysis of contrasting friendship types - girls/boys)

Appendix G: Reflexivity and Positionality

Malterud (2001, p.484) suggests that *'reflexivity starts by identifying preconceptions brought into the project by the researcher, representing previous personal and professional experiences, pre-study beliefs about how things are and what is to be investigated, motivation and qualifications for exploration of the field, and perspectives and theoretical foundations related to education and interests'*.

What are my experiences?

I had a positive school experience at primary and post-primary level and have progressed through the higher education system. I attended a small, rural primary school. My primary school community were like my extended family, and indeed, I was taught by my uncle for five years in primary school. I attended a community school at post-primary level. This school was significantly larger than my primary school experience and was in the local town. I was privileged that most of my primary school family transitioned with me to this school and we remain friends to this day. As a student I was consistent. I was engaged, I worked hard, and I succeeded because of this. I enjoyed the routine, and I enjoyed the predictable nature of the school day. I had preferred subjects and teachers, and I had less preferred one. I did not have any profoundly negative experiences. I had my friends from primary school, and I developed another network of friends at post-primary level. I was involved in extra-curricular activities such as running and music. I can openly say that I liked school. But I loved third level. However, I wouldn't have been able to access third level without the SUSI grant system. I always enjoyed learning, and third level enveloped me in learning, learning for the purpose of the programme and for a future career, but also learning as an individual endeavour. Third level opened my eyes to a whole new world of learning and academics that I didn't even know was possible.

However, my experiences as a teacher opened my eyes to the diversity of school experiences among children and young people. I became more conscious of the way in which children's backgrounds, unique profiles, people in child's immediate environment influenced the manner in which they experienced school. I became more aware of the interplay between the broad range of factors within and beyond the school environment and how these factors had implications for children and young people in different ways, thus creating very different experiences. In my role as teacher educator, I can see this among the young adults that I support but also through the conversations that I am privileged to have with practicing teachers.

So, while I had largely positive school experiences, I am very aware of the diversity of experience among children and young people in relation to school experiences. My experiences as a student, as a teacher and as a teacher educator allow me to empathise with children and young people and facilitate open and honest conversations on the topic of school experiences.

My values, my beliefs, my preconceptions…

I value education and research as a mechanism for emancipation. As someone who wouldn't have had access to third level education without the SUSI grant system, I am truly grateful for the opportunities that I have had. Education, and learning, are huge facets of my identity and I place immense value on these. They have been a source of consistency in times where my life outside of education has been disrupted. I value the work of educators; however, I also recognise that there can be a disconnect between those responsible for delivering the education and those on the receiving end of the process.

I believe in education and research. I believe that education has the power to equip individuals with the skills, knowledge and capacity to navigate life. I believe that all children have a right to be supported to reach their full potential in school to allow them to flourish as individuals, but also to allow them to experience independence and success beyond the school context. However, I recognise that for some educational experiences, particularly formal education, can be challenging. I recognise the many barriers that some individuals are faced with and the implications of this. I recognise that not all individuals, or those supporting them, have the capacity to navigate and negotiate the system to experience their right to a fruitful education in the fullest sense. I believe in research as a means of identifying issues, amplifying voices, critically investigating topics and generating potential solutions to address issues, improve situations or present arguments to support change or lack of change.

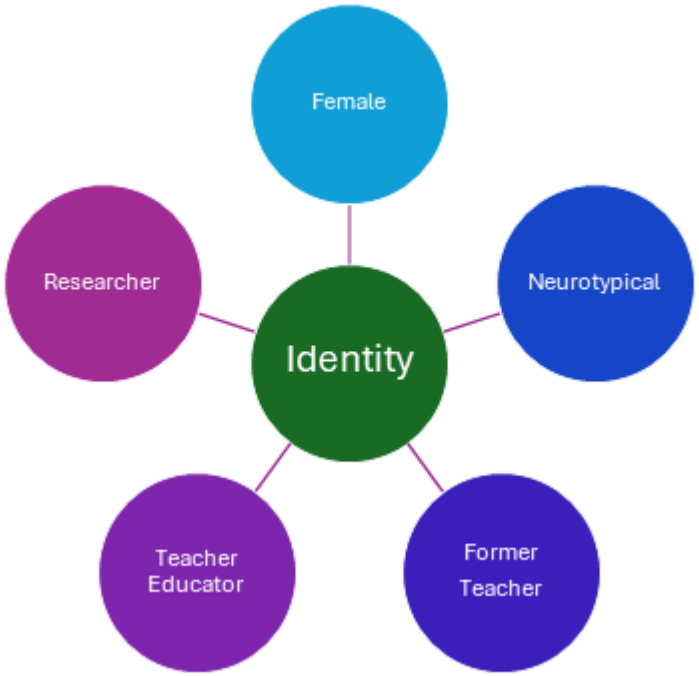
Having experienced the school system and having worked as a teacher previously, I may come with preconceptions. Moreover, having undertaken a multitude of postgraduate programmes in facets of special and inclusive education and considering the extent of my engagement with the research in this area, I may bring certain perspectives to the process. However, I believe that by examining my identities and by being both a reflexive and reflective researcher, these preconceptions can be monitored and not negatively influence the research process.

Finding my Positionality

(Darwin Holmes, 2020; Kara *et al.*, 2021)

Facet	Descriptor	Reflection
Locating the Self	'Acknowledging personal positions that have the potential to influence the research'	My various identities (see below) have the power to influence the research in a number of different ways, at different stages in the research. Each of my identities will bring a different lens to the research process and shape the decisions that I will make as I move through the process. *For example;* I believe that my identity as a former teacher will positively influence how I interact with the participants and design the data collection due to my experience in the classroom. However, my identity as a neurotypical individual may have implications in terms understanding the embodied nature of the girls' experiences. My previous experience as a researcher and research assistant should support me on this journey, in terms of navigating the process as a whole, but also in terms of negotiating the researcher-participant relationships.
Locating in Context of the Participants	'Researchers individually considering how they view themselves, as well as how others view them'	I view myself as approachable but straightforward. I believe myself to be a good listener with the capacity to create an atmosphere conducive to open, honest conversation. I believe that my age and physical stature may

		act as a facilitator when interacting with the girls as it may challenge their preconceptions of what a researcher looks like. Similarly, I think these features, along with my background in primary education may ease parent/guardian anxiety around the process for their daughters. In terms of the research with teachers, I believe that teachers may be more likely to engage with research that is being conducted by someone who has experience in the field (former teacher) and who has the power to influence change (teacher educator).
Locating themselves about the Research Context and Process	'acknowledging that research will necessarily be influenced by themselves and by the research context'	I recognise that my former role as a teacher will undeniably influence what I bring to this process, and will definitely have to be monitored, particularly when designing data collection tools, collecting data and completing data analysis to ensure I don't bring preconceptions or assumptions to the process. Instead, I must work from the basis of the participants in this study and from the data that is in front of me.



My Insider-Outsider Positionality
(Darwin Holmes, 2020; Bayeck, 2022)

Sample	Insider	Outsider
Autistic Girls	Female Ally	Neurotypical Professional
Parents/Guardians	Female Ally Education Professional Researcher	Not a parent Neurotypical Professional
Teachers	Teacher	Teacher Educator Researcher

The interplay between my identity and the research process
(Bayeck, 2022)

Identities	Gaining Access to Research Site and Participants	Data Collection
Female	Research with Girls: *Girls may wish to participate on the grounds that I am a relatively young female researcher.* Research with Parents/Guardians: *Parents/Guardians may be more inclined to express interest in the research as I am a female researcher researching female autistic girls' experiences.*	Research with Girls: *My female identity and my positioning as ally may positively influence participant-researcher relationship which may influence the girls' willingness to share and the depth of their engagement.* Research with Parents/Guardians: *Mothers of girls may be more comfortable sharing their experiences and their daughters' experiences with another female. However, the fact that I am not a parent may influence this. Fathers may feel that as a female I may understand their daughter's experiences better than a male researcher, however, they themselves may feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with a male researcher.*
Neurotypical	Research with Girls: *Girls may be hesitant to participant in research being carried out by a neurotypical researcher.* Research with Parents/Guardians: *Parents/Guardians may be hesitant to participant in research being carried out by a neurotypical research.*	Research with Girls: *Me being a part of the neuro-majority may influence relatability, and girls may feel that I don't understand them. They may withhold experiences and/or mask due to my outsider status in the autism community.* Research with Parents/Guardians: *Parents/Guardians may withhold information about their daughter's experience if they feel that I may not wholly understand it.*
Former Teacher	Research with Girls:	Research with Girls:

	May not want to participate if they have had negative experiences with teachers in the past. Girls may be more inclined to participant in the research knowing that I am a teacher and have experience working with young people.	*May be hesitant to share due to my previous experience as a teacher. They may think that because I am a teacher that I will want to hear certain things and not other aspects of their experience. Girls may assume that because I was a teacher, I may tell their teachers what they tell me. My experience as a teacher may better equip me to design inclusive data collection measures.*
	Research with Parents/Guardians: *May not want to participate if they have had negative experiences with teachers in the past (either in supporting their daughters or in terms of their own personal school experience). May be more inclined to participant knowing that I have a background as a teacher, understand the system and have experience working with children and young people.*	Research with Parents/Guardians: *Parents may be hesitant in their responses, particularly negative responses due to me being a part of the education community. They may be hesitant to share bad experiences knowing that I have worked as a teacher and have colleagues who are teachers. They may also be more willing to share information knowing that I understand the system.*
	Research with Teachers: *Some participants may recognise my identity as a former teacher which may support my research being shared as researched conducted by 'one of us', which in turn may create a link with the community and potentially increase buy-in to participate in the research.*	Research with Teachers: *Being a former teacher may place me at an advantage in terms of understanding and contextualising the language, including colloquial language, used by teachers in their responses.*
Teacher Educator	Research with Girls: *Knowing that I teach teachers, girls may want to participate to allow me to hear their experiences in the hope that I would share it with teachers.*	Research with Girls: *Knowing that I teach teacher, girls may be more inclined to share their experiences in a more balanced manner. They may wish for their positive experiences to be shared as examples of good practice, and they wish for their negative experiences to be shared as examples of how teachers can do better.*
	Research with Parents/Guardians: *Recognising my position as a teacher educator, parents/guardians may be more inclined to engage knowing that I potential to influence practice going forward.*	Research with Parents/Guardians: *Recognising my position as a teacher educator and my potential to influence teacher knowledge and practice, parents/guardians may share a more holistic narrative, both in terms of their daughter's experiences and their experiences as parents navigating the system for their daughters. They may be more*

		inclined to provide recommendations on how teachers and schools can make positive changes if they know I am in a position to disseminate this information on the ground as well as through more formal measures of research dissemination. My identity as a former teacher may position provide me with the ability to ask more meaningful or insightful questions due to my prior experience
	Research with Teachers: *My role as teacher educator was not disclosed to teachers.*	Research with Teachers: *Researcher's role as teacher educator was not disclosed to teachers.*
Researcher	Research with Girls: *Girls may be anxious about the unknown of participating in a 'formal' research study conducted by a researcher. Girls may be anxious about sharing their experiences with a 'researcher'.*	Research with Girls: *Girls may be more inclined to share their experiences with an outside researcher, rather than someone in their school. Girls may be less inclined to share their experiences with an external researcher that they do not know. The formality of the concept of 'researcher' may create a power imbalance which may have implications for data collection.*
	Research with Parents/Guardians: *Parents/Guardians may be happy to participate in 'formal' research with a researcher who has potential to disseminate broadly due to the lack information and knowledge about autism in girls. Parents/Guardians may feel that participating in research may not have an impact on their daughter's experience and therefore may be less inclined to participate.*	Research with Parents/Guardians: *Parents/guardians may share insights and experiences in great detail when presented with the opportunity to talk about their daughter's experiences with someone who they may perceive as a 'more knowledgeable other'. Parents/guardians may participate in data collection to have their voice heard. Parents/guardians may feel intimated to share their experiences if they perceive the researcher to be the 'more knowledgeable other'.*
	Research with Teachers *Teachers may be more inclined to participate in the research due to my role as PhD researcher compared to researcher at Level 8 or 9. Teachers may be less inclined to participate if they see me firstly as a researcher rather than my combined identities as former teacher, teacher educator and researcher.*	Research with Teachers *Teachers may over-estimate their self-reported knowledge for fear of judgement. Teachers may be less inclined to expand on their answers in case their responses are incorrect. Teachers may be more willing to expand on their answers/provide additional comments recognising my position as influential for providing support/facilitating change.*

Appendix H: Ethical Approval

MIC
MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE
COLÁISTE MHUIRE GAN SMÁL

MIREC-5

Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:	A23-009

1. PROJECT TITLE

Autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education provision

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Aoife Munroe
Department / Centre / Other:	EPISE
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher

3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)

☐	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
✓	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
☐	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair ***pro tem*** without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
☐	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
☐	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

I have reviewed this application and I am satisfied it meets MIREC requirements.

Risk assessment is fully fit for purpose.

The application is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	

Appendix I: Safeguarding Statement

Child Safeguarding Statement
for a Research Project involving Children

This sample template may be used for developing a Child Safeguarding Statement for a research project involving children. This sample template is for guidance only. It is not a standardised format for a Child Safeguarding Statement. See the following documents for more information about developing a Child Safeguarding Statement:

- *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017)*
- *Guidance on Developing a Child Safeguarding Statement (www.tusla.ie)*
- *Child Safeguarding: A Guide for Policy, Procedure and Practice (www.tusla.ie)*

A. The Research Project

Research Project Title:	Autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education provision
Timescale for delivery: [Give three key milestone dates for project completion & dissemination]	
February '23: Ethics Application Submission March '23: Distribution of Teacher Questionnaires May '23: Recruitment of Girls/Parents Sample June/July '23: Data Analysis of Survey September/October/November '23: Data Collection with Girls/Parents November/December/Jan '23/'24: Data Analysis from Data Collection with Girls/Parents February/March/April/May '24: Findings/Discussion Write Up Semester 1 A/Y '24/'25: Finish Write Up / Dissemination / Submission	
Are you in the process of completing an ethics application?	**Yes** ☑ **No** ☐
Please provide your MIREC Application Number:	A23-009

B. Child Safeguarding Statement Specific to this Research

1. The general requirements of MIC's *Safeguarding Children Policy and Procedures* will be complied with.
2. In undertaking this research the welfare of the children involved will be the paramount consideration. The principle of non-maleficence will be respected.
3. Appropriate consent from a parent/guardian will be obtained and respect for children will be demonstrated by obtaining and maintaining their informed consent during the research.
4. Attention will be paid to the power differences inherent in the adult/child relationship and the views of participating children will be obtained and listened to.
5. Particular attention will be paid to children's understanding of the research and outcome.

C. Risk Assessment

*I have carried out an assessment of any potential *harm to a child while engaged in this research. The table below lists the areas of risk identified and the procedures for managing these risks. In undertaking this risk assessment, every effort has been made to identify as far as possible the risks of harm that are relevant to the research project and to ensure that adequate procedures are in place to manage all risks identified. While it is not possible to foresee and remove all risk of harm, the procedures in this risk assessment have been put in place to manage and reduce risk to the greatest possible extent.*

*'harm means in relation to a child –
(a) Assault, ill-treatment or neglect of the child in a manner that seriously affects or is likely to seriously affect the child's health, development or welfare, or
(b) Sexual abuse of the child,
Whether caused by a single act, omission or circumstance or a series or combination of acts, omissions or circumstances or otherwise.' (Section 2 of the Children First Act 2015)*

	Risk identified	Measures in place to manage this risk
1.	Risk of Harm/Abuse	Ethical approval for the project will be sought from MIREC. Parent/guardian consent and child assent will be collected In circumstances where 1:1 session, session will be conducted in a room with open door/visual access. Researcher is Garda Vetted
2.	Risk of harm to a child due to a child protection of welfare concern not being recognised or reported by a child/ Disclosure made by a child	Researcher familiar with signs and symptoms of child abuse and MIC Safeguarding Children's Policy. Researcher has undertaken Children's First Training and is aware of specifics of Children First Act 2015. Researcher is aware of designated officers at current institution and will seek information on DLP of school upon participant recruitment and understands the strictly detailed procedures for engaging appropriately in the event of disclosure.
3.	Risk of Power Imbalance	The researcher has planned the data collection approaches and methods with potential power imbalances in mind. Walking interviews have been selected for the first session. This places the participant as the guide or expert which can reduce the power imbalance. Other informal activities will be used to reduce the 'researcher as leader' concept in the second interview session.
4.	Risk of Incomplete/Inaccurate Understanding of Involvement and Informed Consent Process	A young person friendly information sheet/assent form has been designed for autistic girls to engage in the process. This is written in age-appropriate language and breaks down the various aspects of the study and their potential involvement in the study. Information will also be made available in video format. Here, the researcher will introduce herself and explain the project and reasons for the project. Consent will be monitored throughout the process and parental consent will also be sought. Visual cue cards will be given to the girls to allow them to seek breaks, ask questions, stop the interview.
5.	Risk of girls' experiencing elevated anxiety/social communication difficulties (Anxiety and differences in social communication and interaction are areas of core difference in autism and need to be supported appropriately)	Session 1 will take place in familiar environment (school) and session 2 will take place in a predetermined location. Social demands will be reduced using walking interview (S.1) and adopted an 'interrupted interview' where activities will aim to reduce intensity of interaction. Cue cards will be provided to support asking questions, requesting breaks, stopping the interview. If desired, another adult can be present. Girls will have completed a Wellbeing Plan which will indicate an identified trusted person that can be contacted if the researcher was concerned about the individual.

D. Procedures

This Child Safeguarding Statement has been developed in line with the requirements under the Children First Act 2015, the *Children First: National Guidance* and Tusla's *Child Safeguarding: A Guide for Policy, Procedure and Practice.* In addition to this Child Safeguarding Statement, the research project will be bound by and abide by all other existing and forthcoming policies and procedures for the protection of children in research contexts, notably MIC's *Safeguarding Children Policy and Procedures and Safeguarding Statement 2019* and the provisions of the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). In particular MIC's arrangements for the management of child protection or welfare concerns will be followed.

Appendix J: Information Sheet (Parents/Guardians)

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream education settings

Participant Information Sheet (Parents/Guardians)

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD by research in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education under the supervision of Dr Laura Ambrose and Dr Michele Dunleavy. The current study will form part of my thesis.

What is the project about?
The aim of this study is to better understand autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education at post-primary level. This research provides autistic girls with the opportunity to share their lived experience of attending a mainstream education setting while also affording their parents/guardians the chance to share their views on their daughter's experiences. A second element of the project will examine the awareness and perceptions of mainstream post-primary teachers in relation to autism in girls.

Why is it being undertaken?
Research has highlighted a higher rate of autism diagnoses in boys compared to girls. This is often attributed to a different or more internal presentation of autism in girls. In addition to this, much of the research to date has been conducted with male dominant samples. As a result, autistic girls often go unrecognised and/or unsupported in educational settings and face barriers to inclusion and learning. The core objective of the study is to amplify missing voices in educational research, those of autistic girls, to understand their experiences. The inclusion of your voice, as a parent/guardian, will supplement the information provided by your daughter and allow you to provide your insights and perspectives on her experiences in mainstream education. Teacher voices will be elicited in another component of the overall study and will be used to further our understanding of mainstream school experiences for autistic girls.

What are the benefits of this research?
It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will

a) enhance our understanding of how autistic girls experience mainstream educational settings
b) identify good practice in terms of what facilitates positive school experiences while also highlighting potential areas of concerns in terms of the barriers to inclusion and learning faced by the girls
c) provide insight into teachers' awareness of how autism presents in girls and their perceptions of support provision.

What is involved for the participants?

Your involvement in the study: If you are a parent/guardian of an autistic girl (diagnosed at Level 1) who is attending a mainstream setting in the junior end of post-primary education (1st to 3rd year), you and your daughter are invited to participate in this study. If your daughter has access to a special class/support hours but spends the majority of their time in the mainstream setting, you can still participate. (**NOTE**: Your daughter must be aware of their autism diagnosis as this will be brought up in their interview). If you consent to participate you will be involved in one interview session and your daughter will be involved in two sessions (see below for details of their involvement).

In your interview you will be asked about your daughter's educational history and their experiences. You will be asked about their interactions with the school in terms of both staff and the environment. You will also be offered the opportunity to share your own insights on mainstream provision for autistic learners. The interview will take approximately 1 hour and will occur at a location and time that is convenient for you.

Your daughter's involvement in the study: Your daughter will engage with the researcher on two occasions and complete one online task. The interviews have been adapted from the traditional interview format to make them more accessible and engaging.

- Session 1 will take place in your daughter's school (with the principal's consent) and will consist of a walking interview. Your daughter will meet the researcher in the school at a quiet time and will act as a tour guide, bringing the researcher to three or four places of significant importance to them. The researcher will provide prompts to support this walk and your daughter will take pictures of each place visited using a device owned by the researcher. These photos will be discussed again in the second session.
    - Online Task: Your daughter will receive a link to a webpage where they will be asked to sort 9 statements relating to the school experience in order of importance. This activity will form part of the discussion in Session 2.

- Session 2 will take approximately 1 hour and will occur at a location and time that is convenient for your daughter. In this session, the researcher and your daughter will talk about their school experiences (what they like about school, what they don't like about school, what they might change, how they think autism effects the way they experience the mainstream setting, etc). The researcher will refer to the pictures taken during session 1, the ranking task completed online and other visual supports to facilitate and support the discussion with your daughter.

How will confidentiality and anonymity be attended to?

- All information will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than for discussion with my research supervisors. All data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisors.

- All participants will be assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. However, as parents/guardians and daughter groupings will be in use for recruitment, the researcher cannot guarantee complete anonymity within the parent/guardian and daughter group as some quotations may be recognised by the other member of the duo.
- The photos taken of the girls' schools during the walking interview will only be used as a stimulus for discussion in session 2. They will not be included in the thesis.

Right to withdraw
Participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part. If you agree to take part and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without consequence.

How will the information be used/disseminated?
The data from this study will be combined with the data collected from other components of the study and used to form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the dissertation. Direct quotations from interviews will be used, however, these remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. These individual excerpts will be combined with those from other participants. The data collected may also be presented at national/international conferences or published in academic journals.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?
In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

Contact details:
If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors. Our contact details are provided below:

Researcher	***Supervisor 1***	***Supervisor 2***
Aoife Munroe	Dr Michele Dunleavy	Dr Laura Ambrose
Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie	Michele.Dunleavy@mic.ul.ie	Laura.Ambrose@mic.ul.ie
		(Currently on Leave)

This research study has received Ethical approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (REF: A23-009). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix K: Consent Form (Parents/Guardians)

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream education settings

Informed Consent Form for Parents/Guardians

Dear Participant,

As outlined in the **Participant Information Sheet**, the current study aims to explore autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education settings at post-primary level from the perspective of autistic girls and their parents/guardians. An additional component of the study will elicit the views of teachers in mainstream post-primary settings in relation to their awareness and perceptions of autism in girls.

Details of interviews involved are outlined in the Information Sheet. This should be read fully and carefully before consenting to take part in the study.

Your anonymity is assured, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. All information gathered will remain confidential and will not be shared with any third party other than my research supervisors. In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal encrypted laptop.

Please read the following statements before signing the consent form:

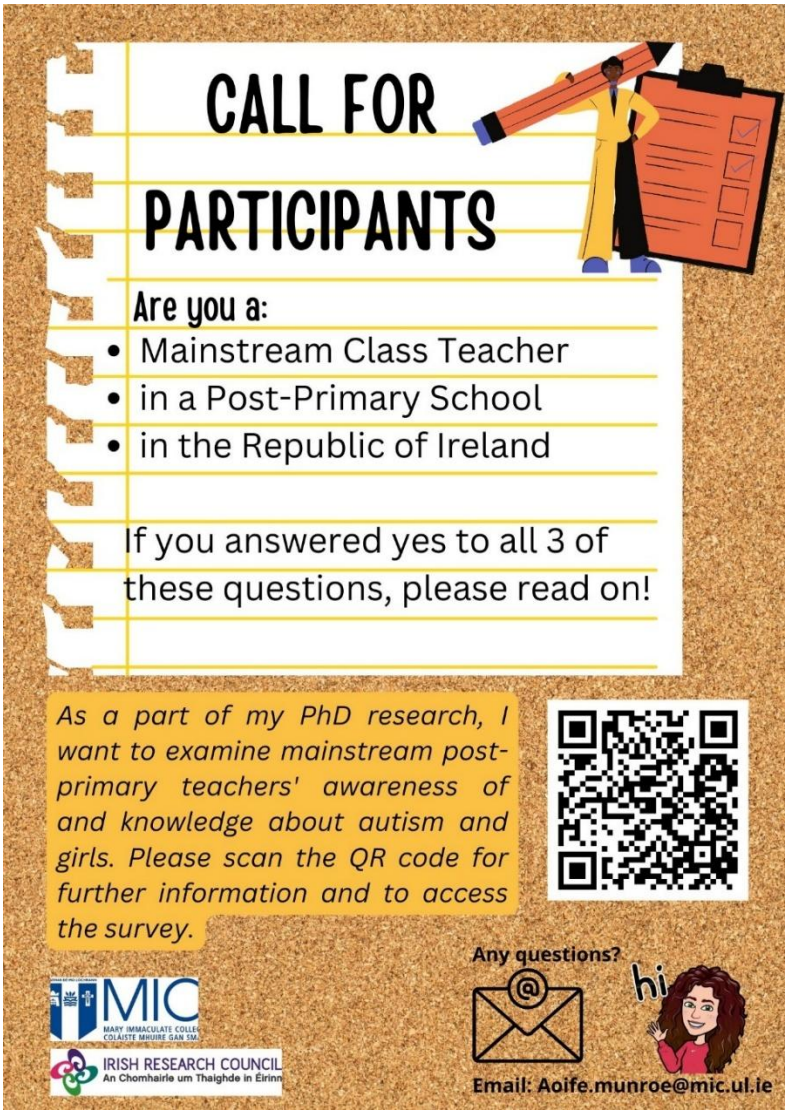
- I have read and understand the parent/guardian information sheet.
- I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving myself and my daughter, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.
- I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving reason.
- I am aware that my results will be kept confidential.

Informed Consent:	Participant name (PRINTED):	_____
☐	Participant name (Signature):	_____
Parent/Guardian Consent:	Date:	_____
☐	Principal Researcher:	_____

Appendix L: Call for Participants Flyer (Primary Study)



Appendix M: Call for Participants (Secondary Study)





Appendix N: Published Paper (Munroe, 2024)

International Conference
The Future of Education

Using 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research' (Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021) as an Ethical Framework for Eliciting the School Experiences of Autistic Girls

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Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland

Abstract

Traditionally, research on the topic of autism was primarily carried out on, about or for autistic individuals (Chown et al., 2017). However, there has been a gradual shift away from this approach in recent times with momentum for inclusive and neurodiversity affirming research growing (Pellicano and Stears, 2011). Encouraging steps have been made in autism research in terms of establishing research priorities and engaging autistic people and their families in research. Despite this, research with autistic young people remains scant (Eilis, 2017). Inclusive research must take place with members of the relevant community (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021). Furthermore, thorough reflection on the ethical considerations is required when working with vulnerable populations to ensure inclusive research practice. The current study aimed to amplify the voices of autistic girls and provide them with the opportunity to share their experiences of mainstream education provision. Participatory research has been identified as a transformative approach to truly ethical and inclusive research, however, Pickard et al. (2022) highlight that early career researchers are often limited in their capacity to facilitate truly participatory research practices, as a result of time, funding and support. This paper details how the researcher adopted the Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research model as a framework to attend to the ethical considerations for including autistic girls in the current study. Fletcher-Watson et al. (2021) appreciate different degrees of inclusion depending on the resources available, the scale of the research and the probable impact. Six key pillars are identified as essential in the delivery of inclusive research within this model. Each of the six pillars will be introduced and detail provided on how the researcher responded to the pillar in terms of its practical implementation. This paper will have implications for future researchers in terms of learning from the actions of the current project and continuing to improve practice when engaging with inclusive research.

