

Autistic Girls' Navigation of School Spaces in Scotland

Owen McGill

School of Education

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Declaration

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Abstract

The number of autistic learners in Scotland are continually growing according to recent statistics from the Scottish Government. Despite this evidence, minimal engagement with autistic girls has taken place to understand these experiences in Scottish schools. This research draws on qualitative methods to explore these experiences, add nuance to current understanding, and make recommendations for future research.

Conceptualised under the epistemic authority of voice and the ontological embodiment of misfitting, the research adopted a situated case study design with thematic analysis to explore the school experiences of five autistic girls. Through power-balanced interviews, the intersections of space, gender, and autism were investigated.

Each case first elucidated individual themes, before commonalities indicated the need for a cross-case synthesis. Five higher-order themes emerged: *A Dichotomy in Mainstream vs ASN Schooling*; *The Impact of School Relationships*; *Manoeuvring School Spaces*; *Gender and Autism*; and *Messages about Autism*.

Original contribution to knowledge arises through two components. Firstly, the study highlights the difficulty autistic girls face when trying to navigate school spaces. Participants indicate navigation of spaces as rooted in tensions with systemic contradictions. Secondly, the research offers a re-starting point for current knowledge on autism, gender and the Scottish school context. Through misfitting preconceived stereotypes, the girls reframe gendered barriers through lived expertise, conceptualising messages and a call to action in future research.

Limitations of the research are discussed, including the smaller participant group and the impact of school gatekeepers framing autistic pupils as vulnerable. Conducting school research post-COVID is also discussed, with a focus on how school communities have adapted since.

Based on the findings, the research makes several recommendations for future work including a reset on exploring the intersections of gender and autism research in school spaces. The issues raised by participants urge future research to comprehend autism and gender beyond systemised stereotypes.

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Table Of Contents

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table Of Contents	iv
List of Tables	x
List of Figures	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure	1
1.2 Setting the Scene	3
1.3 Thesis Position and Key Areas of Focus	5
1.3.1 Being or Becoming: At the Intersections of Autism and Gender	6
1.3.2 Autistic Girls as Missed and Misunderstood	8
1.3.3 Inclusion as Theory and Praxis	10
1.3.4 Exclusion: (Mis)Informed Knowledge in Mainstream(ing)	12
1.4 Reasoning and Rationalising the Questions	15
1.5 Project Summary	17
1.6 Thesis Outline	20
Chapter 2: Reviewing The Literature	23
2.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure	23
2.2 Situating Voice Within a Systemised Process	24
2.2.1 Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria	27
2.2.2 Systemised Screening	29
2.3 Located Literature	31
	iv

2.4 Extracting Themes from the Literature	37
2.5 Common Themes in the Literature	38
2.5.1 Theme 1: A Detrimental Mainstream Experience	39
2.5.2 Theme 2: Teachers Make or Break Autistic School Experiences	43
2.5.3 Theme 3: Inclusion and Supportive Accommodations	46
2.5.4 Theme 4: Peer Relationships	48
2.5.5 Theme 5: Autism in Girls is Misunderstood	52
2.6 Implications from the Review	55
2.7 Conclusion	58
Chapter 3: Methodology and Analysis	59
3.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure	59
3.2 Positioning	59
3.2.1 Positioning Myself Within the Research Boundaries	60
3.2.2 My Identity Within the Research	61
3.3 Conceptual Framework	65
3.3.1 Situating Voice Through Feminist Standpoint Epistemology	69
3.3.2 Misfitting the Narrative: Feminist Disability Ontology	70
3.3.3 Stories or Stigma: Autistic Narratives	72
3.4 Case Study Design	74
3.5 Research Rationale	77
3.5.1 Research Questions	78
3.6 Recruitment and Participants	81
3.6.1 Locating the Knowers	84
3.6.2 The Participants	87
3.7 Beyond the Classroom: Feminist Research in the Field	89
3.7.1 Balancing Power in the Process	90
3.8 Thematic Analysis and Procedure	92
3.8.1 Data Management and Coding	94

3.8.2 Cross-Case Synthesised Themes	97
3.9 Lessons from the Pilot	99
3.10 Ethical Considerations	101
3.10.1 Participants	103
3.10.2 Risk	104
3.10.3 Consent	105
3.11 Conclusion	106
Chapter 4: Participant Cases and Individual Themes	107
4.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure	107
4.2 Case 1: Molly	107
4.2.1 Feeling Unseen	108
4.2.2 Overwhelmed in School Spaces	109
4.2.3 (Un)Supportive School	110
4.2.4 Navigating School Spaces	111
4.2.5 Connectedness in School	112
4.3 Case 2: Chloe	113
4.3.1 Transitions Between Primary and Secondary School	114
4.3.2 Difficulties Connecting with Peers	115
4.3.3 Frustration with My Own Autistic Identity	116
4.3.4 Power of Knowledge in Accommodations	117
4.3.5 ASN Isn't the End Goal	117
4.4 Case 3: Emily	118
4.4.1 Tension in School Space(s)	120
4.4.2 Difficulties in Making Connections	121
4.4.3 Noise as a Barrier in Schools	121
4.4.4 Issues with Online Learning	122
4.4.5 Power of School Relationships	123
4.5 Case 4: Rosie	124
4.5.1 Entwinning Gender into School	124

4.5.2 Making Better Spaces for Boys	126
4.5.3 Mainstream Vs Non-Mainstream Schooling	127
4.5.4 Being a Good Pupil	127
4.5.5 Connecting with Teachers	128
4.6 Case 5: Ashley	129
4.6.1 Trauma in the School Experience	130
4.6.2 Gendered Stereotypes	131
4.6.3 Tensions with Relationships	132
4.6.4 Learning Beyond the School Environment	133
4.7 Finding Commonalities for the Cross-Case Synthesis	135
4.8 Conclusion	137
Chapter 5: Troubled and Empowered – Cross-Case Synthesis	138
5.1 Introduction and Chapter Summary	138
5.2 Theme 1: A Dichotomy in Mainstream vs ASN Schooling	141
5.2.1 Pushed Beyond Our Limits in Mainstream	141
5.2.2 Beyond Mainstream Was Heavenly	145
5.3 Theme 2: The Impact of School Relationships	149
5.3.1 Bullied and Pushed to the Outside	150
5.3.2 Core Friendships and Empathic Teachers	152
5.4 Theme 3: Navigating School Spaces	159
5.4.1 Trying to Find Somewhere I Can Be and Belong in School	159
5.4.2 Connections Help to Empower Spaces in School	163
5.5 Theme 4: Gender and Autism	166
5.5.1 It is Always ‘Boys Will Be Boys’...	167
5.5.2 Treated Differently Just Because We Are Autistic Girls?	170
5.6 Theme 5: Messages About Autism	175
5.6.1 Please Listen to Us and Go Beyond Being Tokenistic	175
5.6.2 Learn from Our Voices and See Beyond Stereotypes	180
5.7 Conclusion	183

Chapter 6: Discussion	184
6.1 Introduction and Structure	184
6.2 Addressing the Core Research Question	184
6.2.1 Reclaiming School Spaces	185
6.2.1.1 Agency in Space.	185
6.2.1.2 Challenging a Dichotomising of School Spaces.	188
6.2.2 The Influence of School Relationships	192
6.2.2.1 Empowered Through Connections.	193
6.2.2.2 The Impact of Bullying and ‘Bad Friends’.	196
6.2.3 Autism, Gender and Voice	199
6.2.3.1 Autism and Gender in the Classroom.	199
6.2.3.2 Building Inclusive Understanding Through Autistic Girls Voices.	204
6.3 Looking to the Future: Entangling Autism Research with Feminist Standpoint and Disability Theories	209
6.3.1 Autism, Gender and Misfitting	210
6.3.2 Implications for Future Research	213
6.4 Limitations	215
6.5 Conclusion	218
Chapter 7: Concluding Thoughts	219
7.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure	219
7.2 Answering the Research Questions	219
7.2.1 Question 1	220
7.2.2 Question 2	221
7.2.3 Question 3	222
7.3 Key Findings	223
7.3.1 School Spaces	224
7.3.2 Autism, Gender, and Repetitions	225
7.3.3 Relationships Across Schools	229
7.4 Evaluation of the Methodology	230
7.4.1 Successes	230
7.4.2 Limitations	231

7.5 Looking to the Future	232
References	236
Appendices	274
Appendix 1: Autistic Learner Numbers by Sex From 2018-2025	274
Appendix 2: PRISMA Elements Drawn Upon (Adapted from the PRISMA Checklist, 2020)	275
Appendix 3: Headteacher Information	278
Appendix 4: Research Advert	280
Appendix 5: Participant Information Forms	281
Appendix 6: Parental Information Sheet	283
Appendix 7: Consent Form	285
Appendix 8: Interview Schedule	286
Appendix 9: Clustering of Codes	289
Appendix 10: Clustering of Codes Under Emerging Commonalities	293
Appendix 11: Memo-Writing Examples	295
Appendix 12: Examples of Margin Writing Split	298
Appendix 13: Mapping Reflections on the Pilot Session	299
Appendix 14: Process of Cross-Case Synthesis	300

List of Tables

Table 2.1: Databases and Locations of Literature.....	26
Table 2.2: Search Terms Utilised in the Review.....	27
Table 2.3: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.....	28
Table 2.4: Located Literature.....	33
Table 2.5: Emergent Themes Under Common Themes in Education.....	39
Table 3.1: Inclusion Criteria.....	85
Table 3.2: Participant Demographic.....	88
Table 3.3: Processes of Reflexive Thematic Analysis.....	93
Table 3.4: Mainstream Vs ASN Emerging Codes.....	98
Table 4.1: Individual Case Themes.....	134
Table 5.1: Troubled In School – Entangled in School Spaces.....	138
Table 7.1: Troubled In School	227

List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Locating and Processing the Literature.....	30
Figure 3.1: Researchers Intersecting Identities.....	62
Figure 3.2: Synthesis	78
Figure 3.3: Recruitment Process.....	83
Figure 3.4: Data Analysis Flow.....	95
Figure 3.5: Memo-writing December 2022.....	96
Figure 4.1: Molly’s Thematic Map.....	108
Figure 4.2: Thematic Map of Chloe’s Session	114
Figure 4.3: Thematic Map of Emily’s Session.....	119
Figure 4.4 – Tensions in Emily’s Session.....	120
Figure 4.5: Thematic Map of Rosie’s Session.....	125
Figure 4.6: Thematic Map of Ashley’s Session.....	130
Figure 4.7: Flow of Cross-Case Synthesis Example.....	136

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure

Exploration of autistic experiences has elucidated rich narratives, while simultaneously advancing understanding of lived expertise as an epistemic authority (Gillespie-Lynch, et al., 2017; Milton, 2014). The development and implications of knowledge bases from these voices have been invaluable in changing the trajectory of autism research. Specifically, knowledge on the intersections of autism and gender have grown exponentially (Mezzatesta-Gava et al., 2025). Doing so has enlightened knowledge of autism in differing contexts, though engagement with autistic girls' school experiences remains lacking in Scotland. The number of autistic girls has been consistently growing according to Scottish Government pupil consensus between 2018 and 2025. Additionally, Scottish Government statistics show the number of autistic girls in Scottish schools has been growing at a faster rate than autistic boys (see Appendix 1). With the absence in engagement with autism and gender experiences in schools, and growing learner numbers in schools, the current research focusses on autistic adolescent girls' navigations of Scottish school spaces.

Participants are in early to mid-teenage years, between the ages of 13 to 16. As such, how I refer to the participants is important to placing and empowering the narratives. As participants are in the mid-teenage age range, 'young women' seems the wrong term, which is typically used in the Scottish education system to refer to pupils in the 'senior' school years. Young girls would also feel like a removal of situatedness and location of the research and how it speaks to broader literature. To situate and empower agency, I refer to the participants as 'girls', while placing them as adolescent. The use of the term 'girls' also emerges from participants reflections on gender identity, which is discussed in depth throughout the thesis. Doing so reflects the age demographic, while placing the research as reflecting adolescent autistic girls' narratives on gender and school experiences.

The growth in gendered autism knowledge has suggested the need for schools to strengthen their inclusive practice (Martin & Milton, 2017). However, the increase in autism diagnoses poses several challenges to teachers and schools in terms of expanding and

adapting school inclusion (Lindsay et al., 2014). Explorations on how gender and autism intersect and influence the school experience continue to reveal unseen nuances. Yet understanding in education still tends focus towards difference and (in)ability. Expansion of knowledge in the field of autism and gender remains absent from much school practice (Adams, MacDonald & Keen, 2019; Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018; Gómez-Marí, Sanz-Cervera & Tárraga-Mínguez, 2022). Questions then arise as to how schools can meet the needs of autistic girls without othering, excluding or generalising gendered research findings. Core to my own thought process throughout the thesis which follows is a point of inquiry: how do autistic girls navigate these school spaces when faced with constant misunderstanding, being unheard and not included?

Inclusion is typically linked to political definitions, which can leave specific learner demographics behind. Particularly at risk are autistic children and young adults (Brede et al., 2017; Gray, Hill & Pellicano, 2023). Autism research has relegated early education to an afterthought despite the impact of such early stages on social and cognitive development. Advances in critical thinking have been crucial in developing an understanding of children as social agents (Wihstutz, 2016). Understanding the needs and values of young adults requires in-depth comprehension of their perspectives (Holland et al., 2010). Seeing children as social *becomings* allows a fluid approach to perceiving their understandings and developing thought processes. Failure to fully grasp and comprehend differences relating to diverse experiences and voices lies at the core of problematic issues in childhood and adolescent research (Punch & Tisdall, 2012). Issues of understanding, cultural pressures, and the influence of adults can further infringe upon the agency of children's voices (Khoja-Moolji, 2016). As such, the growing number of autistic learners suggests that further research on the educational context is needed. Throughout the chapter which follows, I will provide contextualisation of this research project. The chapter will set the scene for the research, commencing with a detailed account of the core debates which position the thesis. The chapter then offers a rationalisation of the research questions and focus, before providing a project summary and an outline of the thesis.

1.2 Setting the Scene

Throughout my time as an autism practitioner, and during my Masters in Autism, I became more aware of a growing trend which didn't seem to be addressed. In my practical role, I engaged with different stakeholders, such as medical professionals, social workers and families of the people I supported. When trying to untangle intense moments of stress and dysregulation, many of these were linked back to the individuals school experiences. Often these thoughts were dismissed as either uncorrelated or 'just how it was'. Yet reflections kept circling back to childhood and school experiences. Small, often seen as insignificant, actions had such a visceral and immediate impact. An authoritative tone or using a full or given name, such as they experienced during crisis in school, caused a fight or flight response. I discussed and tried to untangle these with other practitioners, and as I moved into day centre settings these became more prevalent as younger adults joined us following their last year of school. These anecdotal links showed that this trend was growing, though little was recognised or acknowledge in support needs assessments. The nature of school impact and trauma didn't seem well understood, at times completely unaddressed. Additionally, for young autistic women, the lacking acknowledgement also suggested a reflection of this trend as these were viewed as emotional responses rather than real trauma. A clear divide from the anecdotal evidence showed that gendered perceptions of both autism and social actions were influencing how the impact of school was seen.

My comprehension of gender developed in a similar manner through peer discussion, community and academic engagement, and via my work on this thesis. On the 8th of November 2019, I was part of a team that organised a postgraduate conference titled *Creating Space in Academia*. The conference centred on the ways in which individual's multiple identities create, (dis)empower, and trouble spaces within academia. During the conference, my understanding of *misfitting* (Garland-Thomson, 2012) as praxis for comprehending life narratives solidified. A call to be *epistemologically disturbing* resonated with my own experiences, both as autistic and as a researcher. While my identity diverges from 'normal' through some performances and masking (Garland-Thomson, 2012; Stenning, 2022), realisation grew in recognising the connection between misfitting and the acknowledgement of autistic women and girls. Specifically, how gender and autism intersect and the influence these have on school experiences.

Early autism research focused on boys and men, generalising or altogether missing autistic women and girls from narrative research. Currently, autism is located and diagnosed through two core areas of deficit – lifelong, persistent social communicative challenges and restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). However, framing through deficits has two core issues. Firstly, deficit models stigmatise disability through a medical model of diagnose and treat, failing to encapsulate and understand the impact on autistic identity (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). Secondly, by focusing on points of struggle, autistic individuals are primarily located through moments of crisis and trauma where difference become seen as problematic (Dinishak, 2022). The implications of being missed until points of extreme overload and crisis point to a lacking diversity in understanding autistic identity and experience (Leedham, Thompson, Smith & Freeth, 2020). At its core, autism is argued as being heterogenous (Motttron & Bzdok, 2020), reflecting a broader group with individual and collective experiences and characteristics. The rising recognition of autistic identity pre-diagnosis through these connecting experiences has emerged as a source of empowering identity (Lewis, 2016; Wylie, Lawson & Beardon, 2015). These themselves create debate between those who see their autistic identity as a strength and those who feel a more disabling experience (McGill, 2020). Throughout the thesis I remain aware that some individuals, and the participants within this thesis, see autistic identity as disabling. As such, I frame the lens of empowerment through voice and experience rather than a set narrative on autism.

Neither gender or autism fit a singular category, as each encompasses both individual and collective experiences. With the historically androcentric framing of autism, understanding of the intersections of autism and gender was initially skewed. As such, the residue of the male-framed theories of autism (e.g. Baron-Cohen's *Male-Brained* (1985) and *Empathising-Systemising* (2009)) continue to influence and push back against more nuanced autistic voices relating to gendered experiences. With such an androcentric foundation, I found myself questioning the knowledge base on gender and autism's intersections. Autistic individuals already diverge from perceived social 'norms' and performances (Stenning, 2022). As such, nuances of autistic gender identities are often missed, particularly within developing knowledge bases in education, furthering disempowerment for autistic girls

within school institutions. With an estimated 3.6% of those requiring additional support in schools holding an autism diagnosis (Scottish Government, 2022, 2023a), knowledge bases require bolstering through autistic narratives.

1.3 Thesis Position and Key Areas of Focus

The research and thesis are focused on investigating autistic girls' school experiences, centring how spaces are navigated, created and reclaimed throughout the school journey. Throughout the chapters in this thesis, I refer to space in schools, reflecting on where these emerge, empower, and are navigated by the girls in the research. Space is a broad discipline, covering human geographies (Massey, 2013), social institutions (McDowell & Sharp, 2016; Valentine, 2014), and interrogations of social in/exclusion. For this thesis, I refer to spaces as they exist in the school context. These spaces, particularly in the latter chapters, refer to both physical areas and the sense of feeling and belonging (Wolfe, Higham, Mayes & Finneran, 2024). Spaces in schools can narrate the physical (classrooms, sensory rooms, lunch halls) and the sense of these spaces (a sense of belonging, inclusion and connection) (Mayes, Wolfe & Higham, 2020). While inclusion as theory and practice focusses on being physically involved in the classroom, these same spaces can arguably be exclusionary. As such, school spaces can be both empowering and daunting for pupils, particularly so for autistic learners.

School spaces can be as precarious as they are empowering. Research on school spaces explores progressing from a focus on inability to one of empowerment (Wolfe et al., 2024). Wolfe and Mayes co-produced a reimagining of school-based research through a feminist focus on empowerment, moving from earlier experiences of disenfranchisement and generalising gender (Mayes, Wolfe & Higham, 2020; Wolfe et al., 2024). Wolfe's work moves toward comprehending the *feel* of school rather than measuring 'for the apparent misfitting of students into the mainstream' (2024, p. 915). Here participants were encouraged to embrace and express their emotions while exploring and conceptualising their own narratives. The feeling and emotions of the autistic pupils in Wolfe's work reflect the nature of school climates. A promise is made to support, empower, accept, and envision diversity as both a praxis and a community. Instead, they face victim blaming, bullying, and oppression from a system which should act as protector in *loco parentis*. The vital insights from these

voices offer a strong starting point for interrogating inclusive practices when foregrounding autism and gender in research.

The thesis begins from an understanding that autistic girls' navigation of school spaces, particularly in Scotland, are underexplored. As such, the thesis is positioned on empowerment through voice and agency to explore and educate on how autistic spaces are created and reclaimed in schools. In seeking to explore autistic girls' school experiences, several core areas of debate which frame how the process of the thesis research developed. Throughout this section I will define and explore how these connect with and position the research. These focus on: understanding debates on gender and linking these intersections with autistic identity; autistic girls being positioned as missed and misunderstood; inclusion as a theory and practice; and exclusion and issues surrounding mainstreaming.

1.3.1 Being or Becoming: At the Intersections of Autism and Gender

Troubling gender takes various forms, involving deliberately or subconsciously challenging the oppressive and restrictive practices which heteronormativity entails. Construction of gender relies on centring heteronormative ideologies (Butler, 1988, 2013) and deconstructing these forced gender 'norms'. These norms are centred on a binary imposed by patriarchal and systematised ideologies, while deviations from these binaries trouble and confuse the dominant systems (Butler, 1988; 2004; 2006; 2013). They involve infractions which erode the validity and need for a patriarchal binary system, allowing exploration of identities and sexualities beyond heteronormativity. Challenging and unpacking patriarchal oppression became a significant element in the need for and growth of feminist theory and movements (Ahmed, 2008; Coleman, 2016). Given gender intersects with a myriad of social identities – race, sex, class – 'it becomes impossible to separate out "gender"' (Butler, 1999, p. 6). I would contest this concept, as each perspective builds on individual identity through challenge or acceptance of self and social identity. Lorber states, 'A woman is assumed to be a feminine female; a man a masculine male. Heterosexuality is the interrogated norm' (1996, p. 144), yet challenges emerged through change and expansion of what these actually embody in terms of identity. However, gender still faces scrutiny which compresses non-heteronormative identities, requiring exploration and address.

Such compression was explored by Butler as the *heterosexual matrix*, a hierarchical system of oppression which specifies actions which embody a binary of gender (1988; 2004; 2006; 2013). Limiting gendered actions, the heterosexual matrix allows a patriarchal system to oppress and force conformity, while othering those who challenge these. Such oppression expands beyond gender, bleeding into social, racial and sexual identities. Systemic conformity through socially constructed binaries commences at a young age (Renold, 2005; 2006). For many these binaries begin within nursery school, through mirroring socialised play. However, such binaries aren't necessarily maintained through performance, as explored within Lyttleton-Smith's (2015) ethnographic research on gender formations in nursery. These observations and engagements looked at how the children understood, enacted, performed and troubled their own understandings of gender. How gender was seen by the children often mirrored peer, authority figure, and parental performances. Despite mirroring, clear moments of agency persisted as Lyttleton-Smith's (2015) participants adopted their own perceptions and actions to embody gender. A powerful narrative which both challenged and reinforced gender norms emerged from the children's actions. Critically, these suggest that conformity of gender actions is not perceived by children as binary in nature. As such, seeing gender as a performance or a becoming may require further nuance.