Keywords: *Inclusive Research, Ethics, Ethical Practice, Autism, Neurodiversity, Participation*

1. Introduction

Defined within a clinical context, autism is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in social interaction and communication and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests and activities, including differences in sensory processing [1]. However, from a neurodiversity lens, autism is better understood as a natural variation of neurology [2] associated with a different style of processing [3].

The historical grounding of autism within a medical model of disability [2] meant that autism research in the past prioritised an intervention focus with research conducted *on, about,* or *for* autistic individuals [4,5]. Furthermore, the autistic community were traditionally perceived as harder to engage in research due to the characteristics associated with their diagnosis [6], resulting in the persistent exclusion of autistic individuals from engagement in knowledge production [5]. However, recent developments in autism research have seen a renewed effort to include autistic individuals and those in their immediate microsystem in the identification of research priorities [4] and engagement in research more broadly [7]. Despite the increase in the inclusion of autistic voices in research [8, 9], autistic children and young people remain underrepresented [10], and similar to autism research more generally, samples are often male-biased [11], emphasising the importance of continued efforts to detail processes and promote the inclusion of autistic children and young people in research.

Participatory research has been recognised as a potentially transformative approach to support the inclusion of marginalised voices in research [12,13]. Despite this, the enactment and conceptual understanding of participatory research is varied [14]. Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that

facilitating truly participatory research (participation across all research stages) can be impeded by several factors such as academic environments that are inconsistent with participatory research, support, time and funding [15]. It is also argued that there is a need for flexibility within participatory research to ensure it is not rudimentary in nature [15,16]. In response to this, Fletcher-Watson *et al.* [16] put forth the idea of Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research, a model centred around six key pillars for supporting inclusive research.

The current paper aims to delineate how the 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research' model proposed by Fletcher-Watson et al. [16] was used as an ethical framework for eliciting the school experiences of autistic girls to ensure an inclusive approach to research. The research context within which the framework was operationalised is first presented. Following this, the six pillars of the 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Reseach' are introduced and their application examined in the context of the current study.

2. Research Context

Much of the research exploring mainstream educational inclusion for autistic individuals is explored through the adult stakeholder lens or limited by male-dominated samples. A systematic review of research conducted with autistic individuals suggests that their needs are often not supported in mainstream provision [17]. Furthermore, evidence suggests that due to differences in presentation, autistic girls often go unrecognised and unsupported [18,19] and, as a result face unique systemic barriers to inclusion [20]. In light of this, it is understood that they can have qualitatively different school experiences to autistic boys [21]. There is currently no published research known to the researcher that looks at the experiences of autistic girls in schools in the Irish education context, situating the current research as timely.

The research underpinning this paper is the author's PhD research and is a mixed-methods, multi-informant study to better understanding the educational experiences of autistic girls. The primary research study aim is to explore the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream education provision at post-primary level in the Republic of Ireland. Underpinned by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research seeks to elicit the lived experience of being autistic and attending mainstream education provision and amplify the voices of those historically left out of knowledge production.

3. Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research (200)

The 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research' was developed by Fletcher-Watson *et al.* [16] as a mechanism for embedding inclusive practices within research, across all levels of the continuum of participation [22]. This model places responsibility on researchers to embed inclusive practices within the research process to facilitate research *with* members of the relevant community [23,16]. It promotes the idea that those with 'lived experience of the neurotype being researched' should be provided with 'meaningful and accessible opportunities' to share their experiences [16]. It is argued that community engagement is necessary to ensure the research has a positive impact in terms of its outcomes [24]. The model proposed by Fletcher-Watson *et al.* [16] identifies 6 key pillars that aim to provide guidance for researchers on how to embed inclusive practices within their research. The six key pillars include; *the who and how of inclusive research, setting expectations, community specific inclusion measures, inclusion and intersectionality, the role of empowerment* and *knowledge exchange for inclusion* (**Fig. 1**). The following subheadings present each principle in turn and provide examples of how it was considered in the context of the research.



Figure 1: 6 Key Pillars of 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research' (Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2021)

3.1 The Who and How of Inclusive Research

Inclusive research demands that the voices of those with lived experience are prioritised [16]. Traditionally, adult stakeholders, e.g. parents and teachers, were recruited as proxies in research concerning the experiences of autistic young people [4], however, it is argued that researchers must find ways to facilitate the participation of children and young people in the research process [16], particularly where the research focus is pertinent to their lives. Successful inclusion must be considered from the outset in terms of planning and design and may require adaptations to the research processes. In the current project, autistic girls were central to the process and IPA was selected as an approach suitable for amplifying their voices [25]. In IPA, participants are deemed 'experts-by-experience' [25], an understanding extremely appropriate when seeking to elicit the lived experience of a different neurotype [16]. In addition, While the inclusion of autistic voice is critical, it is also acknowledged that other stakeholders' contributions can develop understanding of a phenomenon and add rigor to the data [16]. Therefore, consistent with IPA research, this study adopted a multi-perspectival approach through the use of dyadic research design with autistic girls and their parents/guardians forming research dyads [26].

3.2 Setting Expectations

The setting of clear expectations is deemed essential in inclusive research to promote transparency in the research process [16]. The researcher and the participants should have a shared understanding in terms of the expectations, roles and responsibilities within the process. Guided by the Participatory Autism Research Starter Pack [27], the researcher ensured that the goals, procedures and outcomes, as well as information on how participant data would be used was detailed to participants in a coherent manner using plain language. The researcher created a private webpage that hosted a suite of resources to support clarity around the research process. These resources included a text-based biography and photograph of the researcher, an animation introducing the concept of research, a video of the researcher introducing the research and explaining the research process, a child-friendly information sheet, a parent/guardian information sheet, an infographic detailing a step-by-step guide of the research process, as well as an option to express their interest in participating or to request

contact from the researcher. The multi-modal approach to information sharing was praised by parents/guardians as useful in initiating discussion on the research with their daughters and for preparing them for the first meeting with the researcher.

3.3 Community Specific Inclusion Measures

In adopting a neurodiversity affirming perspective, it is of critical importance to acknowledge the differences experienced by autistic individuals within the context of a neurotypically-dominated society in order to make provisions for support. The constellation of autistic traits and differences in processing can mean that some autistic individuals may experience difficulties with some of the more commonly adopted research practices [16]. It is the responsibility of the researcher(s) to make adaptations to the research process as necessary to minimise and, where possible, eliminate barriers to participation [16]. Cascio *et al.* [28] advocate for individualised adaptations in four key areas of which will now be discussed in the context of the project.

3.3.1 Consent Procedures: The researcher designed an accessible age-appropriate assent form for the autistic girls that used clear, concise language. The researcher explained the concept of consent to the girls upon initial meeting and discussed the content of the assent form. Following this discussion, the girls were given the opportunity to provide written assent indicating their desire to participate in the research. However, in line with the literature on consent procedures with children and young people [30], *process* consent was employed throughout the study as a way to support safeguarding within research [31]. Assent to engage was reassessed at the start of the second session but was also informally monitored throughout data collection sessions through observation of reactions, engagement and body language. In addition to this, in their wellbeing plan completed in advance of data collection, participants were asked to detail how the researcher would know if they were becoming distressed or wanted a break. This alerted the researcher of signs to look out for. Furthermore, visual cue cards were also incorporated into the session, enabling the girls to control the research in terms of stopping, pausing or continuing, requesting a break or asking a question.

3.3.2 Research Design and Data Collection: Considering design and data collection procedures is integral to inclusive research, with partnership participatory research which situates participants as co-researchers identified as best-practice [32]. However, due to the nature of the current study in terms of its scope, timeline and a pre-accepted research proposal for funding, the researcher was somewhat limited in terms of changes that could be made to the research design. Despite this, inclusivity was a core focus in the selection and use of data collection methods. Recognising the importance of trust and security, a two-session approach to data collection was utilised with the option for participants to request additional informal Teams meetings. Moreover, acknowledging that traditional methods of data collection may not be suitable for autistic individuals [24], a variety of methods were used to accommodate diversity [33]. Firstly, a walk-and-talk session [34] in the girls' schools was selected as a way to empower the girls as experts within the environment. The second session took the form of an 'interrupted' interview [35] to allow for a series of activities to be embedded in the session as prompts for discussion. A side-by-side approach was adopted within the interview to reduce anxiety with diamond ranking, picture as stimulus and metaphor elicitation using illustrated cards incorporated as multimodal activities. In addition to the above, a topic guide was provided to participants in advance of the sessions and flexible options to engage were offered. All participants engaged with the two sessions in a face-to-face capacity with the exception of one participant who completed the second session in an adapted written format.

3.3.3 Support for Participants during the Study: This action point refers to supporting the unique needs of participants. In an effort to facilitate individualised support, a well-being plan was developed and sent to participants in advance of data collection. This endeavoured to elicit pertinent information such as sensory needs, distress signs and identification of support personnel. As previously mentioned, visual cue cards were incorporated into the session to afford individual control to the participants. Participants were offered the option of having a familiar adult present. The researcher ensured the provision of adequate 'wait' time in the data collection sessions and clarification or rephrasing of questions was offered if required. Data collection sessions were undeniably supported by the researcher's personal experience working as a teacher and a research fieldworker.

3.3.4 Tailoring of language to reflect individual preferences: Participants were asked to select their preferred terms (autistic individual / individual with autism / other / no preference) in their wellbeing plan. The participants of the current research did not express specific preferences.

3.4 Inclusion and Intersectionality

Intersectionality acknowledges the various intersecting identities of individuals and proposes that those with various minoritised identities will experience life in a different way to those who share one or some of those identities [36,37]. Autism researchers have emphasised the importance of recognising that the participant's diagnosis is not their sole identity [16,24] and that the other identities may either empower them or place them at a further disadvantage. There is evidence to suggest that the intersection of the non-dominant gender with disability can have a negative impact on life outcomes [38] with autistic females identified as one such cohort at risk [39]. As mentioned previously, autistic females are significantly underrepresented in research [11] and it is only by eliciting the voices of those with lived experience can authentic understanding of their experiences be garnered. The current research responded to a call from researchers to include autistic females in research to better understand the intersections of gender and autism [24,37]. In order to support the selection of a gendered sample, intersectional feminism was used as a theoretical lens within the conceptual framework of the research.

3.5 The Role of Empowerment

Inclusive research emphasises the importance of community members playing an active role in the research process [16]. Therefore, regardless of the level of participation, measures to facilitate empowerment can and should be implemented [16]. Despite not adopting a full participatory approach in this research, the researcher endeavoured to empower participants. Firstly, consistent with Fletcher-Watson *et al*. [16] that 'payment explicitly values expertise by lived experience' and in line with other researchers [40,41], the participants did receive a small reimbursement in the form of a gift voucher. Acknowledging the argument that reimbursement could increase the risk of inducement, it was not advertised on the recruitment call and instead was offered at the end of the process as an expression of appreciation for the time invested and the contribution to the research process [31]. Secondly, Pellicano *et al.* [4] reported that autistic individuals are often not informed of the results of research, despite having shared their views. While the findings of the current study have not yet been finalised, it is intended they will be communicated to the participants. The researcher has indicated to the participants that they will receive a summary of the findings and a copy of any papers published pertaining to the findings. It is hoped that a summary document alongside an infographic and/or brief animation will be developed to present the findings using multimodal means to ensure access for all.

3.6 Knowledge Exchange for Inclusion

The final pillar seeks to highlight how individuals can be disadvantaged in the research process and face barriers to participation in terms of 'technical language' and 'specialist knowledge' [16]. As discussed previously, a number of measures were incorporated into the research to ensure information about the research and the data collection sessions were accessible to participants. Furthermore, to ensure the research project was 'culturally and contextually appropriate' to autistic individuals [24], all materials were reviewed by an autistic individual. In addition to this, the researchers ensured that an open line of communication was maintained during the process and encouraged participants to contact her if they had any questions or wished to discuss anything further [28]. The researcher also drew on her experience working with children and young people and her knowledge and skills garnered from on-going engagement with continuous professional development to support the adoption and embedding of inclusive practices throughout the research.

4. Conclusion

This paper has responded to a call for researchers to provide detail on the measures embedded in research to demonstrate inclusive practices in action [16]. Furthermore, the study used to contextualise this paper has responded to a call to include autistic females in research [37] and has engaged autistic female students to better understand their experiences of mainstream education provision at post-primary level in the Republic of Ireland. It is hoped that this paper has provided some insight into how the work of Fletcher-Watson *et al.* [16] and the model of 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research' can be adopted to support the meaningful engagement of autistic individuals in research. The researcher hopes that this paper provide opportunity for reflection, adds to

the emerging body of literature in this area and continues to promote dialogue and communication in relation to inclusive research.

5. Acknowledgements

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Appendix O: Webpage (Primary Study)

Autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education settings



Who is the Researcher?



My name is Aoife Munroe. I am PhD researcher at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. My research is funded by the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Scheme (Irish Research Council).

My research study is all about autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education at post-primary level in the Republic of Ireland. I want to find out more about how autistic girls experience mainstream settings, what is going well, what could benefit from change, etc.

I am a qualified primary school teacher and have worked as a lecturer in the area of special and inclusive education for students training to be teachers and qualified teachers looking to further their knowledge in this area.

Please keep scrolling to learn more about my research. You will find a video of me introducing myself and providing information about this research for autistic girls, an animation to help you learn more about the research process in general some, the criteria that you must meet to be able to participate and information sheets. You can make a request for me to contact you if you want to learn more or are interested in getting involved.



Introducing the Research

This information video is designed for autistic girls are interested in getting involved in the research. Aoife, the researcher, details what the study is about, what the benefits of the research are, what would be required of potential participants and other important information. This video provides a synopsis of the Information Sheet that can be found below. It is important that the Information Sheet is also read.



Let's learn about research!

Take a look at this short animation video if you would like to learn a little bit about the research process. This video provides some information on;

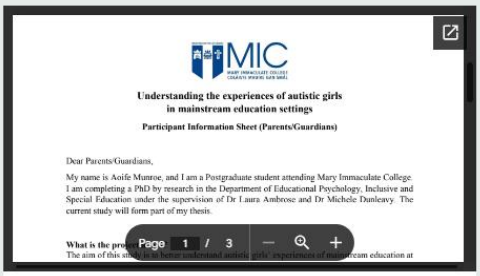
1. What is research?
2. Who does research?
3. Why should young people take part in research?
4. Getting involved in this research!

I'm a parent/guardian, can I participate? Yes, **if** the following statements are true for you:

- I am a parent/guardian of an autistic girl who is formally diagnosed and aware of their diagnosis
- My daughter attends a mainstream post-primary school in Ireland (can have access to special class but spend most time in the mainstream setting)
- My daughter is in the junior end of the school (1st to 3rd year)

I'm an autistic girl, can I participate? Yes, **if** the following statements are true for you:

- I was female at birth
- I have a formal diagnosis of autism
- I attend a mainstream post-primary school in Ireland (can have access to special class but spend most time in the mainstream setting)
- I am in the junior end of the school (1st to 3rd year)



MIC

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls
in mainstream education settings

Participant Information Sheet (Parents/Guardians)

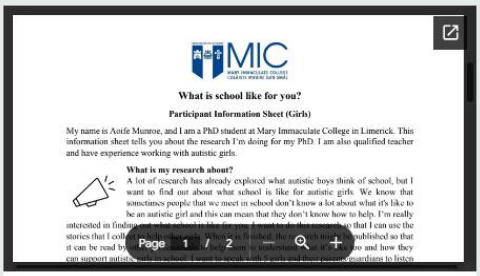
Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD by research in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education under the supervision of Dr Laura Ambrose and Dr Michele Dunleavy. The current study will form part of my thesis.

Page 1 / 3

Information Sheet for Parents/Guardians

Click to Read



MIC

What is school like for you?

Participant Information Sheet (Girls)

My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a PhD student at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. This information sheet tells you about the research I'm doing for my PhD. I am also qualified teacher and have experience working with autistic girls.

What is my research about?

A lot of research has already explored what autistic boys think of school, but I want to find out about what school is like for autistic girls. We know that sometimes people that we meet in school don't know a lot about what it's like to be an autistic girl and this can mean that they don't know how to help. I'm really

Page 1 / 2

Information Sheet for Girls

Click to Read

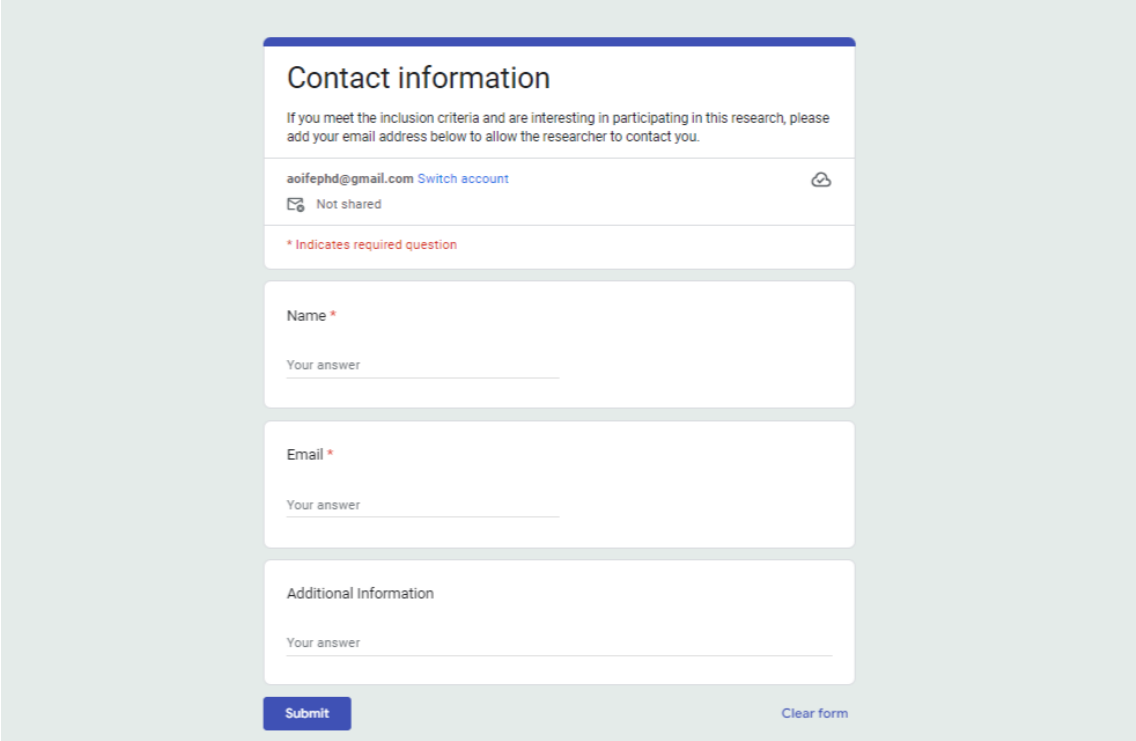


The Research Process

This is a short infographic for autistic girls to summarise what is involved.

Click on the image to enlarge it.

Appendix P: Contact Request Form (Primary Study)



Appendix Q: Information Sheet (Autistic Girls)

What is school like for you?

Participant Information Sheet (Girls)

My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a PhD student at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. This information sheet tells you about the research I'm doing for my PhD. I am also qualified teacher and have experience working with autistic girls.



What is my research about?

A lot of research has already explored what autistic boys think of school, but I want to find out about what school is like for autistic girls. We know that sometimes people that we meet in school don't know a lot about what it's like to be an autistic girl and this can mean that they don't know how to help. I'm really interested in finding out what school is like for you. I want to do this research so that I can use the stories that I collect to help other girls. When it is finished, the research might be published so that it can be read by other professionals to help them to understand what it's like too and how they can support autistic girls in school. I want to speak with 5 girls and their parents/guardians to listen to their stories about school. The number is small so that I can make sure that every girl feels listened to and so that I get all the details right.

What would you have to do?

If you would like to take part, we will meet two times and you will complete one short activity online.



Session 1: The first time we meet we will walk around your school and take photographs of 3 or 4 place that are important (maybe a place that you like, a place that you don't like, a place you go at lunchtime and if there is any other place you want to show me). This will take no more than 30 minutes. At the end of this session, I will tell you about and give you instructions for an online activity that I would like you to do before we meet again.



Online Activity: You will go onto a webpage that I have prepared for you. You will rank various aspects associated with school in their order of importance to you.



Session 2: We will meet again to talk about what school is like for you. We will look at the photographs that we took on our walk and the activity that you completed online and talk about them. We might also look at some other pictures and talk about what it feels like to be autistic in school. We can decide where you would like to do this session.

Each time we meet the session will be recorded, with your permission. This will allow me to type up what you said when I go home.

Will my name and any information I provide be kept confidential (safe and secure)?
Yes, I will also anonymise (change all the names of people and places) your information so that no one else can identify you or your school. Your information will be kept confidential. This includes all the personal details and whatever else you say during the research process. The only time this would change is if you told me something that made me believe that you were not safe.

What will happen to the information I share?
The information that you give me will be kept on my password protected laptop or in a locked filing cabinet. The results of my study will be written up as a part of my PhD which may be presented at national and international conferences or in written papers. I can send you electronic copies of these publications if you wish.

Are there any benefits to me?
I hope that you will find it interesting and helpful to share your experiences of school, and to be involved in helping to improve school for autistic girls in the future. You will also receive a €15 Amazon voucher as a token of my appreciation of your involvement in the study and to thank you for the time that you spent talking to me.

What happens if I change my mind about taking part?
You can change your mind at any time. If you choose to take part and then change your mind later, you can just email me to let me know. You don't have to give a reason. If I have already collected some information from you, it would be deleted.

Next Steps
If you are interested in taking part in my study, please talk to your parents/guardians and ask them to contact me. If you have any questions, you and/or your parents/guardians can contact me or my supervisors. Our contact details can be found below.

Contact Details

The Researcher (Me)	**Supervisor 1**	**Supervisor 2**
Aoife Munroe	Dr Michele Dunleavy	Dr Laura Ambrose
Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie	Michele.Dunleavy@mic.ul.ie	Laura.Ambrose@mic.ul.ie
		(Currently on Leave)

I have been given permission by Mary Immaculate College Ethics Committee to complete this study (REF: A23-009). The Ethics Committee are a group of people who decide if what I would like to do is well thought out and if it will cause any harm or upset. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact somebody that isn't me, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix R: Consent Form (Autistic Girls)

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream education settings

Participant Assent Form



Please read the statement below and put a circle around your answers.

1. I have read and understand the **Participant Information Sheet** and give my consent to take part in this study. This means I agree to take part.	Yes	No
2. The reasons for the study have been explained to me and I know what the information will be used for.	Yes	No
3. I understand what is involved in taking part of this study.	Yes	No
4. I understand that I can stop taking part at any time. I know that I don't have to give a reason if I want to stop taking part and any information already collected from me can be deleted.	Yes	No
5. I am happy to be audio recorded for this research.	Yes	No
6. I understand that all the things I say will not be shared unless there is a concern for my safety.	Yes	No
7. I understand that I can contact Aoife Munroe if I need more information.	Yes	No

Participant name (PRINTED): _____

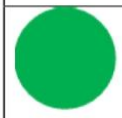
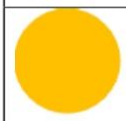
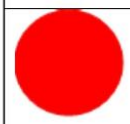
Participant name (Signature): _____

Date: _____

Researcher name: _____

Appendix S: Visual Supports for Interview with Autistic Girls



The first three cards are green, amber, and red.	
	The green card is the first card (on top), and this shows me that you are happy to begin the interview.
	If you are feeling uncomfortable about something, show me the amber/orange card and we can talk about something else.
	If you want to stop the interview, show me the red card and I will stop straight away. You do not need to tell me why unless you want to.
If you are happy to carry on, leave the green card at the top.	
	If you don't understand something, show me this card/the question mark symbol and I will try to explain it in a different way.
	If you need to take a break, show me this card/the clock card and we can take a 5 minute break.

Appendix T: Wellbeing Plan (Autistic Girls)

My Wellbeing Plan





1

Personal Information

Name:
Contact Number:
Email:

- your name and contact details will be kept separate from the research data

2

Further Information

The results of this study may be published in academic journals and conference proceedings. It would be helpful to know a little more about you, so that we can give a summary of the group membership. You will not be personally identified.

Age:
Year of school:
Gender:
Ethnicity:

3

Language of autism

Do you prefer:
Person-first (e.g. person with autism) language?
or
Identity-first (e.g. autistic person) language?
or
No preference

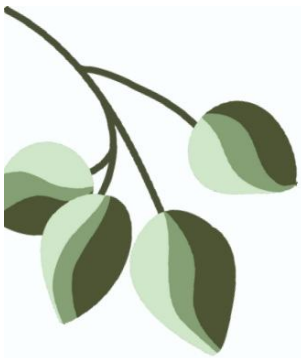
4

Do you have any sensory needs that you would like me to know about?

5

How best can I support you if you become distressed or find participating in the research difficult?

What would you like us to do? For example, if you have to leave, would you like one of the research team to check in with you, as soon as possible? Is there a way that you could tell us if you needed to take a break?



6 Contact details of a trusted person

Please complete the section(s) below with the details of a trusted person, or people, that we could contact if we were concerned that you might be finding things difficult. We will only contact them if we are worried about your safety and would always try to discuss this with you first.

Name:

Their relationship to you:

Number:

Email:

7 Contact details the Researcher

Name: Aoife Munroe
Number: 0868787950
Email: Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie

8 Supportive Organisations

- https://asiam.ie/
- https://turn2me.ie
- https://text50808.ie/ (text-based helpline for https://spunout.ie/)
- https://www.samaritans.org/ireland/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/



9 Any other relevant information

Appendix U: Topic Guide
(Interrupted Interview with Autistic Girls)

Things we will talk about

General chat about school

- Positive aspects of school – things you like/enjoy (we will use the activity that you completed to talk about this)
- Challenges or worries about school - things you don't like/that are difficult/cause worry (we will use the activity that you completed to talk about this)
- We will talk about the informal parts of school, for example, lunchtime, the spaces around the school, and people.
- We will talk about important places in school (how do these places make you feel)
    - A place you like
    - A place you don't like
    - Where do you spend your lunchtime
    - Any other significant place you would like to tell me about
- We will talk about the more structured parts of school so things like teachers, learning, classes (we will use the activity that you completed to talk about this part too).
- Lastly, I will have some illustrations that you can look at. I will ask you if any of them are significant for you or if you can relate to any of them in relation to how you feel about your school experience.

If you have anything else to share or something that you want to add that I don't mention, we can discuss this too. This list is just a short guide so you can anticipate the things we will be talking about when we meet. I hope this is helpful 😊

Appendix V: Inclusive Dissemination (Primary Study)



THANK YOU

Thank you again for taking part in my research. Sharing your experiences of school has helped us understand what school is like for autistic girls. I will share the findings of this research so that your insights can help teachers and schools to know what to continue doing and recognise what they might need change to create more positive experiences.

Six autistic girls participated in this research. Each of you had your own unique experiences of school, however, there were also some similarities in your experiences. I analysed all of the conversations that I had with each of you and found that there were three main themes that linked your experiences. This booklet is to share the main findings of the research with you.



The main findings of the research relate to:

1. The School System
2. The School Environment
3. The People in the School Environment

The image on the next page presents a visual summary of the findings and then each an overview of each finding is provided

"It's important that my teacher understands me for who I am"
The System
Timetable
Books
Punctuality
Attention
Task Management
Workload
Homework
Rehydration
Rest
Play
Homework
School Home Work
"It's like playing catchup...but the catch up doesn't exist"
Home
School
VS
+Subjects:
Woodwork
History
Technology
Art
THE POSITIVES
TEACHING + LEARNING
Traditional Pedagogies
Structure
Modern Approaches
FLEXIBLE
WHY?
HOW?
WHAT?
"What are Autistic Girls telling us about School?"
A.Munroe (2025)
"Why are you doing this, why, why, why?"
TIME TO MASK?
The People
Pathologising
Dismissive
Ignorance
Unsupportive
Teachers: Mediators of Experience
How To....
Passion
Support
care
Explanations
"They can be kind of...interesting"
CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO
Relax
Regulate
Reset
"It's about just trying to get through"
The Environment
Too Loud
Too Crowded
Too Itchy
Too many smells
Emotional Regulation
Sensory Regulation
Systems & Structures
Unsupported Access
No Access
Equality?
Provision of Availability
Where can I go for a break?
Where are my Safe Spaces?
Library?
TOILET?

THEME ONE

The System

The Demands of School

- It can be hard to think about everything (timetables, books) and be on time for classes.
- It can be difficult to keep up with work, concentrate on the right things and stay focused in class.
- Homework can be stressful. It can be difficult to complete homework if the school day has been exhausting. Homework can interrupt personal time.
- Rest was identified as important after school. Examples of activities that were shared were: resting in the bedroom, drawing, listening to music, playing games, watching tv and playing with pets.

Learning in School

- Being able to choose subjects in secondary school was identified as positive.
- If subjects are interesting, it can be easier to engage with learning.
- It can be hard to do some of the things that are expected of students in school. For example: It can be difficult to look at/keep looking at the teacher when they're talking. Instead some girls shared that found it easier to concentrate by not looking at the teacher or by doodling to stay focused.
- Some girls shared that they would like the school system and teachers to be more flexible in the learning process. Different ways of teaching and different modes of assessment were requested by girls to allow them to engage with learning and show their understanding.
- Being provided with options or choice was important.

THEME TWO

The Environment

The Sensory Environment

- Sensory experiences are unique and girls had different experiences of the sensory environment in school.
- Too much noise was the most common issue with the sensory environment. Sometimes echoes and places that were too quiet were also stressful.
- The amount of people in the school environment could be overwhelming.
- School uniforms can be uncomfortable.

Safe / Quiet Spaces

- Having access to 'safe' or 'quiet' spaces were identified as important in school.
- Libraries, specific classrooms, bathrooms and preferred lunchtime locations were identified as 'safe' or 'quiet' spaces.
- Going to these places served different purposes. Sometimes going to a 'safe' or 'quiet' space helped girls to prepare for the school day. Sometimes they helped girls to escape busy locations (e.g. at lunchtime). Sometimes they provided a space to regulate when a break was needed.
- Sometimes school had systems in place to enable access these spaces and other times girls sought out these spaces themselves.

THEME THREE

The People

Interacting with Others

- It can be difficult to interact with others or to join groups of people. Sometimes people say and do things that don't make sense. Sometimes girls shared that they were concerned what other people thought of them. Some girls spoke about masking to blend in with peers.
- At lunchtime, some girls spend time with their friends and other girls attended lunch time groups.
- Girls often spoke about findings places to go away from the main lunchtime areas because these were identified as too busy or too noisy.
- Friendship was an important aspect of school. Some girls had friendship groups and others did not have friendship groups but wanted to have them. Making friends could be difficult and tiring. In some instances, transitioning between primary and post-primary school or telling friends about an autism diagnosis changed friendships.
- Sometimes it was hard to balance the social parts of school with the academic parts of school.

Teachers

- Teachers could positively or negatively influence school experiences.
- Teachers who are passionate about their subject, who make an effort to support, who care, who explain things, and who create a positive classroom atmosphere were praised.
- Teachers who don't understand autism, who are patronising, who don't provide support and who dismiss difficulties were disliked.

THEME THREE

The People

Challenging the Status Quo

- Most of the girls in this research highlighted the need to challenge the status quo.
- Stereotypes, misconceptions, outdated understandings and a one-size-fits-all approach to autism were rejected.
- Girls shared that teachers and other students need to know more about autism.
- There needs to be increased awareness of the different ways that autism presents.
- Each autistic individual needs to be viewed as an individual who has different strengths, interests and needs.
- Support in school should recognise the individual and be centred around what they need at a given time.

Appendix W: Letter of Information (Community Stakeholders)

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream education settings

Letter of Information (Gatekeeper – Autism Organisation/Social Media Group)

To whom it may concern,

My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD by research in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education under the supervision of Dr Laura Ambrose and Dr Michele Dunleavy. The following information will detail the current study and outline your potential role in this research.

What is the project about?
The aim of this study is to better understand autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education settings at post-primary level. This research is dual focus with one aspect of the study focusing on a small group of autistic girls and their parents/guardians while the other element consists of a national survey with post-primary teachers. This is the first component of the larger project and endeavours to explore the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream education settings with supplementary insights being sought from their parents/guardians.

Why is it being undertaken?
Autistic girls often go unrecognised and/or unsupported in educational settings and face barriers to inclusion and learning. While there has been an increase in research relating to the school experiences and inclusion of autistic individuals, many of these studies are from the perspective of adult stakeholder or limited by a male biased sample. The core objective of the study is to amplify missing voices in educational research, those of autistic girls, to provide them with the opportunity to share their unique school experiences.

What are the benefits of this research?
It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will:

a) enhance our understanding of how autistic girls experience mainstream educational settings
b) identify good practice in terms of what facilitates positive school experiences while also highlighting potential areas of concerns in terms of the barriers to inclusion and learning faced by the girls
c) provide insight into teachers' awareness of how autism presents in girls and their perceptions of support provision

Why am I contacting you?
I would appreciate if you could share the attached recruitment poster on your webpage/social media group to raise awareness of the current study. The recruitment poster contains a QR code that, when scanned, brings you to a webpage which contains further information about the study. Participants can email the researcher directly or from this page where they can request the researcher to contact them.

All the information relating to what is involved for participants is detailed on the webpage. However, I would just like to bring it to your attention that the girls who choose to participate will be provided with a wellbeing plan that will aid the researcher in providing a comfortable and safe experience. A number alternative modes of engagement are embedded in the study design to ensure the research process is interactive, accessible and appropriate. In addition, participants will be provided with the interview questions in advance of the interview.

How will confidentiality and anonymity be attended to?

- All information will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than for discussion with my research supervisors. All data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisors.
- Participants will be assigned pseudonyms for anonymity purposes.

How will the information collected be used/disseminated?

The data from this study will be combined with the data collected from other components of the study and used to form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the dissertation. Direct quotations from interviews will be used, however, these remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. These individual excerpts will be combined with those from other participants.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?

In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

Next Steps:

If you are happy to share the attached recruitment poster on your organisation's webpage/social media group, please let me know via return email.

Contact details:

If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors. Our contact details are provided below:

Researcher	***Supervisor 1***	***Supervisor 2***
Aoife Munroe	Dr Michele Dunleavy	Dr Laura Ambrose
Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie	Michele.dunleavy@mic.ul.ie	Laura.ambrose@mic.ul.ie (Currently on Leave)

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (REF: A23-009). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix X: Email to Teachers (Primary Study)

Content of Email sent to Participants of the Secondary Study who opted in to receive communication about the Primary Study:

Dear Principal/Teacher,

I hope you are well. My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a PhD Candidate in the Dept. of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. My PhD research aims to better understand the school experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream education provision at post-primary level. Thank you for sharing your email upon completion of my questionnaire last academic year. I am now reaching out to schools to assist me in recruiting the remaining participants for my study.

I will briefly summarise the research process here, but please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. I have also attached the recruitment flyer inviting autistic girls and their parents/guardians to participate and I would be grateful if you could share this with your school community. The flyer contains a QR code which brings you to a specifically designed webpage containing information about the study presented in a variety of ways https://sites.google.com/view/amunroephd/home

My PhD is looking at autistic girls' (1st - 3rd year) experiences of mainstream education provision. I will be gathering data from the autistic girls themselves and their parents/guardians. The research with autistic girls consists of two parts. The first part consists of a walking interview around the student's school (principal consent is required for this). The second part is a discussion interspersed with activities (designed to minimise stress/anxiety for the participant). This session takes place on a separate occasion. Parents/Guardians will complete one interview session to provide a supplemental perspective.

I would like to take this opportunity to outline the reason that I incorporated the school-based walking interview. The decision to include this session was on the grounds of rapport building and to start the research in a place that is familiar to the girl. This part of the research is very short and generally lasts no longer than 20 minutes. I meet the girl at the school, we visit 3 / 4 significant areas in the school and finish up. The second session will take place elsewhere on a separate day. Ideally, the walking interview would take place when the school is quiet - so either after school or if the school is open for any reason, beyond normal opening hours this would work also. I am very willing to be flexible with this so whatever works for everyone else, I can make work for myself.

I would be extremely grateful if you would consider sharing the study information with autistic girls and their parents/guardians in your school who may be interested in participating. Please take a read of the information sheet attached for further details. I can answer any questions you may have and if this does not suit in its current iteration, I can make alternative suggestions. I would just like to emphasise that your school will remain completely anonymous in the research. Please do not hesitate to contact me.

With thanks,

Aoife

Appendix Y: Pilot Interview Schedule (Parents/Guardians)

Pilot - Parents/Guardians Interview:

- Tell me a little bit about your daughter
  - ~~Diagnosis / Primary School~~ *Responses broad and lacking in direction, more specific prompts needed to guide the discussion and elicit information around diagnostic process*
  - When did she receive her autism diagnosis *(allows to understand experiences within context of time)*
  - What prompted the diagnostic process (parent/teacher/etc) *(connect with research on diagnostic process for girls and experiences of the diagnostic processes)*
  - What, if anything, changed for your daughter following the diagnostic process. *(Useful in terms of understanding autistic identity, impact of a diagnosis, self-awareness)*
- ~~How did your child experience the transition to post-primary school?~~ *This was brought in too early and while important, the focus of the research is more about current experience rather than transition experience. This question has been reduced to a prompt under the broader question of post-primary experience.*
- How are they currently finding post-primary school? ~~How is it different to their primary school experience?~~ *Structure change so one focus question with underpinning prompts to extend discussion, this question is now a prompt.*
  - How did your child experience the transition to post-primary school? *(now a prompt for discussion rather than a focus question – link with transitions literature)*
  - How is it different to their primary school experience? *(now a prompt for discussion rather than a focus question – allow for potential contrasts between primary and post-primary structures)*
  - What barriers, if any, does your daughter face in terms of their learning / inclusion in mainstream as a result of being autistic? Tell me about them. *(now a prompt for discussion rather than a focus question – allow for comparisons with insights from autistic girls)*
  - What aspects of school facilitate a positive experience for them? *(now a prompt for discussion rather than a focus question – allow for comparisons with insights from autistic girls)*
- What kind of support, if any, do they receive? *This overarching question worked well and remains the same as it allowed for an overview of supports to be provided. However, two prompts have been added to understand how support is provided for and understand the parents/guardians and girls' levels of involvement in the support process at school.*
  - Do you feel that this support meets your daughter's needs? *(This question remains the same as it allows for insight into parental perceptions of support received.)*
  - What input, if any, have you had in the support that your daughter receives? *(This has been added to determine parental involvement in support and their perceptions of this.)*
  - What input, if any, has your daughter had in the support that she receives? *(This has been added to determine child voice in the support provision process.)*

    - ~~How would you describe the school staff's understanding of autism and girls in education settings?~~ *(Removed and promoted – see below)*
- How would you describe the school staff's understanding of autism and more specifically autism in girls in education settings? *This question was a prompt under the topic of support provision, however, it has been promoted to a separate question due to its importance in terms of the embedded study, the potential for in-depth information to be shared by parents/guardian in terms of their perceptions and experiences of staff supporting their child.*
- ~~What aspects of school facilitate a positive experience for them?~~ *Brought up to the section focusing on current post-primary experience to improve flow.*
- ~~Do they face any barriers in terms of their learning / inclusion in mainstream? Tell me about them.~~ *Brought up to the section focusing on current post-primary experience to improve flow.*
- How have you, as a family, experienced your daughter's inclusion in the mainstream setting?
    - What has supported / impeded this experience in your opinion? *(Structure change – this to become a prompt under the broader question of family experience)*
    - Have there been any implications of mainstream inclusion? *(this has been added with the intention that it may link in with literature on school avoidance/after-school restraint collapse)*
- Is there anything you would change in relation to your daughter's education?
- One final question, is there any question I should have asked you that I didn't or anything else that you want to add or revisit? *(This has been added in as a question to allow parents/guardians to revisit something, add something or ask a question – it was naturally done in the pilot but now formally added to the schedule)*

Appendix Z: Pilot Interview Schedule (Autistic Girls)

Pilot – Girls Interview

1. ~~Tell me about school~~ *This is too broad of an opener without a direction or a follow up prompt.* Consider opening with this but having the next two questions as a scaffolding structure to extend and guide the discussion.

2. What do you like about school? / What do you enjoy the most? (Introduce Diamond Ranking output)

3. Is there anything you don't like about school? Is there anything you find difficult when you are in school? (Introduce Diamond Ranking output)

4. Diamond Ranking Activity: ~~Talk me through your selection~~ *This may be repetitive of what has previously been discussed in terms of aspects of school that are liked and disliked. Instead considering exploring each of the Diamond Ranking outputs under the previous questions. Open with the general, broader question and see what is elicited unprompted, then introduce the Diamond Ranking outputs to scaffold or extend the discussion.*

5. Photo Elicitation and Emotion Mapping: ~~Introduce photos one by one and talk through them. Select an emotion that corresponds with how you feel in this place.~~ *This is potentially too static. Doing the pictures as a discrete component of the interview may impact the conversational nature of the session. This session needs to be conversational rather than formal interview/question due to the nature of the research and the cohort of participants that I am working with. Instead consider introducing some of the photos at different points and then address any remaining photographs. Furthermore, the emotion aspect of this task needs to be optional. The pilot revealed that sometimes an emotion sticker can help articulate experiences, however, in other instances it may add complexity or be a distraction. I also need to have prompts ready for this section to extend discussion if it remains descriptive in nature.*
   Prompts to consider: How does this place make you feel? / Why does it make you feel this way?

6. Tell me about your teachers. *While I anticipated that the participant would draw on personal experiences, the pilot revealed this may not be straightforward. While I think there is merit in opening with the question as asked in the pilot, adding a hypothetical question here may be useful if girls are hesitant to share their direct experiences with teachers. Adding questions such as 'what does a good teacher do? / what does a bad teacher do?' may provide insight into the aspects that are valued or are rejected by girls. This may increase the likelihood of girls sharing more openly if they are not asked to discuss this in relation to their teachers directly. It may also arise, as evidenced in the pilot, that some aspects of this question may have been briefly discussed in the Diamond Ranking activity. This highlighted the importance of active listening and flexibility. If teachers are prioritised as a topic in the Diamond Ranking output, this discussion can be brought forward to that point rather than repeating and extending when I get to question 6.*

7. Tell me about your experiences of learning in school. *Again, while this broad question is in line with IPA, it may be useful to have some prompts to scaffold the girls if they find this too broad from the outset.*
   Some prompts that could be considered are: How do you find your classes / would you change anything about the classes / how do you find learning / is there anything you wish your teacher would do to make your learning better?

8. ~~Dixit Cards to explore autism~~ *This framing is a bit abrupt. I think this could be opened by introducing the cards first and then providing the prompt for consideration.* Consider: So now we're going to look at some illustrated cards (show the cards), I would like you to look through the cards and see do any of these resonate with you in terms of what it feels like to be you when you're at school or what does it feel like to be autistic in school. ~~What language do you prefer to use 'autistic'/ 'have autism'?~~ *This can be removed from here as is going to be a question in the wellbeing plan so that I know in advance if the girls have any language preferences.*

- *Following on from the previous question, I think it is important that I ask the question* 'If you could teach the people at your school one thing about autism, what would it be?'. *I think eliciting this information will further endorse that this research is research that is grounded in the experiences of the autistic girls who participated. I think it will provide the girls with a sense of ownership over what they want the key take home point to be from their interview.*

- *Following discussion after my presentation on Child Voice at SCoTENS, I think it would be useful to ask the question:* 'What would like to see come out of this research? Who do you think needs to hear about the findings?' *to elicit the girls desires for the research. What* ***audience*** *do they want the research to reach and what* ***influence*** *do they want it have? (Lundy, 2007)*

Appendix AA: Interview Schedule (Parents/Guardians)

Interview Schedule for Parents/Guardians:

Before Session Checklist	
Introductions	
Consent Form	
Dictaphone Recording	

Thanks a million for agreeing to participate in this research. So, at this stage you have read the information sheet and we have discussed the consent form and you have signed it. Just to reiterate again that your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving reason. Your data will be kept confidential. So basically, I really want to emphasis that this is just going to be a guided conversation, I have a few specific questions and some prompts to help us out along the way but really I'm interested in hearing your experiences and your insights.

- Tell me a little bit about your daughter
  - When did she receive her autism diagnosis
  - What prompted the diagnostic process (parent/teacher/etc)
  - What, if anything, changed for your daughter following the diagnostic process.
- How are they currently finding post-primary school?
  - How did your child experience the transition to post-primary school?
  - How is it different to their primary school experience?
  - What barriers, if any, does your daughter face in terms of their learning / inclusion in mainstream as a result of being autistic? Tell me about them.
  - What aspects of school facilitate a positive experience for them?
  - Have you had any experiences in terms of School Refusal/After-School Restraint Collapse?
- What kind of support, if any, do they receive?
  - Do you feel that this support meets your daughter's needs?
  - What input, if any, have you had in the support that your daughter receives?
  - What input, if any, has your daughter had in the support that she receives?
- How would you describe the school staff's understanding of autism and more specifically autism in girls in education settings?
- How have you, as a family, experienced your daughter's mainstream inclusion/school experiences?
  - What has supported / impeded this experience in your opinion?
  - Have there been any implications of mainstream inclusion?
- Is there anything you would change in relation to your daughter's education/ the education system in relation to supporting autistic individuals?
- One final question, is there any question I should have asked you that I didn't or anything else that you want to add or revisit?

Appendix BB: Interview Schedule (Autistic Girls)

Session 1: Walking Interview

Before Session Checklist	
Introductions	
Consent Form	
Wellbeing Plan	
Dictaphone Recording	

How are you?

How was your day?

Tell me a little bit about you. What are your interests? What are your favourite things to do outside of school?

1. Take me to a place that you like/enjoy
2. Take me to a place that you don't like
3. Take me to the place where you go at lunchtime
4. Is there any other important place that you would like me to see?

For each place, take a photograph.

- Tell me where we are
- What happens here
- Tell me a little bit about this place
    - Why do you like it / dislike it
- What would you change about it

After Session Checklist	
Dictaphone Recording Stopped	
JamBoard Activity Explained (Link to be emailed)	
Consent/Wellbeing Plans Filed	
Session 2 Scheduling	

Session 2: Interview Schedule for Girls

Before Session Checklist	
Greetings	
Ongoing Consent	
Dictaphone Recording	

It's good to see you. Thank you again for participating in the research. So, before beginning the last session you signed a consent form to express your agreeance to participate in the research. Just to reiterate again that your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving reason. Your data will be kept confidential. Are you happy to continue engaging with the research? So basically, I really want to emphasis that this is just going to be a guided conversation, I have a few specific questions and some prompts to help us out along the way but really I'm interested in hearing your experiences and your insights.

1. Tell me about school (Talk to me about your experiences of school)
   → What do you like about school? / What do you enjoy the most?

   (Diamond Ranking 1: Supportive Aspects of School – Can you talk me through how you ranked these statements)

   → Is there anything you don't like about school? Is there anything you find difficult or causes you to worry when you are in school?

   (Diamond Ranking 2: Potential Worries about School – Can you talk me through how you ranked these statements)

2. Let's talk about the more unstructured parts of school now.
   → Can you tell me a little bit about your friendships? Best friend / friend group – Feel free to talk to me about them.
   → Can you tell me a little bit about lunch time (where, who with, what, how)

   (Photo Elicitation – Lunch time)

   → Can you tell me a little bit about the other parts of the school day when you are not in class – between classes/unstructured times)
   → Can you describe your pre/post school routine? How do you feel before/after school?

3. So, let's look at the remaining pictures that we took, places you like, dislike, would change/significant place.
    → How does this place make you feel?
    → Why does it make you feel this way?

(Photo Elicitation/Emotion Mapping Activity)

4. Let's talk about your teachers.
    → What does a good teacher do/ Can you think of any words to describe a good teacher (think about your favourite teacher)
    → What does a bad teacher do / Can you think of any words to describe a good teacher (think about your least favourite teacher)

    (Diamond Ranking – 'DR activity, 'my teacher understands me for who I am', 'my teacher understands autism','worry about teacher').

5. Tell me a little bit about your learning experiences.
    → How do you find your classes
    → Would you change anything about the classes
    → How do you find learning
    → Is there anything you wish your teacher would do to make your learning better?

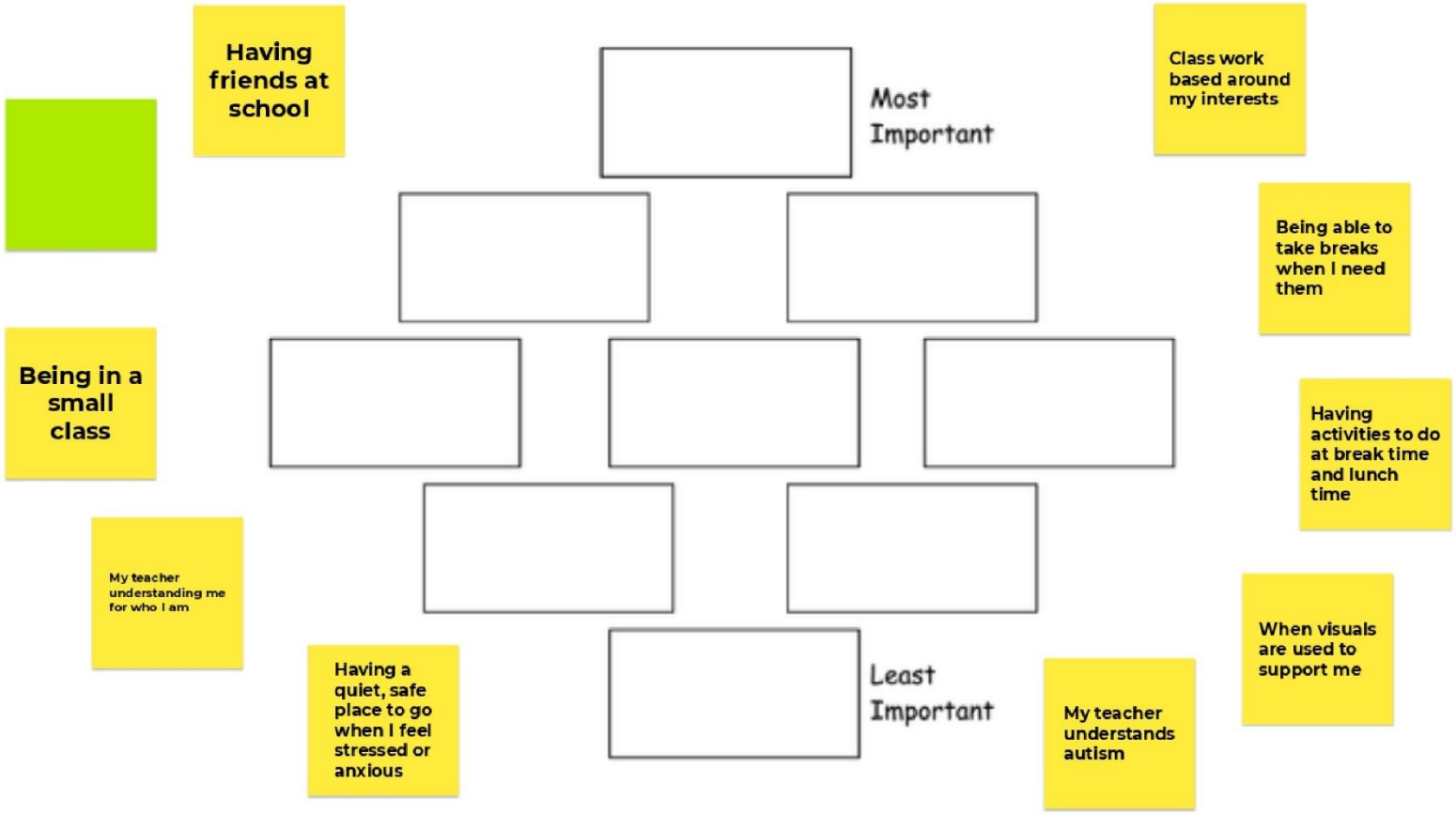
6. We're coming to the end now – Identity/Autistic Identity
    → Take a look at these cards – do any of these cards resonate with you?
    → Do any of them describe what it feel like to be autistic in school

    (Dixit Cards)

7. If you could teach the people at your school one thing about autism, what would it be?
8. What would like to see come out of this research? Who do you think needs to hear about the findings?

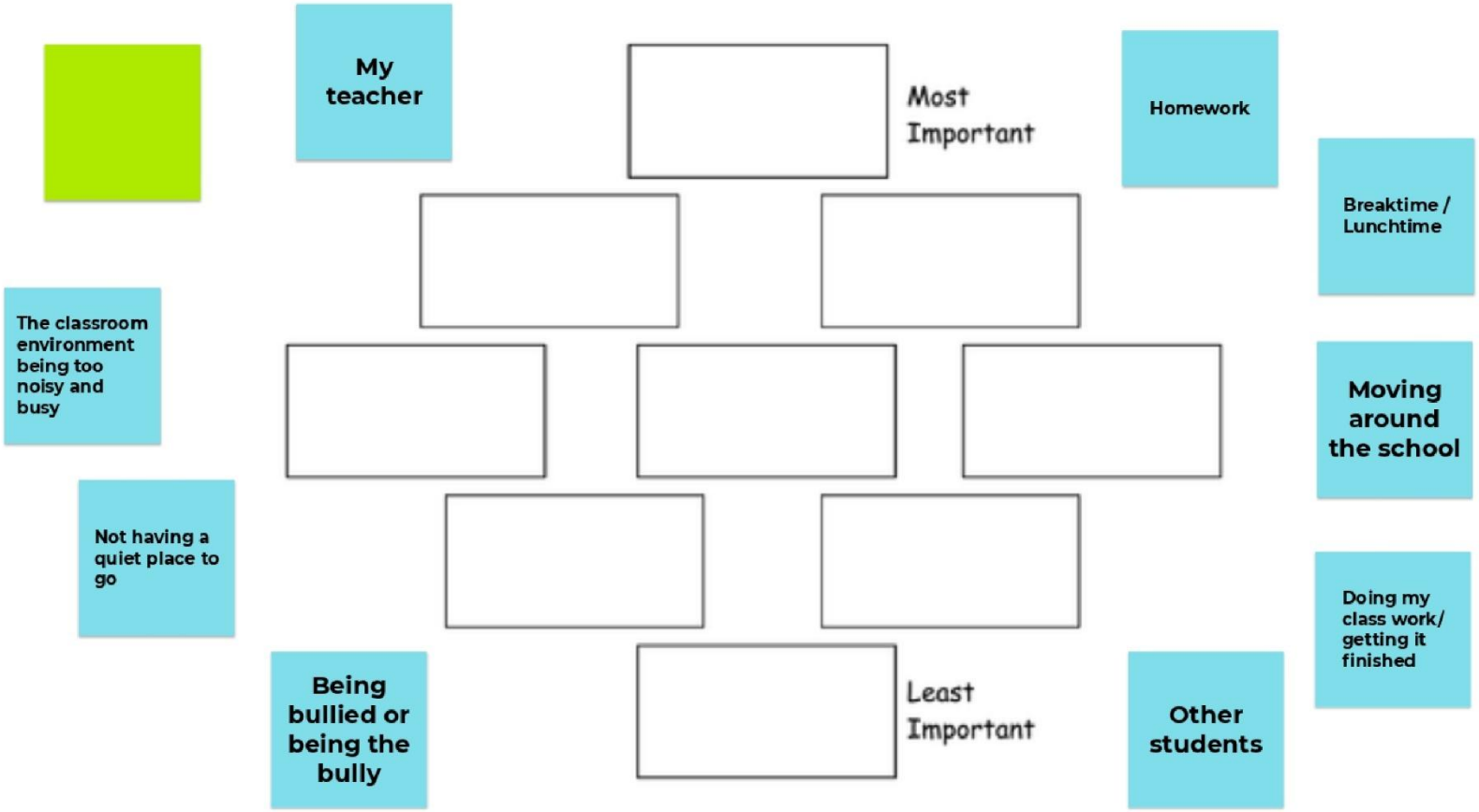
Appendix CC: Diamond Ranking Activities

(Supportive Aspects)



Appendix CC: Diamond Ranking Activities

(Potential Worries)



Appendix DD: Dixit Card Selection



Appendix EE: Letter of Information

(Principals – Primary Study)

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream education settings

Letter of Information

Dear Principal,

My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD by research in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education under the supervision of Dr Laura Ambrose and Dr Michele Dunleavy.