Gender intersects differently with autistic and neurotypical ways of being (Bumiller, 2008; Moore, 2022). For example, autistic non-binary and queer identifying narratives are even less frequently considered than those of autistic girls (Cohen et al., 2022; Hillier et al., 2020). To understand the intersections of autistic gendered experiences, interrogation of the nuances of autistic being is required. However, these require layers of interrogation on what gender means, is and feels for autistic individuals and where these are culturally and socially located. There are unspoken subtleties which form societal outlooks on gender. Such actions, or performance, are rooted within heteronormativity (Butler, 1998, 2013; Renold, 2005; 2006), with girls facing social pressures surrounding gender performance (Cin, 2017; Rawlings, 2016; Renold, 2005; 2006). Social media, social norms and heteronormative ideologies lie at the core of standardising and distorting gender (Hanckel et al., 2019; Hertz & Johansson, 2015; Sastimdur, 2023). For many autistic girls, such performances include camouflaging or masking to fit in with peer and social expectations (Cook, Ogden &

Winstone, 2018; Pearson & Rose, 2021; Tierney, Burns & Kilbey, 2016). As these gender performances are typically grounded in heteronormative practice, autistic girls become vulnerable to misrecognition and their needs being misunderstood (Driver & Chester, 2021; Hull & Mandy, 2017; Hutson & Hutson, 2023). Additionally, the male-centred focus of early gender and autism research skews how autism and gender are perceived. As such, autistic girls face misrecognition of their needs and further disempowerment in schools (Whitlock et al., 2020; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2020).

Challenging the conflation of what gender is stereotyped to be and how it is experienced is key to the focus of the thesis in interrogating autistic girls' experiences of gender. Positioning the thesis to focus on autistic girls' experiences is key at a time when the political context of gender has faced constrictions within Western society. Western media and politics have villainised trans and non-hetero identities, arguing that problems include the forced transitioning of children, indoctrination, and the removal of others' rights through extreme radicalisation (Crasnow, 2021; Liu et al., 2024). A continued propagation of demonising non-hetero communities skews the broader narratives on gender. With a growing number of autistic individuals identifying as trans, non-binary or agender (Bonazzi et al., 2025; Strang et al., 2023), comprehensions of gender and autism's intersections require reconsideration. From the debates surrounding the definition of gender, the thesis is positioned that autistic perspectives of gender require further exploration, particularly within the school context where identity exploration and sense of self begin to develop.

1.3.2 Autistic Girls as Missed and Misunderstood

Mapping the trajectories of how autistic girl's voices are engaged in knowledge is a complex task. Early diagnostic recognition of autism mirrors the male-centredness of the heterosexual matrix. Autistic girls went unrecognised compared to male peers, with many reflecting on masking and mirroring to fit in with peers from a young age (Cook et al., 2018; Corscadden & Casserly, 2021; Jordan, 2022). Despite adaptations in diagnostics, many remain unrecognised until later in life (Bargiela, Steward & Mandy, 2016; Leedham et al., 2020; Zener, 2019). Those girls who do receive earlier diagnosis, however, continue to report receiving inadequate support, particularly in school (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024). Therefore,

despite growth in knowledge, gaps remain with respect to how experiences of gender intersect with and influence autistic girls' school experiences.

As the number of autistic girls receiving diagnoses rises (Russell et al., 2022), how gender intersects with the autistic experience has gained traction within research (Mezzatesta-Gava et al., 2025; Moore et al., 2022). Social stereotyping of gender maintains heteronormativity through performance and actions, though autistic experiences of gender are positioned in rejection of these (Tierney et al., 2016). Additionally, autistic women report higher levels of pressure and exclusion, wherein they are perceived as lacking femininity (Stewart, 2012). This individuality is often misconstrued as ignoring social conformity, putting autistic girls at risk of becoming socially othered and excluded from mainstream settings (Dean, Adams & Kasari, 2013). Explorations of autistic girls' experiences of school highlight such exclusion (Brede et al., 2017). While autistic girls' experiences have depth and nuance within research, how these intersect with gender and influence school experiences remain largely unaddressed. Conclusions on autistic experiences then built a knowledge base with androcentric foundations, with non-hetero males also missing or lost. Despite the growth in recognition of autistic girls and women, the experience and being of gender remains skewed and male dominated.

The layers within social dynamics, particularly within schools, impose unspoken rules and hide already unseen experiences (Lee, 2011). These require more understanding from autistic girls' perspectives. Autistic identities, bodies and gender identities intersect in a way which disrupts heteronormative performances, though not always consciously. Exploration of autistic girls' school reflections also requires awareness that the autistic body may be experienced by some as disabled compared to peers (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022; Davidson & Henderson, 2010). As such, alongside gender, the broader intersections of disability need to be taken into consideration. Contextualising experiences where disability and gender intersect entails highlighting the connections between (dis)empowerment, gender and the body (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Stenning, 2022; Swain & French, 2000). Contextualising of gender and disability entails comprehension that these individuals challenge bodily oppression and societal gender oppression simultaneously (Asch, 2001; Garland-Thomson, 2011; Tremain, 2013; 2015). Within the context of autism, the body itself may not openly challenge these

oppressions on the surface. Rather, the world-experience is shaped within the sensory and cognitive processes of autism (Stenning, 2022). As such, how challenges are presented may be through troubling mainstream (and alternative) constructions of gender and its performance.

Engagement with performance and actions of gender poses difficulty for many autistic individuals (Dean, Harwood & Kasari, 2017; Kourti & MacLeod, 2019; Wood & Eagly, 2015). These lead to conflations between how autism and gender are *seen* and how these intersections are *experienced* as many autistic people indicate that they challenge heteronormative conformity (Miller, Nachman & Wynn, 2020; Warrier et al., 2020). These experiences are then at risk of being generalised into broader autism narratives rather than as nuanced challenges to gender. Much of the early school research on autism followed gendered generalising, meaning autistic girl's voices were unheard. Tied together with masking, misdiagnosis, and growing numbers of autistic girls in schools, a general sense of disempowerment emerged from autistic women's reflections on childhood (Elcheson et al, 2018; Simone, 2010; Tornvall, 2023). Critically, at the core of the intersections of gender, masking, performance, becoming, and being are autistic girls in schools who's voices and needs are missed and misunderstood. To comprehend the nature of autistic girl's school experiences, an understanding of how they feel and navigate schools is necessary. In taking from these factors I am positioned towards the need for further engagement with autistic girls' school experiences. Therefore, this thesis adopts a feminist standpoint and position to approach the interrogation of autistic girl's navigation of school spaces.

1.3.3 Inclusion as Theory and Praxis

Inclusion, in much the same way as diversity, is both loosely and poorly defined (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Imray & Colley, 2017). Inclusion requires several factors, including: intelligence and common sense (Obiakor, 2011); strong leadership (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran & Walther-Thomas, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000; Salisbury, 2006); collaborative teaming (Janney & Snell, 2005); adapting the curriculum and approach to pedagogy (Udvari-Solner, Villa & Thousand, 2002); strong support from appropriate staff (Giangreco & Broer, 2005); and a developed relationship with family input (Summers et al.,

2005). Inclusion in the UK education systems found its beginnings in the Warnock Report (1978). Its findings and recommendations continue to influence modern approaches to inclusion (Norwich, 2019). Segregation was replaced by the integration of communication bases and special education teachers in mainstream settings. The beginnings of a movement towards Individualised Educational Programs (IEP) also progressed from the report: ‘A personal folder, containing records of his progress and other factual information about him, should be maintained in school for every pupil and should be readily available for consultation’ (Warnock Report, 1978, paragraph 4.19). Additionally, the report highlighted the need for language development, progressing movement beyond stigmatised and generalising language (particularly sections 3.26-3.29). However, the report largely skewed the outlook on inclusion with a male-centred focus, reflective of the knowledge base at the time rather than the rigidity of the report. Schools were largely split by sex, with girls and boys expected to fulfil specific gender roles. Expectations of autism knowledge in mainstream schools were non-existent, as was much of the resource provisioning. Knowledge of autism and gender affirmation are now part of the mainstream, with additional support offered in schools. Yet debate continues on what exactly inclusion means and what it looks like in practice, particularly for autistic pupils (Holmes, 2024; Rice, Kenny & Connolly, 2023).

Despite advances since the Warnock Report’s call to move past stigmatised language (Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009), neurodiversity and disability are continually considered with respect to impairment and pathology. With decades of research, advocacy and political action since the Warnock Report our approaches have seemingly progressed. Warnock reflected on these elements, seeing inclusion as the ‘disastrous legacy’ of the 1978 report, due to the conflicts which emerged in how inclusion became theorised and implemented in schools (Warnock, Norwich & Terzi, 2010, p. 19). While positive impacts on support, accommodations and schooling for additional needs have progressed, how inclusion is viewed by those implementing practice and policy is a cause for concern (Warnock, 2005, in Warnock et al., 2010). Reflecting on the impact of inclusion stemming from the original report, Warnock also argues that inclusion as primary praxis doesn’t meet the needs of additional support learners (Warnock et al., 2010). Such a perspective reflects the broader debate surrounding autism and inclusion, with a lack of autistic voices being at the core of debates. These consistently occurring gaps within the literature require addressing, with

autistic learners' narratives and experiences framing the discussion (Milton, 2014). Children who are stifled and stigmatise their self-perception may struggle to develop themselves and their capabilities, thereby fulfilling a self-prophecy of being lesser (Zajda, 2019).

Contextualising research on gender and autism within Scottish school contexts requires interrogating *how* inclusion is enacted. While Scottish schools utilise the above factors to build inclusion, Scotland's approaches to ensuring autistic learners' inclusion are grounded in autism focused policy (Scottish Government, 2018; 2021). Progressive thought about how the environment can adapt to include individuals, rather than filtering these pupils into the current environment, is vital (Florian & Linklater, 2010). Such a perspective 'focuses on each child being an equally valued member of the school culture' (Eldar, Talmor & Wolf-Zukerman, 2010, in Linsay et al., 2012, p. 102). Yet educational research in Scotland fails to adequately engage with a knowledge base which elucidates autistic girls' voices. Moreover, for many autistic individuals, exclusion is their primary experience (Moyse, 2021; Schneider, Fong & McLaughlin, 2025; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017), as such, the thesis is positioned to look at inclusion with a critical lens and seek to understand how inclusive spaces are/aren't created and navigated in schools.

1.3.4 Exclusion: (Mis)Informed Knowledge in Mainstream(ing)

Exclusion of autistic individuals within Scotland has significantly increased (National Autistic Society, 2018). Findings within the *Not Included, Not Engaged* report highlighted the use of part-time timetables, ranging from four-day weeks to half-days in school, as an exclusionary practice. Here, parents reported disillusionment with the ability of Scottish local authorities to accommodate and support autistic pupils. Such practice was perceived as reflective of teachers' and school institutions' inability to offer adequate support for autistic pupils, as reflected within broader literature (Cook & Ogden, 2022; Hasson et al, 2024; Watling, 2004). Within a system built on inclusion through practice and policy, quiet exclusions are a worrying trend. Exclusions which don't follow policy, and are therefore illegal, have increasingly been adopted by mainstream school environments (Totsika, Gray & Solmi, 2025). A recent report from the Scottish Government investigated the quality of provisioning and resources for ASN pupils from stakeholder perspectives (2023b). The report

highlighted that parents, support staff and teachers saw a drop in the quality and consistency of resources for ASN pupils. In the Scottish Government's report, the stakeholders also highlighted the fundamental value that staff at all levels hold. This value expanded to joining with outside practice in liaising with medical and social work individuals involved in the pupil's care. Critically, however, these aspects of positive resourcing were highly dependent on the Local Authority and wasn't consistent across Scotland.

These findings mirrored an earlier pre-COVID report on the implementation of additional support learning in Scotland. The Scottish Government's earlier report highlighted that "the physical presence of a child or young person who has additional support needs in a mainstream school does not constitute inclusion" (2020, Theme 2, para 2). Further, the report also highlighted the issue surrounding what mainstream/ing means for additional support learning. Tying together with the *Not Engaged* report which published the same year, a clear gap emerges on the impacts of exclusion and the need and value of mainstreaming. Such reasoning, drawn from micro and macro stakeholder narratives, offers insight, though lacks nuance in comprehending pupils' experiences.

Nuancing reflections, Brede et al. (2017) explored autistic pupils' experiences of school exclusion, involving eight boys and one girl. Through interviews, pupils elucidated a level of disempowerment and trauma from experiences with teachers as influencing exclusion. Such barriers led to a decreased sense of belonging, through unmet needs, leading many to react. Reactivity to disempowerment can be seen as behavioural by many educators of autistic individuals (Adams, MacDonald & Keen, 2019). Critically, many teachers see themselves as incapable and unsupported in accommodating and teaching autistic pupils (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Ravet, 2018; Lindsay et al., 2013). These considerations, however, are rooted within a generalised perspective, missing the nuances and unseen contexts which relate to the intersections of autism and gender. Further to Brede's exploration, Sedgewick (2017) drew focus to autistic girls' school experiences, offering some balance to gendered understandings. Progressive narratives from eight autistic girls revealed unsuitable environments and peer tensions, as already mentioned in literature. However, nuanced accounts were given about the lack of understanding surrounding and supporting autistic girls (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Ravet, 2018; Lindsay et al., 2013). Autistic perspectives on

exclusion often lie in the social contexts of barriers in school, such as bullying, relationship tensions, and failings in teacher knowledge (Gray, 2018). While these could be conceptualised as generalised barriers, the gendered impacts nuance understanding, particularly in the context of social exclusion.

Socialised exclusion remains a source of disempowerment for autistic girls within schools (Brede et al., 2017; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017), extended to social and gendered violence. Gendered violence within bullying is rooted in systemic violence through actions and rhetoric (Rawlings, 2015; 2019; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015), disempowering victims through social marginalisation of identity and their sense of self. Marginalisation of autistic girls can be linked through reflective accounts to camouflaging and masking to meet social expectations (Elcheson et al., 2018; Hendrickx, 2015; Simone, 2010; Tornvall, 2023). Social exclusion formed part of Stewart's (2012) accounts, with participants' experiences of exclusion being rooted in misinformation relating to autism and gender. Many autistic individuals described not seeing themselves as fitting a particular performance or role of gender (Bumiller, 2008; Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Davidson & Tamas, 2016; Jack, 2014). As such, there is a greater incidence of autistic pupils experiencing difficulties surrounding inclusion and *fitting in*.

With social and unspoken rules as barriers, alongside misunderstanding of autism and gender, a movement towards mainstreaming autistic pupils as best practice poses worrisome issues. There are several perceived benefits to autistic children being included within mainstream education. These include, though are not limited to, developments in social interaction and relationships (Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012), and neurotypical children gaining a stronger understanding of autism and autistic culture (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011). While there may be several positives to 'mainstream' inclusion, there remain perspectives which suggest detriment remains in such environments. Indeed, Warnock sees the focus on inclusion in the 1978 report as overly influencing the mainstreaming of additional needs learners (Warnock et al., 2010). Some teachers and institutions may approach autism from a medicalised perspective, focusing on inabilities (Hudry et al., 2010), which does little beyond creating an integrative environment lacking in community focus. If autistic children are consistently positioned as being impaired or incapable of certain actions, they become undervalued and

underestimated. Such a position may become true when professionals fail to see beyond their own stigmatised perceptions, creating barriers to the accessibility of a high-quality and meaningful education (Humphrey, 2008). As such, the nature and benefits of mainstreaming require balancing through a robust engagement with autistic pupils voices.

While some may benefit from a mainstream school environment, many will face greater disadvantage therein (Mesibov & Shea, 1996; White et al., 2007). Increased variables, stressors, and a broader timetable in secondary schools (Lohaus et al., 2004; Rice, Frederickson & Seymour, 2011) can remove a level of freedom and adaptability previously enjoyed in primary environments. These changes influence experiences and engagement in secondary environments. Many autistic learners have become disenchanted with secondary education through everchanging social culture and a lack of understanding of their needs (Gill, Esson & Young, 2016). Despite developments in such understandings, little has been accomplished as to how to progress inclusion from primary into secondary education. The development of more inclusive environments therefore relies greatly on the voices of those who depend on them. From the issues surrounding exclusion, the thesis is positioned that autistic girl's narratives remain unaddressed and the nuances of these school experiences are largely misunderstood. Through focussing on autistic girl's experiences and navigation of school spaces, the research is positioned and committed towards platforming and empowering knowledge through epistemic authority of voice.

1.4 Reasoning and Rationalising the Questions

Understanding how autistic girls navigate schools offers vital novelty for the current knowledge base both in the Scottish and broader research context. Aspects of camouflaging (Bargiela et al., 2016; Pearson & Rose, 2021), under-recognition in diagnostics (Driver & Chester, 2021; Duvekot et al., 2017), and generalising through androcentric framing of autism indicate that more knowledge is needed. Diagnostic tools are continually being developed to be more inclusive of autistic girls and women (Cook, Hull & Mandy, 2024; Navarro-Pardo et al., 2021). Paired with rising numbers of autistic learners in the Scottish system (MacIver et al., 2023), the argument could be made that knowledge bases should be more robust to support these girls. Yet the current knowledge base on autistic girls' school

experiences in Scotland remains almost non-existent. While rich and nuanced narratives can be taken from voices focused beyond these, it is important to acknowledge that the Scottish knowledge base specifically needs bolstered.

Critically, this research emerges at a point where autism faces scrutiny through stigma, particularly within social media (Edwards et al, 2024; Hungerford, Kornhaber, West & Cleary, 2025). Gender identity and autism are being explored through nuanced narratives (Mittertreiner et al., 2024), though, concurrently, gender identity beyond heteronormativity faces repression and villainisation (Liu et al., 2024). Autistic advocacy has advanced the approaches and values of research to become more inclusive (Cage et al., 2024; Poulsen et al., 2022). Currently the autistic community and other organisations are fighting misinformation on causes and an epidemic surrounding autism. Alongside these factors, mainstreaming autistic learners is being pushed as the best outcome (Horgan, Kenny & Flynn, 2023; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a, 2008b). However, the dearth of literature surrounding education, gender and autism in Scotland would suggest these conclusions be approached with caution. Research addressing autistic girls' school experiences in Scotland would advance this vitally lacking knowledge base through epistemic authority of autistic girls' voices. As such, how differing school environments (ASN, mainstream and beyond) are experienced was considered to enhance the potential scope of participants. Doing so also acknowledged that many autistic girls may be absent from mainstreaming, or the school system itself (Moyse, 2020; 2021). Underlying a core query, *How do autistic girls create and navigate spaces in the Scottish education system?* three research questions were developed to address the gaps in current knowledge:

- How are the school experiences of autistic girl and girls situated?
- What do these reflections tell us about the way spaces are created and navigated within schools?
- What knowledge and messages can be drawn upon to enhance comprehension and expand on creating space for autistic girls in schools?

1.5 Project Summary

As the research adapted and became more reflective of the need to centre participant voice and experience, the overall aim of the research became more focused. I initially planned to bring together reflections on the classroom, adding to the growing body of literature including both teacher and autistic perspectives on the value and inclusivity of the classroom. Driven by growing numbers of diagnosed girls and women (Bargiela et al., 2016; Harrop et al., 2024; Seers & Hogg, 2023), it became apparent the research could address important gaps. Therefore, I centred on exploring how autistic girls navigate school spaces and experiences in Scotland. The literature review highlighted a lack data relating to Scotland, with English-centred research dominating explorations of gendered autistic experiences. The review also brought to light the small numbers of participants included in these studies. A highlighted deficit in teacher knowledge from both autistic pupils' (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Sedgewick, Hill & Pellicano, 2019; Sedgewick et al., 2016; Whitlow, Cooper & Couvillon, 2019) and teachers' (Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021; Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Ravjet, 2018) perspectives gave rise to the need to encapsulate a broader message as to what educators need to know. As such, the overall aim became to empower participants by engaging with their voices, with the aspiration to nuance the current knowledge base and create a starting point for future research.

Theoretical Framework: Misfitting Through Situated Knowledge

Building a framework which elucidated the lived experiences of participants while interpreting the factors which surround these involved understanding lived realities within schools as holding multiple levels of complexity. To comprehend the implications of theoretical framing within research, it is important to construct definitions of the terminology used therein. I look to Harding's definitions; epistemology as 'a theory of knowledge', methodology as 'a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed', and method as 'a technique for [...] gathering evidence' (1987a, pp. 2-3). Feminist standpoint theory's epistemological approach is central to the research. Harding sees this knowledge production as based on the social siting of participant/individual knowledge (2009). Simply put, the concept of *situated knowledge* is based on centring the voices of marginalised individuals in exploring those systems and institutions with which they engage. Various writers wrote concurrently, and separately, on the conceptualisation and need for a feminist standpoint

epistemology (Collins, 1997; Harding, 1997; Hekman, 1997; Smith, 1997 wrote on the basis of a feminist standpoint, with similar and conflicting elements). Throughout the multiple conceptualisations, Harding's outlook on situating knowledge was mirrored in the aims of this thesis research. Progressing through the research development and exploration, the concept of *misfitting* within feminist disability studies resonated with located autistic experiences. Misfitting here looks to Garland-Thomson's (2012) reinterpretation of the disabled body as challenging both societal norms and expectations of disability. Those who misfit challenge the role of identity, gender, how bodies are seen, what bodies can do, and what it means to be disabled (Garland-Thomson, 2012). Feminist disability literature seeks to challenge and dismantle systems which oppress, disempower and marginalise disabled individuals (Asch, 2001; Garland-Thomson, 2001, 2007, 2011; Tremaine, 2013). Threads connected the experiences of misfitting and autistic school experiences.

Here I developed a framework capable of reinterpreting the potentially disempowering nature of school systems while comprehending the power and agency of autistic bodies. To misfit as an autist is to be a challenge, or trouble, to the dominant ideologies of both social and neuro-norms (Stenning, 2022). Such explorations require comprehending marginalisation through the ableism imposed upon autistic individuals 'forced to question the validity of their experiences', deconstructing the implications of socially imposed norms to untangle the 'painful aspects of misfitting' (Stenning, 2022, p. 2). Thus, the engagement of misfitting within my conceptual framework allows interrogation of (dis)empowerment within a neuro-framed perspective. As I will continue to argue throughout this thesis, autistic girls are typically perceived through an androcentric and stereotyped lens. Diagnostics emerged from perceptions of autism in (white) boys and men (Dukevot et al., 2017; Goldman, 2013; Seers & Hogg, 2023). Throughout the thesis, and in the findings, I argue for empowerment through voice and the need to challenge misunderstandings of autism and gender. This was made possible through foregrounding the epistemic authority of participants and utilising *situated knowledge* and the ontology of *misfitting*.

Setting and Participants

Following COVID, there emerged a need for an adaptive and accessible research space. Participants were invited to attend a Zoom-based interview, with the option of a

parent/teacher/supporting individual accompanying them. While there were advantages to this, particularly following a global pandemic, there were some downsides. Primarily that I was unable to physically engage and explore the school with participants to better understand the spaces which fuelled their experiences. Ultimately the research included five participants in total, with three based in the Glasgow area, one in Edinburgh and another in the Moray local authority. These participants, under pseudonyms, were:

- Molly – aged 14, S4
- Chloe – aged 14, S3
- Emily – aged 13, S2
- Rosie – aged 16, S5
- Ashley – aged 16, S5

Each participant had experienced both mainstream and non-mainstream environments, such as communication or support bases or additional support needs schools. One attended Steiner and an all-girls school, with three having experienced home-schooling outside of COVID restrictions.