A student in your school has expressed interest in participating in my research study and I am writing to you today to seek your permission to conduct one part of the research process on the school site. The following information will detail the current study and outline your potential role in this research.

What is the project about?
The aim of this study is to better understand autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education settings at post-primary level. This research provides autistic girls with the opportunity to share their lived experience of attending a mainstream education setting while also affording their parents/guardians the chance to share their views on their daughter's experiences. A second element of the project consisted of a questionnaire to examine mainstream post-primary teachers' awareness and knowledge of autism in girls. I hope to share the findings of this part of the research before the end of this year.

Why is it being undertaken?
Research has highlighted a higher rate of autism diagnoses in boys compared to girls. This is often attributed to a different or more internal presentation of autism in girls. In addition to this, much of the research has been conducted with male dominant samples. As a result, autistic girls often go unrecognised and/or unsupported in educational settings and face barriers to inclusion and learning. The core objective of the study is to amplify missing voices in educational research, those of autistic girls, to understand their experiences. The inclusion of parents/guardians and teacher voices will be used to build a more comprehensive understanding of mainstream school experiences for this cohort.

What are the benefits of this research?
It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will

a) enhance our understanding of how autistic girls experience mainstream educational settings
b) identify good practice in terms of what facilitates positive school experiences while also highlighting potential areas of concerns in terms of the barriers to inclusion and learning faced by the girls

Why am I seeking your consent?
It is hoped that autistic girls who choose to participate in this study will take part in two sessions with the researcher. A student from your school has expressed interest in participating in the research, I am requesting your consent to allow the first session to take place within the school setting.

This session would consist of a short walking interview (No longer than 30 minutes). This session has multiple purposes: to build rapport and to empower the girl as an expert of her experiences. The girl will lead me (the researcher), with the support of a prompt, to three/four significant areas within the school that are important to tell her story. A photograph of each place will be taken on a researcher owned and password protected device and this will be used as a stimulus for discussion in session 2. I firmly believe that meeting in the girl's school is important as the school is a familiar environment for the participant and will also help to contextualise the aims of the research.

It would be preferred if this session could be facilitated at a quiet time to protect the anonymity of the participant but also for data protection purposes to ensure no other individuals would be recorded in the data collection either via the audio recording or in any photographs taken. I am open to discussing the logistics of this request to ensure it is in the best interest of all parties.

How will confidentiality and anonymity be attended to?

- All information will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than for discussion with my research supervisors. All data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisors.
- The school will not be identified in the research and the autistic girls will be assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.
- The photos taken during the walking interview will only be used as a stimulus for discussion in session 2. The photos will not be included in the thesis.

How will the information be used/disseminated?
The data from this study will be combined with the data collected from other components of the study and used to form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the dissertation. Direct quotations from interviews will be used, however, these remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. These individual excerpts will be combined with those from other participants. The data collected may also be presented at national/international conferences or published in academic journals.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?
In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

Next Steps:
If you are happy to for the student in your school to participate in this research, please complete the accompanying informed consent form and send back via return email.

Contact details:
If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors. Our contact details are provided below:

Researcher	***Supervisor 1***	***Supervisor 2***
Aoife Munroe	Dr Michele Dunleavy	Dr Laura Ambrose
Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie	Michele.Dunleavy@mic.ul.ie	Laura.Ambrose@mic.ul.ie (Currently on Leave)

This research study has received Ethical approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (REF: A23-009). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix FF: Consent Form (Principals)

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream education settings

Informed Consent Form (Principal)

Dear Principal,

As outlined in the **Letter of Information**, the current study aims to explore autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education settings at post-primary level from the perspective of autistic girls and their parents/guardians.

Details of what is involved are outlined in the Information Sheet. This should be read fully and carefully before signing this consent form.

The anonymity of your school is assured and your participation with the process is voluntary. All information gathered will remain confidential and will not be shared with any third party other than my research supervisors. In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal encrypted laptop.

Please read the following statements before signing the consent form:

- I have read and understand the participant information sheet.
- I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I am fully aware of all the procedures involved, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.
- I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving reason.

Participant name (PRINTED): _____

Participant name (Signature): _____

Date: _____

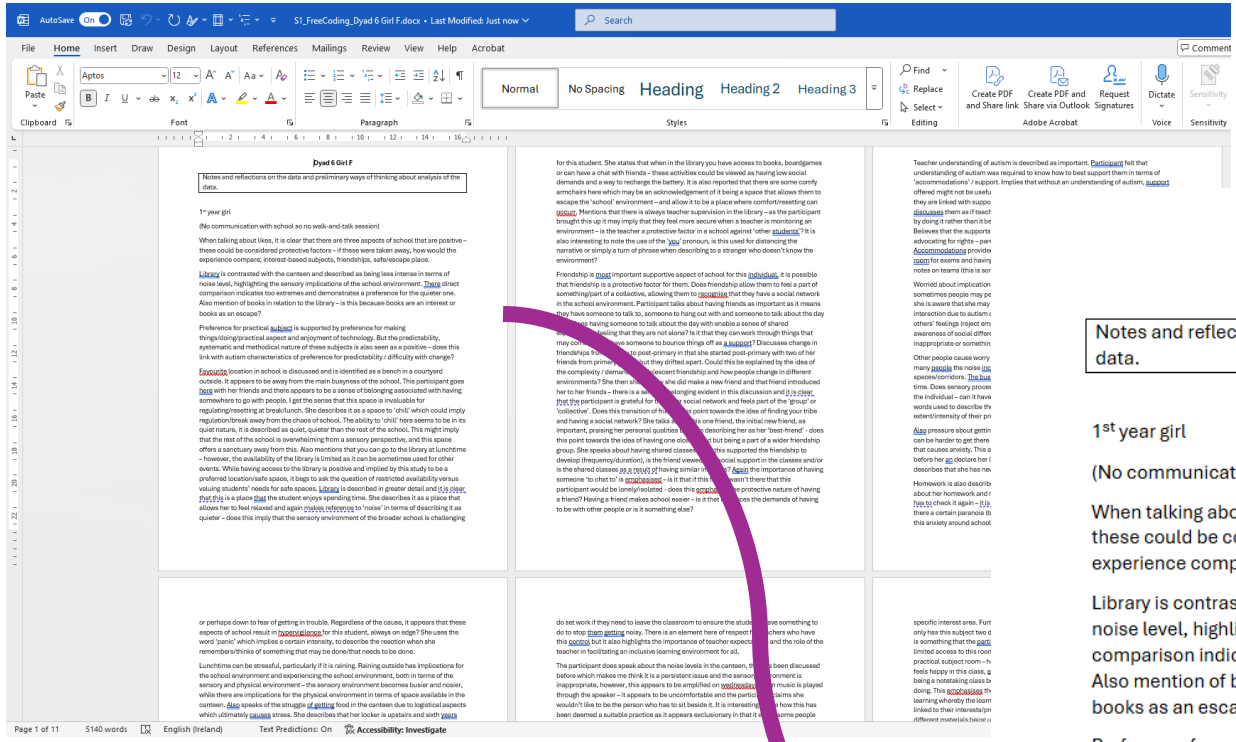
Researcher name: _____

Appendix GG: Prevalence Table (IPA)

(Across) Group Experiential Themes (Across Group GETs)

	Drawing from the Girls	***Ava***	***Bella***	***Ciara***	***Danielle***	***Emma***	***Freya***	***Contributing Parents***
Theme	**Subthemes**							
Being Autistic in a Neurotypical School System	- Coping or Surviving? The Demands of Post-Primary School	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Arlene Bronagh Caitriona Deirdre Eimear Fiona
	- Learning: A Tale of Two Halves	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Bronagh Eimear Fiona
Being in the School Environment	- Negotiating the Sensory Environment	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Deirdre Fiona
	- Finding Sanctuary: The Role of Safe Spaces	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Arlene Bronagh Fiona
Being with Others	- Navigating Social Interactions with Peers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Arlene Bronagh Caitriona Deirdre Eimear Fiona
	- Teachers: Mediators of Experience	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	- Challenging the Status Quo	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
A Parent Perspective on Support	**Subthemes**	***Arelene***	***Bronagh***	***Caitriona***	***Deirdre***	***Eimear***	***Fiona***	
	- Making Sense of Teacher Awareness, Knowledge & Understanding	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	- Experiences of the Support Processes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	- Shining a Light on the Role of Advocacy	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	

Appendix HH: Free Coding Example (IPA Step 1)



My free coding documents tended to be between 10-15 pages depending on the session. These documents recorded my initial thoughts on the data before formal analysis. The screenshot on the right provides an example of typical content in a free coding file.

Dyad 6 Girl F

Notes and reflections on the data and preliminary ways of thinking about analysis of the data.

1st year girl

(No communication with school so no walk-and-talk session)

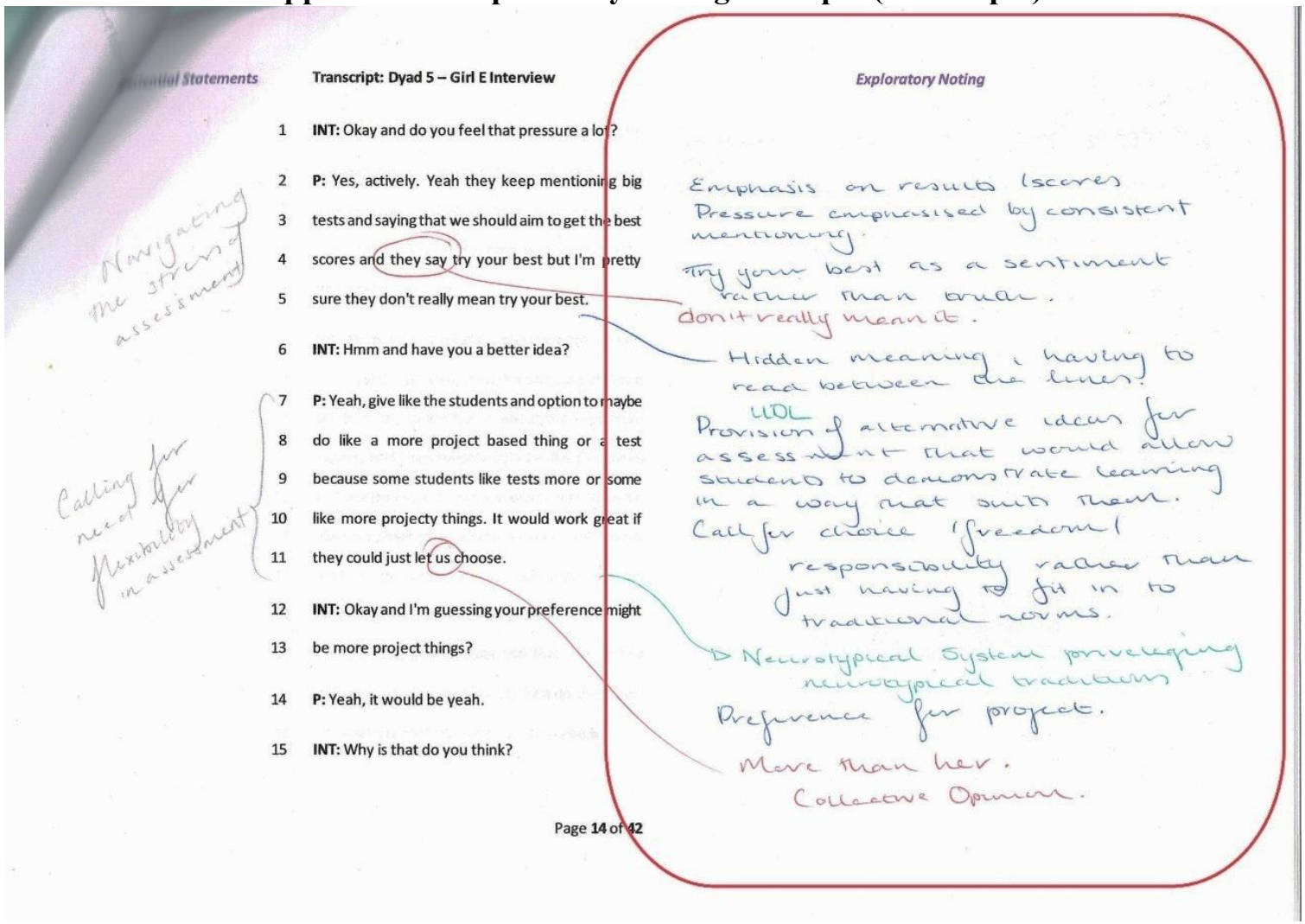
When talking about likes, it is clear that there are three aspects of school that are positive – these could be considered protective factors – if these were taken away, how would the experience compare; interest-based subjects, friendships, safe/escape place.

Library is contrasted with the canteen and described as being less intense in terms of noise level, highlighting the sensory implications of the school environment. There direct comparison indicates too extremes and demonstrates a preference for the quieter one. Also mention of books in relation to the library – is this because books are an interest or books as an escape?

Preference for practical subject is supported by preference for making things/doing/practical aspect and enjoyment of technology. But the predictability, systematic and methodical nature of these subjects is also seen as a positive – does this link with autism characteristics of preference for predictability / difficulty with change?

Favourite location in school is discussed and is identified as a bench in a courtyard outside. It appears to be away from the main busyness of the school. This participant goes here with her friends and there appears to be a sense of belonging associated with having somewhere to go with people. I get the sense that this space is invaluable for regulating/resetting at break/lunch. She describes it as a space to 'chill' which could imply regulation/break away from the chaos of school. The ability to 'chill' here seems to be in its quiet nature, it is described as quiet, quieter than the rest of the school. This might imply

Appendix II: Exploratory Noting Example (IPA Step 2)



Initial Statements

Transcript: Dyad 5 – Girl E Interview

1 **INT:** Okay and do you feel that pressure a lot?

2 **P:** Yes, actively. Yeah they keep mentioning big
3 tests and saying that we should aim to get the best
4 scores and they say try your best but I'm pretty
5 sure they don't really mean try your best.

6 **INT:** Hmm and have you a better idea?

7 **P:** Yeah, give like the students and option to maybe
8 do like a more project based thing or a test
9 because some students like tests more or some
10 like more projecty things. It would work great if
11 they could just let us choose.

12 **INT:** Okay and I'm guessing your preference might
13 be more project things?

14 **P:** Yeah, it would be yeah.

15 **INT:** Why is that do you think?

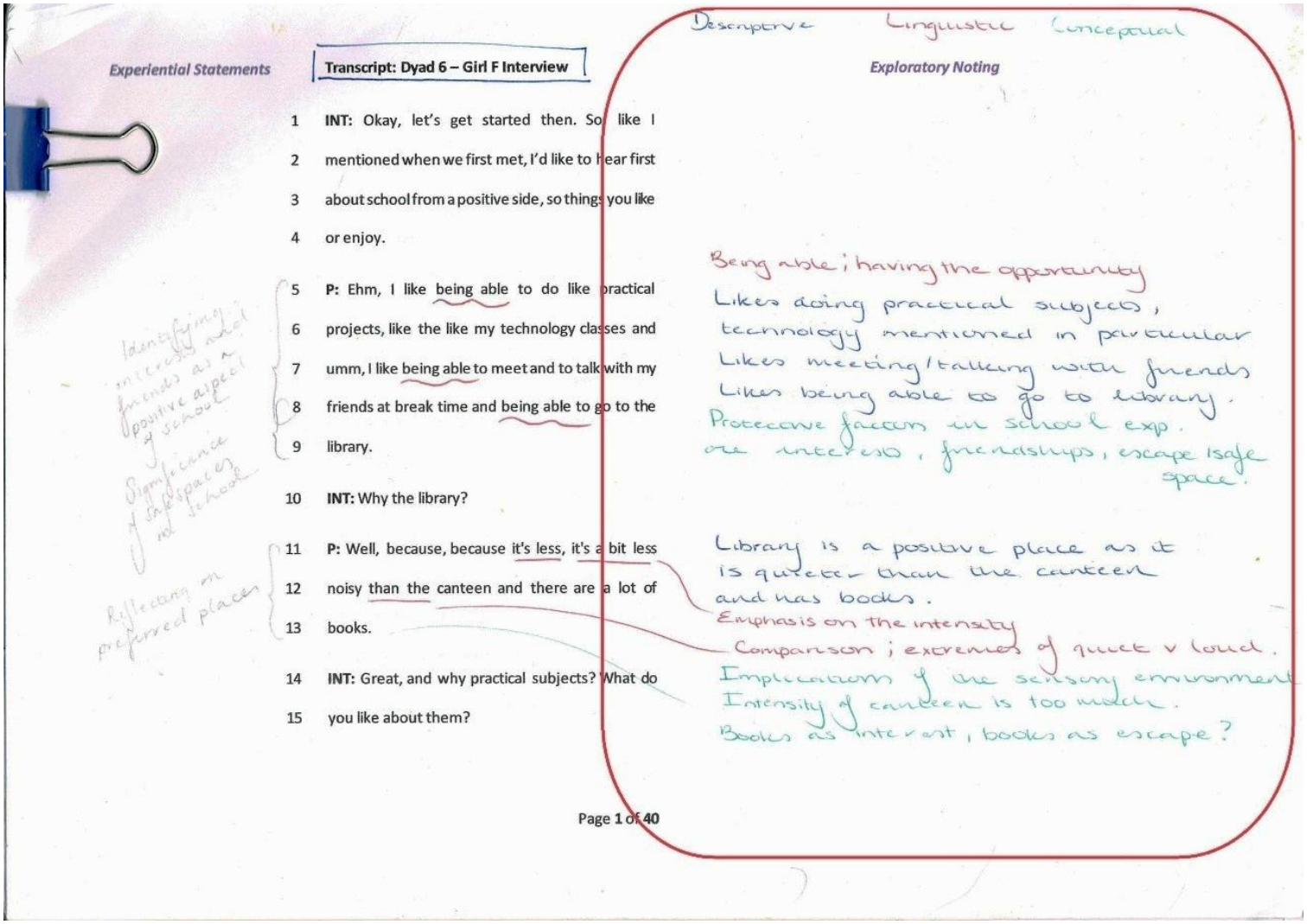
Page 14 of 42

Navigating the stress of assessment

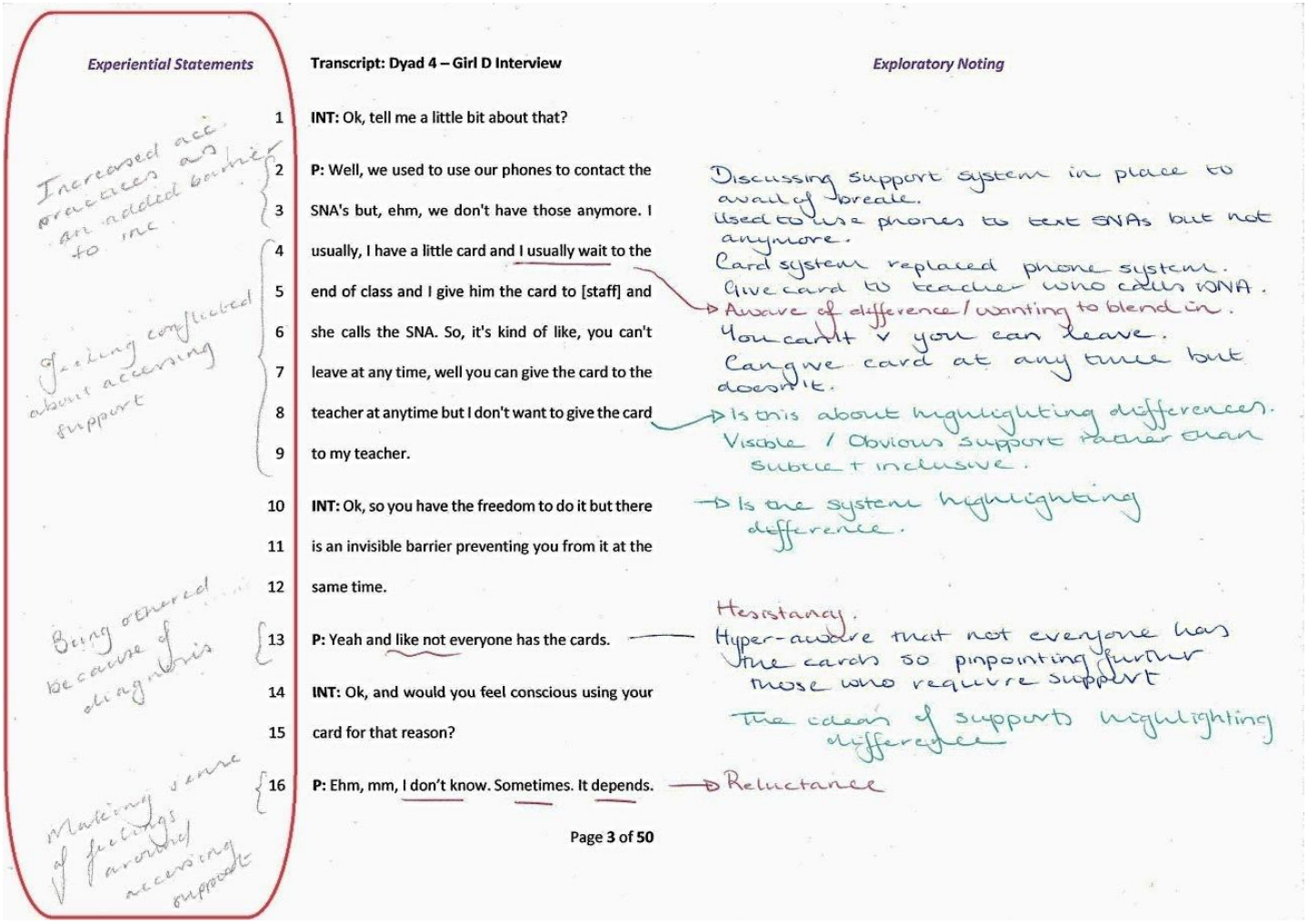
Calling for need for flexibility in assessment

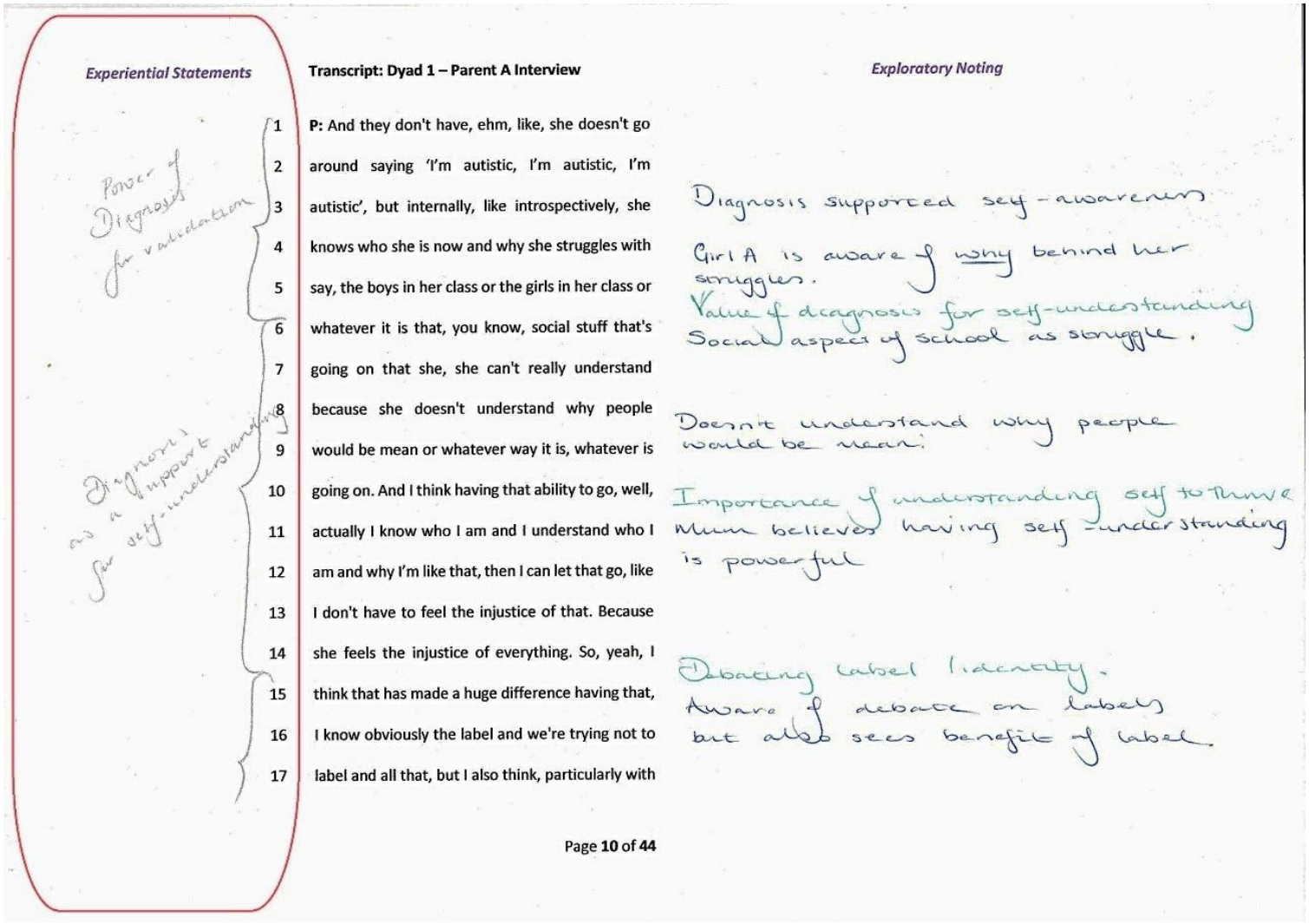
Exploratory Noting

Emphasis on results (scores)
Pressure emphasised by consistent mentioning.
Try your best as a sentiment rather than true.
don't really mean it.
Hidden meaning, having to read between the lines.
UDL
Provision of alternative ideas for assessment that would allow students to demonstrate learning in a way that suits them.
Call for choice (freedom/ responsibility rather than just having to fit in to traditional norms.
Neurotypical System privileging neurotypical traditions
Preference for project.
More than her.
Collective Opinion.