Common Themes

The research evoked a sense of repetitions. Repetitions within education, within autistic experiences, within the current knowledge base. The literature review highlighted findings under a heading of *Repetitions in Education*, linking reflections across over a decade of literature with little to no divergence from these. As such, the emergent pattern highlighted a need for a more in-depth exploration of the intersections and impact of autism and gender on school experiences. My findings add nuance and depth to current literature in how gender and autism intersect in creating power to navigate, create and reclaim school spaces. The findings were drawn together under the core theme *Troubled in School – Entangled in School Spaces*, with five themes emerging:

- A Dichotomy in Mainstream vs ASN Schooling
- The Impact of School Relationships
- Navigating School Spaces

- Gender and Autism
- Messages About Autism

Through concepts of *misfitting* and *situated knowledge*, the findings untangled the strands of participants' experiences focused on school spaces, relationships and gender. How these girls troubled teacher knowledge and understandings of autism, and navigated school spaces nuanced the current knowledge base. As such, these girls were empowered to enhance knowledge in the Scottish context.

1.6 Thesis Outline

The chapter which follows, the literature review, elucidates the need for this research via interrogation of the current knowledge base on autistic girls' school experiences. The review used aspects from the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) process to locate literature related to autistic girls' school experiences. With limited research available surrounding the Scottish context, it was vital the review locate and situate knowledge from similar frameworks. As such, the literature which emerged was focused more broadly upon the UK context. The review highlights five studies, each offering critical insight into autistic girls' school lives. Through thematic analyses, the motifs which intersect across the studies are critically explored and drawn out to lay the foundation to progress onto the methods and theoretical framework of the thesis.

Chapter 3 details the study's methods and approaches, building on the gaps underscored in the literature review. A critical overview is given on my own identity as a male, autistic researcher, justifying my ability and positioning to conduct the research. From here, I address the research questions and how these tie in with the gaps located in the literature. The need for a social constructivist approach is explored within Chapter 3 to address critical knowledge gaps with respect to autistic girls' school experiences. The conceptual framework, which draws on situated knowledge and misfitting, bolsters the constructivist approach of the research. Further justification is then given as to the efficacy of using case study methodology alongside exploration of the five participants. Tying these

together, the fieldwork and thematic analysis processes allow me to justify the approach of critically engaging with knowledge through participant voice. In doing so, I also explore the pilot session and how the lessons learned solidified the fieldwork approach, leading into the case study chapter.

Chapter 4 then moves to critically explore each of the participants' cases individually. Each case is given space for exploration, offering detail on the processes and experiences of school for each participant. Individually, participant cases are explored in terms of emergent themes which highlight the core elements of their experiences. These build critical nuance, exploring how each girl experienced school, highlighting which components were valued and crucial in shaping their experiences. Each case progressed to beginning to answer the research questions, tying elements of navigation and critical insight into the emerging themes. I recognised the value these case studies could hold both individually and collectively. To draw on, and give place to, these voices, a cross-case synthesis was justified. Doing so allowed the broader messages to reflect the depth of participants' voices and messages.

Chapter 5 objectively frames participant narratives, clustering the findings from each case into a singular, broader narrative. Under the overarching theme *Trouble with School Spaces*, the emergent themes from the cross-case synthesis are discussed. These constituted five core themes reflective of the girls' experiences: *Troubled in Mainstream*, *Empowered Elsewhere*; *The Impact of Relationships Across the School*; *Manoeuvring School Spaces*; *The Trouble with Gender and Autism*; and *Listen and Learn from Us*. Each theme critically examines how situated knowledge and misfitting emerged from participants' voices. These themes also expand on the core research aim, elucidating how the girls navigate schools through challenging space, gender and socialised norms. Further to these, the importance of the relationships with peers and teachers leads into the girls' framing of messages for learning from their experiences.

Chapter 6 progresses to link the research findings with current literature. Here, the overarching research question is addressed through three core areas tied to school spaces: how school spaces are navigated, created reclaimed; the influence of school relationships; the

power of autism, gender and voice. Throughout the chapter, I situate the knowledge drawn from participants as nuancing how school spaces are seen and experienced. Critically, the discussion provides novel knowledge on how school spaces fail to fully include autistic girls through unspoken contingencies and rules. Findings are then linked to current autism and gender knowledge, before exploring how constructions of autism and gender in the classroom limit access and recognition. Here the findings go beyond current literature, stating the need for stronger recognition of autistic girls, whose support needs are often missed or generalised. Throughout, the findings are linked back to the main research question, addressing the research gap regarding autistic girls' school knowledge, and offering future recommendations to strengthen understanding. Following discussion of the findings, I address the challenges and limitations of the research.

Chapter 7 then offers a summation of the project and findings, highlighting the reclamation of empowerment participants experienced, while tying together the threads of the thesis. The structure of the thesis allowed the research to centre autistic girls' voices, while focussing on how gender and autism are constructed and experienced within school spaces. The literature review which follows, addresses the gaps in current knowledge and debates, introducing the research focus on autistic girls in Scottish schools.

Chapter 2: Reviewing The Literature

2.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure

Building on the introduction, this chapter will systematically explore the literature on autistic girls' school experiences. Gendered barriers remain in the diagnostic process (Loomes, Hull & Mandy, 2017; Seers & Hogg, 2023) which influences how autistic girl's needs and actions are understood. Tied with masking to fit in (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Livingston et al., 2019) and the generalising of gendered experiences, autistic girls' voices remain largely unheard compared to those of their male peers. As such, a level of prejudice continues for those who don't fit the autism stereotype (Stenning, 2022). Such prejudice fuels the debate on the inclusivity of autism research and the autistic community (den Houting et al., 2022). Within the educational context, debates on the inclusion of autistic pupils highlight disparities between what is being done and how this feels for autistic learners (Goodall, 2020; Humphreys, 2008; Miles, Boyle & Richards, 2019). With literature gaps with respect to the Scottish school context, understanding is drawn from the broader UK educational setting to evidence the need for the current thesis.

To locate specific and detailed literature on autistic girls' school experiences, I systemised the process through drawing on elements from the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA offers a specific and systemised approach to locating literature. Utilising these processes, this chapter details the specific processes and search terms used to locate peer-reviewed literature focused on autistic girls' school experiences in the UK. From the five papers identified, the methods and data are extracted and analysed to determine the common themes that emerge from these narratives. The identified gaps are then contextualised, justifying the need for the research in this thesis.

2.2 Situating Voice Within a Systemised Process

Building the review involved engagement with several guiding documents and processes to ensure a robust approach. It was vital that the process was systemised to meet the dual purpose of the review; to accurately locate data from the UK context while simultaneously centring the reflections of autistic girls' school experiences. Much of my initial guidance was systemised through PRISMA guidelines. However, as the approach of the analysis was thematic, it diverged from the overall reporting process (Page et al., 2021) (as the review wasn't a wholly specific PRISMA approach, Appendix 2 shows the specific PRISMA elements drawn from). The review utilised a systematic structure to move beyond the Scottish context, while focusing on factors of situated knowledge and misfitting. As such, the processes detailed in the sections which follow show the precision and clarity of the current literature surrounding autistic girls' school experiences.

Disparity remains when looking at literature which address the gendered impacts of autistic school experiences. The androcentric framing of autism research in its infancy continues its infringement on comprehensive explorations of autism and gender (Goldman, 2013). As such, autistic girls' voices and experiences remain disempowered compared to those of their male peers. From reflections in *Aspergirls* (Simone, 2010) and *Spectrum Women: Walking to the Beat of Autism* (Cook & Garnett, 2018), autistic girls are (un)empowered differently than male peers in education, the extent of which remains largely unexplored. Comprehending autistic girls' reflections on education requires interrogating the current knowledge base while building a robust foundation for addressing gaps.

Reflections on education from autistic women looking at their childhoods conceptualise differently centred stories. While issues such as understanding ability (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Sciutto et al., 2012), bullying (Cappadocia, Weiss & Pepler, 2012; Maiano et al., 2016; Van Roekel, Scholte & Didden, 2010), and the impact of structured environments (Carnahan et al., 2009) translate across gender barriers for autistic individuals, there are issues consistently specific to autistic girl's experiences. Narratives within *Aspergirls* (Simone, 2010) highlight a discord in perceptions of capabilities, linked to autistic girls being seen as having emotive issues rather than being neurodiverse (Duvekot et al., 2017). Academic proficiency became a barrier to support for some; 'everyone ignored my problems

because I had good grades' (Simone, 2010, p. 30), a recurring barrier expressed with respect to misinformation related to autism in women and girls (Bumiller, 2008). Further, when looking at the writings within Spectrum Women (Cook & Garnett, 2018), Elchesen voices her childhood frustration at being seen to have 'problem behaviours' (p. 34) rather than unmet needs. Elchesen also highlights academic difficulties, sensory overloads, and meltdowns (Cook & Garnett, 2018) as the outcomes to being overwhelmed in school, critically showing the unseen impact of masking.

With the Scottish context having no recent literature to ground the research within, the gaps which the review (and broader research) address were drawn from UK-wide papers. As such, the review used the layers of masking, missing voices, and interrogations of gendered school experiences to ground itself and commence seeking literature through the following question:

1 What do autistic girls highlight as important about their experiences of school?

The focus of the review was to contextualise and nuance how and where current knowledge is formed and summarised. Thus, I aimed to draw on research that embodied voice and experience, setting these at the core of the research.

Generalising girls' experiences within broader narratives alongside boys' misses the nuances as to how gender and autism intersect within the school context. As such, systemising the processes of locating literature meant expanding the search parameters. The areas explored (shown in Table 2.1) were selected to enable the examination of educationally situated literature. Using the Elton B. Stephens Company (EBSCO) database, a research database providing access to multiple journal databases, allowed the selection of journals likely to contain nuanced literature. The databases explored within EBSCO were expanded upon through exploring broader literature in Google Scholar and the journal storage (JSTOR) database. As I journeyed through the databases, my initial literature review highlighted potential research gaps. Thus, alongside the additional databases explored, I looked to journals with a feminist and gender focus, such as *Gender and Education* and *Feminist*

Geographies. As such, I sought areas where factors such as exploring (dis)empowerment and situated knowledge engaged through voice would be better located.

Table 2.1: *Databases and Locations of Literature*

Database/Location of Literature:	EBSCO	JSTOR	Outside Sources
	• British Education Index • Child Development and Adolescent Studies • Education Abstracts (H.W. Wilson) • Educational Administration Abstracts • Educational Resource Information Centre (ERIC) • Humanities International Complete • PsycARTICLES • PsycINFO • Teacher Reference Centre	• Journal of Classroom Interaction • British Journal of Educational Studies • Feminist Studies • Women's Studies Quarterly	• Google Scholar • Signs • Hypatia • Feminist Review • Gender and Education

Following the location of the databases, the search terms utilised were developed based on lessons from the initial review attempts (these highlighted no literature focused on Scotland at the time of the review). To target the specific literature required, the terms used were developed through focusing on situated knowledge. As voice was central to the review, the terms had to be specific. As the processes developed, so too did the focus on how terms were utilised. Critically, the term *autism* was expanded to encompass the differing ways in

which it could be utilised across different research, depending on its positioning. As shown in Table 2.2 below, the terms used were expansive. By targeting literature that focused on autistic voices to explore experiences, I was able to draw out the situated knowledge embedded within. Utilising the search terms allowed the review to progress through a systemised process, as guided by PRISMA.

Table 2.2: *Search Terms Utilised in the Review*

Autism	Education	Voice	Gender
Autism spectrum conditions	Inclusive education	Voices	Girls
Autism spectrum disorder	Early education	Experiences	Female
ASD	Primary school	Attitudes	Young women
ASC	Junior school	Perceptions	Young Woman
Asperger	Secondary school		
	KS1		
	KS2		
	Year 1/2/3/4/5/6/7		
	Additional Support Education		
	Special education		
	Additional support needs		

2.2.1 Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

As the range of literature on autistic experiences of school extends to book chapters (Barb & Cook, 2018; Simone, 2010), theses (Moyse, 2020; Wood, 2017), and representation from parents and teachers (Azad & Mandell, 2016), it was vital that the current review focus

on specific criteria. The literature focusing on autism, schools, and girls/young women within the search yielded 16,254 papers across the databases and additional searches (as I will explore in the next section). As such, avenues of access to autistic voices relating to gendered perspectives on school experiences were opened. With the intention of drawing out autistic voices, strict parameters were set. Table 2.3 below shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Critical parameters were vital to ensuring the review included both situated knowledge and nuance. The literature must have engaged with and portrayed autistic experiences to be considered with respect to the broader research the thesis undertook. The included research was peer-reviewed to ensure the findings were rigorous. The literature review was conducted between 2020 -2024, focussing on emerging literature during the time preceding and during the thesis write-up. The initial stages of the review were conducted between 2020 and 2022, drawing the initial elements together which founded the review. The final full conducting of the paper location took place in January 2025, allowing the location of papers across 2024. Considering the span of 12 years (2012-2024) also allowed for the fluctuating nature of educational reforms and adaptations to be accounted for. Changes in perspectives on autism and voice would therefore be accounted for, while ensuring knowledge was situated within autistic girl's perspectives. Finally, the inclusion criteria sought to align with the broader UK narrative by engaging literature written in English and by encompassing primary, secondary, and additional support settings.

Table 2.3: *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
- published within the last 12 years - uses qualitative methods (e.g. interview, focus group, reflective pieces such as diaries) - must acknowledge autistic girls' reflections within the paper - focus on early or secondary education - be published in the English language - focused on UK population(s)	- dissertations and theses - book reviews - book chapters - already conducted systematic literature reviews/meta-analysis, - papers on further/higher education - quantitative papers or papers which don't involve autistic voice, - papers not published in English, - papers focused on non-UK populations,

- papers which are parent/teacher focused (and do not include the autistic pupils' perspectives or voices)

Book chapters, dissertations, and previously conducted reviews were removed during the screening process to ensure rigour in the identified research. Self-authored pieces were also omitted due to the potential to be positioned towards a particular narrative focus (though they were utilised critically to frame the drive for the review and thesis). Quantitative research was removed because voice exploration was the purpose of the review. Literature which focused solely on parental or educator perspectives was also eliminated to ensure autistic voices remained at the core. Extracting the literature through the systemised processes designed for the review allowed the screening to identify papers relevant to the aims of the review.

2.2.2 Systemised Screening

The process of locating the literature enabled a broad range of autism and education literature to be explored. With over 16,000 papers identified, the screening process ensured that the final papers met the criteria for addressing the research questions. The process of locating and removing papers is shown in Figure 2.1. The initial searches identified 16,232 pieces of literature from the EBSCO database and 22 from outside sources. The screening process began with removing duplicate literature. The remaining initial literature was then screened to ensure these met the review's parameters. First, the literature was drawn down to the last 12 years (7188) before ensuring these were peer-reviewed papers by checking the associated journal for editorial or commentary pieces (5815). Papers were then filtered to those published in English, reducing the number to 5320.

Following identification of these papers, the next stage of screening focused on highlighting those in which participants and the research focus were based within the UK (75). Of these papers, 43 met the quality of reviews from the initial screening. Abstracts were screened for methodology, quality and significant involvement of autistic girls' experiences and voices within education. Of the screened literature, five papers met the following criteria:

using a quality qualitative method which drew meaningfully on autistic girl's/young women's experiences of early and secondary education; adopting an understanding of autistic perspectives within the results; taking from child-perspectives in the research exploration and

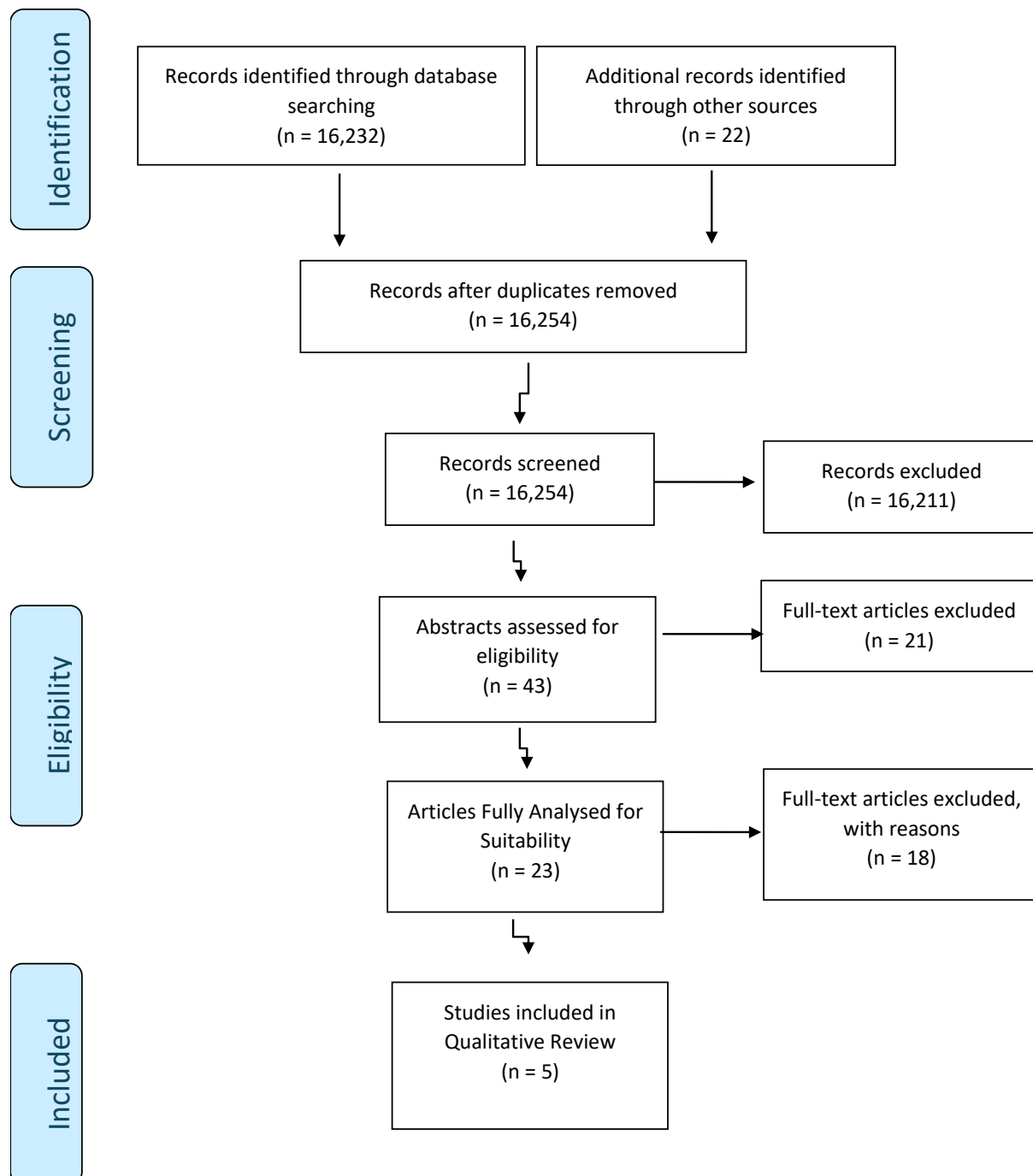


Figure 2.1: *Locating and Processing the Literature*

analysis; having a distinct focus on autistic girls' perspectives within the research; novel findings and/or implications for the current knowledge base in autism research. The nuance within the systemised process brought five final papers forward that engaged with wholly situated knowledge, as shown in Table 2.4 below.

2.3 Located Literature

In terms of current autism research, the value of methods that acknowledge autistic voices hold epistemic authority through lived expertise (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Milton, 2014). Throughout the screening process, the available literature seemed to favour male voices, potentially as they remain more easily accessible and locatable. Among the approaches adopted, interviews were the preferred method for data collection, a preference which was mirrored in the five studies chosen for further exploration. Dillon, Underwood and Freemantle (2016), Goodall and MacKenzie (2019), and Tomlinson, Bond and Hebron (2022) adopted semi-structured interviews, while Sproston, Sedgewick and Crane (2017) utilised open-ended interviews, and Billington, Loucas and Knott (2024) drew on focus groups.

It is typical for researchers to perceive interviews as the most appropriate 'method of giving voice to various issues' (Matteson & Lincoln, 2009, p. 660). Interviews can be descriptively, interpretatively and theoretically sound, yet not account for the *individual* and the expertise of their unique perspective in the broader context of their lived experience (Maxwell, 2012). Qualitative interviewing is also a medium that allows for a sturdier, more empathic approach to sensitive and emotive issues (Fylan, 2005). Reflective pieces by autistic women have conceptualised education settings as largely negative (Cook & Garnett, 2018; Simone, 2010). Autistic individuals may prefer semi-structured rather than open-ended questions as they can offer more guidance on the topic. Additionally, there can be more guided formatting to participants' answers to semi-structured questions. Such guidance could enable more robust identification and theme formation within the data while offering participants question guidance where they feel this would be accommodating (Zanuttini, 2023).

Additionally, only one of the five papers indicated using more than one approach. Goodall and Mackenzie (2019) conducted research using a quality participatory research framework, such as those proposed by Chown et al. (2017) and Fletcher-Watson et al. (2019). While the four other papers drew on gaps in the literature to highlight the research's procedures and aims, Goodall and Mackenzie (2019) drew on a children's research advisory group to identify factors important and meaningful to autistic girls. Similar examples of both participatory autism research (Wright et al., 2014) and child-perspective research have developed studies that are meaningful and improve knowledge bases. Critically, such research can inspire renewed vigour in autism research. Goodall also drew out more detail on their participants' school experiences from primary through secondary, adapting the style of their methods. Expanding beyond the children's research advisory group and semi-structured interviews, several participatory activities were adopted. '*Beans and Pots*', diamond ranking, '*Good Teacher/Bad Teacher*' and '*Me at School*' all drew on factors highlighted by the children's research advisory group to capture the girls' perspectives. Beyond simply ranking factors related to education, these were identified by autistic children prior to data collection. Past research has exemplified the value of such methods (MacLeod, Lewis & Robertson, 2014). The development of their research, in contrast to that of Dillon, Sproston and Whitlow, is vital to a developed understanding of autistic expertise. Utilising the children's research advisory group highlighted the role of autistic expertise through experience (Milton, 2014). Through emphasising the epistemic authority of voice from the outset of the review, the importance of autistic lived expertise intertwines throughout the findings.

Table 2.4: *Located Literature*

Paper	Method	Demographic(s)	Analysis	Themes/Findings
Billington, Loucas & Knott <i>“I liked school, but school didn’t like me”: Autistic Young Adults’ Reflections on Their Mainstream Primary School Experiences</i> (2024)	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews Focus Groups	6 autistic participants 4 female, 2 male	Thematic Analysis	The undesirability of difference The various guises of bullying The emotional labour of ‘being good’ Looking back
Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle <i>Autism and The UK Secondary School Experience</i> (2016)	Qualitative: Self-report questionnaires Semi-structured interviews	14 autistic and 14 NT adolescents Autistic cohort was built of 11 males and 3 females Both groups were gender matched Mean age 13.57	Content Analysis	Understanding of own behaviours Relationships with school staff Peer interaction and social skills Homework
Goodall & MacKenzie	Qualitative:	2 Girls	Thematic Analysis	Areas of discussion arose which were explored in detail from the

<i>What About My Voice? Autistic Young Girls' Experiences of Mainstream School</i> (2019)	Children's research advisory group (CRAG) Semi-structured interviews Several participatory activities <i>Beans and Pots</i> activity Diamond ranking <i>Good Teacher/ Bad Teacher</i> <i>Me at School</i>	'Sarah-Jane' (aged 17) Asperger diagnosis & auditory processing difficulties 'Ro' (aged 16) Asperger diagnosis & ADHD	girls' perspectives, falling under 'The educational experiences of Ro and Sarah-Jane': Impact on wellbeing Bullying and friendships Inclusion according to Ro and Sarah-Jane
Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane <i>Autistic Girls and School Exclusion: Perspectives of Students and Their Parents</i> (2017)	Qualitative: Open-ended interviews. Parents and girls were questioned about: (a) the current classroom environment; (b) experiences of exclusion; (c) prior expectations of their current educational	8 Autistic girls (11–18 years) who had experienced exclusion from mainstream secondary education and one of their parents (seven mothers and one father).	Thematic analysis Three themes and occurring sub-themes. Inappropriate school environments: Difficult sensory environments Classroom peers

provision; and (d) the girls' previous experiences of mainstream education

Alternative opportunities
Pressures in mainstream education

Tensions in school relationships:

Staff relationships

Peer relationships

Communication

Problems with staff responses:

Lack of understanding

School support

Parent battles

Personal challenges

Qualitative:

3 autistic girls:

Thematic
analysis

Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron

The Mainstream School Experiences of Adolescent Autistic Girls
(2022)

Case study	Elizabeth, Year 10, Age 14	Understanding of SEN and individual need
Semi-structured interviews	Bella, Year 10, Age 15	Facilitators
	Katherine, Year 11, Age 16	Social interactions
		Self-identity
		Awareness of autism/individual need

The individual themes which arose from each study were drawn from thematic analysis for four of the papers and content analysis from one (Dillon et al, 2016). These approaches allow structured elements to be extracted from participant voice and reflect their meaning (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Methodologically, the use of interviews with thematic analysis offers a strong intersection to interpret participant reflections. As each of the located held small participant groups, these stand out as appropriate approaches. Ultimately, 24 girls formed the overall participant group of autistic girls in the located studies. Critical engagement with demographics would typically offer depth and empower a review. However, the papers identified within the review don't all offer enhancement through exploring age within the demographics. The girls were typically towards the older age of pupils in UK schools. As such, the review gained strong backing due to a clear need to better understand autistic girl's school experiences through situated knowledge. To engage with nuance in these experiences, the review adopted a thematic analysis of the identified papers.

2.4 Extracting Themes from the Literature

Thematic analysis falls under a broad umbrella of processes, interpretations and developing themes. As a general approach, initially adapted from content analysis (Dusi, 2022), thematic analysis allows for identification of commonalities in the data and the evolution of themes. Based on the papers reviewed, engagement with thematic analysis required broadening beyond the much-used reflexive thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022). In working with the papers, I first drew on the works of Boyatzis (1998) and Guest et al. (2012), where coding processes were deductive and the nature of the data was explored with a specific goal in mind. In working with the located papers, each held context beyond simple data on pupils' school experiences. As such, coding was vital in finding the emergent themes across the papers. At its core, thematic analysis is a process of building themes from data through (re)reading, coding, clustering, and identifying core themes that align with different components of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; Robson, 2022; Silverman, 2021). As such, when drawing on existing data, the coding and clustering elements are key to gaining a real sense of it and its traction.

While thematic analysis doesn't necessitate a set structure or use, theorists have set guidance on performing thematic analysis. As I progressed with the data, I kept in mind insights from Boyatzis (1998) and Braun and Clarke (2006) to build a robust, structured process. Alongside guidance from Boyatzis (1998) and Guest (2012) on using deductive coding, I utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and writing up the report. First, I went through each paper individually, extracting the reflective accounts of participants. These were then combined into a single document such that the quotes were the central data used. With the data gathered together, I then began to follow the processes of coding and clustering it. I coded each quote, encompassing codes such as 'space', 'teachers' and 'support'. These framed the initial groupings of data, which could then be extracted and clustered. Clustering the data gave each dataset depth, enabling comprehension of its objective nature and meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2017, 2019). These clusters moved beyond the broader coding, splitting the codes (such as 'support' into positive and negative outcomes) into what would become the broader themes (Boyatzis, 1998). In moving to step three, the clusters allowed me to locate my initial themes, bringing forward elements such as 'mainstream vs additional needs schools' and 'good vs bad support'. Steps four and five were enacted several times, returning to the themes and revising them to really dig into the data and identify the higher order themes that emerged. Throughout the analysis, I remained attuned to the context and framing of the data, ensuring that the themes that emerged across the located papers reflected the accounts within them. The final recurring themes are discussed below, contextualised through the studies and the data which emerged from their participants.

2.5 Common Themes in the Literature

Thematic analysis gave rise to an overarching theme, *Common Themes in Education*, involving five themes, as shown below (Table 2.5). Repetitions arose through participant voices reiterating the same barriers and components of disempowerment. Focusing on the situated knowledge embedded within the five papers, nuance was encountered through the

emergent themes. Each reflected an intersection of the different findings and focuses of the papers, while situating current knowledge.

Table 2.5 - Emergent themes under *Common Themes in Education*

Common Themes in Education

Theme 1	A Detrimental Mainstream Experience
Theme 2	Teachers Make or Break Autistic School Experiences
Theme 3	Inclusion and Supportive Accommodations
Theme 4	Peer Relationships
Theme 5	Autism in Girls Is Misunderstood

2.5.1 Theme 1: A Detrimental Mainstream Experience

Throughout the located literature, the themes surrounding the school environment highlighted and reflected the rise in the perspectives of mainstream as detrimental (Hebron & Bond, 2017; Horgan, Kenny & Flynn, 2023; Larcombe, Joosten, Cordier & Vaz, 2019). Each paper focused on mainstream environments, with Sproston (2017) drawing on the autistic girls experiences in mainstream schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRU). As such each paper elucidated where struggles in mainstream emerged. Billington's (2024) exploration of autistic young adults mainstream experiences through focus groups and interviews highlighted a sense of intensity. Through reflecting back on primary school, participants highlighted mainstream settings as being both unsupportive and exhausting. The four women participating within Billington's (2024) research highlighted aspects of trying to perform as 'good' to meet expectations. Critically, argument could be made that these were autistic women reflecting on memories which are rooted in tensions and a different time and process in schools. However, the inclusion of Billington's (2024) work takes the opposing attitude.

Current framing of autistic girl's school experiences is repetitious, highlighted by the recurring connections across literature. As such, drawing on these alongside current reflections shows where changes are made and where more needs accomplished. Additionally, these reflections synthesise with current findings, suggesting that detrimental experiences of mainstream schools aren't shaped solely by the school approach, but the environment (Williams, Gleeson & Jones, 2019).

Indeed, early constructions and explorations of autistic children in mainstream schools highlighted that those with strong coping strategies may find school "intolerable" (Wing, 2007, p. 32). While Billington's paper was published, and located, after the research for the thesis had taken place, it is reflective of the findings across the papers located in the review. The idea of struggle and a detrimental experience in mainstream settings emerged across the literature, though attributed to different aspects of mainstream spaces. From Dillon's (2016) self-report questionnaires and interviews with autistic pupils (3 girls whose narratives are drawn in the review) in England, aspects of stress surrounded mainstream environments. The three girls took reflections on moving with the stressors, such as homework, to attain grades and their goals in school. These stressors reflected findings in Liefer (2021), suggesting that goals and seeking attainment don't eliminate the stress for autistic pupils in mainstream environments. Further, within Goodall's (2019) multifaceted approach to exploring autistic girls school experiences in a UK school, a sense of exhaustion and being emotionally drained emerged. Both girls in their research found difficulty, with one wanting to leave her mainstream secondary due to emotional stress. The nature of the school environment influenced the outcomes of these girl's school experiences. The first of these expressed a powerful and emotive reflection on the effects of school: *'I am not doing this [secondary school] anymore. I am physically, mentally and emotionally drained [...] I am done with this. Talking about it makes me angry [...] very angry and upset.'* Within the extract, the sense of frustration and anger highlighted the negativity of their experience. Goodall's second participant attributed the stress of the school's environment to their own stress levels: *'I was very stressed trying to cope with the noise, the large class sizes, the constant changing of classrooms.'* Here, the individual looks at the stress which maintains the day-to-day motions of schooling as having a negative influence on their experiences.

Critically, Goodall's (2019) participants highlighted more robust concepts of where mainstream becomes overwhelming through noise and joint spaces. Sproston's (2017) exploration of autistic girl's experiences of exclusion focused on mainstream and PRU settings. The impact of noise and difficulty in mainstream settings here expanded beyond those of the other studies. Critically highlighting why mainstream is viewed as so difficult, one of Sproston's (2017) participants narrated mainstream as a '*psychological enclosure*' where '*you are surrounded by all these people, all this different noise [...] a big room and lots of people in it*'. Reflections throughout the literature exemplified sensory overload as a barrier, though more consistently in mainstream environments. Noise became transferred throughout pupils' school trajectories, with the impact growing from primary into secondary environments. While an argument could be made that there are typically larger groups of pupils in secondary environments than in primary, the impact of noise remained consistent. Secondary schools also tend to have pupils regularly moving between classrooms and spaces. Reflections focused on mainstream environments, with larger spaces, pupil populations, and the consistency of movement being important factors. Within Tomlinson (2021), the physical experience of movement became exacerbated by noise: '*It was awful moving to the next class. Everyone was coming out and it was just swarmed with people pushing, running, shoving, throwing bottles*'. One participant in Sproston's work mirrored this: '*the corridors are evil [...] there's lots of people [...] it's very noisy and they touch you and I don't like it*'. Corridors and joint spaces, particularly in mainstream, were highlighted as places to avoid because they proved to be consistently overwhelming and noisy (Kanakri et al., 2017; Wood, 2020).

Reflections throughout the literature point to these issues remaining largely unaddressed in practice (Wood, 2020). Noise differed in its impact between the general school space and the classroom, with a sense of enclosure and claustrophobia surrounding the spaces between classrooms. The impact of noise within the classroom emerged as distracting and frustrating, and as a consistent barrier to concentration and learning. From the literature, a synthesis of the impact of noise can be drawn, highlighting a broader narrative of noise within mainstream environments, which placed further pressure on autistic pupils, expanding inaccessibility. Throughout the emergent literature, noise within mainstream settings framed a broader sense of negativity, leaving little sense of belonging or safety. For Sproston's (2017) participants, safety encompassed both physical and emotional aspects. A sense of safety was

valuable within additional support environments; *'The value of being somewhere where you feel safe, comfortable cannot be underestimated'*. Differing exponentially from mainstream reflections, the offer and sense of safety became naturalised within smaller settings. With staffing to pupil ratios being higher with smaller classes in additional support environments, reflections drew forth a sense of being valued through time and empowerment. Further results within emergent literature continue the exploration of empowerment through a sense of being understood and valued. Value within additional support environments brought an encouraging sense of positivity. Current debate centres on mainstreaming as effective from a practice and inclusion perspective (Larcombe et al., 2019; Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Neal & Frederickson, 2016). However, autistic narratives, as shown in this review, and teachers' reflections (Russell, Scriney & Smyth, 2023) highlight the actual difficulties faced in practice. As such, a sense of the binary opposition between mainstream and SEN remains (Birkett, McGrath & Tucker, 2022; Hammel, 2012; Neal & Frederickson, 2016).

Beyond the systematically located literature, a recent meta synthesis by Williams, Gleeson & Jones (2019) explored how autistic pupils make sense of their autistic selves, elucidated the difficulties autistic pupils faced in the accessibility of school environments. Transitional and joint spaces, such as corridors and lunch halls, pose the greatest challenge to autistic pupils (Nuske et al, 2019). When looking to secondary spaces, which were the core level of schooling explored by the girls in the reviews located literature, strategies for transitions are predominantly pupil-led (Birkett, McGrath & Tucker, 2022). Doing everything within their power, participants in Birkett (2022) sought to filter and drown out background noises which were new or more profound than in primary school spaces. When looking to the located literature, these implications can reason the narrative which arises with mainstream as detrimental. Further investigations into stakeholder perspectives on the suitability of mainstream provisioning for autistic pupils highlights the perceived failings of support (Attard & Booth, 2023; Bond & Hebron, 2016). Broader literature can elucidate reasoning on the perspectives which dichotomise mainstream and additional support settings. Within a review of 23 papers in the UK, Roberts & Simpson (2016) highlighted the main impactors on mainstream access for autistic pupils. Drawing on teachers, autistic pupils and parents as stakeholders, a lacking level autism knowledge emerged as the core barrier to an accessible mainstream environment. The knowledge of staff and teachers in mainstream were highlighted as being difficult to navigate by the girls in the located literature. Looking to

Sproston's (2017) contextualisation of a sense of safety in an English PRU, the smaller, more engaged classes were critical in creating a sense of value and belonging. Looking to the themes which emerged across the located literature, the impact of mainstream as detrimental critically framed those which followed. With the implication of mainstream spaces as inaccessible, reflecting broader conclusions (Hemmingson & Borell, 2002; Price & Romualdez, 2025), I also sought to explore the impactors surrounding these collective experiences.

2.5.2 Theme 2: Teachers Make or Break Autistic School Experiences

From the nature of negative mainstream experiences, aspects of positivity emerged in terms of the relationships formed with teachers. While these weren't wholly positive, with some reflecting a negative impact, they consolidated where influence from teachers emerged. The most recent findings in the review from Billington (2024) conceptualised a worrying narrative which frames the impact autistic girls can feel from teachers. When reflecting on their relationships with teachers, a mostly negative perspective, with one going as far as feeling bullied by one of her teachers in primary school. Teachers exert influence, through subconscious or deliberate means, over whether pupils have positive or negative experiences (O'Hagan, Bond & Hebron, 2022). Critically, as Billington's (2024) participants were reflecting on events from over 15 years ago, such a negative perspective remaining a core memory highlights how insidious school trauma can be.

Throughout the literature, participants further indicated that teachers influence could make or break their school experience. These fluctuated between some negative and some positive impacts which teachers had upon their school experiences. Within Sproston's (2017) findings on autistic girls in England, participants reflected negatively upon teachers; *'the teachers annoy me'*, *'they didn't understand me'*, *'some [teachers] were really grumpy'*. These were furthered by conceptualising a feeling of teachers just giving up on them. At the core of these reflections, the idea of being misunderstood is linked to a broader notion of teachers as problematic. Arguably, these may not be the teachers' intentions (Ravet, 2018). However, the impact on the emotional experience of pupil's shapes how they continue to

experience these teachers and classes. Further, within Dillon's (2016) exploration of autistic pupil's school experiences in England, the girls reflected on a negative teacher being one felt disengaged with the pupils and pupils needs. Critically, these focused on teachers setting group or class work and expecting the pupils to get on with it. The girls reflected on not always knowing and being able to keep up with the workload. Within mainstream classrooms and schools, autistic girls (and women reflecting on past experiences) highlight an overwhelming level of knowledge and awareness which adds to the stress of processing (Honeybourne, 2015; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2020). These reflections mirror the stressors expressed by Billington's (2024) participants, adding to the possibility of a broader issue remaining unaddressed.

Engagement with teachers forced a relationship upon the pupils, with differing needs being either perceived or not by teachers within mainstream environments. Being missed in terms of misconceptions of support needs in favour of louder voices in the class became a point of contention. Broader literature has troubled the need for, and comprehension of, mainstream environments for autistic pupils (Wolfe & Higham, 2020; Wolfe et al., 2024). There appears to be a discord between the autistic pupils' and teacher's perspectives. As such, the emergent literature indicates a lack of knowledge on the cohesion between perceived efficacy and the lived realities of autistic girls in mainstream school. Goodall's (2019) participants highlighted feeling let down by teachers, seeing a dismissive attitude towards them as framing a negative outlook. Critically, feelings of being undervalued or pushed to the side by teachers led into a sense of fear and trepidation.

Within the emergent literature, a sense of trepidation surrounded engaging with new or substitute teachers. Within Tomlinson's (2021) exploration of autistic girls' experiences of mainstream school in England, difficulties with new teachers and the prospects of working with these changing dynamics were examined. Partially, these were drawn from the fact that they were new and unfamiliar faces. For others, unfamiliarity was both stressful and perceived as not worth the mental stress; *'if there's a supply teacher or trainee then [...] that is always a time where I will leave'*. How these relationships formed wasn't wholly explored. Rather, these represented a stressor within an already tense environment for the pupils. The girls in Sproston's (2017) research conceptualised negativity from teachers with a sense of

fear that accompanied being chastised. For the girls in Sproston's (2017) research, the feeling of being under threat for being or acting wrong framed the negativity surrounding their perceptions of teachers. Critically, the girls highlighted being made an example of in front of the class making them feel under constant threat, highlighting the impact of fear which teachers can create. Within the broader literature, teacher attitudes towards autism highlight not feeling equipped to support autistic pupils (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018; Azad & Mandell, 2016). These sentiments tie with Tomlinson's (2021) participants believing teachers absolved themselves of the girls and passed these on to classroom supports. As such, the negative experiences surrounding teachers raises questions of knowledge and provisioning of support.

Beyond the negative experiences with teachers, the impact of a positive teacher was empowering. Such positivity, as felt from teachers, instilled a sense of belonging and compassion. Within the reflections drawn from the literature, the two girls interviewed in Goodall's study (2019) shifted the focus to being seen by teachers: *'being listened to [...] it's nice when teachers get to know the students because you get to know what they like'*. A sense of belonging and being understood is key to creating positive school experiences. The sentiment of being understood is reflected in broader narratives of autistic girls (Myles, Boyle & Richards, 2019). These also emerged across the conceptualisations of what made a good and positive teacher. Further reflections in Sproston (2017) highlighted similar thoughts on what an understanding teacher embodied: *'[they] understand where I'm coming from, and when I'm angry they leave me alone'*. Comprehension of needs here was exemplified through an understanding of where space from the classroom was required, recognised and allowed by teachers.

Within the located literature, the nature of positivity was framed through engaging and actively pushing and giving support. Participants within Dillon's (2016) exploration of autistic secondary school experiences highlighted that positive relationships with teachers formed when they could see that they actively tried to support and engage with them in the classroom. These sentiments were echoed by the girls in Tomlinson's (2021) research who saw positive relationships with teachers arising through being understanding. However, literature converges on the idea that teachers (primarily in mainstream environments) lack the

knowledge, time, and training to replicate this (Anglim et al, 2018; Conn, 2017; Rodden, 2019). The disconnection between expectations and the allocation of support in additional support and mainstream environments remains a point of contention. However, autistic girls in the emergent literature maintained a sense of positivity in the relationships which developed with teachers and other school staff. A gap in comprehending the limitations of SEN and mainstream environments requires a nuanced understanding from the autistic pupil's perspective. As such, there remain indications of further knowledge being required from this point of view. The value of teacher relationships then connects and leads into the themes which follow, focused on accommodations and social experiences.

2.5.3 Theme 3: Inclusion and Supportive Accommodations

The third emergent theme arose from how mainstream and non-mainstream environments were perceived and experienced. This involved exploration of how accommodations and inclusion were experienced. Goodall's (2019) two participants offered an interesting perspective on what inclusion meant: *'to be treated as a person [...] a feeling of being happy, welcome and belonging in the environment'*. The same individual further discussed inclusion, stating *'it's not the building which matters, it's the attitude and atmosphere inside it'*. These insights are critical to understand the rest of the theme and the literature which it speaks to. A sense of belonging and being valued underpins inclusion as a feeling. In building on how inclusion is felt, Goodall's (2019) two participants also highlighted where they felt included and supported through answers to 'I feel happy at school' with untrue and 'I like going to school' with the words *'unwanted'*, *'scared'*. The conclusion from Goodall also highlighted that "they do not enjoy non-discrimination, empowerment, acceptance or a sense of belonging" (2019, p.18). For the girls to conceptualise what inclusion means and should feel like while not experiencing these at school is a poignant sentiment to commence this theme. Knowing inclusion while not feeling it threaded throughout reflections on accommodations.

Within Dillon's (2014) cohort, one of the three autistic girls added to this sentiment with respect to instances where more pupils were involved, and everyone was engaged in the classroom. Critically, such a perspective mirrors past reflections on what inclusion can and

should mean (Douglas et al., 2019). Emotive aspects of inclusion are vital to reframing and restructuring *how* inclusion is felt beyond a definition. Further, the girls in Dillon's (2016) research conceptualised the differences which felt more inclusive and accommodating. Being pushed into choosing partners to work with often left the girls being paired with the teachers or forced to stand alone while their peers paired up. They also highlighted that having groups set and being smaller were more accommodating as these enabled the girls to focus and engage better without becoming overwhelmed.

These sentiments were mirrored within Billington's (2024) participants narratives. Through their exploration on autistic adults reflecting on their primary school experience, there remained a distinct intensity in these narratives. Participants here highlighted that looking back on their awareness and the accommodations elucidated what should have happened. While, arguably, the participants didn't know their needs at the time and these developed throughout the school journeys, tensions emerged in believing that more should have been done. The four women reflected on being autistic girls in primary school as needing more support and that teachers should have realised and accommodated these. The structuring of accommodations not being in place or understood was further complicated by Sproston's (2017) participants. For transitions into the PRU or into secondary school prior to these, their participants highlighted that aspects of inclusion and accommodations were made but where wholly unsuitable. These then tainted how the school experience was framed. Further, the girls in Sproston's research exemplified where supports were agreed upon, initially given and then no longer implemented by the schools. By removing the accommodations, the schools, whether consciously or not, communicated a lack of belief that they were needed. Doing so underestimates needs, reflecting conclusions in broader literature from autistic girls and women that they remain unseen and unacknowledged (Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). Further, these highlight the gaps arising, discussed in depth later in the chapter, which suggest autistic girl's voices lack a balanced engagement compared to male peers.

While the application of accommodations was debated, Sproston's (2017) cohort drew more opposing perspectives on how accommodations and inclusion were experienced. Within the PRU environment, one participant saw the removal of certain classes from their timetable as effective in aiding their management of anxiety and being overwhelmed: '*they*'

completely cut out the social side of education, so in free periods or times where I didn't have lessons I could leave the school, which was really valuable'. Such a perspective may be viewed as stereotypical given broader concepts of autism, though the removal of social expectations can lessen the tension and stress that daily school life entails (Billington et al., 2024; Mayes et al., 2021). While some may find solace and comfort in the reduction and removal of classes (Rutherford et al., 2020), this is not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution and can lead to the complete removal of school provision (National Autistic Society, 2018). Autistic girls are an often-underrepresented group within school narratives, facing difficulties in finding supportive accommodations, leading to being absent from school (Moyse, 2022). Structuring accommodations requires continued practice and reflection to ensure these are suitable and adaptive to individual needs (Howard & Vajda, 2016). While autistic pupils report that these accommodations have no impact on feelings of inclusion (Goodall, 2020), teachers highlight a lack of time and resources to implement further inclusive accommodations (Anglim et al., 2018; Rodden, 2019). How pupils see autism as being understood was also framed in terms of stereotypes, constructing gaps between inclusion in practice and how pupils experience this. Though a level of positivity developed, the nature of inclusion remained at odds with its experience. Autistic pupils have reflected on inclusion throughout the literature (Goodall, 2020; Sedgewick, 2016). From early inceptions of autism-focused literature, inclusion has continued to evolve. However, the relegation of autistic needs within mainstream environments continues to prevail, leaving a sense of anger and hopelessness. Such a disconnect represents significant gaps between knowledge and practice - one requiring further exploration.