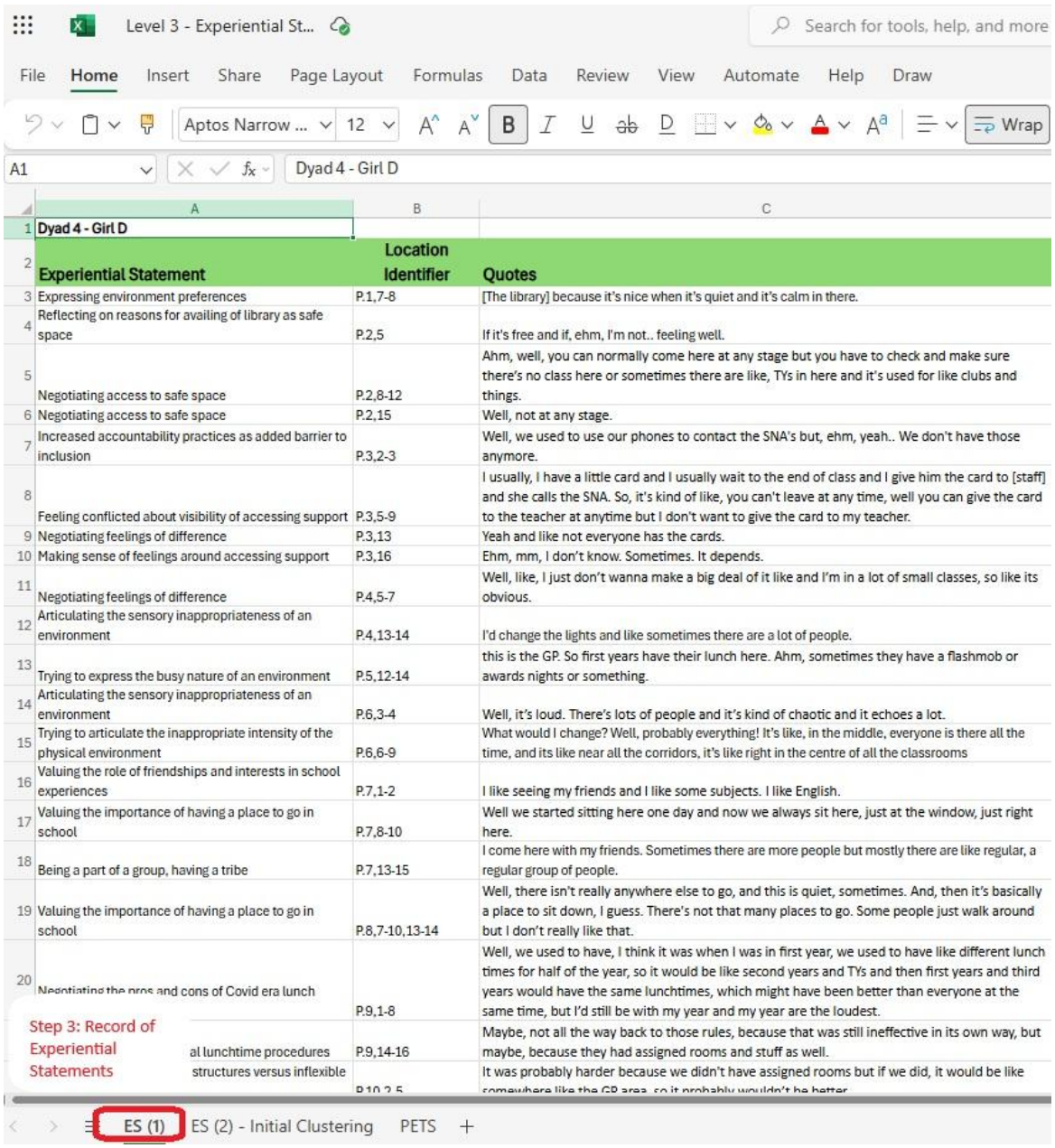

Experiential Statements
Transcript: Dyad 6 – Girl F Interview
Descriptive
Linguistic
Conceptual
Exploratory Noting
1 INT: Okay, let's get started then. So like I
2 mentioned when we first met, I'd like to hear first
3 about school from a positive side, so things you like
4 or enjoy.
5 P: Ehm, I like being able to do like practical
6 projects, like the like my technology classes and
7 umm, I like being able to meet and to talk with my
8 friends at break time and being able to go to the
9 library.
Being able; having the opportunity
Likes doing practical subjects, technology mentioned in particular
Likes meeting/talking with friends
Likes being able to go to library.
Protective factors in school exp.
ore interests, friendships, escape/safe space.
Identifying interests and friends as ^ positive aspect of school
Significance of safe spaces in school
10 INT: Why the library?
11 P: Well, because, because it's less, it's a bit less
12 noisy than the canteen and there are a lot of
13 books.
Reflecting on preferred places
Library is a positive place as it is quieter than the canteen and has books.
Emphasis on the intensity
Comparison; extremes of quiet v loud.
Implications of the sensory environment
Intensity of canteen is too much.
Books as interest, books as escape?
14 INT: Great, and why practical subjects? What do
15 you like about them?
Page 1 of 40

Appendix JJ: Experiential Statements Example (IPA Step 3)



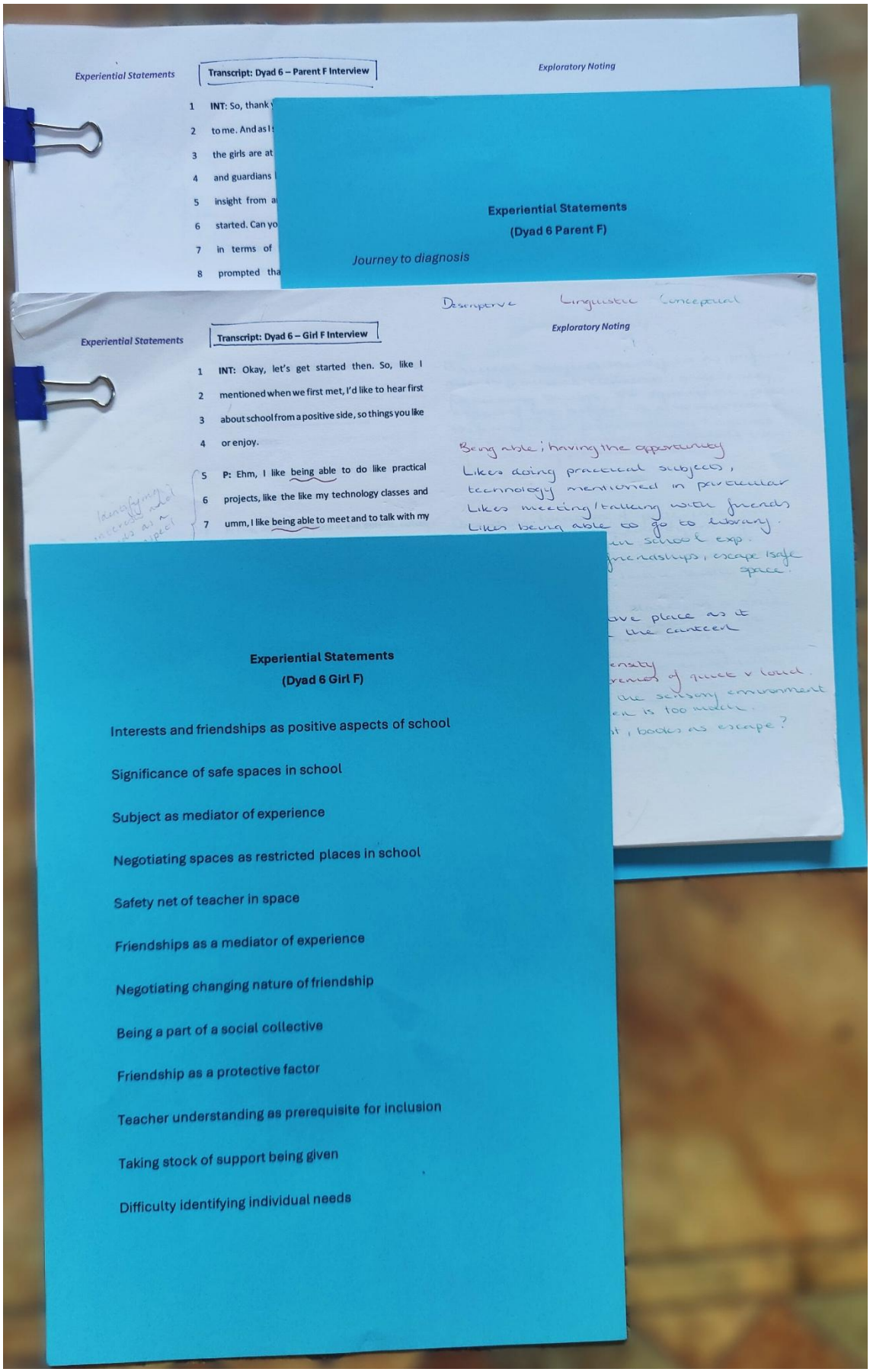

Experiential Statements
Transcript: Dyad 1 – Parent A Interview
Exploratory Noting
Power of Diagnosis for validation
Diagnosis as a support for self-understanding
1 P: And they don't have, ehm, like, she doesn't go
2 around saying 'I'm autistic, I'm autistic, I'm
3 autistic', but internally, like introspectively, she
4 knows who she is now and why she struggles with
5 say, the boys in her class or the girls in her class or
6 whatever it is that, you know, social stuff that's
7 going on that she, she can't really understand
8 because she doesn't understand why people
9 would be mean or whatever way it is, whatever is
10 going on. And I think having that ability to go, well,
11 actually I know who I am and I understand who I
12 am and why I'm like that, then I can let that go, like
13 I don't have to feel the injustice of that. Because
14 she feels the injustice of everything. So, yeah, I
15 think that has made a huge difference having that,
16 I know obviously the label and we're trying not to
17 label and all that, but I also think, particularly with
Page 10 of 44
Diagnosis supported self-awareness
Girl A is aware of why behind her struggles.
Value of diagnosis for self-understanding
Social aspect of school as struggle.
Doesn't understand why people would be mean.
Importance of understanding self to thrive
Mum believes having self-understanding is powerful
Debating label/identity.
Aware of debate on labels but also sees benefit of label.

Appendix KK: Managing Experiential Statements in Excel

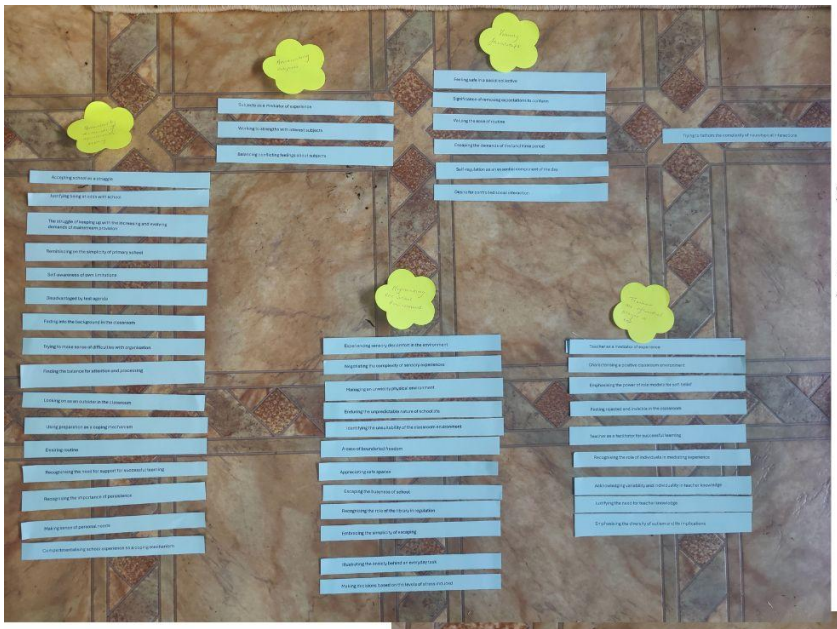


	A	B	C
1	**Dyad 4 - Girl D**		
2	**Experiential Statement**	**Location Identifier**	**Quotes**
3	Expressing environment preferences	P.1,7-8	[The library] because it's nice when it's quiet and it's calm in there.
4	Reflecting on reasons for availing of library as safe space	P.2,5	If it's free and if, ehm, I'm not.. feeling well.
5	Negotiating access to safe space	P.2,8-12	Ahm, well, you can normally come here at any stage but you have to check and make sure there's no class here or sometimes there are like, TYs in here and it's used for like clubs and things.
6	Negotiating access to safe space	P.2,15	Well, not at any stage.
7	Increased accountability practices as added barrier to inclusion	P.3,2-3	Well, we used to use our phones to contact the SNA's but, ehm, yeah.. We don't have those anymore.
8	Feeling conflicted about visibility of accessing support	P.3,5-9	I usually, I have a little card and I usually wait to the end of class and I give him the card to [staff] and she calls the SNA. So, it's kind of like, you can't leave at any time, well you can give the card to the teacher at anytime but I don't want to give the card to my teacher.
9	Negotiating feelings of difference	P.3,13	Yeah and like not everyone has the cards.
10	Making sense of feelings around accessing support	P.3,16	Ehm, mm, I don't know. Sometimes. It depends.
11	Negotiating feelings of difference	P.4,5-7	Well, like, I just don't wanna make a big deal of it like and I'm in a lot of small classes, so like its obvious.
12	Articulating the sensory inappropriateness of an environment	P.4,13-14	I'd change the lights and like sometimes there are a lot of people.
13	Trying to express the busy nature of an environment	P.5,12-14	this is the GP. So first years have their lunch here. Ahm, sometimes they have a flashmob or awards nights or something.
14	Articulating the sensory inappropriateness of an environment	P.6,3-4	Well, it's loud. There's lots of people and it's kind of chaotic and it echoes a lot.
15	Trying to articulate the inappropriate intensity of the physical environment	P.6,6-9	What would I change? Well, probably everything! It's like, in the middle, everyone is there all the time, and its like near all the corridors, it's like right in the centre of all the classrooms
16	Valuing the role of friendships and interests in school experiences	P.7,1-2	I like seeing my friends and I like some subjects. I like English.
17	Valuing the importance of having a place to go in school	P.7,8-10	Well we started sitting here one day and now we always sit here, just at the window, just right here.
18	Being a part of a group, having a tribe	P.7,13-15	I come here with my friends. Sometimes there are more people but mostly there are like regular, a regular group of people.
19	Valuing the importance of having a place to go in school	P.8,7-10,13-14	Well, there isn't really anywhere else to go, and this is quiet, sometimes. And, then it's basically a place to sit down, I guess. There's not that many places to go. Some people just walk around but I don't really like that.
20	Negotiating the pros and cons of Covid era lunch	P.9,1-8	Well, we used to have, I think it was when I was in first year, we used to have like different lunch times for half of the year, so it would be like second years and TYs and then first years and third years would have the same lunchtimes, which might have been better than everyone at the same time, but I'd still be with my year and my year are the loudest.
	al lunchtime procedures	P.9,14-16	Maybe, not all the way back to those rules, because that was still ineffective in its own way, but maybe, because they had assigned rooms and stuff as well.
	structures versus inflexible	P.10,2-5	It was probably harder because we didn't have assigned rooms but if we did, it would be like somewhere like the GP area, so it probably wouldn't be better

Appendix LL: Case Level Experiential Statements



Appendix MM: Clustering Experiential Statements (IPA Step 4)



For each case, I cut up the Experiential Statements and started to group them by similar ideas/concepts. This was what my initial clustering looked like.

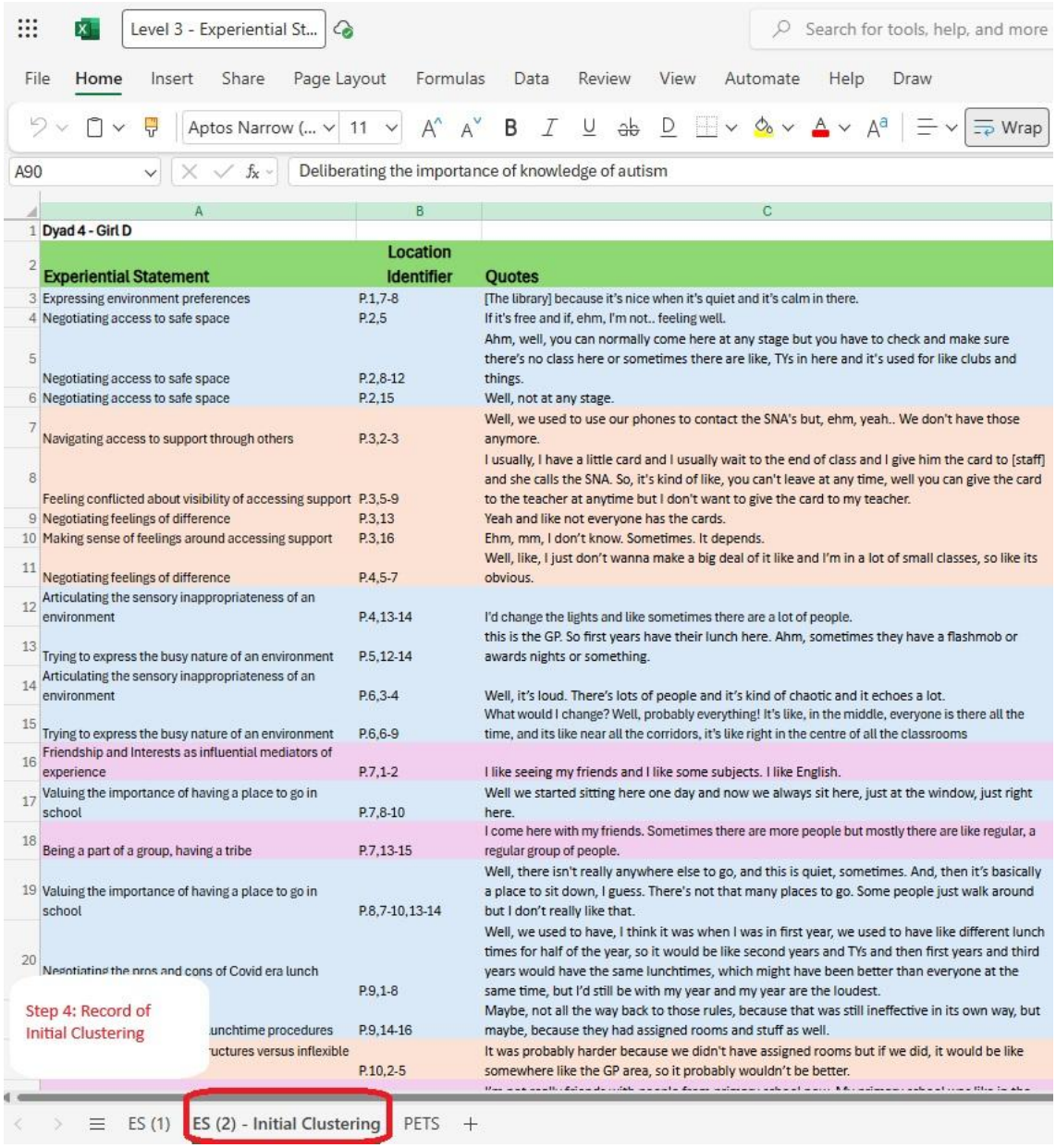
When I was happy with the clusters I had formed I grouped them and allocated them a provisional name. This process allowed me to stay close to the data and supported me in developing my digital records alongside the manual analysis process.





I completed the above process for each case (N=12). I assigned each dyad (N=6) a colour at this stage. Within the dyads, the data collected from girls was identifiable by yellow tabs and parent data identifiable by orange tabs.

Appendix NN: Managing Experiential Statement Clustering in Excel



	A	B	C
1	**Dyad 4 - Girl D**		
2	**Experiential Statement**	**Location Identifier**	**Quotes**
3	Expressing environment preferences	P.1,7-8	[The library] because it's nice when it's quiet and it's calm in there.
4	Negotiating access to safe space	P.2,5	If it's free and if, ehm, I'm not.. feeling well.
5	Negotiating access to safe space	P.2,8-12	Ahm, well, you can normally come here at any stage but you have to check and make sure there's no class here or sometimes there are like, TYs in here and it's used for like clubs and things.
6	Negotiating access to safe space	P.2,15	Well, not at any stage.
7	Navigating access to support through others	P.3,2-3	Well, we used to use our phones to contact the SNA's but, ehm, yeah.. We don't have those anymore.
8	Feeling conflicted about visibility of accessing support	P.3,5-9	I usually, I have a little card and I usually wait to the end of class and I give him the card to [staff] and she calls the SNA. So, it's kind of like, you can't leave at any time, well you can give the card to the teacher at anytime but I don't want to give the card to my teacher.
9	Negotiating feelings of difference	P.3,13	Yeah and like not everyone has the cards.
10	Making sense of feelings around accessing support	P.3,16	Ehm, mm, I don't know. Sometimes. It depends.
11	Negotiating feelings of difference	P.4,5-7	Well, like, I just don't wanna make a big deal of it like and I'm in a lot of small classes, so like its obvious.
12	Articulating the sensory inappropriateness of an environment	P.4,13-14	I'd change the lights and like sometimes there are a lot of people.
13	Trying to express the busy nature of an environment	P.5,12-14	this is the GP. So first years have their lunch here. Ahm, sometimes they have a flashmob or awards nights or something.
14	Articulating the sensory inappropriateness of an environment	P.6,3-4	Well, it's loud. There's lots of people and it's kind of chaotic and it echoes a lot.
15	Trying to express the busy nature of an environment	P.6,6-9	What would I change? Well, probably everything! It's like, in the middle, everyone is there all the time, and its like near all the corridors, it's like right in the centre of all the classrooms
16	Friendship and Interests as influential mediators of experience	P.7,1-2	I like seeing my friends and I like some subjects. I like English.
17	Valuing the importance of having a place to go in school	P.7,8-10	Well we started sitting here one day and now we always sit here, just at the window, just right here.
18	Being a part of a group, having a tribe	P.7,13-15	I come here with my friends. Sometimes there are more people but mostly there are like regular, a regular group of people.
19	Valuing the importance of having a place to go in school	P.8,7-10,13-14	Well, there isn't really anywhere else to go, and this is quiet, sometimes. And, then it's basically a place to sit down, I guess. There's not that many places to go. Some people just walk around but I don't really like that.
20	Negotiating the pros and cons of Covid era lunch	P.9,1-8	Well, we used to have, I think it was when I was in first year, we used to have like different lunch times for half of the year, so it would be like second years and TYs and then first years and third years would have the same lunchtimes, which might have been better than everyone at the same time, but I'd still be with my year and my year are the loudest.
	unchtime procedures	P.9,14-16	Maybe, not all the way back to those rules, because that was still ineffective in its own way, but maybe, because they had assigned rooms and stuff as well.
	uctures versus inflexible	P.10,2-5	It was probably harder because we didn't have assigned rooms but if we did, it would be like somewhere like the GP area, so it probably wouldn't be better.

Appendix OO: PETs in Excel Workbook (IPA Step 5)



Girl D: Surviving the sensory school

Expressing environment preferences	P.1,7-8	[The library] because it's nice when it's quiet and it's calm in there.
Negotiating access to safe space	P.2,5	If it's free and if, ehm, I'm not.. feeling well.
Negotiating access to safe space	P.2,8-12	Ahm, well, you can normally come here at any stage but you have to check and make sure there's no class here or sometimes there are like, TYs in here and it's used for like clubs and things.
Negotiating access to safe space	P.2,15	Well, not at any stage.
Articulating the sensory inappropriateness of an environment	P.4,13-14	I'd change the lights and like sometimes there are a lot of people.
Trying to express the busy nature of an environment	P.5,12-14	this is the GP. So first years have their lunch here. Ahm, sometimes they have a flashmob or awards nights or something.
Articulating the sensory inappropriateness of an environment	P.6,3-4	Well, it's loud. There's lots of people and it's kind of chaotic and it echoes a lot.
Trying to express the busy nature of an environment	P.6,6-9	What would I change? Well, probably everything! It's like, in the middle, everyone is there all the time, and its like near all the corridors, it's like right in the centre of all the classrooms
Valuing the importance of having a place to go in school	P.7,8-10	Well we started sitting here one day and now we always sit here, just at the window, just right here.
Valuing the importance of having a place to go in school	P.8,7-10,13-14	Well, there isn't really anywhere else to go, and this is quiet, sometimes. And, then it's basically a place to sit down, I guess. There's not that many places to go. Some people just walk around but I don't really like that.
Negotiating the pros and cons of Covid era lunch procedures	P.9,1-8	Well, we used to have, I think it was when I wa times for half of the year, so it would be like se years would have the same lunchtimes, which same time, but I'd still be with my year and my Maybe, not all the way back to those rules, be
Trying to determine the ideal lunchtime procedures	P.9,14-16	maybe, because they had assigned rooms and
Trying to express the busy nature of an environment	P.11,3-5	Ehm, assemblies, exams, centenary sessions w here. And, then 5th years have their lunch here
Meeting the demands of school life	P.11,8-9	You kind of have to go here, a lot, and that can
Articulating the sensory inappropriateness of an environment	P.11,11-14	Well, it's not good for a lot of reasons. It's brig and just not nice and they bring in microphon
Indicating the gravity of environment unsuitability	P.12,7	I don't know like, it is just the whole place.
Negotiating the conflicting sensory experiences in a given place	P.12,9-15	Well, it depends on the situation. Sometimes for like short periods of time, because if I'm go But if I'm in it for a long time or if we have to s centenary session or something.
Reflecting on the internal and external factors influencing experiences in a space	P.13,1-4	Sometimes, it, kind of depends. It depends on won't want to be here or if it's an uncomfortat
Taking stock of the positives and negatives of the safe space	P.17,8-13	Now, it has, they painted it blue, like a dark blu change the seats, the seats aren't very comfor like lava lamps and Himalayan salts and stuff, a
Emphasising the need for teachers to understand Sensory Processing Differences	P.23,14-16	Teachers that yell a lot are not good, I know a they like, they talk really loudly.
Conflicting feelings relating to the suitability of identified safe space	P.26,10-12	I don't know if I would go to the library at lunc like a place I can go most of the time.
Being overwhelmed by the demands of the classroom environment	P.27,10-14	If it's too much in the classroom, I probably we my work done I'll probably be given out too as
Being overwhelmed by the demands of the classroom environment	P.28,1-7	Sometimes I prefer to like do it at home so I ca doing a lot of things at once when you have to in the seat properly and you have to like be pr wanted at home while doing the work
Articulating the sensory inappropriateness of an environment	P.34,10-14	I try to get to my next class as quickly as I can. I'm like not in class, if I'm like in the library the my ears, it's very loud.