2.5.4 Theme 4: Peer Relationships

The fourth theme examined the difficulties experienced in navigating social spaces and feeling socially exposed. The nature of bullying, isolation, and difficulties experienced with socialising led to negative school experiences. Within Goodall's (2019) exploration of two autistic girls' school experiences in England, both participants experienced social isolation. Throughout their interview, one participant reflected being a victim of social and physical violence, which continued into secondary with the same perpetrators:

‘I was bullied when I was younger [...] verbal physical and there was once [...] sexual [...] which is bad. It was a pupil. [Short silence and closed body language – squeezing her arms in]. Some bullies followed me to secondary school which made me feel I couldn’t answer any questions or talk out’

The detriment experienced by this young woman impacted all aspects of her school experience. With the perpetrators still sharing her new school environment, a seriously troubling lack of support shows the systemic ingraining of social violence in school spaces. The reflection from Goodall’s participant here elucidates the insidious nature of bullying. From the reflection, a sense of injustice can be drawn. One which reflects the broader literature of unseen and unacknowledged instances of gendered violence towards autistic girls (Cooke et al., 2025). Instances of social violence such as these can have a lasting impact on the building of friendships and connections (Saggers et al., 2017). The girl in the extract above further elucidated upon social isolation throughout the classroom and the broader school environment. Even when they believed they had found a bond within school, these unfortunately appear to be surface deep: *‘I found that I had no close friends and no one to talk to. I felt very lonely and often found myself without anyone to play with’*.

The experience of bullying frames a significant component of autistic school reflections. Arguments about the nature of bullying have highlighted stereotyping and teachers’ attitudes as influencing peer attitudes towards autistic pupils (Cook et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020). For autistic girls, the consistent impact of bullying and isolation has led to absences from school (Moyse, 2021). In Sproston’s study (2017), one participant explored how social bullying pushed her away from having friends. Filtered through a sense of confusion, the participant expanded on the issues of making new friends when already having a friend group: *‘I was a bitch for talking to other girls and being friends with them and that I was abandoning them and betraying them’*. The subtleties of socialising instigated isolation through frustration. Manoeuvring through social spaces and friendships seemed to exist on a spectrum across the located research.

One of the girls within Billington's (2024) exploration in England elucidated the social impact of using accommodations: *'Sometimes I was allowed to leave [the class] and pace in the corridor but I often didn't do that cus [...] people would bully you then because of that. Or like, pick on you for leaving (Sophie)'*. The nature of this quote explicitly shows the impact of not only being different but also being seen as different. While accommodations are hard fought to get, othering through accessing these poses a secondary challenge to autistic girls. Overcoming social barriers becomes a point of systemic challenge when accommodations create marginalisation. Here, Billington's participant elucidates the explicit form that bullying and social exclusion can take. Tomlinson (2021) has argued that the exploration of school experiences indicated that subtleties of socialising led to a sense of being left behind. The nature of isolation stems from the intersections of social difficulties with the nature of school groups and expectations (Brede et al., 2017). Linking with the social pressures, aspects of bullying which emerged across the five papers can be contextualised through connected repetitions in broader literature. From Cappadocia, Weiss & Pepler's (2012) self-reporting on bullying from 192 parents of autistic children, several factors emerged which contextualised the type of bullying their children faced. Their children were reported as experiencing bullying focused on their mental health, social and communicative difficulties and their (lack of) friend groups. Ochi et al (2020) utilised a comparative approach to bullying and school refusal, measuring between 94 autistic and 143 neurotypical children. Of the 94, 27 autistic participants were girls, with autistic pupils facing significantly higher rates of bullying leading to school refusal. While extensive, there is a bigger picture missed, which autistic voices can expand upon.

Looking to the impact of peer relationships, a recent study by Atkinson, Wright and Wood-Downie (2025) adds nuanced perspectives on autistic perspectives. In their open-ended online survey, including 25 autistic girls, a content analysis reflected the concerns autistic pupils hold. Critically, the findings reflected the importance of peer relationships, though concern on the veracity of these beyond the school. Worryingly, 66% of their participants felt they didn't belong at school. While not a piece of research which fit the boundaries of the review, Atkinson's (2025) research reflects the detriment explored in the located research. As such, comprehending where the difficulties emerge is key to nuancing current findings. Aspects of socialising can become pressured through gendered expectations, with navigation of identity politics magnifying these (Walton & Fisette, 2013; Youdell, 2010). Within Dillon's

(2016) cohort, the girls reflected on social difficulties with a focus on struggling to make friends. These were reflected by Sproston's (2017) participants, where the social pressures and subtleties became barriers to making meaningful connections. Further to these elements, social difficulties, rooted in unwritten rules and actions, brought about a sense of exposure. Social exposure left individuals with a further sense of isolation. Critically, this relates to friendships and the classroom itself. The nature of feeling exposed extended beyond solely social instances. Broader social judgments and the perception of peers led to a consistent sense of unease in autistic girls (Corscadden & Casserly, 2021), and as such there remains a lack of cohesion in how these social difficulties are addressed.

Relationships weren't framed as wholly negative. Rather, there were gems of value which emerged and were important to the girls. Within Tomlinson's (2021) reflections of autistic girls mainstream experiences in England, participants highlighted the value and support close friends offered. Placing importance on friendships has been shown in broader literature (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018; Fox, Williams & Asbury, 2024) elucidated in Sedgewick's (2016) research on gendered difference in autistic adolescents motivations for friendship highlighted the positive aspects of having companionship. Further, later research by Sedgewick (2019) suggested that autistic motivations for friendship were rooted in gendered differences in perceptions of what friendship entailed. For the girls in the located research these sentiments were reflected. Within Dillon (2016) and Goodall (2019), the mainstream school experience of the girls saw the struggles in wanting to make good friends. Critically, for the two girls in Goodall's (2019) research, friendship was the second most important factor in their school journeys. Having close friends allowed a sense of belonging, akin to inclusion through feeling valued. Autistic narratives have explored the nature of being othered and pushed to conform to social boundaries (Lawson, 2008; Martin & Milton, 2017). Understanding the nature of these interactions requires engaging with further voices. The need to pressure the self to fit a particular narrative of teachers and peers creates unattainable goals for some autistic pupils. Anger, frustration and fear are powerful emotions. These extended to a negative view of school environments and experiences. Such experiences have pushed autistic girl out of school (Moyse, 2020; Moyse & Porter, 2015), replicating a worrying trend in autistic narratives which requires further nuance. From the located literature, the small number of studies expanding autistic girls school narratives shows the need to build and address these impacts. Throughout the emergent and broader literature,

there is a clear gap with respect to addressing autistic needs and the danger of becoming further isolated.

2.5.5 Theme 5: Autism in Girls is Misunderstood

Looking at Table 2.5, the final theme that emerged across the located papers brought together the emerging narrative through elucidating the impact of misunderstandings of autism. Building on the preceding themes, this final aspect captured how being seen and understood as autistic by peers and teachers affected daily school life. Throughout the located literature, a narrative emerged which focused on how autistic girls perceived others knowledge of autism in schools. These were framed through exploration of being othered, feeling a sense of not belonging and teachers knowledge leading to a lack of support. Within Tomlinson's (2021) exploration of school, one participant highlighted the impact that a lack of understanding of autism can have on perceptions of self and frustration, exemplifying her feelings when being observed by teachers: *'They're just sort of there like, "why is that girl there rocking? What's she doing?"'*. The impact of misunderstanding and stereotyping became so great that some would disengage and leave the classroom. The notion of being underestimated was pervasive across the broader literature (Hungerford et al., 2025). Engaging within schools while being infantilised and underestimated added nuance to where (mis)understandings of autism lay.

Such perspectives were core to the frustrations of autistic girl. One participant in Tomlinson's study highlighted her levels of frustration following official diagnosis: *'I didn't understand that like people before I was diagnosed would always say "when you live on your own" it was always "when" and now it's "if". And it's like [...] what's changed?'* This sense of unease and confusion highlighted how stereotyping can hinder through others' infantilisation and underestimating of their ability (Akhtar, Dinishak & Frymiare, 2022; Bosco, 2023; Hungerford et al., 2025). Further, Tomlinson's (2021) participants narrated a sense of being pushed beyond their means as teachers didn't understand their needs and limits. Published following data for the thesis being gathered, Hamilton and Roberts (2025) elucidated the socialised impacts of gendered norms continuing to infringe gendered

understanding of autism. Drawing on interviews with 9 girls attending a Welsh mainstream school, the broader findings conceptualised similar repetitions to the findings in this review – peer relationships as fragmented and teacher impact on school experiences. Critically, these findings linked across the located literature, showing acknowledgment of the impact of gendered stereotypes in how autism is seen in schools. Throughout the papers located in this review, the nature of autistic girl's school experiences was been framed through being misunderstood. Differing from the second theme in section 2.5.2, here the girls in the five located papers highlight, through exploring being misunderstood, that knowledge on autism and gender requires bolstering.

Within the reflections, a broader narrative connects with outside literature on self-reflection and where voice and the impact of being misunderstood goes unseen. Billington's (2024) participants reflected on embodying the nature of systemic constraints and the need for change by drawing on self-reflection and self-discovery following their time in primary school. Primarily, the participants highlighted the need for support and knowledge as having these would have changed their experiences, with one of the girls highlighting the emotional impact of being misunderstood and under-supported:

Looking back, like, it just makes me angry. I'm just, like, full of anger because if they'd just intervened a bit earlier, y'know...maybe I wouldn't have gone through all that mess (Sophie, in Billington, 2024)

Self-discovery and self-reflection are powerful narrative tools. Critically, these engage with the unseen impact of being underestimated and feeling undervalued. Infantilising and underestimating based on outdated stereotypes of autism remains prevalent (Hungerford et al., 2025). Educators highlight the nature of autism as difficult to comprehend (Anglim, 2018), although, arguably, these remain tethered to the nature of seeing the stereotype rather than the individual. Such systemic constraints within mainstream schools create a consistent barrier. The nature of being understood as both autistic and as an individual has garnered limited exploration within literature (Botha, 2020; Wood, 2020). However, further

consideration is required to develop strategies as to how these can expand current practice and knowledge, within the classroom and beyond.

Enhancement of teachers' knowledge was highlighted by the negative components of participants' experiences. One voice within Goodall's study created a starting point for engaging teachers who were lacking knowledge: *'teaching staff might have to re-adjust their thinking and attitudes towards someone with autism and how they can best provide support'*. Miscomprehension of autism continues through stereotyping and available resources, which perpetuate othering and infantilisation (Hungerford, 2025). A recent exploration of 17 mainstream school staff, twelve of which were qualified teachers, in England situated reflections on meeting autistic girls needs as facing barriers (Ward & Powell, 2026). Core to these were time and training constraints which ensued that knowledge wasn't always applicable or specific. Within these reflections, a dearth arose between the availability of autism specific training and knowledge between primary and secondary schools. The issues in knowledge arose when autism and gender resources and training was discussed, with one participant highlighting; *"Unless you sort of go to something that's specifically oriented towards autism in girls ... I don't think it gets mentioned at all"* (Ward & Powell, 2026, p.7). Critically, and more importantly for this review, these are mirrored in the autistic girl's narratives, emerging through a systemic undervaluing and misunderstanding of autistic needs.

The systemic nature of autistic girls as undervalued and misunderstood expanded across systemic boundaries, progressing into joint and social spaces. Sproston's (2017) findings highlighted autistic girls as experiencing being misunderstood by both peers and teachers. Within their interviews with autistic girls, Sproston's (2017) findings elucidated how the girls saw themselves as being misunderstood by peers and teachers. Teacher's misunderstandings of autism and gender led to needs being unaccommodated, while peers didn't understand their actions and socially disengaged with the girls. Critically, disengagement has led to autistic girls being absent from schools (Friswell & Egerton, 2019; Sproston et al, 2017). Goodall's (2019) participants mirrored these findings, showing that peers socially distanced themselves. Interestingly, both papers engaged the idea of autism as a difference, as an othering experience rooted in both gender and autism stereotypes and how the don't fit. Gendered stereotyping has infringed on the navigation of school spaces

(McCabe & Anhalt, 2022). As such, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that autistic girls would face similar barriers. In addition, autistic girls already face stigma through the stereotyping of autism, as previously discussed (Brickhill et al., 2023). The systemic nature of autism being understood in terms of inability remains mainly centred in androcentric terms and thought. As such, the nature of peer and teacher miscomprehensions of autism is critical to understanding where the systemic barriers to accessibility lie.

Engagements with broader autistic narratives provide insight into the impact systemic school contradictions can ultimately have. For some, a teacher's approach gave a form of permission to peers to treat autistic girl differently (Simone, 2010). While diagnosis remained core to stereotyping, the nature of teacher understanding failed to recognise daily struggles. One struggle, which was replicated across the emergent research, indicated the nature of teachers' engagement in support. Little was drawn from the literature to enhance comprehension of reclamation or to challenge the framing of autism from participant perspectives. In much the same tone, the themes which emerged within this review don't offer a foundation for the contexts of space and place within the school. As such, the rest of the chapter will integrate these gaps which require address and situate the research and direction of the thesis.

2.6 Implications from the Review

From the thematic findings, the basis of knowledge was drawn to highlight recurring patterns throughout the literature. Despite clear advances in engaging with the challenges autistic girls face in primary and secondary education, numerous important factors remain unaddressed. A distinct gap exists with respect to gendered approaches to school experiences. The autistic participants in the located research indicated a need for further understanding of ability, environmental influences, and sensory processes. Given the push to advocate for gender equality and a balancing of gendered power in education (Cin, 2017; Gill et al., 2016), there remains a clear disconnect between practice, policy and experience. The five located papers bring a significant insider perspective to where progression and failures lie. Primarily, there remains a distinct focus on the negativity associated with mainstream settings and the lack of autism knowledge. As knowledge on autism and gender has become more

comprehensive, paired with growing autistic pupil numbers (Scottish Government, 2025), practice knowledge should also be improving. Given research findings are continually expanding knowledge, clear improvements have been made. However, the repeated narrative of detrimental experiences shows that changes are either not universal or aren't truly impacting autistic pupil's daily lives. As such, a clear gap lies in understanding how and why autistic girls remain unseen, and how autism and gender are understood in school spaces.

Lax knowledge extends to engagement with autistic girl's voices. Such engagement spans two core facets – entangling voice with knowledge and empowering voice. These voices are not given space to situate knowledge compared to their male peers. Indeed, the research highlighted in the review reflects the low numbers of autistic girls narratives being engaged in literature. While I have reiterated the slowly emerging understanding of autism and gender in diagnostics, I have also argued against viewing autistic girls as constituting a now *emerging population*. Rather, these voices have continued to exist within social margins, often behind social masks (Bargiella et al., 2016; Seers & Hogg, 2023; Stewart, 2012). The concept of lacking engagement is reflected in the studies which engaged both boys and girls. Within the located papers, Dillon (2016) engaged with the largest cohort, including 14 autistic and 14 neurotypical pupils. From the 14, only three autistic participants were identified as girls. Such disparities are reflective of the broader need to recognise the individuality of autistic gendered experiences to push from the androcentric generalising of the autistic experience. From the themes which emerged focused on accommodations (section 2.5.3) and autism and gender knowledge (section 2.5.5) there are implications from the unseen impact these have on autistic girls. Tying with the broader educator reflections on lacking training and knowledge provisioning (Ward & Powell, 2026), a gap emerged on how autistic girls experiences are translated into applicable knowledge which requires address.

Two of the emergent themes (sections 2.5.2 and 2.5.4 above) highlighted the nature of relationships and understanding from peers and teachers. From these and the lacking knowledge on autism and gender there were clear implications for *how* autistic girls are understood in the school and in broader knowledge. Throughout the located papers, aspects of not fitting stereotypes emerged through not being understood and support needs being unacknowledged. Here, the girls explored being fitted into brackets of autism stereotypes but

not fully being a part of these. Arguably, these could be seen as a broader reflection on autism knowledge. However, this thesis' argues that these are an issue of how autism and gender are *conceptualised*. The girl's voices within the literature review reflected being misunderstood, socially exposed, bullied and struggling to be recognised. This forms a gap where a novel way to conceptualise autistic gendered school experiences is needed. Arguably, misrecognition of struggles *could* be attributed to masking, though the onus is then placed on the pupils. Rather, these girls are within systemically bound spaces which have collective rules and regulations which they are expected to adhere to without explicitly being told what these are. As such, the review shows that little is known about how schools are understood and navigated, or *how* these spaces empower or fracture school experiences. More in-depth research on how spaces and school institutions are navigated would work critically to engage and empower autistic voices. Finally, the contextualisation of the research and thematic findings raised issues of location. As the UK encapsulates differing approaches within the devolved governments, each context offers somewhat unique insights. Ultimately, no literature emerged which centred autistic girls' school experiences within the Scottish context. Bringing this together with the lacking knowledge on autistic girl's school experiences and understanding of how school spaces are navigated, clear gaps which require address emerged which guided the research for this thesis.

This chapter aimed to locate and show existing gaps in literature to justify and place the need for the research in this thesis. Extracting the gaps from the thematic findings and review foregrounded areas requiring focus. A need for a novel conceptualisation of autism and gender became apparent. Through my interpretations of the literature, a lens of misfitting in the work of Stenning (2022) could improve knowledge bases. Critically, the repetitious nature of research requires address to begin improving the current knowledge base and autistic girl's experiences of school. Little is known about the setting, navigation, and intersections of space, gender, and autism in schools. Further, the located literature held no account of any differences which arise in mainstream and non-mainstream school environments. Integrating these components, the research and thesis gained a foundation. Contextualisation of the Scottish experience offers the research an area of exploration. Focus on autistic girl's experiences of schools should also be explored through the exploration of navigating school spaces. Given the gaps which are evident in the literature, an approach that

engages and empowers voice should be adopted, being adaptable where required. Building on these gaps, I developed the basis for the research.

2.7 Conclusion

The literature review has systematically given an account of current literature, drawing out common themes which capture autistic girls' school experiences in the UK. As such, the chapter has provided a lens through which to envision and rationalise the research. The review also highlighted the lack of a knowledge base on the Scottish context, utilising literature from the wider UK to contextualise current knowledge. This has led to explication of the dual commitment of this research to explore school experiences and to platform autistic girls' voices in these narratives. The thesis will now proceed to the next chapter, which will detail the methodology used.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Analysis

3.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure

Progressing from the literature review, the methodology chapter sets the foundation of the approaches used in the thesis and the rationale behind these decisions. Exploring the methodology establishes the journey of decisions made and literature considered to best explore participant voice. My position within the thesis is set out, discussing how I fit and am suited to conduct the research. The conceptual framework is then discussed, justifying the decision on utilising feminist standpoint's epistemic authority of voice, and feminist disability theory's misfitting as an embodiment of challenge to social stereotyping. Justification is given for the choice of a research design of case study methodology, before discussing the reliability of the recruitment. Within the discussion of recruitment, the processes of manoeuvring gatekeepers to locate participants is highlighted before exploring the demographic of autistic girls. The research procedure is then discussed through a re-balancing of power, before the thematic analysis and accountability are considered. Throughout the chapter, issues of power balance, voice and methodological reasoning are addressed within the research context.

3.2 Positioning

Research is a living, fluid process, requiring consistent reflection and adjustment to ensure adaptability. While endeavours to construct a perfect process oversee research design, data and outcomes, these are ultimately influenced by the researcher's positioning (Adkins, 2004; Gounder, 2025; Skeggs, 2002). Positioning refers to the elements of identities which construct belief systems, worldviews, engagement, and perceptions of community (Adkins, 2004; Crasnow, 2013; Dean, 2017; Harding, 2009; Skeggs, 2002). Where researchers fit within their research ultimately underlies the intricacies of power, place and comprehension of participant realities. To ensure reliability throughout research processes entails being open and honest in reflecting on how the researcher may impact and influence the research process, data, and interpretation of the findings. Throughout, the researcher must also annotate and highlight their position and how these relate to power (re)distribution across the

research. As a cis-male researching gendered autistic experiences, interrogating my positioning aids in untangling and redistributing power. Throughout this section I explore the positions of power I hold and how I challenged these.

3.2.1 Positioning Myself Within the Research Boundaries

Explorations of the world begin with understanding how we are positioned to interpret and understand it (Goundar, 2025; Holmes, 2020; Smith, 1987). We can *position* ourselves, *situate* ourselves, *integrate* ourselves in our research, though we cannot create entirely neutral research. As eloquently stated by Stanley and Wise, '[w]hether we like it or not, researchers remain human beings' influenced by 'feelings, failings, and moods', holding a contingent 'influence [on] how we feel and understand what is going on' (1993, p. 157). The position of the researcher will invariably hold some influence within the research, requiring in-depth self-reflection as to how they impact throughout the research process. Doing so is advantageous for more than creating rich context, as it can allow for a more robust interrogation of power structures (Reich, 2021). It is important to understand that as the research process becomes adaptive, the researcher should be responsive to these changes. The nature of power within the research process entails being aware of how researchers impact participants and their engagement. Though achieving this takes consistent practice and reflection.

Reflexivity as a praxis involves 'disciplined self-reflection', and a detailed exploration of what influence researcher morals, values and virtues will have upon the interpretation of findings (Wilkinson, 1993, p. 493). For myself, reflexivity is critical to navigating the impact of marginalisation felt by autistic girl (Adkins, 2004; Harding, 2009). Within the debates surrounding feminist standpoint theory, the core facet remains to interpret and bring to life the voices of those oppressed and suppressed by social institutions (Gurung, 2020; Harding, 2004; Intemann, 2016). Dean's writing on reflexivity states it to be 'a widely highlighted issue in research practice', and one which 'still causes confusion, suspicion and wariness' (2017, p. 1). As much as the research process can be recognised as following a procedure or laid out format with participants as social agents, there remains the issue of the researcher forgetting themselves. In taking from feminist rhetoric the notion of the inability to

separate the self from research (e.g. Ahmed, 2017; Stanley and Wise, 2002), it is necessary to look to my positioning, primarily my identity as autistic, a researcher and an autism practitioner.

3.2.2 My Identity Within the Research

As I fit society's idea of 'average' or 'able' in terms of the material body, the inner turmoil of my intersecting identities poses difficulty. Each of these intersections - sexual identity, neurodivergence, working-class roots - offer a different understanding of myself. As a white, working-class, cisgender, bi, autistic male, there remains a large part of my belief system wherein I see myself as an imposter. Imposter syndrome is common within the academy (Breeze, 2018; Chapman, 2017; Parkman, 2016), and particularly so with PhD students (Bothello & Roulet, 2018; Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). Do I have a right to engage with autistic girl? Am I the right person for this research? Will I be seen as a fraud? Though common worries, I believe these to be questions I must explore and address. How then am I the *right* person for this research? In designing the research these factors remained key aspects requiring reflection. In navigating power dynamics and positioning myself, reflection took the form of Figure 3.1, wherein the multifaceted components which found core aspects of my identity are mapped, with each standing alone while intersecting concurrently.

Connecting influence across my identities are elements of power. My whiteness, being cisgender, and the privilege of passing throughout my school journey all contribute to an experience which may diverge from those of participants. Through reflection, the research design was then framed to redistribute power. Interviews were constructed to place power in participants' hands, while the research process ensured participants guided questions and refused those which made them uncomfortable. Rapport was built through reflection in the interviews, engaging with participants and being guided by their body language and reactions. To maintain accountability and reflection throughout data management and analysis, memo-writing and reliability checks were consistently used. While these components are explored in greater detail below in section 3.9.1, they are core to introducing reflexivity as praxis. Reflecting upon Figure 3.1, I will now progress to discussing the three core facets of my identity relevant to the research.

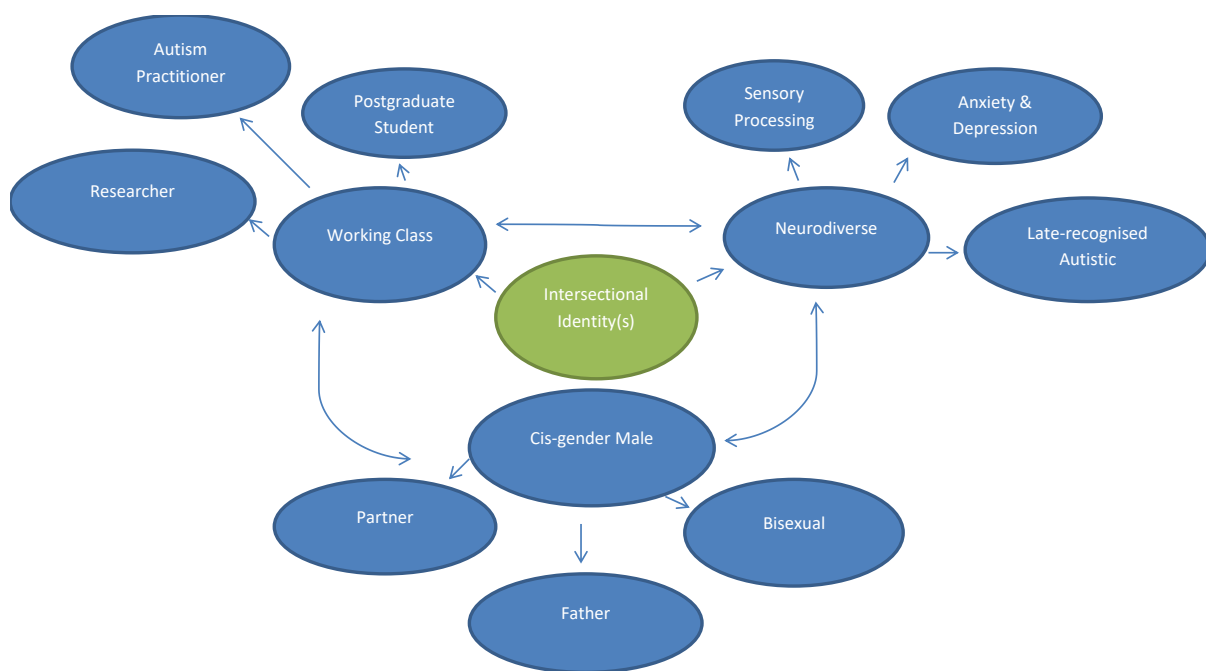


Figure 3.1: *Researchers' Intersecting Identity(s)*

White, Cisgender Male Researcher

My position as a white, autistic male places a certain level of privilege and power in my hands which may create unwanted or unseen boundaries between researcher and participants. In their work looking at *Critical feminist reflexivity and the politics of whiteness in the 'field'*, Faria and Mollett see whiteness:

not as fixed, biologically determined, phenotype, but as a structural advantage, standpoint, and set of historical and cultural practices. Positioned as a noncategory, normal, natural' (2016, p. 81).

As such, my whiteness presents a problem, particularly when looking to the gendered experiences of pupils who have faced marginalisation. My identity holds a level of privilege – though as Manion and Shaw (2009) point out, no-one is consistently privileged or oppressed as these are fluid concepts. Being a white male has troubled my approach to the research. Masking my autistic identity has enabled me to achieve a good education, as has my

time in higher education. As such, there are environments, scenarios and gendered barriers I haven't had to face. It may be easier for myself as a cisgender male to not feel the implication of my gender identity. While some would perceive gender as a fixed identity (Wood & Eagly, 2015), such ideologies find their origins in deeply ingrained social or cultural traditions.

Gender is not solely an overarching, definitive, or master status bound in the rigidity of social binaries (Riforgiate & Ruder, 2017). As a researcher involved in gender research, creating space for broader interrogations of participants' experiences requires attentiveness. As practice, attentiveness entails progressing boundaries as a researcher, while ensuring awareness of participants' individuality (Ackerly & True, 2019). Attentiveness to my identity was bound into the process, drawing on components of Oakley's feminist re-framing of interviews (1981; 2016), incorporating components of feminist standpoint and feminist disability writings (Garland-Thomson, 2001, 2011; Harding, 2004, 2009; Stenning, 2022). The re-interpretation of my white maleness through these concepts highlighted the subtlety of my positioning. Systems of oppression impacted me based on my class, and now neurodivergent, identities rather than my gender and being. However, social and occupational spaces weren't made as inaccessible as they would likely be for participants. These elements needed to remain in my direct awareness to ensure a balance of power throughout the research process.

Late Recognised Autistic Male

Autistic reflections highlight perceptions of incapability and being misunderstood in education environments (Goodall, 2020; Goodall & McKenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017, Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2021), and my experience resonates with these. What were differences and 'strange' to peers, teachers and family were my ways of meeting sensory needs. Staring into the sun as intensely as possible until my eyes strained at the sensation or squeezing my eyes until I 'saw stars' as I found the sensations soothing and calming, were ignoring the teacher/adult/others and being ignorant or lazy. Being or sitting still resulted in constant chewing of my clothes for some form of input. While this was perceived by teachers as me being 'socially anxious', there remained only a half-truth to this. Interactions with peers moved from my personality coming through to mirroring the interests of those around me to fit in. While masking is common in autistic reflections (Cook et al.,

2018; Tierney et al., 2016), it meant repressing certain actions and forms of stimming for sensory input to ‘fit in’ with peers.

Identifying oneself as an autistic autism researcher can potentially entangle and trouble the politics of motive and meaning in research. Reflecting on their work as an autistic autism researcher and advocate, Botha (2022) points to both the empowerment they experienced and the condemnation they faced. Despite the strides made in achieving a PhD in the field of autism research, Botha still faces criticism due to being autistic. We either ‘do not have qualifications in the field [therefore] we are not qualified to speak to our *own* existence, and yet, even when we are we are biased anyway’ (Botha, 2022, p. 6). Even though autistic individuals have reflected on their position in their research, such expertise continues to be perceived as agenda through identity (Gillespie, 2017; Milton, 2014). Accessing these intricacies through connected identities, however, may leave the researcher open to claims of projecting an agenda upon the research. In abating this potential, I utilised reflective processes within both the data analysis and re-reading phases, which I will detail later within this chapter.

Autism Practitioner

My work as an autism practitioner also holds implications as to how I view certain aspects of theory, practice and points of autistic experience. During my eight years as an autism practitioner, I have supported young adults and adults in their daily lives. Within the practice contexts of housing and day centre support, I have witnessed the negative impacts of school experiences extending into adult life. What may seem small, or even insignificant, actions, phrases or tones can have a lasting impact (Shkedy, Shkedy & Sandoval-Norton, 2020). Forced to sit still at tables for lunch becomes freezing in a shared kitchen. Authoritative tones from anyone close-by remind some of teachers in their time at school, triggering flashbacks and a fight-or-flight response. The idea of entering somewhere busy becomes a reminder of school corridors, having to be navigated carefully to avoid being overwhelmed. These factors represent daily struggles for people I have supported, whose trauma stems from experiences at school. While these aren’t representative of every school experience, a sense of wariness has influenced my outlook.

Within the practice context of my role, I have consistently engaged with the impact of theory and policy on practice. Such engagement has framed a disparaging perspective. My work experience has elucidated points of failure of policy related to inclusion. How autism training and education is structured and applied, and the ability of practitioners in different settings to adequately support autistic individuals across their life journeys, feels lacking. As such, I am positioned to interpret certain elements of participant experiences through a lens of embodied frustration. In managing my position, I remained reflective, drawing on memo-writing to interpret and regulate my thoughts and how they tied into the data analysis.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

Conceptually framing research involves understanding how the research is influenced and understood through certain paradigms and positioning on knowledge production, epistemology, and lived realities, ontology (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Research is framed under a paradigm, being a “a set of beliefs about the way in which particular problems exist and a set of agreements on how such problems can be investigated” (Fraser & Robinson, 2004, p. 59). These are all encompassing throughout the research and “provide the boundaries for the researcher’s ethics and values, actions in the social world, the control of the study” extending throughout the research process from “basic and fundamental understanding of the world the researcher is investigating” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p.25). As such, how the researcher views, understands and seeks to interpret participants realities and data is rooted in the research paradigm.

While I argue that autistic girl’s voices remain lost or unheard within educational knowledge bases, importance lies in how I *see* this being framed. Partially, I see these as situated by outsiders in terms of stereotyped dualisms, while also framed in how knowledge is situated. Dualisms reflect the mirroring of binary systems as a means of perceiving the world (Boyer, Mayes & Pini, 2017) - men/women, nurture/nature, rational/emotional. Feminist epistemologies and knowledge production challenge generalised and dualistic constructions of lived realities. These challenges emerged against positivist concepts of an

objective truth. Comte's perspectives on positivism, which he argued as being reflective of the ideas of Socrates and Plato, say that reality could only be explored scientifically, being influenced by natural laws (2025). Critically, Comte theorised how scientific methodology could engage and explain knowledge (Marla, 2025). The positivist perspective argues that "all objects that are not approached by the method of observation and experiment are merely imaginary creations" (Maretha, 2023, p. 127). As such, a positivist outlook can be seen to push a way of knowing the world which is grounded in a sense of objective absolutes.

Much of the processes of positivist research has been rooted in quantitative approaches (Maksimovic & Evtimov, 2023). As such, arguments against the veracity of truth in positivism pushed back on the idea of objective truth (such as feminist standpoint theory under Harding, 1997; 2009). However, the nature of voice isn't rooted in wholly interpretive approaches. Arguably, positivist-framed methods have been applied successfully beyond wholly quantitative methods, being employed in ethnography (Hayre et al, 2022) and anthropology (Marla, 2025). However, debate from a post-positivist standpoint argues that positivism commences:

with a reduction of the context of investigation to the rules of logic and to a precise language whose meanings are transparent to those in the scientific community who use it (Ariail Reed, 2023, p. 25)

Commencing from a reductive stance of objectivity fails to then incorporate the differing factors which shape and influence realities. A singular truth can only be reflective of a singular phenomenon, ultimately missing the vastness of social and cultural realities.

An interpretivist paradigm is grounded opposingly to positivism, understanding that problems and realities are socially contextualised (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Rehman and Alaharti, 2016). While the development of interpretivism is attributed to Lincoln & Guba's (1985) work on naturalistic inquiry, the paradigm emerges throughout differing prior research exploring lived realities. Contextually, understanding through this paradigm involves the

belief that reality is socially constructed, with multifaceted interpretations with subjective meanings. In their review of paradigms, Alharahsheh & Pius (2020) stated that interpretivism “considers differences such as cultures, circumstances, as well as times leading to development of different social realities” (p. 41). These aspects set the nature of being and investigating realities as intersecting, a critical factor for the research. Critiques of the interpretivist paradigm argue that there is a lack of generalisability (Mack, 2010). Rather than simply limited to typically smaller demographics of participants, criticism extends to viewing findings through interpretivism as limited to one group and context (Cohen, Manion & Marison, 2011). The research in this thesis, arguably, is located in exploring a particular context for autistic girls. However, the thesis, as discussed in detail below, is also grounded in feminist standpoint epistemology and feminist disability ontology. The current research explores more than one context, while seeking the social constructions which frame autistic gendered experiences in schools. Therefore, while an interpretivist framing would empower voice, the research requires commencing from a paradigm which sees these as socially constructed.

Similarities emerge across interpretivist and constructivist paradigms (Parsons, 2010), through key differences emerge. For the research a broader lens was necessary to understand autistic girl's experiences. As such, my work is rooted in constructivism, invoking feminist standpoint epistemology and feminist disability ontology to conceptually frame the research. Constructivism perceives that multiple realities emerge and exist across individual narratives (Liu & Matthews, 2005). While interpretivist outlooks focus on interpretations of the world, constructivist outlooks focus on the social constructions of participants realities (Adom, Yeboah & Ankrah, 2016). As such, the meanings which participant derive, and construct are core to understanding and untangling these realities. As the thesis interprets the realities which are shaped by, and shape, autistic gendered experiences, there is a need to interpret social constructions of participants. Critically, constructivism doesn't begin with specific theoretical shaping, rather it seeks to understand knowledge throughout the research process (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Further, the paradigm understands that researchers are not a neutral part of the process, a critical factor as my positioning discussion highlighted earlier in the chapter.

As constructivism overlaps at points with interpretivism, there are similar criticisms which arise. As the social realities of participants are explored, there are criticisms of constructivism which emerge from these. Interpreting social realities and meanings entails contextualisation of both findings and implications. Criticism arises on the generalisability of constructivist findings, citing these as being only applicable to the context of the research (Trainor & Graue, 2014). As such, argument is made that implications from constructivist framed research aren't useful beyond their given context. Further critiques build on the idea of generalisability, expanding to the situating of the research and data. Argument is made that constructivist research struggles with a lack of awareness of the social structures which influence participants construction of meaning (Liu & Matthews, 2005). As such, findings are seen as isolated within these interpretations, with little acknowledgement of the impact of these social structures and institutions. However, the research requires interpretation of the social structures which impact participants constructions of their reality. Tied with misfitting as an ontological conceptual framing, the thesis offers insight while building beyond these criticisms. As such, a constructivist paradigm merges with a focus on empowering and investigating through participant voices.

With the positioning of this thesis being that autistic girl's voices are missed within educational knowledge bases, it became apparent that drawing on feminist epistemology and ontology would be key. Feminist epistemology has worked to untangle understandings of truth, objectivity, method, and the knowing subject (Van der Tuin, 2016). Accumulating perceptions of knowers, their positions and lived expertise allows for understanding of cultural, material and community knowledge of the world (Barbour, 2018). Connecting these perspectives, I perceive knowledge as part of individual and collective lived, daily experiences. The research therefore draws on feminist standpoint's epistemic authority of participant voices and feminist disability's critiques of social and neuro-normalcy through misfitting.

3.3.1 Situating Voice Through Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

Standpoint epistemology moved beyond generalisations of women's lives, arguing that sociology ignored, objectified and *othered* women from the outside (Smith, 1987). Though literature has progressed since Smith's *Everyday World*, her point remains highly relevant. As feminism(s) have continually developed, so too has understanding of minoritising and oppression throughout different cultures, identities and political standings. Standpoint theorists began by recognising how power relations help shape our understanding of the world. Harding, seen as the matriarch of standpoint feminism, moved against positivism, citing 'feminist empiricists' (1993, p. 51) as those who do not intend to challenge or reinvent knowledge development, but rather to improve existing frameworks (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Indeed, in Hartsock's earlier writing on standpoint feminism, the opposition to positivist and empiricist approaches arose from the idea that individuals/groups/communities 'see [...] the world in a particular way', solely on the basis that they 'live in a particular social location' (1997, p. 37).

Standpoints are not exclusive to any theoretical basis, method or political ideology, they are based within the perspective of the individual, the community, the society (Harding, 2007). To engage with feminist standpoint(s) is to interrogate the intellectual and political experiences and struggles of women from their perspectives as insider experts. Hekman's *Truth and Method Revisited* (1997) argued for feminist standpoint as claiming an objective truth and rejecting postmodern/poststructuralist ideologies. Within their interrogation of feminist standpoint theory, Rouse (2009) indicated the interchangeability and consequence of knowledge as gathered or acquired throughout experience rather than an unchanged representation of the individual/community. As such, to foreground a 'truth' as the *one truth* of an individual or group would be to fail the marginalised voices which hold epistemic authority. From feminist standpoint theory, I draw my epistemic stance through aiming to empower autistic girls epistemic authority of voice.

Insights which connect feminist aspects of gender performance and standpoint conclude autistic women as fighting for space and voice (French, 2024). When connecting

feminist standpoint theory with autism research, the intersections of gender and power through voice are to be considered. Russell et al suggest “autism, autistic identity, diagnosis of autism and masking/performance could be usefully separated.” (2025, p. 9). While pushing towards a neuro-inclusive approach to autism and gender, arguably untangling realities requires untangling the systemic barriers which surround these. Without these barriers being interrogated, how these systemic contradictions influence autistic girls’ experiences and actions in schools remains unaddressed. Comprehending the reasons for masking intersects with the gendered experience through actions and social pressures on performance (McQuaid, Lee & Wallace, 2022). For the research, comprehensions of masking as passing, hiding or escaping are core to understanding why these actions are necessary in schools. Actions of empowerment through centring voice are vital to understanding the lived realities, both individual and collective, of autistic girls.

Though much work has been accomplished through exploring the daily lives of autistic women and girls through their own voices (particularly in Carpenter, Happé & Egerton, 2019), the early life experiences of autistic girls are largely unexplored. The experiences and lives of marginalised peoples provide particularly significant *problems to be explained* or research agendas. Hartsock asserts that the concept of the ‘feminist standpoint’ had been developed in the first place to oppose the view that social groups ‘see [...] the world in a particular way’ just because they exist ‘in a particular social location’ (Hartsock, 1997, p. 371). Autistic individuals can hold both insider *and* outsider knowledge, drawing on the experience and expertise of both sides (Naples, 2013). and building an understanding of girl’s experiences from their current and past reflections. Particularly for autistic girls, knowledge surrounding the school experience is lacking compared to male and neurotypical peers. As such, feminist standpoint offers a lens which places the epistemic authority of participants at the core of the research.

3.3.2 Misfitting the Narrative: Feminist Disability Ontology

The study of disability as an academic field and site of activism has branched beyond the reductivist overlook of positivist and medicalised thought in the last two decades. While critical disability studies has drawn on disability models and activism to develop its pivotal

adaptation to thought and knowledge around disability (Goodley, 2013) other paradigms have further moulded disability studies. Feminist disability studies (FDS) ‘encourage us to move away from universalizing concepts of disability to reveal the multitude of disability experiences’ (Knoll, 2009, p.124), seeking to incorporate individual experiences rather than a single shared experience. Socio-political challenges to the constructed materiality of bodies and disability are at the heart of feminist disability studies. Garland-Thomson reiterated that ‘disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune’ (2001, p. 17). Tremain’s (2017) work on *Knowing Disability Differently* has exemplified such a need while also building a challenge as to what remains to be accomplished. Conceptualising epistemic injustice, Tremain calls for those with epistemic expertise to be better accounted for in research. Advocating for the inclusion of disabled lived knowledge production mirrors my consistent call for the same with autistic girl’s voices. As such, the need for an ontological perspective, gleaned from FDS, is vital to perceiving autistic experience beyond the material body.

Garland-Thomson wrote of the disabled body as a source of power, intersecting disability knowledge with ‘feminism’s most significant academic contribution to date’, arguing that this is its ‘mandate to consider gender as a category of difference’ (1994, p. 583). In her work, Garland-Thomson expands on this thought: ‘If disability is inherent in the human, how can it at the same time disqualify us from full membership in the human community?’ (2012, p. 339). While Garland-Thomson’s work tends to focus on the material, my thoughts move towards the neurodiverse, though the idea and argument remain similar. Autistic individuals have historically been left out of research which explores their lives. Seen as unable to participate, with needs prohibiting a normal life (Lawson, 2008), autistic voices have been repressed in favour of those of parents and professionals. More recent argument has led to the discussion of autism as difference rather than deficit (Kapp et al., 2013), progressing trajectories which mirror disability epistemology.

Misfitting or misfit theory (2011) builds a theoretical understanding moving beyond viewing disability in terms of the individual and empowerment. As a concept, misfit moves against the blanket constructions of disability while solidifying agency through identity (Garland-Thomson, 2013). The epistemic authority of voice then links autism and FDS. Hall

(2015), writing in *Hypatia*, seeks to move towards a ‘critical and political disability analyses’ which offers ‘challenges to persisting assumptions about central concepts in feminist, queer and disability studies’ (2015, p. 1). In combatting such heavily ingrained notions of disability, the individual and their identity are vital. In understanding the motivations of the current developing research, such thought offers context.

To misfit as an autistic is to be a challenge, or trouble, to the dominant ideologies of both social and neuro-norms (Stenning, 2022). Such explorations require comprehending marginalisation through the ableism pushed upon autistic individuals ‘forced to question the validity of their experiences’, navigating the implications of socially imposed norms to untangle the ‘painful aspects of misfitting’ (Stenning, 2022, p. 2). Such a focus looks to the implications of environment, material and immaterial disability for the individual. Within the research design, the need for comprehension of realities entails misfitting as a valid and critical engagement. Autistic girls’ experiences of how gender and individuality are conflated with an androcentric norm requires engagement with insider perspectives which move away from the collective. Through the lived realities of participants as challenging neuro-normalcy, misfitting understands that the intersections of gender and autism can challenge current knowledge. As such, drawing on the concept of being epistemically disturbing allows the research to be positioned in exploring and drawing nuance from individual and collective participant school realities.

3.3.3 Stories or Stigma: Autistic Narratives

As the concept of ‘authoring autism’ is central to the thesis, understanding the various arguments and perspectives is vital to moving forward. How stories are constructed relies on intersecting factors which construct our identities and how society perceives these. Storying can ‘help constitute and construct our realities and modes of being’ while maintaining ‘social and cultural’ individuality (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 18). Building on Smith’s belief that ‘selves and identities are constituted through narratives’ (Smith, 2008, p. 24), requires one to test their own boundaries and comfort. As such, when storying disabled lives issues of power through social structures may arise.

Two prominent texts have influenced my understanding and reasoning regarding looking at re/storying autism. The first, Yergeau's *Authoring Autism* (2018), highlights the discord created through challenging the ableist and reductionist outlooks of autism by drawing on both autistic and non-autistic lenses. Much of the writing on autism has historically come from lenses which are 'rooted in misogynistic and scientific reduction' (Yergeau, 2018, p.68). Such positivist angles hold conceptualisations which 'almost inevitably portray autistics as white' (Heilker, 2012, para. 2). The rhetoric developed around autistic individuals who aren't white males leaves little room for comprehension beyond certain stereotyped constructions. Such issues are raised by Yergeau as seeing autistic individuals as 'lacking self-reflection', thereby impeding engagement with their experiences and their 'narrative value' in favour of outsider perspectives (2018, p. 7). In exploring participant narratives, the design of the research sought to build rapport and empowerment, and to show the value such narratives offer to the building of knowledge bases.