Girl D: Flexing around the concept of support

Navigating access to support through others	P.3,2-3	Well, we used to use our phones to contact the SNA's but, ehm, yeah.. We don't have those anymore.
Feeling conflicted about visibility of accessing support	P.3,5-9	I usually, I have a little card and I usually wait to the end of class and I give him the card to [staff] and she calls the SNA. So, it's kind of like, you can't leave at any time, well you can give the card to the teacher at anytime but I don't want to give the card to my teacher.
Negotiating feelings of difference	P.3,13	Yeah and like not everyone has the cards.
Making sense of feelings around accessing support	P.3,16	Ehm, mm, I don't know. Sometimes. It depends.
Negotiating feelings of difference	P.4,5-7	Well, like, I just don't wanna make a big deal of it like and I'm in a lot of small classes, so like its obvious.
Weighing up benefits of no structures versus inflexible structures	P.10,2-5	It was probably harder because we didn't have assigned rooms but if we did, it would be like somewhere like the GP area, so it probably wouldn't be better.
Recognising breaks as necessity for coping	P.16,1-2	Well, because I probably wouldn't be able to do anything if I wasn't able to take breaks.
Acceptance of varying support needs	P.16,5-6	Mmm, I think it depends on how I'm feeling really, like if I'm stressed or anything.
Resigned at inadequate structures in school	P.16,13-15	That's more of an important thing, that isn't quite there yet. Like, that's an important thing that should probably be done.
Challenging assumptions that small class sizes are better for all	P.21,9-12	Well, that one [small class] isn't important for me, but like could be for other people, but it just isn't for me. It's just being in a small class, is actually no help. I don't like being in small classes because you can hear all the noises and it's like, too quiet.
Being self-aware of own strengths and limitations as liberating	P.25,10-12	My biggest worry is about being able to take breaks, if I amn't able to take breaks, I probably won't be able to do anything else.
Navigating access to support through others	P.25,15-17	Well, usually I have to wait till the class ends and then I'll like call an SNA so I can go somewhere in school
Being self-aware of own strengths and limitations as liberating	P.26,1-2	taking breaks can also just be like reading my book when its lunchtime or something, like going to library or something.
Being self-aware of own strengths and limitations as liberating	P.28,10-11	Well I'd have a cup of tea and I'd probably like sit in a different way. I might play music.
Being self-aware of own strengths and limitations as liberating	P.28,11-17	It does depend on what I'm doing, because I can't listen to music if it's something I have to like really concentrate on or if it's something to do with like, if I'm writing a history essay I can't listen to music because then I'll just be like writing down the list of the songs or the lyrics. The not having a quiet place to go is kind of already something that is there, so I guess it's like something that I've kind of learned to deal with
Resigned at inadequate support structures in school	P.29,6-9	My afterschool routine changes because sometimes we go on the bus so we have to like walk for a while and I don't like walking and sometimes we're collected or I have stuff after school. Am, so I think it depends. I think it's better when I don't have stuff after school because I feel like I have more time, so I like after school on Wednesdays, it's a half day!

Girl D: Making sense of autistic processing in learning

Incorporation of interests for positive experiences	P.14,2-6	Well.. I don't know, I mean, ehm English is my favourite subject because I like reading, and I doing extracurriculars because it involves fun things, so like I do a science competition in Dublin and that's cool.
Grateful for support to pursue interests	P.14,8-15	Well, I did it last year. It's, ahm, basically science competition, you have an exhibition on a project you wanna do and like its on a different topic every year. Like, I do projects on autism and we went up last year to stay in hotel and I was with my friend, but this year I'm in a room on my own because she's not doing it and they have an SNA sent up with me.
Making sense of the implications of autistic processing	P.19,1-4	My classwork being based around my interests is very important, otherwise I would be like yelled at a lot for not paying attention.
Making sense of the implications of autistic processing	P.20,1-4	Well, its, ahm, I'm probably not paying attention if I am looking at them. I'm more likely to be paying attention if I'm, like drawing or something. So yeah, probably that.
Struggling with traditional classroom practices due to processing differences	P.20,6-7	Ehm, I don't like to answer questions when I'm asked questions.
Making sense of the implications of autistic processing	P.20,11-14	Ehm, I'd probably forget to volunteer. It's harder to like listen and understand things if I'm like listening to the questions and trying to get an answer.
Rejection of traditional didactic teaching practices	P.24,1-4	teachers who, I think some teachers teach in a kind of old fashion way, where they want everyone to be like looking up at them and like engaging in the class and I think those teachers who are like that, probably might stress people out.
Requiring a combined approach of teaching approaches for optimum learning	P.24,8-13	I think good classes depend on different things. We do that in my Spanish class sometimes and that's fun but it can get a bit rowdy, I s English class we have like the tables small.
Making sense of the implications of autistic processing	P.31/32,15-16,1-2	Like it's definitely harder to like pay a energy I'm probably less likely to sit d
Subjects as determiner of mood	P.32,12-13	I feel tired going to school, but, it doe
Making sense of the implications of autistic processing	P.41,2-5	Well, I don't really have like, problem understand what I'm doing
Making sense of personal approach to learning	P.41,8-13	I think a good way to measure my cor if I'm really, really trying hard to focus my book, but for subjects like English
Balancing conflicting feelings about subjects	P.42, 6-10	I think my least favorite class is maybe really participate in it anyway, so gett there's kind of no point in me being t Um, it's a little bit easier to engage w
Balancing conflicting feelings about subjects	P.42/43,13-16,1-2	umm like I probably wouldn't try as h things like, things like Irish kind of see know you need it for some jobs I gue
Rationalising the importance of learning being interesting	P.42,5-12	Teachers could maybe make my class but rather than just like kind of talkin practical classes, its always theory, so doing the same thing over and over a

Girl D: Experience as a social negotiation

Friendship and Interests as influential mediators of experience	P.7,1-2	I like seeing my friends and I like some subjects. I like English.
Being a part of a group, having a tribe	P.7,13-15	I come here with my friends. Sometimes there are more people but mostly there are like regula regular group of people.
Remembering past friendships	P.10,13-15	I'm not really friends with people from primary school now. My primary school was like in t middle of nowhere.
Friendship and Interests as influential mediators of experience	P.13,14-15	I like that I can see my friends and I like extracurriculars and I like English.
Being a part of a group, having a tribe	P.15,5-6	I have a group of friends and I would be close enough to them.
Being a part of a group, having a tribe	P.15,8-12	Ohh, well I've known like about three or four my friends since I was like born, but like we became friends when we were in school together. Ehm, I have one friend from primary sch and then I have a couple of friends from sports.
Being a part of a group, having a tribe	P.18,6-9	Ehm, we don't meet up that often because we're all busy enough, so when we do it's usuall something fun, so like we went ice skating for my friend's birthday last week and that was r fun.
Flexing around diagnosis versus individual	P.19,8-10	I don't know. I think it depends on the person. I don't know if it's autism or if its more about understanding the particular student with autism.
Challenging perceptions of autism	P.19,11-14	Like if a teacher is being told that a particular student has autism, it doesn't mean that they like, an alien, you know, they're still still like, a person.
Subjects and teachers as influential in determing experiences	P.22,3-4	Well I don't like some subjects and I don't like some teachers.
Experiences being contingent on the interactions within which they occur	P.22,7-8	well it's, it depends on what teacher I have and what we're doing.
Challenging perceptions of autism	P.22,11-15	Well, I don't like being patronized, which I think happens sometimes with people, especially teachers that know I'm autistic will be like, they kind of speak to me in a higher pitch, or say things slowly which is annoying.
Teacher as a mediator of experience	P.23,6-10	I think with a bad teacher it depends on your experience, so like there are some teachers th my sister loved but that I don't like at all, so it depends on perspective, so how a teacher tre student.
Being a part of a group, having a tribe	P.26,7-9	Sometimes they just like understand that I don't want to talk or anything and I can like say t
Recognising teachers as influential factors in experience	P.29,10-13	Teachers and stuff can be still kind of worrying, we have set teachers now when I'm getting teachers next year. But I don't like my teachers sometimes.
Feeling at odds with teachers	P.29,15-17	Some teachers are patronising and some teachers like yell a lot, so yeah, they're kind of the main reasons.
Being the same but different among friends	P.31,6-8	My friends are funny and the sleeping one is because we're always saying how we're so tire and sometimes I lie down on the window sill.
Teacher as a mediator of experience	P.38,12-14	I guess, I don't know. My favorite teacher is my English teacher and so it's just like I like this subject anyway and she's nice
Teacher as a facilitor for successful learning	P.38/39,15-17,1-3	So I guess, maybe a teacher who isn't like too stressed because sometimes the stressed tea means a stressed class, like the teacher isn't like, it's kind of like a teacher who's relaxed bu too relaxed so but will stress about the exam, like you know we get the work done but like i not like intensive.
Making a call for a person-centred approach	P.39,7-11	I think they [teachers] should know a little bit about the students, and it's a very big school they can't get to know every student in every class, like there's a lot of people but I think th should like, it's like paying attention to the students as well as like teaching them.
Being a part of a group, having a tribe	P.40,1-2	Well, I like classes that my friends are in, that's better.
Deliberating the importance of knowledge of autism	P.47,7-13	I really like the history and not because it's good but because like, it's crazy how nobody kn about it, so and particularly because of like how people like or like say things they don't understand, because I was talking to some person yesterday and they were like you don't h autism, you just have Aspergers.
Deliberating the importance of knowledge of autism	P.48,4-8	Well, I think it's kind of, it's like you know history about anything, I think you can't have any motivation to like change things unless you know like what's happening before and it's just of, like I guess understanding better.
Deliberating the importance of knowledge of autism	P.48, 12-14	People in school and teachers and stuff, probably. They need to know about the findings.
		I think they [peers in school] should know some things, not just gonna, like I think most peo

These are the four PETs generated from the data collected in the Sessions with Danielle!

Appendix PP: Overview of PETs (Autistic Girls)

Personal Experiential Themes (Autistic Girls)

Girl A - Ava	
Theme 1	Being ambushed by demands of mainstream
Theme 2	Positive impact of preferred subjects
Theme 3	Negotiating the school environment
Theme 4	Teacher as influential player in experience
Theme 5	Valuing friendships

Girl B - Bella	
Theme 1	Negotiating the social landscape of adolescence
Theme 2	Coping as a daily response
Theme 3	Navigating difference in the school environment

Girl C - Ciara	
Theme 1	School as a demanding experience
Theme 2	Negotiating the role of teacher as mediator of experience
Theme 3	School as a social endeavour

Girl D - Danielle	
Theme 1	Surviving the sensory school
Theme 2	Flexing around concept of support
Theme 3	Making sense of autistic processing in learning
Theme 4	Experience as a social negotiation

Girl E - Emma	
Theme 1	A solo endeavour, surviving school
Theme 2	Teachers; a driving force or a roadblock
Theme 3	Negotiating the unavoidable social encounters
Theme 4	Questioning learning within the 'system'

Girl F - Freya	
Theme 1	Negotiating the social world
Theme 2	Thinking about school as a place
Theme 3	Embracing diversity of subject
Theme 4	Making sense of support - Role of teacher in support

Appendix QQ: Overview of PETs (Parents/Guardians)

Personal Experiential Themes (Parents/Guardians)

Parent A - Arlene	
Theme 1	Valuing the autism diagnosis
Theme 2	School Experience as complex - School experience as a journey - Acknowledging factors that influence experience - Recognising the impact of being autistic at school
Theme 3	Feeling frustrated with teacher knowledge
Theme 4	Perspectives on support - Experiences of support process - Role of advocacy in support process

Parent B - Bronagh	
Theme 1	Appreciating the demands of mainstream (general, social, sensory)
Theme 2	Recognising autism self-understanding as a journey
Theme 3	Teachers as key players in school experience - In identification - In support

Parent C - Catriona	
Theme 1	Diagnosis as an answer
Theme 2	Feeling anxious about finding the balance
Theme 3	Support as a joint effort

Parent D - Deirdre	
Theme 1	Processing autism and its implications (sensory, social, identity, processing)
Theme 2	Disappointed by the professionals
Theme 3	Celebrating teacher as cheerleader

Parent E - Eimear	
Theme 1	A move in the right direction, the transition from primary to post-primary
Theme 2	Autism understanding; em- or over-powering
Theme 3	Plugging the gaps with advocacy
Theme 4	Calling out a system at odds with autism

Parent F - Fiona	
Theme 1	Emphasising understanding of self/autism as powerful in mediating experience
Theme 2	Reflecting on influential factors in experience (sensory, social, interests)
Theme 3	Feeling let down by the system

Appendix RR: GETs in Excel Workbook (Step 7)

A new excel workbook was created for each GET



G-GET 1 G-GET 2 G-GET 3 +

24	**Girl A: Positive Impact of Preferred Subjects**		
25	Subject as a postive mediator of experience	P.2, 2-3,10	This is my wordwork class. I do workwork studies and also sometimes graphics... I'm very happy with it.
26	Working to strengths with interest subjects	P.2, 5-6	Because it's just, like it's.. a physical class. It's very easy for me to just, like, do my own thing in it.
27	Balancing conflicting feelings about subjects	P.15/16, 15-17,1-4	Well, having class work based on my interests is important. It's because, there's a lot of stuff on like the syllabus, for all the different subjects, and a lot of them I probably won't use like again. So I'm like I won't use it, I don't need it, so I won't pay as much attention, if like, as opposed to if it was something that I was like really interested in.
28	Balancing conflicting feelings about subjects	P.31/32, 15-17,1-8	So constructions studies is one of my option subjects. It's a very hands-on subject, where you can like kind of, there are no, like you can kind of do what you want with it, like the projects and stuff and like it's nice because you can do your own stuff and my teacher for it, he's really nice as well and it's just good as opposed to other classes where you have to like stress about doing homework and like writing a bunch of stuff down, you can just take a break and like try and make something.
29	Balancing conflicting feelings about subjects	P.41, 4-12	I would change the stuff we learn to be stuff we would use, like more in everyday life and stuff, like we probably won't be going around writing poetry essays for like everyday, but we will need to know how to like do taxes and stuff I'm afraid, definitely at some point. So, I think in the last couple of years it would be better to like explain what it would be like living on your own and stuff.
30	Subject as a postive mediator of experience	P.9, 11-12	I don't actually take art, but like if I could go back and choose my subjects again, I would choose art.
31	**Girl C: School as a demanding experience**		
32	Navigating the idea of conformity	P.2	I don't like some of the rules.
33	Recognising sensory needs	P.3	I like the classroom to be quiet.
34	Rejecting homework	P.3	I don't do homework, ever. So homework is not important to me.
35	Preparing for the demands of the day	P.4	Most mornings I am late for school, so class has started when I get there. Sometimes between classes I visit the bathroom just to have five minutes.
36	Subjects as mediators of experience	P.4	History and sometimes [autism class] can be annoying. History is annoying because the teacher and the class. There is a lot of difficult work.
37	Rejecting expectations of learning in normative system	P.5	I don't like learning things. I don't like having to memorise.
38	Subjects as mediators of experience	P.2	I don't like History or CSPE.
39	**Girl D: Making sense of autistic processing in learning**		
40	Incorporation of interests for positive experiences	P.14,2-6	Well.. I don't know, I mean, ehm English is my favourite subject because I like reading, and I doing extracurriculars because it involves fun things, so like I do a science competition in Dublin and that's cool.
41			Well, I did it last year. It's, ahm, basically science competition, you have an exhibition on a

7	**Girl E: Negotiating the unavoidable social encounters**		
8	Recognising friendships as a protective factor	P.10/11,15-16/1-2	I mean having friends is an important thing, just in general. Having things the lunches less boring although if you have friends that helps too.
9	Interests and friends as a protective factor	P.17,7-9	Well, you know there are different clubs on different days and if there's n talk with my friend, so that's pretty cool.
0	Lunch clubs as a distraction	P.19,13-15	Em, kind of like, usually getting up and doing something, usually if I'm fee me from that
1	Lunch club as a social opportunity	P.20,1-2	They're [lunch clubs] all social things anyways, it's just am I doing somet
2	Recognising the benefits of a small school	P.20,10-12	It's not hard to know where to go, because I've been in the school for alm point, you could get it within a week.
3	Recognising social connections	P.21,6-11	I have one good friend and a couple of like, better, not better, but they're maybe, good acquaintainces is probably what you'd call them. Ehm, durin with my sister and her friend so that also, like, I also end up talking to the
4	Recognising social connections	P.21/22,15-16/1-5	Well, we were both working on, like painting the windows for 'stand up we of just clicked. We were right beside each other talking. Sometimes outsi have a coffee, drink coffee.
5	Recognising social connections	P.22,11-13	I tend to spend time with the same people, I don't tend to move from grou
6	Awareness of social differences	P.23,4-6	My biggest source of worry is other students. Well, it's not *other* student just, as a whole, socially, like making sure I have a social life with the othe
7	Awareness of social differences	P.23,9-11	Ehm, well sometimes, well some clubs I do more alone, and then others too, but then sometimes I just want to be alone too.
8	Expressing social preferences	P23/24,14-15/1-2	Well, it depends on the people, cause like some are nicer than others, bu just a couple of people that I wouldn't want to necessarily like sit beside
9	Navigating adolescent social interactions	P.24,4-12	Some people are, it's just kind of clashing personalities for the most part weird jokes, more offensive jokes. It's mostly their personalities. Like, the or the autism thing, they're just generally, just teenage boys' kind of thing
0	Negotiating the complex demands of masking	P.38,5-11	This reflects masking and the way I mask in school, like pretending, not s Like trying to make, trying to feel better about things rather than just be h like actually 'this is hard' or whatever or feeling sometimes you have to g I'm very clearly crying.
1	Holding back for fear of burdening	P.38,13-15	I mask because I don't want to bother people with negatives.
2	**Girl F: Negotiating the social world**		
3	Interests and friendships as positive aspects of school	P.1,5-8	I like being able to do like practical projects, like my like technology class able to meet and to talk with my friends at break time.
4	Friendships as a mediator of experience	P.5,3-7	Ehm, the most important one for me is having friends at school. I like h because like, because then I like, I can have someone to talk to and, an talk about like the day with.
5	Negotiating changing nature of friendship	P.5,10-12	Em, I first went, went into secondary school with some, with two of m school, but then, but then we kind of drifted apart
6	Being a part of a social collective	P.5,12-15	I made friends with another girl in my class and she introduced me to h friends.
7	Friendship as a protective factor	P.6,9-10	Yeah, it's [school] kind of easy to, easier to have like a friend to like cha
8			Ehm, well it worries me that if, that if, actually if like someone thinks i'

The PETs relevant to the overarching GETs were extracted from the case level excel workbooks. Each GET therefore consisted of a number of different PETs (and their associated Experiential Statements, Quotes and Location Identifiers) GETs were developed for both autistic girls and their parents.

Appendix SS: Overview of GETs (Autistic Girls)

Group Experiential Themes (Autistic Girls)

Girls GETs		
Theme 1	The Good and the Bad of mainstream post-primary	Being ambushed by demands of mainstream / Positive impact of preferred subjects
		Coping as a daily response / Navigating difference in the school environment
		School as a demanding experience
		Making sense of autistic processing in learning / Flexing around concept of support
		A solo endeavour, surviving school / Questioning learning within the 'system'
		Embracing diversity of subject / Making sense of support
Theme 2	Coping in the school environment	Negotiating the school environment
		Coping as a daily response
		Surviving the sensory school
		Thinking about school as a place
Theme 3	Negotiating the social landscape	Valuing friendships / Teacher as influential player in experience
		Negotiating the social landscape of adolescence / Navigating difference in the school environment
		School as a social endeavour / Negotiating the role of teacher as mediator of experience
		Experience as a social negotiation
		Teachers; a driving force or a roadblock / Negotiating the unavoidable social encounters
		Negotiating the social world / Making sense of support - Role of teacher in support

Appendix TT: Overview of GETs (Parents/Guardians)

Group Experiential Themes (Autistic Girls)

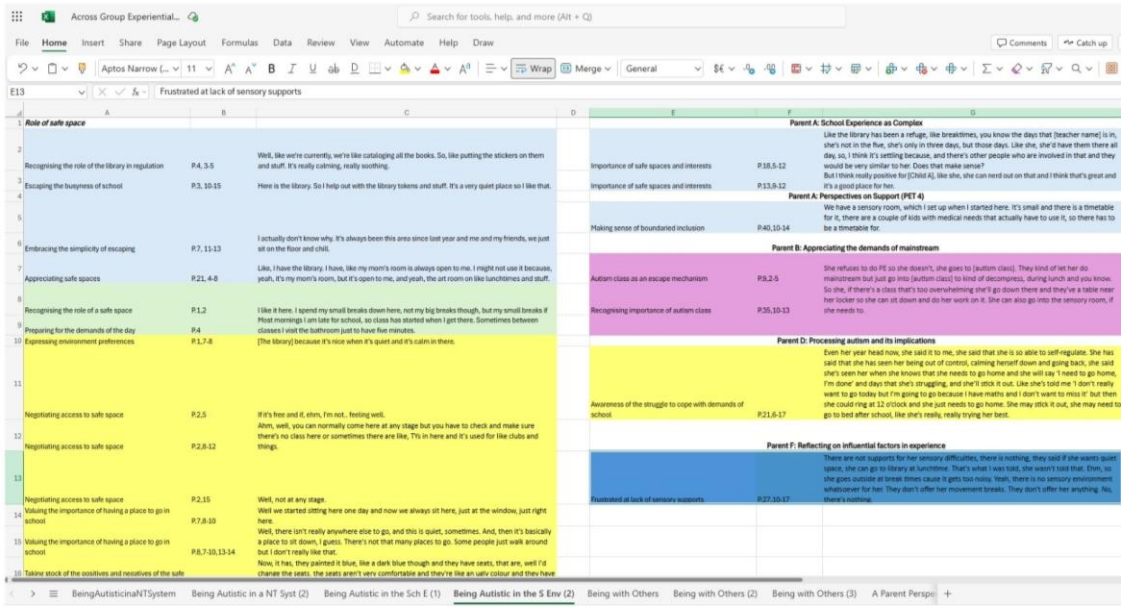
Parent GETs		
Theme 1	Diagnosis; powerful and challenging	Valuing the autism diagnosis
		Recognising autism self-understanding as a journey
		Diagnosis as an answer
		Autism understanding; em- or over-powering
		Emphasising understanding of self/autism as powerful in mediating experience
Theme 2	Recognising the complexity of school experience	School Experience as complex
		Appreciating the demands of mainstream
		Feeling anxious about finding the balance
		Processing autism and its implications
		A move in the right direction, the transition from primary to post-primary
		Reflecting on influential factors in experience
Theme 3	Navigating the system	Feeling frustrated with teacher knowledge / Perspectives on support
		Teachers as key players in school experience
		Support as a joint effort
		Disappointed by the professionals / Celebrating teacher as cheerleader
		Plugging the gaps with advocacy / Calling out a system at odds with autism
		Feeling let down by the system

Appendix UU: Across Group GETs in Excel Workbook (Step 8)



A new excel file was created for the Across Group GETs. Each Across Group GET had a separate excel workbook. The GETs from the girls and their parents populated the Across Group GETs.

This is an example of my Excel Workbook for an Across Group GET. The data from the girls is on the left hand side and the supplementary data from their parents is on the right hand side.



Appendix VV: Overview of Across Group GETs

Across Group Experiential Themes (Across Group GETs)

	Drawing from the Girls		*Drawing from the Parents*	
Theme	**Subthemes**		**Supplementary**	
Being Autistic in a Neurotypical School System	- Coping or Surviving? The Demands of Post-Primary School - Learning: A Tale of Two Halves	**G-GET 1** *PETs;* *(A1/2)* *(B2/3)* *(C1)* *(D2/3)* *(E1/4)* *(F3)*	- Recognising demands of PP - Navigating the system - Self-understanding (diagnosis)	**P-GET 2/1**
Being in the School Environment	- Negotiating the Sensory Environment - Finding Sanctuay: The Role of Safe Spaces	**G-GET2** *PETs;* *(A3)* *(B2)* *(D1)* *(F2)*	- Recognising demands of the school environment	**P-GET 2**
Being with Others	- Navigating Social Interactions with Peers - Teachers: Mediators of Experience - Challenging the Status Quo	**G-GET3** *PETs;* *(A4/5)* *(B1/3)* *(C2/3)* *(D4)* *(E2/3)* *(F1/4)*	- Recognising social difficulties - Meeting social demands - Role of teachers in experience	**P-GET 2/3**
Parent Perspectives on Support			**Subthemes** - Making Sense of Teacher Awareness, Knowledge & Understanding - Experiences of the Support Processes - Shining a Light on the Role of Advocacy	**P-GET 3** *PETs;* *(A3/4)* *(B3)* *(C3)* *(D2/3)* *(E3/4)* *(F3)*

Appendix WW: Dissemination Plan

Conferences Attended			
Date	***Event***	***Format***	***Submission Title***
June 2022	Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) Conference (University of Limerick)	Poster	Autistic Girls' Experiences of Mainstream Education: Situating the Study in Literature
May 2023	Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) Conference (University of Limerick)	Poster	Conducting Research with Autistic Girls: Looking at Ethics Through the Lens of Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research
May 2023	Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) Conference (University of Limerick)	Oral Presentation	Autism and Girls: Linking Presentation to Diagnostic Criteria
June 2023	European Educational Research Association (EERA) Summer School	Poster	Exploring Autistic Girls Experiences of Mainstream Education Provision: Reflections on a Participatory Approach
September 2023	Children's Rights, Participation and Education Symposium (Queen's University, Belfast)	Poster	Using Inclusive Research to Explore Perspectives on Inclusive Education: Autistic Girls and Mainstream Education Provision
September 2023	Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) Conference	Poster	Mainstream Post-Primary Teachers' Knowledge of Autism in Girls: A Preliminary Analysis
October 2023	SCoTENS Conference	Oral Presentation	Deliberations on Children's Rights, Voice and Participation in Research and Education
December 2023	Children's Research Network Symposium	Oral Presentation	Using Inclusive Research to Explore Autistic Girls' Perspectives on Mainstream Education Provision
April 2024	Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Conference	Poster	Autistic Girls' Experiences of Mainstream Post-Primary Education Provision: The Emerging Findings

April 2024	Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Conference	Oral Presentation	Mainstream Post-Primary Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding of Autism in Girls
June 2024	The Future of Education 15th International (Pixel) Conference	Oral Presentation*	Using 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research' (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021) as an Ethical Framework for Eliciting the School Experiences of Autistic Girls
September 2024	British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference	Oral Presentation	Exploring the School Experiences of Autistic Female Students using an Eclectic Approach to Data Collection: Insights from the Researcher and the Participants
April 2025	Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Conference	Oral Presentation	Exploring the School Experiences of Autistic Female Students using an Eclectic Approach to Data Collection: Insights from the Researcher and the Participants

Planned Conference Attendance			
July 2025	London International Conference on Inclusive Education (LICIE)	Oral Presentation	Autistic Girls' Experiences of Mainstream Education Provision at Post-Primary Level in the Republic of Ireland
July 2025	London International Conference on Inclusive Education (LICIE)	Oral Presentation	Mainstream Post-Primary Teachers' Awareness, Knowledge and Understanding of Autism in Girls
September 2025	14th Autism Europe Congress (AEC 2025)	Poster	Autistic Female Students' Experiences of Mainstream Education Provision at Post-Primary Level in the Republic of Ireland

Publications		
Date	***Place Published***	***Publication Title***
November 2023	Irish Educational Studies Journal	Recognising autism in girls within the education context: reflecting on the internal presentation and the diagnostic criteria
November 2023	Inclusive Education SIG Newsletter	Autistic Girls, Inclusion and Mainstream Education Provision: A Review of the Literature
December 2023	Middletown Centre for Autism Research Journal	Systemic Barriers to Mainstream Education Provision as Experienced by Autistic Girls: An Executive Summary of the Literature
June 2024	The Future of Education 15th International (Pixel) Conference Proceedings	Using 'Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research' (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021) as an Ethical Framework for Eliciting the School Experiences of Autistic Girls

Planned Publications		
Timeline	***Proposed Paper***	***Target Journal/Place of Publication***
Summer 2025	Mainstream Post-Primary Teachers' Awareness, Knowledge and Understanding of Autism in Girls	Educational Psychology in Practice Autism Research International Journal of Inclusive Education European Journal of Special Needs Education
September 2025	What do post-primary teachers know, want and need in relation to autism in girls?	ASTIR Magazine/TUI Magazine (Union magazines for post-primary teachers)
A/Y 2025/2026	Autistic Girls' Experiences of Mainstream Education Provision at Post-Primary Level in the Republic of Ireland: The Perspectives of Autistic Girls and their Parents	Autism Irish Educational Studies International Journal of Inclusive Education European Journal of Special Needs Education
A/Y 2025/2026	Parents experiences navigating the school system to support their autistic daughter's educational journey	Neurodiversity Autism Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders

Appendix XX: Questionnaire (Pilot Version)

Information Sheet

Understanding the Experiences of Autistic Girls in Mainstream Education Settings

Dear Teacher, My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD by research in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education under the supervision of Dr Laura Ambrose and Dr Michele Dunleavy. The current study will form part of my thesis.