The second core influence on my work, a study by Douglas et al. (2019), brings together six participant-made short films which put forward an understanding of autism, school experience and inclusion. Douglas' work moves in a manner which 'keeps the meaning of autism moving, always emerging, resisting, fading away and becoming again', while these stories 'shift what autism might be and become' through intentional and subconscious juxtapositions (2019, p. 3). Douglas' participants present a narrative of 'embodied difference as relational, generative and desirable' (2019, p. 27), encompassing an understanding which draws on autistic identity and experience. The framing from both Yergeau's and Douglas' work offers a model which encompasses my philosophical approach to neurodiversity; not interchangeable with perceptions of 'normal' or in need of 'recovery' or intervention but *relational* and *generative*.

Entangled within the position of this thesis is a need to better understand autistic girl's lives through situated knowledge, developing generative knowledge to nuanced current knowledge bases. Reductionist approaches and understanding of autism as whiteness (Heilker, 2012; Yergeau, 2018), male (Baron-Cohen, 2009), and a childhood condition have done little more than repress engagement with other autistic narratives. Through bringing concepts of shape, mind, and neurodiversity together from these perspectives, the ability to author these

stories is placed instrumentally through adopting these concepts. Together, the conceptual framework recognises and promotes the importance of understanding and including autistic girls' stories as vital to building new knowledge.

3.4 Case Study Design

Beginning from an epistemic position of autistic girls as knowers with epistemic authority was vital to the design of the research (Crasnow, 2019; Harding, 2009; 2014; Steiner, 2018;). Further, understanding the intersections of autistic identity and gender is critical to developing knowledge of school experiences. Through, drawing on components of misfitting the research set out an approach which focussed on excavating depth while understanding participants embody challenge and resistance to dominant and systemic stereotypes (Garland-Thomson, 2012; Stenning 2022). Critical connections between epistemic authority of voice and misfitting bridged the need for a research design which understands how identity and autism are socially constructed and stigmatised. Drawing from the knowers perspectives (Cohen et al, 2021; Harding, 2014; Murdock, 2021; Yin, 2018), bridging the implications of disability and the immaterial (Garland-Thomson, 2012; Kaffer, 2017; Stenning, 2022) while exploring the lived realities of school experiences from participants voices drew me towards a methodological design which linked these.

Case study research seeks to contextualise participants' real-life experiences of environments, situations or institutions (Yin & Davis, 2007). As such there is a degree of initial ambiguity when looking to what a case study can, and does, entail. Some scholars perceive that:

the essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result.

(Schramm, 1971, in Yin, 2018, p. 14)

These decisions aren't limited to one side of the divide either. Comprehending "*how* the subject is identified" [emphasis added by me] and *why* something might have happened or why that may be the case (Thomas, 2011, p. 4) applies to both the decisions made about the research, and the context of participant's lived realities. As I formulated the design and methodology for the research, I held in mind a particular quote throughout my framing of both the research questions and research design: 'both empirical material and theoretical literature are necessary, but neither is sufficient on their own' (Schwartz-Shea & Yannow, 2012, p. 34). Formulation of the research was considered alongside the theoretical perspectives of feminist standpoint, feminist disability, and misfitting, alongside the findings from the literature review. As such, beginning from an epistemic position of autistic girl as knowers with situated knowledge was vital to the design of the research (Crasnow, 2013; Harding, 2014; Steiner, 2018; Van der Tuin, 2016). Further, comprehension of where components of autistic identity intersect with both challenges and successes holds vital potential in developing knowledge of lived realities, nuancing outsider comprehension of autistic identity within schools.

Nuanced findings on autistic girl's school experiences within Scotland are almost non-existent, despite recent findings suggesting that 2.6% of pupils in primary schools were autistic in 2022 (Maciver et al., 2023). As such, drawing on components of misfitting through the immaterial, that is the neurological rather than the body, broadened the approach to uncover depth within school experiences (Garland-Thomson, 2012; Stenning 2022). Drawing from the knower's perspective (Cohen et al., 2021; Harding, 2014; Murdock, 2021; Yin, 2018), bridging the implications of disability and the immaterial (Garland-Thomson, 2012; Kaffer, 2017; Stenning, 2022), while exploring the lived realities of school experiences guided the methodological choices I made. The case study design allows for the research to explore depth in participants' experiences (Bromley, 1986; Stake, 2013; Swanborn, 2010; Yin, 2018; Yin & Davis, 2007), particularly within educational contexts (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2012; Harrison et al., 2017; Merriam, 1988). The research in this thesis sought to engage with the school experiences of autistic girl and girls within the Scottish context. As such, comprehending gendered differences within the lived reality of school experiences requires engagement with feminist epistemology.

Recent writings focusing on the methodological implications of case studies when paired with feminist knowledge production have nuanced how these can link. As I began to bridge the two, I engaged with Aragon's elucidation on a situated case study (2021). A situated case study seeks to 'realise the values of situated methodology, both in their formulation and in the theorising, they enable' (Aragon, 2021, p. 41). Thusly, a situated case study should place value on the approach utilised, while ensuring the value from participant reflections is drawn upon and developed effectively. Aragon highlights three elements which situate the ontological accounts of the cases: gives salient construction of the description of the individual's real-world context of the case; brings together experiences of (in)justice and how these factor into real-life lived experiences for marginalised individuals; backs the evidence through empirical literature in a systemic manner. Drawing on the idea of situated case studies for the research brings a level of nuance to the methodology.

My interpretation of case studies drew on elements of feminist standpoint and disability theories in figuring epistemic and ontological comprehension. Utilising situated case studies enables exploration of autistic girls' school experiences in three key stages. Firstly, the situated case study allows the research to explore each participant's experiences individually, with depth and breadth. While it is important to remain aware that these cases represent reflections explored during a certain time and research environment, as individual facets of the research they are vital. Each case represents what participants felt was important to their experiences. The case study method then lends itself to laying a foundation for each case to stand alone with respect to the school experience of each individual participant. Secondly, the situated case study alongside thematic analysis (discussed in greater detail later in the chapter) offers the conceptual framework more robust integration into the analysis. Utilising situated knowledge's epistemic focus on participant voice to root the data and cases offers strength to the research methodology. Tied with feminist disability ontology as a process to understand experiences relating to autistic identity and gender allows the case study method to situate participants lived realities. Thirdly, entwined with the first two points, the thematic analysis of each case allows the commonalities between the cases to synthesise into a broader narrative surrounding autistic girls' school experiences. In doing so, the nuances of autism, gender and school experience can be approached concurrently to enable a distinct narrative. As such, the case studies highlighted points of marginalisation, oppression,

disempowerment, and the gendered components impacting participants lived realities (Cohen et al., 2021; Fehr, 2021; Murdock, 2021; Yin, 2018).

3.5 Research Rationale

With the foundation set I began to untangle the rationale which framed the research questions. Synthesising the findings from the literature review chapter added to my understanding of the gaps in engaging autistic girls' school experiences. The intersections of the school spaces, gender, and autistic identity are core to the explorations of this research. Critically, it is how the knowledge can be located while ensuring voice is centred that drives the research questions. As Figure 3.2 shows, each of the individual elements which stem out from the centre, *Autistic Pupils' School Experiences*, represent the repetitions highlighted in the literature review. The figure shows the two core areas of impact, the self and the school community, which influence school experiences individually and collectively. Each branch of the 'self' relates to how developments of image and representation can be aspects of performance and misfitting with respect to the neuro-norm. These elements hold negativity, though reflect a broader story.

Autistic girl's narratives frame a sense of loss of voice and agency within their school journey's, as evidenced in the earlier literature review. Identity and misfitting related to perceptions of *neuro-norms* highlight how aspects of gender, masking, and being unseen influence and intersect with the experience of school community. 'School community' branches mirror the impact of both school experiences and othering. Each branch leading

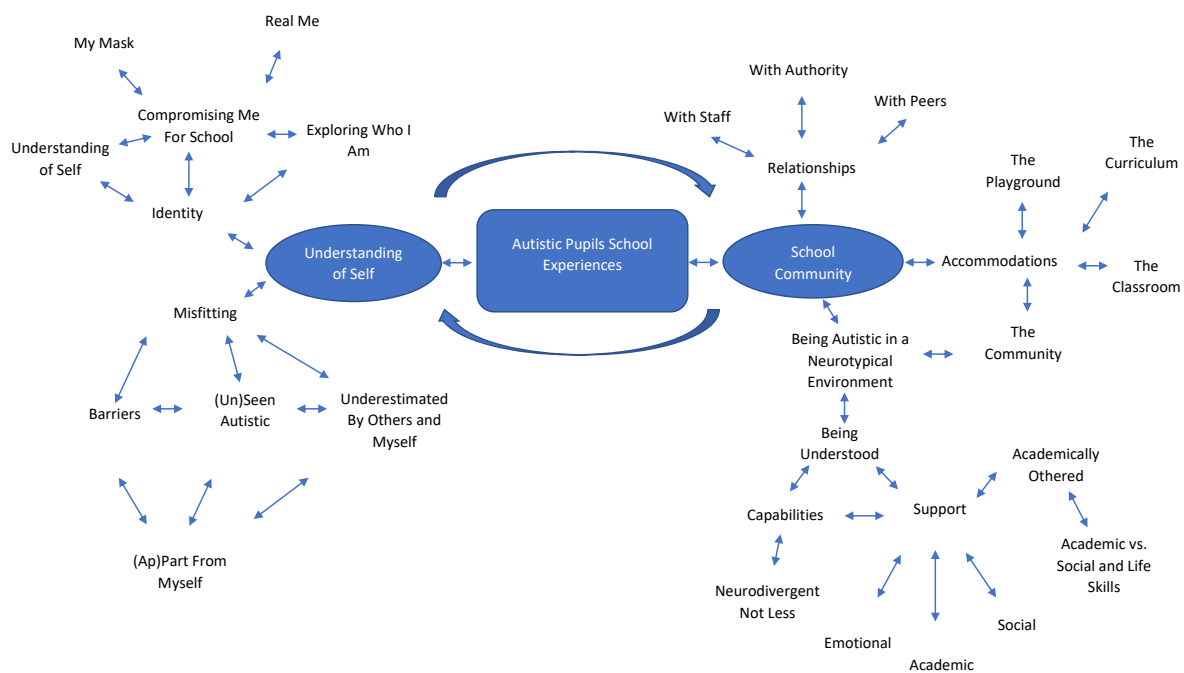


Figure 3.2 – *Synthesis*

outward and back inward reflects each component intersecting and impacting the others. Here, the entanglement represents the core findings from the literature, highlighting the impacts of misfitting and being misunderstood. In approaching the rationale and objectives of the research the voices of autistic participants and broader narratives remain central. Situating the knowledge of autistic participants allows for engagement with direct experiences which are rooted in lived expertise (Gillespie-Smith et al., 2017; Harding, 1987; 2009; Milton, 2014). How these voices are framed can inhibit critical and successful development of autism knowledge. As such, the research questions are founded on an overarching question, which focuses on autistic girls epistemic authority.

3.5.1 Research Questions

The overarching question is formatted to encompass several elements of the school experiences of autistic pupils, while looking to inclusion within classroom communities:

How do autistic girls create and navigate spaces in the Scottish education system?

Part of the drive for such an approach relates to the increasing acceptance of how successful mainstreaming autistic pupils has become with little consideration given to the broader potential outcomes (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a, 2008b). Indeed, the literature review conducted as part of this thesis have shown the gaps in current understandings of autism, markedly when looking to gender identities outside of cis males' experiences. Further, the value of an empathic, understanding, and knowledgeable educator is immeasurable to promoting a positive educational experience (Brown & McIntosh, 2012).

However, the system reportedly fails to offer a certain intricacy to training to allow for individuals to *have* space. The importance of space is multifaceted (Massey, 2013; McDowell & Sharp, 2016; Yuan, 1979), yet for autistic and other neurodiverse individuals, space is rarely explored outside of advocacy and online contexts. Spaces and social geographies for autistic individuals hold an empowering, and often new, engagement with identity and understanding of self (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Brownlow & O'Dell, 2013). These spaces can empower, support, include, and help with the development of self-understanding (Gans, 2002). Yet within the Scottish context there remains no literature on such processes for autistic pupils.

In building on the need for autistic individuals' voices to be included within current knowledge, the first *sub-question* focuses on the autistic pupils themselves:

1. How are the school experiences of autistic girl and girls situated?

The value of experience lies in an individual's *situated knowledge* – that is their lived expertise (Harding, 2009; Milton, 2014). Individuals receiving educational provision hold valuable expertise on how the system functions and supports. Seeking to fill the gap within current research entails focusing on marginalised narratives. Progressing the exploration involves exploring situated knowledge further. With the noted generalisations in educational reflections failing to highlight intersections relating to gender in autistic children's and

adolescents' reflections, (e.g., *Aspergirls*, *Autism in Women and Girls*, and *Spectrum Women*) there remains a broadening gap in understanding. Investigating how these experiences are felt by these pupils, alongside current practice within the school and classrooms, will allow for a critically developed understanding.

2. *What do these reflections tell us about the way spaces are created and navigated within schools?*

While the first research question moves to understand general experiences, the second enables interpretation of the intersecting factors of pupils' lives through comprehending their experiences. Building upon a feminist-framed lens for the research, there is a need to bring elements of empowerment to participants. Through engaging participant reflections, an in-depth comprehension and development of the ways in which autistic learners manoeuvre through educational spaces can expand current thought. Critically, this can allow knowledge development to reflect participants' *unseen* experiences through a lived and expert lens. As such, the third research question will seek to build on participants' knowledge-production in working alongside the narratives to develop knowledge to advance educators' comprehension of accommodation and space:

3. *What knowledge and messages can be drawn upon to enhance comprehension and expand on creating space for autistic girls in schools?*

The final research question will act to envelop and bind the three sub questions together to answer the overarching research question. Through engaging the situated knowledge of autistic participants' lived experiences, this question brings together the knowledge drawn throughout the research to allow core messages from autistic participants for teachers and schools to be given place to enhance current knowledge bases.

3.6 Recruitment and Participants

As the research set out with the aim to explore autistic girls school experiences, the recruitment strategy adopted both purposive and snowball sampling. The use of an eclectic recruitment strategy has proven effective in approaching and exploring autistic girls experiences (Hamdani et al, 2023; Moyse, 2021). Purposive sampling, according to Campbell et al, should be “aligned from an ontological, epistemological and axiological perspective with the overarching aims of the study” (2020, p. 653). The conceptual framing of the research focused on the epistemic authority of autistic girl’s voices. As such, purposive sampling allowed the specific population to be targeted throughout the recruitment process. However, with my maleness and the impacts following COVID, I remained aware of the difficulties that could arise. Combining purposive and snowball sampling allows for broader networks and individuals to be contacted and potentially recruited. Important to the use of snowball sampling were Noy’s (2008) conceptualisations of social knowledge and power relations. Noy’s exploration of snowball sampling highlighted that snowball sampling was consistently used as a “safety net or a fall-back alternative” rather than an active approach (2008, p. 331). In situating snowball sampling methodologically, Noy urges understanding of knowledge location and production. For the research these were elements already in consideration, both practically and conceptually. Epistemic authority of voice aligned with the recruitment approaches, allowing the final group of participants to be located.

Early conceptions of gatekeeping, such as that by Broadhead and Rist (1976), have elucidated the control gatekeepers hold and how they may *trouble* research. Gatekeeping influences the research endeavour in several ways: by limiting conditions of entry, by defining the research problem within the area of study, and by limiting access to data and respondents. Kay (2019) explored avenues and difficulties relating to accessing gatekeepers with respect to research involving young people and vulnerable children. From Kay’s paper, elucidation of gatekeepers holding power and influence over access through their perception of the research study’s value and direction are highlighted. The relationship between gatekeeper and researcher is a vital yet complicated one (Crowhurst & Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013, p. 457), with the possibility of gatekeepers influencing whether participants consent to research involvement (Emmel et al., 2007).

Knowledge on autistic school experiences should be located and produced by these voices. Locating a population which already faces lacking inclusion in Scottish literature forced reflection on how to approach potential participants and gatekeepers. As such, the recruitment plan was built on three core points of contact to reach participants: schools, including mainstream, ASN and other environments such as charity-led education; charity organisations based within Scotland; and social media posts and groups with a focus on autism-led and autism-specific groups. The rationale here allowed for a broader approach which understands that autistic girls aren't necessarily engaged with school institutions (Moyse, 2021), while comprehending the individual nature of experience.

The recruitment process was split between stages 'A', 'B', and 'C'. Figure 3.3 below shows the distribution and stages of the recruitment process. Stage 'A' involved locating potential schools, charities, and social media groups as sites for recruitment. Locating potential points of contact, each of Scotland's 32 local authorities were explored, going through school information and websites to identify schools which were ASN specific, hold additional support bases, and were likely to be a contact point for participants. Arguably, almost every school in the UK has autistic pupils, it is, however, the nuances in understanding autism and additional needs which would enable schools to identify these girls. Stages 'B' and 'C' were easier to approach as they involved smaller groups. Stage B involved locating charity groups which offer support to autistic children, young people, and parents of autistic children. The charities located were both larger, offering support across various boroughs and Scotland itself, and smaller, local charities to incorporate as broad an audience as possible. The third stage, C, involved a broader audience to contact. Stage C was built from different social media groups, forums, and sites to purposely target parental groups, support groups and autistic girls themselves.

Following ethical approval from Strathclyde University, I commenced recruitment with strategy A. As the schools were divided into Local Authorities I began emailing headteachers and heads of ASN with the information sheet for schools (shown in Appendix 3). Several local authorities required an application to be filled out detailing the content of the study and the justification of it before authorising schools to engage with the research. Upon

confirmation I began batch-contacting ten schools to understand the nuances of the recruitment process and adapt as necessary.

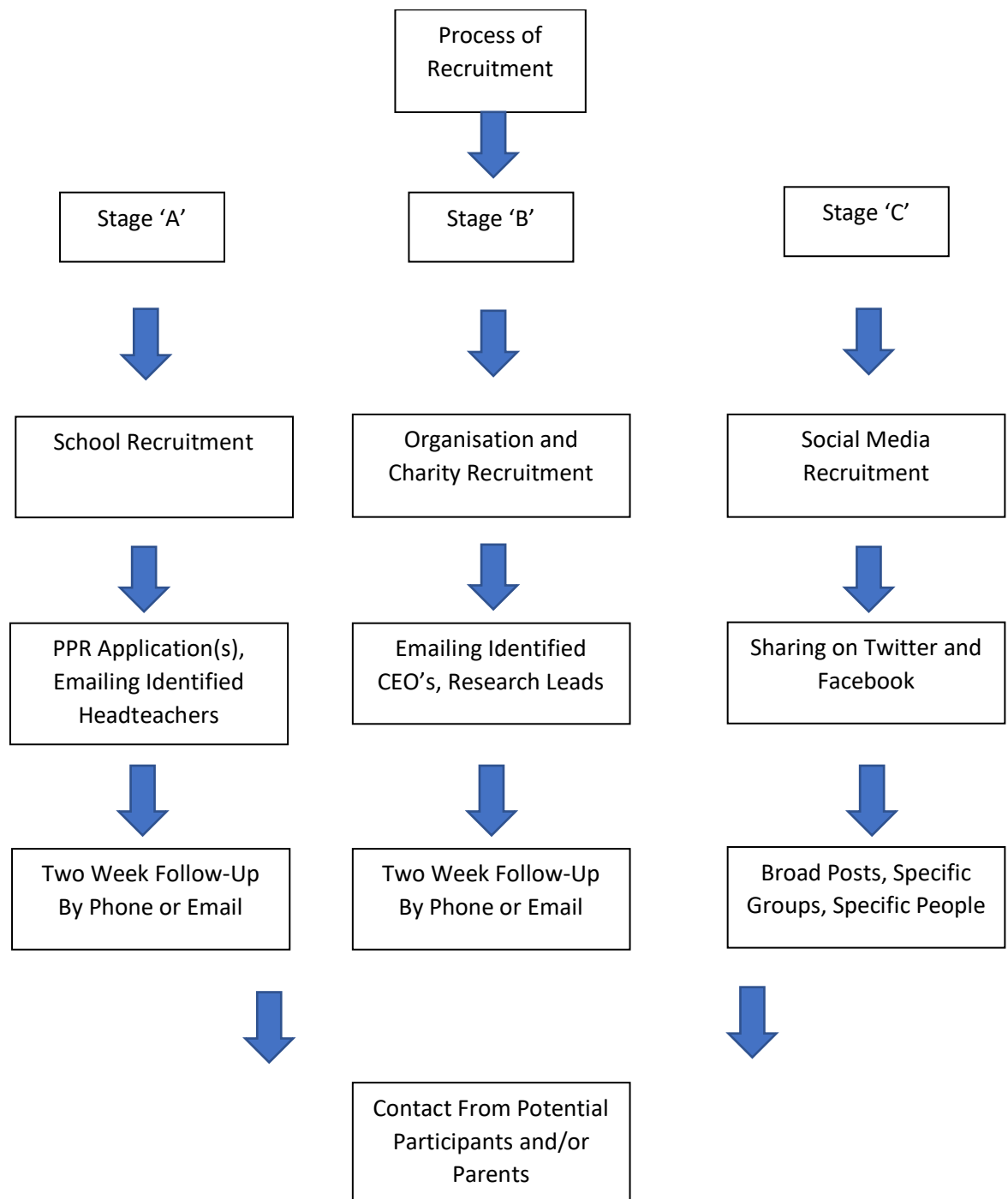


Figure 3.3: *Recruitment Process*

During the initial follow-up contact of two weeks, I faced a barrier in reaching the headteachers as the email hadn't been passed on or flagged by administration. Out of the initial ten, five had been sent to a localised school inbox and these five faced the same issue. The plan then adapted to sending information to the headteachers' direct emails, continuing the two-week follow-up. The headteachers were supplied with an introductory email, detailing the study, purpose, method, and that the schools were not expected to act as a bridge in conducting the research, but rather as a bridge to contact potential participants. Within the email a study advert and information sheets for participants and parents or guardians were supplied.

Recruitment stages B and C commenced during the end stages of phase A. Here the focus of recruitment moved from broader knowledge implications to more personal benefits. Stages B and C were initially to be enacted concurrently, though I chose to intertwine these as some reached a similar demographic, such as parents and family groups on social media being linked with charity bodies. Recruitment looked to bridge the gap in reaching those autistic girls who are absent or outside the school system and who can add real value to the knowledge base around school experiences (Moyse, 2021). Here gatekeepers and individuals contacted regarding the research and potential participation were supplied with information sheets outlining the research (see Appendices 3, 5 and 6), potential mediums of participation, and the method they could be involved in. Responses within stages B and C proved fruitful in comparison to stage A. In the end 75% from the second phase responded positively, and 60% from the third (which weren't broad posts) responded positively to share the research.