What is the project about?
The overarching aim of this research is to better understand autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education provision at post-primary level. This research is dual focus with one aspect of the study focusing on a small group of autistic girls and their parents/guardians while the other element consists of a national survey with post-primary teachers. This is the second component of the larger project and endeavours to examine the awareness and understanding of mainstream post-primary teachers in Ireland in relation to autism in girls.

Why is it being undertaken?
Autistic girls often go unrecognised and/or unsupported in educational settings and face barriers to inclusion and learning. While there has been an increase in research relating to the school experiences and inclusion of autistic individuals, many of these studies are from the perspective of adult stakeholder or limited by a male biased sample. The core objective of the study is to amplify missing voices in educational research, those of autistic girls, to provide them with the opportunity to share their unique school experiences. However, the researcher appreciates that parents/guardians and teachers can offer additional insights and perspectives on this topic and so their inclusion as participants is highly valued.

This component of the study aims to examine the current awareness of post-primary teachers in relation to how autism presents in girls while also exploring teachers' perceptions of support provision for this cohort. It is hoped that this survey will draw attention to good practice being carried out in our schools while also identifying gaps in

teacher knowledge and understanding to allow for planning of targeted continuous professional development.

What are the benefits of this research?
It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will;
-enhance our understanding of how autistic girls experience mainstream educational provision
-identify good practice in terms of what facilitates positive school experiences while also highlighting potential areas of concerns in terms of the barriers to inclusion and learning faced by the girls
-provide insight into teachers' awareness of how autism presents in girls and their perceptions of support provision

What is involved for the participants?
Participants will complete an online survey, which should take approximately **10-15 minutes** to complete. There will be a variety of questions including multiple choice questions and providing short written answers to questions.

How will confidentiality and anonymity be attended to?
All information will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than for discussion with my research supervisors. All data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisors. An ID number will be generated for each participant, and it is this rather than the participant's name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity.

Right to withdraw
Involvement in this study is voluntary. However, if you do agree to participate, your anonymity is assured. You can withdraw from the survey at any stage by exiting. It will not be possible to withdraw your survey data after submission. This is because all data are anonymised and it is not possible to link anonymised data with individual participants.

How will the information be used/disseminated?
The data from this study will be combined with the data collected from other components of the study and used to form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the dissertation. Direct quotations from the open ended

questions in the survey will be used. These individual excerpts will be combined with those from other participants and will remain anonymous. The data collected may also be presented at national/international conferences or published in academic journals.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?
In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop. Contact details: If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors. Our contact details are provided below: Researcher: Aoife Munroe - Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie - 0868787950
Supervisor 1: Dr Laura Ambrose - Laura.Ambrose@mic.ul.ie
Supervisor 2: Dr Michele Dunleavy - Michele.Dunleavy@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (Application REF: A23-009). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

By continuing with the survey you are providing informed consent and confirm that;
1. You have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet
2. You understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for
3. You are fully aware of all the procedures involving your participation, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study
4. You know that your participation is voluntary and that you can withdraw from the survey at any stage, however, it will not be possible to withdraw your survey data after submission.
5. You are aware that all participant data with be kept confidential

Section One: A Little Bit About You

Please select what qualification(s) you have

- ☐ Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.)
- ☐ Professional Master of Education (PME)
- ☐ Postgraduate Qualification in the area of Special/Inclusive Education

☐ Other; explain

Please select the number of years that you have been teaching

- ○ 0-5
- ○ 6-10
- ○ 11-15
- ○ 16+

Please select which type of school you are currently teaching in

- ○ Single sex girls school
- ○ Single sex boys school
- ○ Mixed school

Have you ever taught a girl diagnosed with Autism?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Don't Know

Section Two: Understanding of Autism

How would you rate your understanding of autism?

	1	2	3	4	5
Slide to Indicate Choice					

How would you rate your understanding of how autism presents in girls?

	1	2	3	4	5
Slide to Indicate Choice					

Where has your understanding of autism come from? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ Training provided by Department of Education / NCSE
- ☐ Training facilitated by an Education Centre
- ☐ Training provided by an external organisation
- ☐ Training during Initial Teacher Education
- ☐ Experience of working with children and young people with an autism diagnosis
- ☐ Personal experience (e.g. someone in my family has an autism diagnosis)
- ☐ Other; explain

Section Three: Autism and Girls

The prevalence of autism is the same in males and females

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Do you think autism presents differently in males and females?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Unsure

Please indicate to what extent you disagree/agree with each of the statements below in terms of the female presentation of autism.

	Disagree	Agree
Are socially motivated	○	○
Have no/few friends	○	○
Have an intense relationship with one particular friend	○	○
Have unusual interests/obsessions	○	○
Display challenging behaviour	○	○

	Disagree	Agree
Are in long-term friendship groups	○	○
Demonstrate good verbal communication skills	○	○
Display strengths in using non-verbal communication	○	○
Copy the behaviour of people around them	○	○
Have lots of friends	○	○
Engage in repetitive behaviours	○	○
Exhibit differences in sensory processing	○	○
Find changes in routine difficult	○	○
Demonstrate controlling behaviour	○	○
Have the same interests as their female peers	○	○

Please use the space below to detail any other characteristics that you are aware of, that an autistic girl may display.

How confident would you say you are at recognising autism in females?

- ○ Not At All Confident
- ○ Not Very Confident
- ○ Somewhat Confident
- ○ Very Confident
- ○ Extremely Confident

How confident would you say you are at supporting diagnosed females?

- ○ Not At All Confident
- ○ Not Very Confident
- ○ Somewhat Confident
- ○ Very Confident
- ○ Extremely Confident

What type of support would you put in place in the mainstream setting for a girl with a diagnosis of autism?

Section 4: Teacher Professional Learning Needs

What do you feel would be most helpful in supporting your setting to best identify, understand and support the needs of autistic girls? (Please rank your choices)

- ☐ Specific training on identifying autism in girls
- ☐ Specific training on strategies and interventions to support girls with a diagnosis of autism
- ☐ Workshops for the staff on the topic of women and girls and autism
- ☐ Other; explain

Which of the following would be most appropriate in delivering training to you?

- ○ Online (Live)
- ○ Online (Recorded)
- ○ Online and In-Person

○ In-Person

Additional Information

Is there anything else that you feel is important to mention, but I haven't asked, please use this section to add additional comments.

The second part of this research project involves listening to the voices of autistic girls (and their parents/guardians) to gain a greater insight into school experiences from the lived experience perspective.

If you would be willing to pass on information to autistic girls and their parents/guardians in your school about the next phase of the research, at a later date (Approx. September/October 2023), please input your name and contact details into the second survey which will open automatically at the end of this survey. This ensures that your responses to the current survey remain completely anonymous.

Thank you sincerely for completing this survey. It is very much appreciated.

Powered by Qualtrics

Appendix YY: Anonymised Exemplar of Pilot Questionnaire Feedback

Questionnaire Feedback

Questions	Comments
Were the instructions clear?	Yes.
Were any questions ambiguous?	I don't think so, but I think some people might overestimate their knowledge in the self-report component while others may underestimate it. I would also add labels to the rating questions where you have to slide between 1 to 5 to indicate your choice, so maybe add a label of 'low' or 'poor' at 1 and then 'excellent' at 5 or something along those lines.
Did you object to answering any questions?	No.
Was any major topic omitted?	No, I don't think so. I like how you provided some opportunity for qualitative responses and the option to add any additional comments – I think that would allow people to share extra relevant information if they had something else to add.
Was the layout of the questionnaire clear/attractive?	Yes, I found it really clear and easy to navigate.
How long did it take you to complete it?	About 15 minutes.
Have you any additional comments?	I think the question on characteristics might benefit from a more gradient response rather than a yes/no as sometimes things aren't as clear cut as a yes/no response.

Appendix ZZ: Final Questionnaire

Information Sheet

Understanding the Experiences of Autistic Girls in Mainstream Education Settings

Dear Teacher, My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD by research in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education under the supervision of Dr Laura Ambrose and Dr Michele Dunleavy. My research is funded by the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Programme. The current study will form part of my thesis.

What is the project about?
The overarching aim of this research is to better understand autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education provision at post-primary level. This research is dual focus with one aspect of the study focusing on a small group of autistic girls and their parents/guardians while the other element consists of a national survey with post-primary teachers. This component of the larger project endeavours to examine the awareness and understanding of mainstream post-primary teachers in Ireland in relation to autism in girls.

Why is it being undertaken?
Autistic girls often go unrecognised and/or unsupported in educational settings and face barriers to inclusion and learning. While there has been an increase in research relating to the school experiences and inclusion of autistic individuals, many of these studies are from the perspective of adult stakeholder or limited by a male biased sample. The core objective of the study is to amplify missing voices in educational research, those of autistic girls, to provide them with the opportunity to share their unique school experiences. However, the researcher appreciates that parents/guardians and teachers can offer additional insights and perspectives on this topic and so their inclusion as participants is highly valued.

This component of the study aims to examine the current awareness of post-primary teachers in relation to how autism presents in girls while also exploring teachers'

perceptions of support provision for this cohort. It is hoped that this survey will draw attention to good practice being carried out in our schools while also identifying gaps in teacher knowledge and understanding to allow for planning of targeted continuous professional development.

What are the benefits of this research?

It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will;

-enhance our understanding of how autistic girls experience mainstream educational provision

-identify good practice in terms of what facilitates positive school experiences while also highlighting potential areas of concerns in terms of the barriers to inclusion and learning faced by the girls

-provide insight into teachers' awareness of how autism presents in girls and their perceptions of support provision

What is involved for the participants?

Participants will complete an online survey, which should take approximately **10-15 minutes** to complete. There will be a variety of questions including multiple choice questions, rating scales and providing short written answers to questions.

How will confidentiality and anonymity be attended to?

All data will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than for discussion with my research supervisors. All data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisors. An ID number will be generated for each participant, and it is this rather than the participant's name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity.

Right to withdraw

Involvement in this study is voluntary. However, if you do agree to participate, your anonymity is assured. You can withdraw from the survey at any stage by exiting. It will not be possible to withdraw your survey data after submission. This is because all data are anonymised and it is not possible to link anonymised data with individual participants.

How will the information be used/disseminated?

The data from this study will be combined with the data collected from other

components of the study and used to form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the dissertation. Direct quotations from the open ended questions in the survey will be used. These individual excerpts will be combined with those from other participants and will remain anonymous. The data collected may also be presented at national/international conferences or published in academic journals.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?
In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop. Contact details: If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors. Our contact details are provided below: Researcher: Aoife Munroe - Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie - 0868787950
Supervisor 1: Dr Laura Ambrose - Laura.Ambrose@mic.ul.ie
Supervisor 2: Dr Michele Dunleavy - Michele.Dunleavy@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (Application REF: A23-009). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

By continuing with the survey you are providing informed consent and confirm that;
1. You have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet
2. You understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for
3. You are fully aware of all the procedures involving your participation, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study
4. You know that your participation is voluntary and that you can withdraw from the survey at any stage, however, it will not be possible to withdraw your survey data after submission.
5. You are aware that all participant data with be kept confidential

Section One: A little bit about you

Please select your gender

- ○ Male
- ○ Female

- ○ Other
- ○ Prefer not to say

Please select what qualification(s) you have

- ☐ Four Year Education Undergraduate
- ☐ Higher Diploma in Education (H.Dip)
- ☐ Professional Master of Education (PME)
- ☐ Postgraduate Qualification in the area of Special/Inclusive Education
- ☐ Other; explain

Please select the number of years that you have been teaching

- ○ 0-5
- ○ 6-10
- ○ 11-15
- ○ 16+

Please select which type of school you are currently teaching in

- ○ Single sex girls school
- ○ Single sex boys school
- ○ Mixed school

Have you ever taught a girl diagnosed with Autism?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Don't Know

Section Two: Understanding of Autism

Where has your knowledge and understanding of autism come from? (Please select all

that apply)

- [ ] Training provided by Department of Education / NCSE
- [ ] Training facilitated by an Education Centre
- [ ] Training provided by an external organisation
- [ ] Training during Initial Teacher Education
- [ ] Experience of working with children and young people with an autism diagnosis
- [ ] Personal experience (e.g. someone in my family has an autism diagnosis)
- [ ] Other; explain

How would you rate your knowledge and understanding of autism?

	Low			High
1	2	3	4	5
Slide to Indicate Choice				

How would you rate your knowledge and understanding of how autism presents in girls?

Low				High
1	2	3	4	5
Slide to Indicate Choice				

Section Three: Autism and Girls

The prevalence of autism is the same in males and females.

- ○ True
- ○ False

Do you think autism presents differently in males and females?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Unsure

Please indicate to what extent you disagree/agree with each of the statements below in terms of the presentation of autism in females.

	Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Agree
Are socially motivated	
Have no/few friends	
Have an intense relationship with one particular friend	
Have unusual interests/obsessions	
Display challenging behaviour	
Are in long-term friendship groups	
Demonstrate good verbal communication skills	
Display strengths in using non-verbal communication	
Copy the behaviour of people around them	
Have lots of friends	
Engage in repetitive behaviours	
Exhibit differences in sensory processing	
Find changes in routine difficult	
Demonstrate controlling behaviour	
Have the same interests as their female peers	

Please use the space below to detail any other characteristics that you are aware of, that an autistic girl may display.

How confident would you say you are at recognising autism in females?

- ○ Not At All Confident
- ○ Not Very Confident
- ○ Somewhat Confident
- ○ Very Confident
- ○ Extremely Confident

How confident would you say you are at supporting diagnosed females?

- ○ Not At All Confident
- ○ Not Very Confident
- ○ Somewhat Confident
- ○ Very Confident
- ○ Extremely Confident

What type of support would you put in place in the mainstream setting for a girl with a diagnosis of autism?

Section 4: Teacher Professional Learning

What do you feel would be most helpful in supporting your setting to best identify, understand and support the needs of autistic girls? (Please rank your choices)

- ☐ Specific training on identifying autism in girls

☐ Specific training on strategies and interventions to support girls with a diagnosis of autism

☐ Workshops for the staff on the topic of women and girls and autism

☐ Other; explain

Which of the following would be most appropriate in delivering training to you?

- ○ Online (Live)
- ○ Online (Recorded)
- ○ Online and In-Person
- ○ In-Person

Section 5: Phase 2

Is there anything else that you feel is important to mention, but I haven't asked, please use this section to add additional comments.

The second part of this research project involves listening to the voices of autistic girls (and their parents/guardians) to gain a greater insight into school experiences from the lived experience perspective.

If you would be willing to pass on information to autistic girls and their parents/guardians in your school about the next phase of the research, at a later date (Approx. September 2023), please input your name and contact details into the second survey which will open automatically at the end of this survey. This ensures that your responses to the current survey remain completely anonymous.

Appendix AAA: Mapping of Statements for Characteristic Identification in Questionnaire

Questionnaire Statement Mapping

Characteristic (Questionnaire Statement)	Characteristic Theoretically Aligned with Literature (TAL) on Presentation of Autism in Girls	Included in study by Gray *et al.* (2021)	Supporting Literature
Are socially motivated	✓	×	Attwood, 2007; Lai *et al*., 2015; Hiller *et al.*, 2015
Have no/few friends	✓	✓	Carrington *et al.*, 2003; Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Lai *et al.*, 2015; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Attwood and Garnett, 2019; Horlock, 2019; Morewood *et al*., 2019; Sedgewick *et al.,* 2019; Ryan *et al.*, 2021
*Have lots of friends***	×	✓	
Have an intense relationship with one particular friend	✓	✓	
*Are in long-term friendship groups***	×	×	
*Have unusual interests/obsessions***	×	✓	Kopp and Gillberg, 1992; Winter-Messiers, 2007; Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Solomon *et al.,* 2012; Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Lai *et al.*, 2015; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017
Have the same interests as their female peers	✓	✓	
Demonstrate good verbal communication skills	✓	×	Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Lawson, 2017; Parish-Morris *et al.*, 2017
Display strengths in using non-verbal communication	✓	×	Hiller *et al.,* 2014; Lawson, 2017; Attwood and Garnett, 2019
Copy the behaviour of people around them	✓	✓	Attwood, 2007; Lai et al., 2015; Mandy and Lai, 2017; Dean *et al.*, 2017; Hull et al., 2020; Wassell and Burke, 2022

Engage in repetitive behaviours	✓	×	Attwood, 2007; Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017; Hebron and Bond, 2019; Wassell and Burke, 2022
*Display challenging behaviour***	×	✓	May *et al.*, 2012; Solomon *et al.*, 2012; Hiller *et al.*, 2014; Bond and Hebron, 2019; Wassell and Burke, 2022
Find changes in routine difficult	✓	✓	Cook O'Toole, 2018; Bond and Hebron, 2019
Demonstrate controlling behaviour	✓	×	Gould and Ashtown-Smith, 2011; Lai *et al.*, 2015; Attwood and Garnett, 2019; Bond and Hebron, 2019
Exhibit differences in sensory processing	✓	×	Lai *et al.,* 2011; Duvekot *et al.,* 2017; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017

*** Reverse coded items. References support that these characteristics may not be as commonly associated with girls compared to boys*

Appendix BBB: Letter of Information

(Principals – Secondary Study)

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream education settings

Letter of Information (Principal)

*(Survey Distribution: This Letter of Information will be sent via email to school principals. A link to the web-based survey was included within the email. Principals were asked to forward the survey link and a copy of the **Letter of Information (email)** to the mainstream class teachers on their staff. A Participant Information Sheet and an electronic Informed Consent Form were provided as the opening pages of the survey)*

Dear Principal,

My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD by research in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education under the supervision of Dr Laura Ambrose and Dr Michele Dunleavy. The following information will detail the current study and outline your potential role in this research.

What is the project about?

The aim of this study is to better understand autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education settings at post-primary level. This research is dual focus with one aspect of the study focusing on a small group of autistic girls and their parents/guardians, while the other element consists of a national survey with post-primary teachers. This is the second component of the larger project and endeavours to examine the awareness and perceptions of mainstream post-primary teachers in Ireland in relation to autism in girls.

Why is it being undertaken?

Autistic girls often go unrecognised and/or unsupported in educational settings and face barriers to inclusion and learning. While there has been an increase in research relating to the school experiences and inclusion of autistic individuals, many of these studies are from the perspective of adult stakeholder or limited by a male biased sample. The core objective of the study is to amplify missing voices in educational research, those of autistic girls, to provide them with the opportunity to share their unique school experiences. However, the researcher appreciates that parents/guardians and teachers can offer additional insights and perspectives on this topic and so their inclusion as participants is highly valued.

This component of the study aims to examine mainstream post-primary school teachers' current level of awareness of and knowledge about how autism presents in girls while also exploring teachers' perceptions of support provision for this cohort. It is hoped that this survey will draw attention to good practice being carried out in our schools while also identifying gaps in teacher knowledge to allow for planning of targeted continuous professional development.

What are the benefits of this research?

It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will:

a) enhance our understanding of how autistic girls experience mainstream educational settings
b) identify good practice in terms of what facilitates positive school experiences while also highlighting potential areas of concerns in terms of the barriers to inclusion and learning faced by the girls
c) provide insight into teachers' awareness of how autism presents in girls and their perceptions of support provision

Why am I contacting you?

I am conducting a national survey to gather information on post-primary teachers' awareness of and knowledge about autism in girls. Participants will complete an online survey consisting of tick box, multiple choice and short answer questions which should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. I would appreciate if you could forward the survey link and a copy of this **Letter of Information** to all mainstream class teachers in your school.

Link to Survey: https://micquality.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2tcBix3dro89HcW

How will confidentiality and anonymity be attended to?

- All information will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than for discussion with my research supervisors. All data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisors.
- An ID number will be generated for each participant, and it is this rather than the participant's name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity.

How will the information be used/disseminated?

The data from this study will be combined with the data collected from other components of the study and used to form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the dissertation. Direct quotations from open ended questions may be used, however, these remain anonymous through the use of ID numbers. These individual excerpts will be combined with those from other participants. The data collected may also be presented at national/international conferences or published in academic journals.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?

In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

Contact details:
If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors. Our contact details are provided below:

Researcher	***Supervisor 1***	***Supervisor 2***
Aoife Munroe	Dr Laura Ambrose	Dr Michele Dunleavy
Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie	Laura.Ambrose@mic.ul.ie	Michele.Dunleavy@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (quote reference number when you have received it). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix CCC: Letter of Information to Gatekeepers
(Education Support Centres)

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream education settings

Letter of Information (Education Support Centres)

*(Survey Distribution: This Letter of Information will be sent via email to education centres. A link to the web-based survey was included within the email. Directors were asked to distribute the survey link and a copy of the **Letter of Information (email)** to their teacher mailing list. A Participant Information Sheet and an electronic Informed Consent From were provided as the opening pages of the survey)*

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD by research in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education under the supervision of Dr Laura Ambrose and Dr Michele Dunleavy. The following information will detail the current study and outline your potential role in this research.

What is the project about?

The aim of this study is to better understand autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education settings at post-primary level. This research is dual focus with one aspect of the study focusing on a small group of autistic girls and their parents/guardians while the other element consists of a national survey with post-primary teachers. This is the second component of the larger project and endeavours to examine the awareness and perceptions of mainstream post-primary teachers in Ireland in relation to autism in girls.

Why is it being undertaken?

Autistic girls often go unrecognised and/or unsupported in educational settings and face barriers to inclusion and learning. While there has been an increase in research relating to the school experiences and inclusion of autistic individuals, many of these studies are from the perspective of adult stakeholder or limited by a male biased sample. The core objective of the study is to amplify missing voices in educational research, those of autistic girls, to provide them with the opportunity to share their unique school experiences. However, the researcher appreciates that parents/guardians and teachers can offer additional insights and perspectives on this topic and so their inclusion as participants is highly valued.

This component of the study aims to examine mainstream post-primary school teachers' current level of awareness of and knowledge about how autism presents in girls while also exploring teachers' perceptions of support provision for this cohort. It is hoped that this survey will draw attention to good practice being carried out in our schools while also identifying gaps in teacher knowledge to allow for planning of targeted continuous professional development.

What are the benefits of this research?
It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will:

a) enhance our understanding of how autistic girls experience mainstream educational settings
b) identify good practice in terms of what facilitates positive school experiences while also highlighting potential areas of concerns in terms of the barriers to inclusion and learning faced by the girls
c) provide insight into teachers' awareness of how autism presents in girls and their perceptions of support provision

Why am I contacting you?
I am conducting a national survey to gather information on post-primary teachers' awareness of and knowledge about autism in girls. Participants will complete an online survey consisting of tick box, multiple choice and short answer questions which should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. I would appreciate if you could forward the survey link and a copy of this **Letter of Information** to all teachers on your post-primary mailing list or publish the recruitment poster on the platform you used to share information with teachers.

Link to Survey: https://micquality.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2tcBix3dro89HcW

How will confidentiality and anonymity be attended to?

- All information will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than for discussion with my research supervisors. All data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisors.
- An ID number will be generated for each participant, and it is this rather than the participant's name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity.

How will the information be used/disseminated?
The data from this study will be combined with the data collected from other components of the study and used to form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the dissertation. Direct quotations from open ended questions may be used, however, these remain anonymous through the use of ID numbers. These individual excerpts will be combined with those from other participants. The data collected may also be presented at national/international conferences or published in academic journals.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?
In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

Next Steps:
If you are happy to forward the survey link and letter of information or share the attached recruitment poster on your preferred platform, please let me know via return email.

Contact details:
If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors. Our contact details are provided below:

Researcher	***Supervisor 1***	***Supervisor 2***
Aoife Munroe	Dr Laura Ambrose	Dr Michele Dunleavy
Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie	Laura.Ambrose@mic.ul.ie	Michele.Dunleavy@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (quote reference number when you have received it). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix DDD: Letter of Information to Gatekeepers
(Providers of Post-Graduate Programmes in Special/Inclusive Education)

Understanding the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream education settings

Letter of Information (Head of Department - Provider of PGSE Programme)

*(Survey Distribution: This Letter of Information will be sent via email to Heads of Department of Third Level Institutions that offer the Postgraduate Diploma in Special/Inclusive Education. A link to the web-based survey was included within the email. Heads of Department were asked to distribute the survey link and a copy of the **Letter of Information (email)** to their teachers on the postgraduate programme. A Participant Information Sheet and an electronic Informed Consent Form were provided as the opening pages of the survey)*

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Aoife Munroe, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD by research in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education under the supervision of Dr Laura Ambrose and Dr Michele Dunleavy. The following information will detail the current study and outline your potential role in this research.

What is the project about?

The aim of this study is to better understand autistic girls' experiences of mainstream education settings at post-primary level. This research is dual focus with one aspect of the study focusing on a small group of autistic girls and their parents/guardians while the other element consists of a national survey with post-primary teachers. This is the second component of the larger project and endeavours to examine the awareness and perceptions of mainstream post-primary teachers in Ireland in relation to autism in girls.

Why is it being undertaken?

Autistic girls often go unrecognised and/or unsupported in educational settings and face barriers to inclusion and learning. While there has been an increase in research relating to the school experiences and inclusion of autistic individuals, many of these studies are from the perspective of adult stakeholder or limited by a male biased sample. The core objective of the study is to amplify missing voices in educational research, those of autistic girls, to provide them with the opportunity to share their unique school experiences. However, the researcher appreciates that parents/guardians and teachers can offer additional insights and perspectives on this topic and so their inclusion as participants is highly valued.

This component of the study aims to examine mainstream post-primary school teachers' current level of awareness of and knowledge about how autism presents in girls while also exploring teachers' perceptions of support provision for this cohort. It is hoped that this survey will draw attention to good practice being carried out in our schools while also identifying gaps in teacher knowledge to allow for planning of targeted continuous professional development.

What are the benefits of this research?
It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will:

a) enhance our understanding of how autistic girls experience mainstream educational settings
b) identify good practice in terms of what facilitates positive school experiences while also highlighting potential areas of concerns in terms of the barriers to inclusion and learning faced by the girls
c) provide insight into teachers' awareness of how autism presents in girls and their perceptions of support provision

Why am I contacting you?
As a provider of a postgraduate programme in special and inclusive education for qualified teachers, you are working directly with a cohort of people that are best placed to engage with my research. I am conducting a national survey to gather information on post-primary teachers' awareness of and knowledge about autism in girls. Participants will complete an online survey consisting of tick box, multiple choice and short answer questions which should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. I would appreciate if you could bring this study to the attention of the post-primary teachers that are currently undertaking your postgraduate programme in the area of special and inclusive education by sharing the survey link and a copy of this **Letter of Information** with them or publishing the recruitment poster on the platform you used to share information with teachers.

Link to Survey: https://micquality.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2tcBix3dro89HcW

How will confidentiality and anonymity be attended to?

- All information will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than for discussion with my research supervisors. All data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisors.
- An ID number will be generated for each participant, and it is this rather than the participant's name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity.

How will the information be used/disseminated?
The data from this study will be combined with the data collected from other components of the study and used to form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the dissertation. Direct quotations from open ended questions may be used, however, these remain anonymous through the use of ID numbers. These individual excerpts will be combined with those from other participants. The data collected may also be presented at national/international conferences or published in academic journals.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?
In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

Next Steps:
If you are happy to forward the survey link and letter of information or share the attached recruitment poster on your preferred platform to bring it to the attention of your postgraduate students undertaking programmes in the area of special and inclusive education, please let me know via return email.

Contact details:
If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors. Our contact details are provided below:

Researcher	***Supervisor 1***	***Supervisor 2***
Aoife Munroe	Dr Laura Ambrose	Dr Michele Dunleavy
Aoife.Munroe@mic.ul.ie	Laura.Ambrose@mic.ul.ie	Michele.Dunleavy@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (quote reference number when you have received it). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix EEE: Codebook for Questionnaire

Quantitative Codebook

This codebook details the variable names, and the numerical values assigned to data within SPSS.

Section One: Background Information

1.	Gender	**S1Q1**	Male	O^1	
			Female	O^2	
			Other	O^3	
			Prefer not to say	O^4	
				No	Yes
2.	Qualifications	**S1Q2_1**	Four Year Undergraduate	O^0	O_1
		S1Q2_2	Higher Diploma in Education (H.Dip)	O^0	O^1
		S1Q2_3	Professional Master of Education (PME)	O^0	O^1
		S1Q2_4	Postgraduate Qualification in the area of Special/Inclusive Education	O^0	O^1
		S1Q2_5	Other; explain	O^0	O^1
3.	Years Teaching	**S1Q3**	0-5	O^1	
			6-10	O^2	
			11-15	O^3	
			16+	O^4	
4.	Type of School	**S1Q4**	Single sex girls school	O^1	
			Single sex boys school	O^2	
			Mixed school	O^3	
5.	Taught a girl diagnosed with autism	**S1Q5**	Yes	O^1	
			No	O^2	
			Don't Know	O^3	

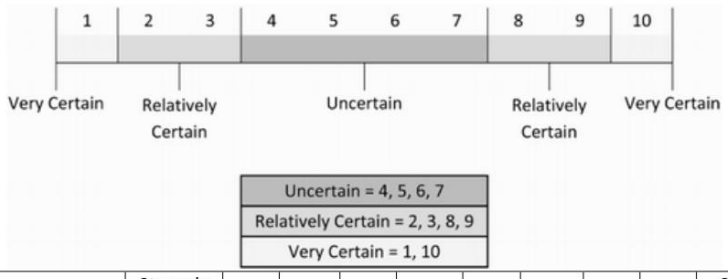
Section Two: Knowledge of Autism

				No	Yes
6.	Source of Knowledge / Understanding of Autism	**S2Q6_1**	Training from Department of Education / NCSE	O^0	O^1
		S2Q6_2	Training facilitated by an Education Centre	O^0	O^1
		S2Q6_3	Training provided by an external organisation	O^0	O^1
		S2Q6_4	Training during Initial Teacher Education	O^0	O^1
		S2Q6_5	Experience working with children and young people with an autism diagnosis	O^0	O^1
		S2Q6_6	Personal Experience	O^0	O^1
		S2Q6_7	Other; explain	O^0	O^1
7.	Rating of Knowledge /		Ranking Question from 1-5 (Low – High)		

	Understanding of Autism				
		S2Q7	Low	○1	
			Quite Low	○2	
			Moderate	○3	
			Quite High	○4	
			High	○5	
8.	Rating of Knowledge / Understanding of how Autism presents in Girls		Ranking Question from 1-5 (Low – High)		
		S2Q8	Low	○1	
			Quite Low	○2	
			Moderate	○3	
			Quite High	○4	
			High	○5	

Section Three: Autism and Girls

9.	Prevalence of Autism is the same in males and females			
		S3Q9	True	○1
			False	○2
			Don't Know	○3
10.	Do you think autism presents differently in males and females?			
		S3Q10	Yes	○1
			No	○2
			Unsure	○3

11.	Please indicate the what extent you disagree/agree with each of the statements below in terms of the female presentation of autism → Ranking Question from 1 – 10 (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)  									
		Strongly Disagree 1									Strongly Agree 10

S3Q11A	Are socially motivated	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11B	Have no/few friends	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11C	Have an intense relationship with one particular friend	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11D*	Have unusual interests/obsessions	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11E*	Display challenging behaviour	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11F*	Are in long-term friendship groups	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11G	Demonstrate good verbal communication skills	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11H	Display strengths in using non-verbal communication	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11I	Copy the behaviour of people around them	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11J*	Have lots of friends	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11K	Engage in repetitive behaviours	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11L	Exhibit differences in sensory processing	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11M	Find changes in routine difficult	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11N	Demonstrate controlling behaviour	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10
S3Q11O	Have the same interests as their female peers	○1	○2	○3	○4	○5	○6	○7	○8	○9	○10

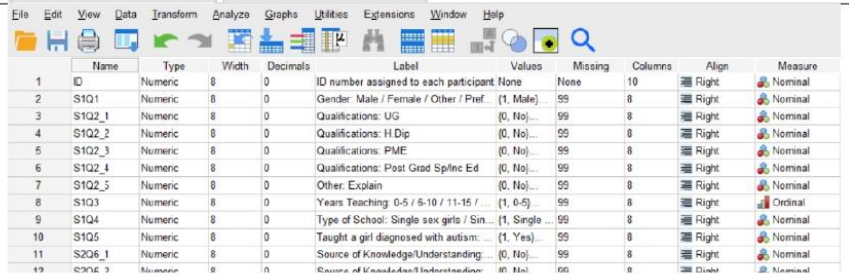
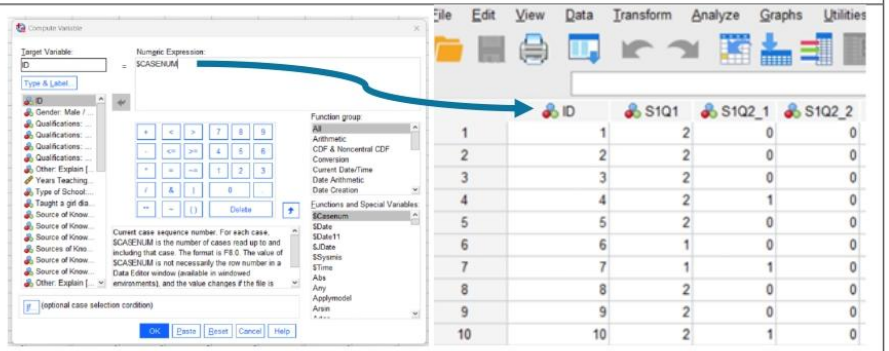
***Recoded;** ReS3Q11D, ReS3Q11E, ReS3Q11F, ReS3Q11J

12.	How confident would you say you are at recognising autism in females?			
		S3Q12	Not at all Confident	○1
			Not Very Confident	○2
			Somewhat Confident	○3
			Very Confident	○4
			Extremely Confident	○5
13.	How Confident would you say you are at supporting diagnosed females?			
		S3Q13	Not At All Confident	○1
			Not Very Confident	○2
			Somewhat Confident	○3
			Very Confident	○4
			Extremely Confident	○5

Section Four: Teacher Professional Learning

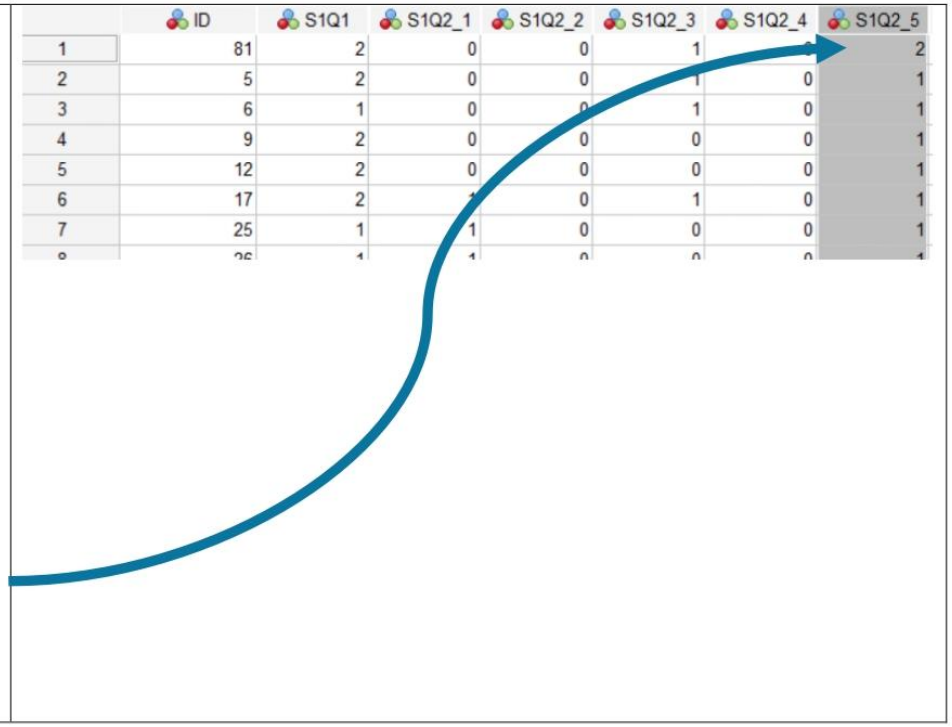
14.	CPD Needs		(This is also a ranking question)	1 (Most Helpful)	2	3 (Least Helpful)
		S4Q14_1	Specific training on identifying autism in girls	○1	○2	○3
		S4Q14_2	Specific training on strategies and interventions to support girls with a diagnosis of autism	○1	○2	○3
		S4Q14_3	Workshops for the staff on the topic of women and girls with autism	○1	○2	○3
		S4Q14_4	Other, explain;	No ○0	Yes ○1	
15.	CPD Type					
		S4Q15	Online (Live)	○1		
			Online (Recorded)	○2		
			Online and In-Person	○3		
			In-Person	○4		

Appendix FFF: Preparing Quantitative Data for Analysis

Preparing Quantitative Data for Analysis	
Step 1: • Values for all responses were inputted in line with values assigned in the Codebook. • **Image: Numeric values and their corresponding qualitative response.**	
Step 2: • The value 99 was assigned to represent missing data. • **Image: Screenshot of the variable view following initial inputting of data.**	
Step 3: • Following upload of all data, each response was assigned an ID number to protect the anonymity of participants. • **Image: Generating response ID numbers.**	

Step 4

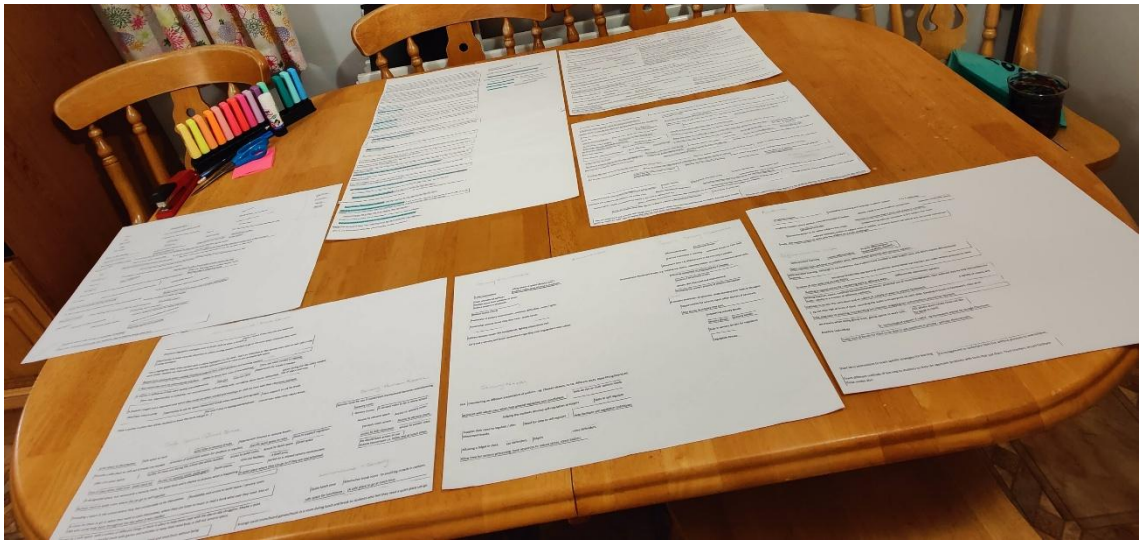
- Cleaning and screening of data was undertaken to check for and correct errors.
    - Scores for each variable were checked to ensure they were within the range of values for that variable.
    - Where a value fell outside the range of possible variables it was necessary to correct this.
- **Image: Example whereby the variable selected had a minimum of value of 0 and a maximum of 1, however, a value of 2 was reported when frequencies were carried out. In order to correct this, cases were sorted in ascending order in the data view, the response where 2 was input was brought to the top and the error reviewed and corrected in light of the original raw data.**



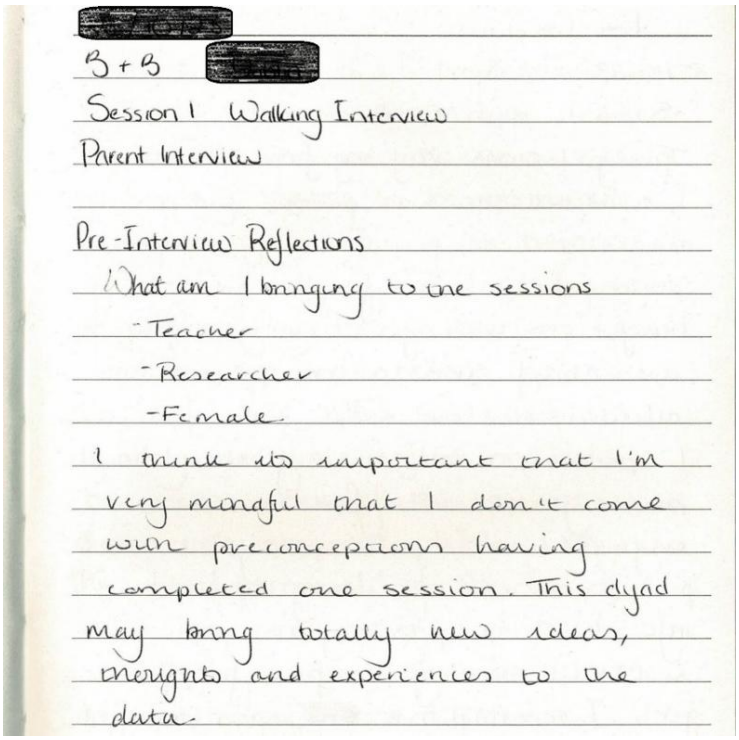
	ID	S1Q1	S1Q2_1	S1Q2_2	S1Q2_3	S1Q2_4	S1Q2_5
1	81	2	0	0	1	1	2
2	5	2	0	0	1	0	1
3	6	1	0	0	1	0	1
4	9	2	0	0	0	0	1
5	12	2	0	0	0	0	1
6	17	2	1	0	1	0	1
7	25	1	1	0	0	0	1

Appendix GGG: Qualitative Data Analysis (Questionnaire)





Appendix HHH: Example of Pre- and Post-Data Collection Reflection



[redacted]

B + B [redacted]

Session 1 Walking Interview

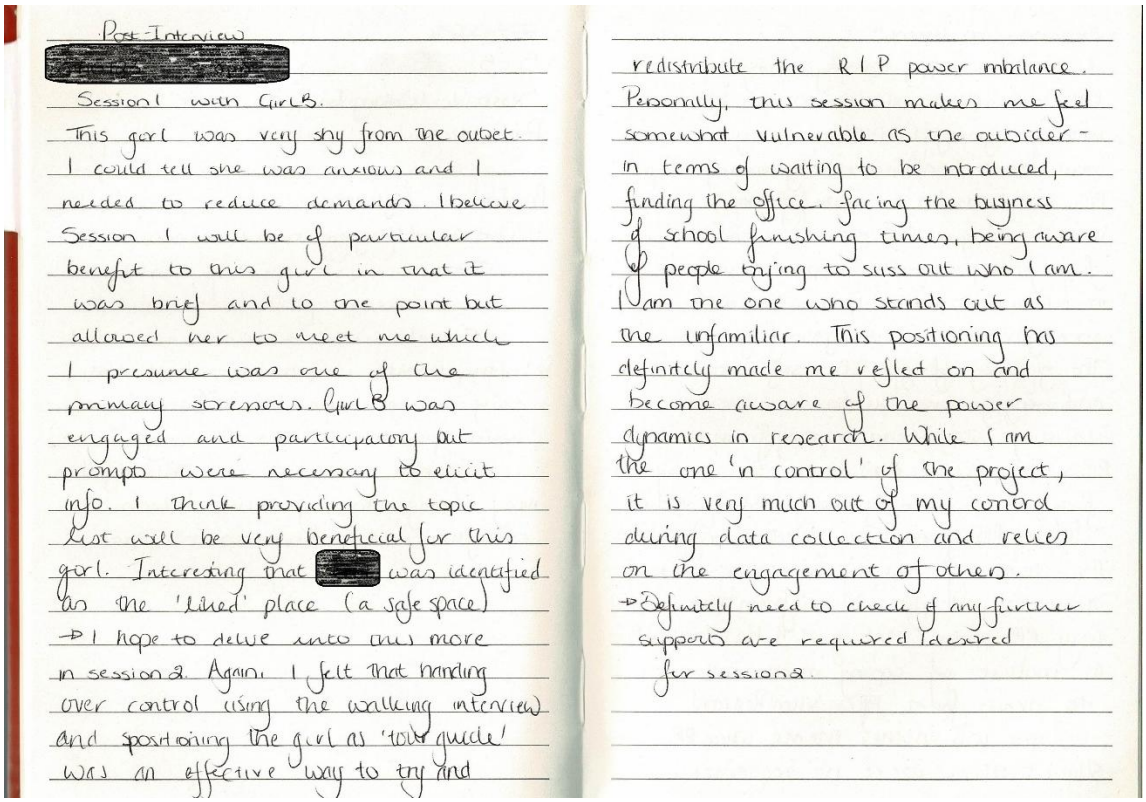
Parent Interview

Pre-Interview Reflections

What am I bringing to the sessions

- Teacher
- Researcher
- Female.

I think its important that I'm very mindful that I don't come with preconceptions having completed one session. This dyad may bring totally new ideas, insights and experiences to the data.



Post-Interview

[redacted]

Session 1 with Girl B.

This girl was very shy from the outset. I could tell she was anxious and I needed to reduce demands. I believe Session 1 will be of particular benefit to this girl in that it was brief and to the point but allowed her to meet me which I presume was one of the primary stressors. Girl B was engaged and participatory but prompts were necessary to elicit info. I think providing the topic list will be very beneficial for this girl. Interesting that [redacted] was identified as the 'liked' place (a safe space) → I hope to delve into this more in session 2. Again, I felt that handing over control using the walking interview and positioning the girl as 'tour guide' was an effective way to try and redistribute the R I P power imbalance. Personally, this session makes me feel somewhat vulnerable as the outsider - in terms of waiting to be introduced, finding the office, facing the busyness of school finishing times, being aware of people trying to suss out who I am. I am the one who stands out as the unfamiliar. This positioning has definitely made me reflect on and become aware of the power dynamics in research. While I am the one 'in control' of the project, it is very much out of my control during data collection and relies on the engagement of others. → Definitely need to check if any further supports are required / desired for session 2.

Appendix III: Assumption Check
(Mixed ANOVA - PG/NoPG x Aut/Aut in Girls)

Assumption Checks for Examining the Role of a Specialist Qualification on Self-Reported Knowledge/Understanding of Autism

Assumption checks are considered in line with guidance from Pallant (2016)

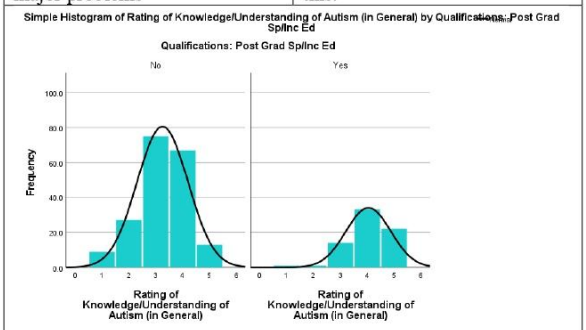
Data:

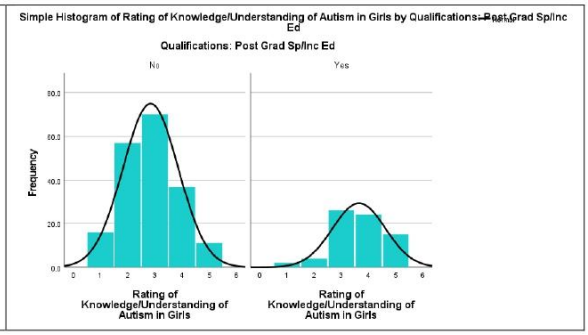
(DVs) Self-Report Data on Teacher Knowledge/Understanding of Autism (in General/in Girls)

(IV) Demographic Data (Teachers with v without PG Qualification)

Assumption Checks:

Assumption	*Requirement*	*Assumption Status*
Level of Measurement	Dependent Variable (DV) is measured at the interval or ratio level	✓
Random Sampling	Scores are obtained using a random sample from the population	✓
Independence of Observations	Each observation/ measurement must not be influenced by another observation	✓

Normal Distribution	Distribution of scores should be normally distributed *with large enough sample sizes (+30), the violation of this sample should not cause any major problems	Scores are reasonably normally distributed. Scores for teachers with a PG are slightly skewed to the left. However, the large sample size should allow for this.
		

Homogeneity of Variance	Variability of Scores for each of the groups is similar *Tested using Levene's test for equality of variances in SPSS (Results of Levene's Test should not be significant, i.e. they should be greater than .05)	✖ Sig. level for Autism in General is .031 *(significant). Mixed ANOVA is reasonably robust to violations of this assumption provided size of groups is reasonably similar (191:71)* ✓ Sig. Level for Autism in Girls is .976 *(not significant)*

Assumptions for Mixed ANOVA:

Assumption	*Requirement*	*Assumption Status*
Homogeneity of Intercorrelations	For each of the levels of the between-subjects variable, the pattern of intercorrelations among the levels of the within-subjects variable should be the same *Tested using Box's M Statistic as part of the analysis using SPSS	✓ Sig. is .005 *(not significant)*

Appendix JJJ: Assumption Check
(T-Test - PG/NoPG x Confidence Rec/Supp)

Assumption Checks for Examining the Role of a Specialist Qualification on Self-Reported Confidence
(Recognising Autism in Girls & Supporting Autistic Girls)

Assumption checks are considered in line with guidance from Pallant (2016)

Data:

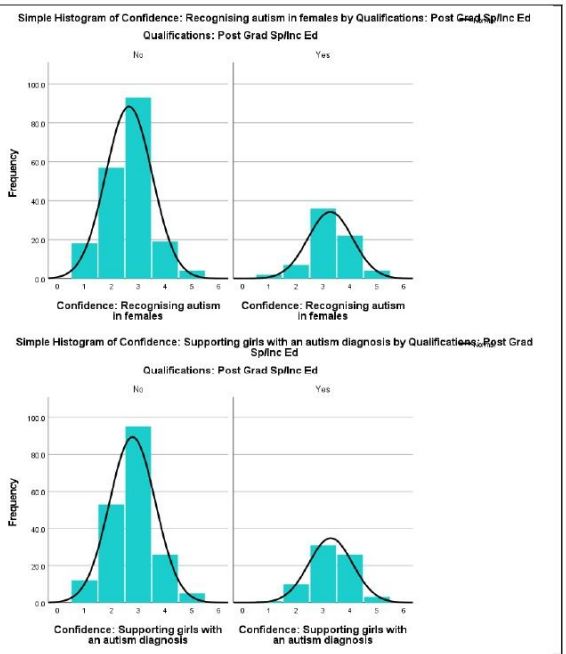
(DVs) Self-Report Data on Teacher Confidence Recognising Autism in Girls & Supporting Autistic Girls

(IV) Demographic Data (Teachers with v without PG Qualification)

Assumption Checks:

General Assumptions:

Assumption	*Requirement*	*Assumption Status*
Level of Measurement	Dependent Variable (DV) is measured at the interval or ratio level	✓
Random Sampling	Scores are obtained using a random sample from the population	✓
Independence of Observations	Each observation/ measurement must not be influenced by another observation	✓
Normal Distribution	Distribution of scores should be normally distributed *with large enough sample sizes (+30), the violation of this sample should not cause any major problems	✓

		
Homogeneity of Variance	Variability of Scores for each of the groups is similar *Tested using Levene's test for equality of variances in SPSS (Results of Levene's Test should not be significant, i.e. they should be greater than .05)	▪ Qualification x Recognising Autism in Girls (T-test) ✓ *Sig.* .443 ▪ Qualification x Supporting Autistic Girls (T-test) ✓ *Sig.* .887 *(not significant)*

Appendix KKK: Assumption Check
(T-Test/ANOVA - Demographics x Identification of Characteristics)

Assumption Checks for Examining Teacher Identification of Characteristics associated with Autism in Girls

Assumption checks are considered in line with guidance from Pallant (2016)

Data:

(DVs) Teacher Perceptions of Characteristics of Autism in Girls (10-point scale)

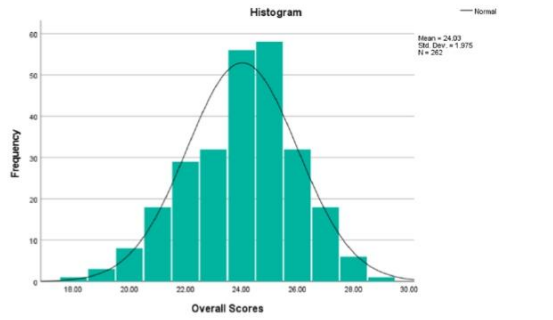
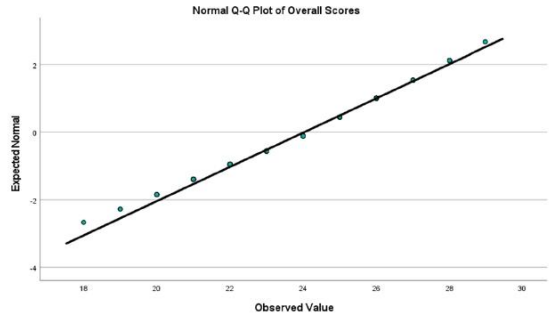
(IV) Demographic Data

- PG Qualification (T-test)
- Gender (T-test)
- Years Teaching (ANOVA)
- School Context (ANOVA)
- Experience (ANOVA)

Assumption Checks:

General Assumptions:

Assumption	*Requirement*	*Assumption Status*
Level of Measurement	Dependent Variable (DV) is measured at the interval or ratio level	✓
Random Sampling	Scores are obtained using a random sample from the population	✓
Independence of Observations	Each observation/ measurement must not be influenced by another observation	✓
Normal Distribution	Distribution of scores should be normally distributed *with large enough sample sizes (+30), the violation of this sample should not cause any major problems	✓

	 	
Homogeneity of Variance	Variability of Scores for each of the groups is similar *Tested using Levene's test for equality of variances in SPSS (Results of Levene's Test should not be significant, i.e. they should be greater than .05)	▪ PG Qualification (T-test) ✓ *Sig.* .947 *(not significant)* ▪ Gender (T-test) ✓ *Sig.* .503 *(not significant)* ▪ Years Teaching (ANOVA) ✓ *Sig.* .358 *(not significant)* ▪ School Context (ANOVA) ✓ *Sig.* .704 *(not significant)* ▪ Experience (ANOVA) ✓ *Sig.* .536 *(not significant)*