3.6.1 Locating the Knowers

Within the recruitment context, there were no limitations as to the type of schooling participants had experienced. Each of the located recruitment groups were supplied with recruitment adverts (shown in Appendix 4) with information on the research and participation criteria, with the inclusion criteria shown below in table 3.1. Throughout recruitment, my comprehension of who held knowledge and who held *access* to knowledge became a focal point for reflection. As Yin implores, reflection is necessary as to who the *knowers* are within research (2008), and herein those who hold subject knowledge were seen to be the autistic

participants themselves. The position of knowers, however, expanded within recruitment as gatekeepers became another branch of knowers, or holders of *access* to knowledge. While my position as a white man has connotations of power, power imbalance, and gendered issues (Ahmed, 2017; Smolović-Jones et al., 2020), the position of participants within recruitment faced opposing complications from gatekeepers' outlooks. As Murdock (2021) and Yin (2018) have explored, the accessibility of knowers becomes enclosed in barriers to certain individuals and research circumstances. Autistic girls are knowledge holders through experience (Carpenter et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2018; Milton, 2014; Tornvall, 2023), though enlightenment through their knowledge was often secured behind the boundaries created by gatekeepers. Each stage of the recruitment process, however, nuanced the boundaries and access to these individuals.

Collective exhaustion from COVID created barriers within each of the recruitment stages. Recruitment commenced in November 2021 following the lifting of COVID

Table 3.1: *Inclusion Criteria*

Participation Criteria

Diagnosis, in the process of getting a diagnosis or self-identify as autistic
Gender identify as a girl
Aged between 10 and 16,
School equivalent between primary 6 and secondary year 4.
Spent time in the Scottish school system
Currently living in Scotland
AAC or English speaking
Interview constraints – able to take part in an online interview

restrictions. Gatekeepers in stage A expressed difficulty in expending resources to share the research or worry that the lasting impacts upon pupils would be too much to put upon them in

addition to adapting to the ‘new normal’. Charity bodies within stages A and B expressed a similar concern related to exhaustion of potential participants and available resources. As such, my approach to recruitment became adaptive, looking to engaging with larger schools and charities first, as these were more likely to hold larger amounts of funding and resources, while remaining aware of the issues being faced by smaller, more localised groups. While such action could be argued to be marginalising to those in areas outside of larger charity catchments and for those in lower-income areas who may be unable to access such groups, action was taken to abate this. Many smaller charity groups were contacted and engaged with the research recruitment. Charities contacted highlighted stretched resources, stating that engagement would take second place to aiding autistic children’s readjustment to a ‘new normal’ within these groups.

Though a ‘new normal’ offered the suggestion of new challenges, an older regime of disempowerment overshadowed much of the attempted recruitment in stage A. Disenfranchisement through institutional power and perspectives is not a new factor in impacting feminist and autism research. Throughout recruitment, my comprehension of knowers and access was challenged as the autistic individuals themselves were placed behind barriers created by gatekeepers. Predominantly an issue for stage A of recruitment, those knowers who held access to autistic girl oversaw their agency. Many ASN schools and support bases indicated their belief that autistic girls within their networks would be too vulnerable to participate in the research - rationalising such perspectives through the phrases ‘wouldn’t have the capacity’, ‘would be too vulnerable’ and ‘we couldn’t guarantee safety’. With the removal of agency being a symptom of a broader issue, access from both sides of the research was restricted through outsider perspectives. A population already minoritised being denied access to opportunities to reflect on their experiences by barriers out with their control was indeed troubling.

As such, navigating local authorities became, as expected, a challenge, and one which recurred due to the need to carry out such research, particularly following a pandemic. Throughout recruitment, a recurrent theme of ‘passing the buck’ arose between school settings and charities. When in the depths of stage A, some headteachers expressed frustration at being approached for research, arguing that charities are more suitable places for

recruitment for the research. Conversely, charities and support groups declared similar confusion, as they believed they were not a suitable point of contact and that I should have contacted schools instead. Of the charities contacted, ten expressed an unwillingness to engage with research as a rule due to the consistent demand placed upon them and their negative experiences in the past. Such rationalising is understandable given the limited resources many of these charities had. Though the outcome became another barrier and removal of agency for autistic girl, I navigated these by focusing on specific charities which supported autistic girls, highlighting the potential benefits participation could have.

3.6.2 The Participants

Through recruitment, five participants were located who agreed to take part in the research (see Table 3.2). Each participant had experience in both ASN and mainstream environments, with three having experienced home schooling and one Steiner schooling. Each of these participants took part in an online face-to-face interview over either Zoom or Teams. Emily was 13, while the other participants were slightly older, with Molly and Chloe being 14 and Rosie and Ashley being 16. Rosie and Ashley focused on their experiences relating to later secondary years. Emily, Chloe and Molly reflected more on the transition from primary into secondary as this move was recent. Each participant referred to themselves as a girl throughout the process. While Chloe reflected on seeing herself as more of a tomboy, she still saw what she referred to as more feminine aspects of her character and presentation.

Rosie posed a particular challenge with respect to her placement within the research. Throughout the interview, Rosie referred to herself as a girl, placed her experience alongside other girls, and argued her perspective as that of an autistic girl. However, when approaching her gender identity Rosie expressed seeing herself as a girl, but also not seeing the point in holding a gender identity. While, at this point, part of Rosie's argument lay with her not seeing the need to hold a specific identity as she attended an all-girls' school, reflection on where this guided the thesis arose. Arguably, Rosie responded to the advertisement for research exploring autistic girls' school experiences, referred to herself as a girl, and expressed the experience of being a girl. Approaching Rosie's case, I drew from her focus on

referring to herself as an autistic girl as justification of including her reflections in the research.

Table 3.2 – *Participant Demographics*

Participant Pseudonym	Age	School Year (and equivalent for those not in school settings)	Type of Schooling	Local Authority	Gender Identity	Ethnicity	Age of Diagnosis	Autistic Family Member(s)
Molly	14	4 th	Mainstream and ASN	Moray	Girl	White, Scottish	12	Yes
Chloe	14	3 rd	Mainstream and ASN	Glasgow City Council	Girl	White, Scottish	6	Yes
Emily	13	2 nd	ASN & Mainstream Bases	Glasgow City Council	Girl	White, Romanian	5	No
Rosie	16	5 th	Steiner, Home-schooling, ASN, Mainstream, All Girls Mainstream	Glasgow City Council	I don't really identify with a gender	White, Scottish	12	No
Ashley	16	5 th	Mainstream, ASN, Online Learning (Outside of Covid-19), Home-schooling	Glasgow City Council/Renfrewshire	Girl	White, Scottish	8	No

Each of the participants had experience of mainstream schools in primary education, having moved into either an additional support needs (ASN) school or base in secondary. Molly had school support in accessing the ASN base within her mainstream secondary school, while Chloe and Emily had transitioned into ASN schools via their move from primary to secondary education. While each participant had experienced both mainstream and ASN environments, Ashley and Rosie held the most unique schooling transitions, having moved outside of the typical ASN and mainstream school environments. Rosie's attendance expanded into a completely different schooling approach within her Steiner School experience, moving into more nurture-focused schooling than the other participants within her primary experience, before attending home-schooling, and then moving into a mainstream school to complete primary. At the time of the interview, Rosie attended an all-girls' school which had recently begun to transition boys and young men into the school

environment. Ashley experienced a far more precarious school journey compared to other participants, moving consistently between a mainstream primary school and home-schooling throughout her formative school years. Secondary level experiences didn't balance out for Ashley either, as she transitioned from mainstream, to home-schooling, to ASN, to fully online-based learning between first year and mid-way through third year.

The final component of the demographic information shown in the above thumbnail arose within the interviews themselves through participants' expositions. The impact of an autistic family member, in the case of Molly and Chloe an autistic older sibling, was critical to their school experience. Both Molly and Chloe were given an insight into their sibling's experience of school and what to expect prior to their attendance. In terms of advocating and pushing boundaries of space and accommodations their reflections showed a stronger sense of self in terms of accommodations and required changes than those of other participants.

3.7 Beyond the Classroom: Feminist Research in the Field

How research is designed and approached is based on preconceptions of the need for, and value of, exploring specific phenomenon. As the literature review elucidated, the need for the research in this thesis is important to address gaps. Exploring school reflections, however, doesn't necessitate being within the physical school – particularly when exploring where a sense of community and belonging emerge. After-school groups have also held a place as an invigorating environment for children both socially and academically (Saadu, 2023), support networks, such as the Scottish Women's Autism Network, offer networking groups for teenage autistic pupils. These represent belonging and inclusion beyond the classroom, highlighting that school research doesn't necessitate being in the classroom to be valuable. The research for this thesis was in part dictated by the climate at the time of data gathering. Conducting research immediately following the lifting of COVID restrictions in Scottish schools meant drawing on online approaches as access remained limited. As such, the research processes entailed approaching empowerment of voice through non-school based approaches.

3.7.1 Balancing Power in the Process

Interviews hold different meanings depending on the context and the understanding the researcher has of their research. Interview approaches are diverse, with semi-structured approaches being not only the most common but the preferred approach (Braun, Clark & Gray, 2013). It is the context and focus of the research which determines the efficacy of adopting interviews. Oakley's early conceptualisation of a feminist-framed interview perceives the aims and outcomes of interviews as 'best achieved when the relationship of the interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical' (1981, p. 41). Feminist-framed interviews differ from the traditionally conceptualised interview process in their ability to instigate interviewee power and governance over the process. Such focus has been reflected upon as 'uncovering the *subjugated knowledge* of the diversity of women's realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated' (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 184, emphasis in original). Oakley's (2016) framework for feminist interviews embodies the philosophy and ethos which have constructed and founded research. Empowering participants, focussing on silenced voices, equal balance in power, and creating a sharing dialogue. Part of Oakley's framing hinged on interviews being gender matched, but between the participants and researcher here this cannot be achieved. Rather there is the opportunity for these interviews to be *neuromatched*, as both the participants and I are neurodiverse, reflecting on suggestions of positive rapport being built on a more stable base between neurotypes (Crompton et al., 2020). Building on Oakley's (1981; 2016) work, such a balancing of power is vital to building rapport in a short space of time.

Further, with respect to rapport building, I drew from Linabary and Hamel's (2017) case study incorporating *feminist online interviewing*. Mirroring Oakley's (2016) feminist framework for interviewing, Linabary and Hamel challenged dynamics of power, resistance and reflexivity within the virtual interviewing process. Though their work brought nuance to comprehending the value of written online interviews, elements also translate into the dynamics of virtual online interviews. The removal of a physical shared space doesn't remove as much pressure on the session as could be suggested. Rather, the space is more precarious, with subtle boundaries and more elements of power to be considered by the researcher (Linabary & Hamal, 2017). The intricate, potentially intrusive nature of interviews

may be detrimental to the interview process. More so as I am aiming to work with children and adolescents with unique and individual processes and understandings of their experiences. Intersectional identities, participants' perspectives of the interviewer, and participants' personal lives will all have a varying impact on the atmosphere of the interview (Rice, 2009; Roulston, 2010). Vigilance was key to understanding that interviews were not direct reflections of experiences and accounts (Alverson, 2011). Rather, they are recalled realities susceptible to impact of the emotion and reflection of the time of their experiences. Yet these lived realities were critical to developing a nuanced understanding of the intricate nature of school experiences.

Potential participants and their parents were first supplied with the information sheets (shown in Appendix 5 and 6), with a time for an arranged online meet-up for any further questions being offered by the researcher. None of the participants took up the offer, with no additional questions communicated through email. Prior to the sessions commencing, participants were asked to fill out the consent form (with those under 16 being asked to provide a guardian signature or verbal consent at the beginning of the session) and were offered access to the questions before the interview session. At the beginning of each session, I gave participants a brief introduction on my background, identity, and the research before offering space for any questions and reaffirming consent verbally (the consent forms are shown in Appendix 7, and the interview schedule and breakdown are shown in Appendix 8). During the introductory time, it was reaffirmed to participants that any questions or topics approached which were concerning or upsetting could be avoided, with consent being entirely voluntary and withdrawable at any time, with collected data removed.

Each session followed a similar structure to offer as much similarity within the process as possible, though as these were individualised sessions guided by the participants there were differences in the way the topics, questions and times were utilised. Throughout each session, participants were given the role of 'leader' in progressing topics through exploring their experiences, while the role of the researcher was to act as a guide when discussions required some pushing forward. Throughout the sessions these roles became fluid, as some participants asked for or required more input from the researcher while others were more eloquent and ready with their points of discussion. As each session progressed, in

all cases, bar one, participants began to take the leading role, with time taken at the end of each to explore any areas they felt had been missed.

3.8 Thematic Analysis and Procedure

Working critically with the data was vital to drawing out accounts which reflected participants' voices and experiences. Knowing gender and knowing experiences impacted by identities which aren't my own is a difficult concept to grasp (Ahmed, 2017; Oakley, 2016; Valentine, 2013). Participants' reflections consisted of elements which are foundational to their experiences, and which moulded and shaped how they perceive and understand their experiences (Cohen et al., 2021; Crasnow, 2013; Smith & Osbourne, 2022). In building the thesis to place the epistemic authority of participants at the core of the research findings, thematic analysis enhanced the centring of school narratives.

Thematic analysis falls under a broad umbrella of processes, interpretations, and developing themes. Thematic analysis 'is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). At its core this is a process of building themes from data through (re)reading, coding, clustering, and connecting patterns which emerge into the core themes which align with different components of the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Robson, 2022; Silverman, 2021). Critically, thematic analysis isn't directly rooted in a particular epistemology (Robson, 2011), though it draws upon elements of building codes within analysis of the data set. Ensuring reliability and transparency, I drew from Boyatzis (1998) and Dusi (2022) as coding was mainly inductive, though elements were theory driven, as the conceptual framework influenced the design of the data intake and exploration.

Table 3.3: Processes of Reflexive Thematic Analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2022)

Step	Main Process	Sub-Processes
1. Reading and re-reading	Familiarity was developed with the data through transcription and re-engaging with the data following the interview. Interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document, using pseudonyms.	Engaging with initial thoughts on the data and written reflection on the session from a self-reflective, subjective perspective.
2. Initial notes	Following transcription and re-reading, initial notes on the data were taken. These notes were split between three core sub-processes: memo writing, subjective margin writing and objective margin writing. Data was then broken down gradually into what would become the initial codes.	Memo-writing was used as an accountability measure to ensure reliability in the interrogation of the data. Data was split into the subjective and objective perspectives allowed development of the clusters which led into the coding process.
3. Coding	The initial coding took part individually for each case following the interview note taking. Each transcript was then progressed through individually, with the open coding allowing for the initial codes to be located.	Initial Codes were drawn from the raw data. Emerging codes were collected and guided the formation of the emerging clusters.
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes	Following the locating and defining the codes, the connections across the differing clusters were gathered and broken down into the individual case themes.	Developing participant voice in the codes and themes. Individual themes from each case emerged concurrently.
5. Moving to the next cases	Each case was then approached individually before being synthesised. These were then built upon as each interview took place and followed the same process building into the larger coding process (shown in Appendices 9 and 10).	Individual themes emerged in each case. Commonalities begin to emerge across the cases. Themes and codes lead into a cross-case clustering.
6. Looking for patterns across cases	Each emerging theme from each was then brought together (further example of this is shown in Chapter 4). Final higher order themes were then consolidated and the findings written up.	Common emerging themes were explored. Clustering and reliability processes were performed through repetition. Final Higher Order themes emerge.

3.8.1 Data Management and Coding

Data management was guided by six components (Braun & Clarke, 2022), with an overview of the process shown in Table 3.3 above and explored in detail below (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2022, Engward & Goldspink, 2020, and Osborn & Smith, 2022): reading and re-reading; initial notes; coding; searching for connections across emergent themes; moving to the next cases; and looking for patterns across cases. Figure 3.4 below shows how these were each interlinked, with movement to each stage accompanied by certain markers I adapted to ensure completion and reliability. For example, moving from the *initial notes* into the *emerging themes* stage, the processes of memo-writing, initial thoughts and initial codes had to be completed prior to progression. Doing so allowed each case to be approached individually (and latterly synthesised across cases), ensuring that both the subjective and objective nature of the data was accounted for. Additionally, in splitting my own thoughts from participants' data, what emerged was a process which was wholly reflexive in practice. Throughout the rest of the section, I will explore the key points of the data analysis as they related to the final thematic outcomes.

The first process in engaging with the data involved reflection following the session, through reading, re-reading. and notetaking. During the sessions I endeavoured to build a level of familiarity with the data as points emerged through notetaking. Following the session, I reflected on my thoughts and the core components which emerged throughout it. Beginning with an immediate reflective process set up a foundation for familiarity with participants' reflections. Naturally, researchers hold thoughts on the data based on their positioning (Adkins & Skegg, 2005; Dean, 2016). In moving to reduce my impact on the data, I initially focused on the meanings and points related to participants' experiences. Using brief reflective notes taken during and immediately following the session allowed nuanced understanding of where participants data and my perspectives clashed. The transcription process for each session began within 48 hours of the interview. Here it was important to take time to reflect on my notes while listening to the session again before transcription. Engaging with the raw data in its natural form allows for a more robust building of familiarity (Charmaz, 2017; Silverman, 2013), while following the guidance of developing a robust thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Engward & Goldspink, 2020; Tuffor, 2017).

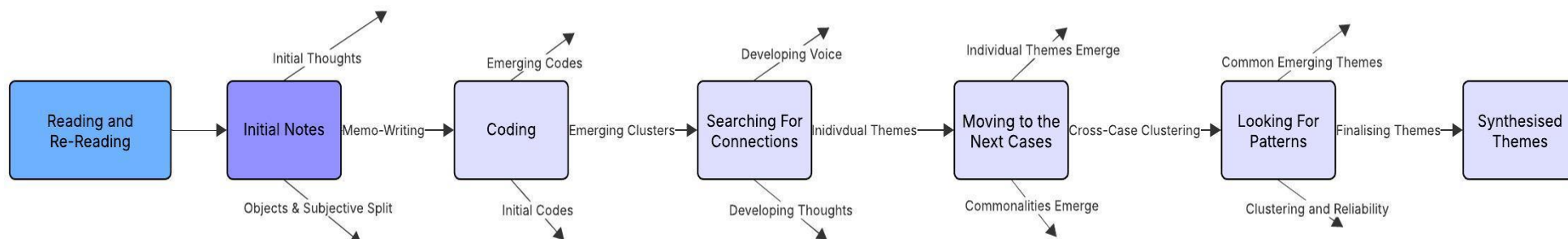


Figure 3.4 – *Data Analysis Flow*

Building a high level of familiarity allowed progression beyond seeing the interview as a solid, rigid session. Rather, I was able to bring together voice and emergent data as a fluid, living being.

Notetaking as a reflective praxis allowed for reflecting on core points which emerged throughout the session, offering insight into the traction and direction of participants' narratives (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Cohen et al., 2022; Smith & Osbourne, 2022). In building the analysis, the nuances drawn by memo-writing were enhanced by line-by-line coding (examples of raw memo-writing are shown in Appendix 11). Doing so brought comprehension of both the subjective and objective nature of the data (Charmaz, 2021). I saw that my perceptions and any attempts to cluster without a *feeling* for the data and emotion behind it would negatively influence *how* I engaged with these nuances. As I moved throughout the emergent data, attentiveness to my position and gender became nuanced through memo writing. Figure 3.5 gives an insight into how my emotions and frustrations began to become entangled in understanding of the transcripts, as well as where I reflected upon removing my own position and experience from the process.

Memo-Writing – December 2022

There's an element here of fighting... not just fighting for something, but fighting against something – fighting to create something. There's a tension here... every participant talked about it... they felt it... displayed it during the interviews. I've disturbed the space being a male researcher, yes, but this tension goes beyond the research space. It focuses on the school spaces and what's disturbing and interrupting these...:

- *Inaccessible areas of school create and become barriers themselves*
- *Sensory overload through these environments – sights, smells, sounds*
- *Boys seemed to dominate classroom spaces, meaning participants felt left and pushed out of everyday school spaces*
 - *Social scenarios create tension*
 - *Gendered perceptions of both autism and pupils:*
 - *Boundaries in accessing spaces with peers created through gendering of spaces*
 - *Pushed past social boundaries of accessing spaces and places*

Figure 3.5 – *Memo-writing December 2022*

Coding within research is a progressive and critical point of data analysis, untangling data ‘to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way’ (Creswell, 2015, p. 156), and drawing together core relatable components (King et al., 2019; Saldaña, 2016). To begin the coding process, each transcript was studied sentence by sentence, highlighting and transferring the sentences, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2016), Charmaz (2014), and Adu (2019). These emerged through the earlier transcript reading and margin writing, though re-reading following more transcripts being added allowed for previously unseen nuances to blossom within each (Appendix 12 shows an example of how margin writing was split between the subjective and objective elements from the raw data to ensure reliability in data meaning).

Reliability in the processing and building of clusters was of critical importance (Boyatzis, 1998; Dusi, 2022; Dusi & Stevens, 2022). Guidance on coding suggests that researchers build upon two phases within the process, one on insider meaning and one on outsider meaning (Gough and Scott, 2000). Within my processes of analysis, I differentiated between the subjective and objective meaning participants attributed to their reflections within the coding processes. As each section drawn from an individual case became entangled within the broader context, the nature of the realities elucidated by participants became apparent. The process of coding allowed for an attentiveness to the oppressive nature of educational experiences (Alcoff, 2017; Bartky, 2018; Oksala, 2004), while also attending to the situatedness of these experiences (Swanborn, 2010; Yin, 2018). As such, the overall aim of exploring the depth and intricacies of participants’ narratives remains at the core of data analysis (Lincoln et al., 2018).

3.8.2 Cross-Case Synthesised Themes

Drawing out nuances may be interesting, exciting and invigorating, with it becoming easy for the researcher to be drawn in many directions, which can risk the obscuring of meanings (Charmaz, 2021). Working with the raw codes and clustering allowed the search for connections individually, and latterly across cases (Appendix 9 shows the initial codes which were developed from the extracted data). These emerged gradually, taking each case individually, before drawing in and synthesising codes from the cases which followed (Braun

& Clarke, 2019; Dusi, 2022). Doing so brought potentially unrecognised contexts from later participants into the fold, nuancing perspectives within the emergent data. Within the research the needs extended beyond visualising and comprehending these connections. Participants' accounts were powerful, emotive and inspiring, meaning the data analysis needed to mirror such sentiment.

Table 3.4: *Mainstream Vs ASN Emerging Codes*

Mainstream	ASN/Non-Mainstream
Noise as a Barrier	ASN/Non-Mainstream As Positive
Feeling Different	Teachers More Helpful ASN
System's Against Me	Later Secondary More Positive
Where Is My Support?	Primary More Structured
Crescendo/Build Up	More Understanding of My Needs
School Is Too Much	
Mainstream As Negative	
Playground Too Much	
Felt Left Out	
Can't Regulate Properly in School	

Clustering of data allowed for individual voices to add to the broader collective narrative (King et al., 2019). Reliability in the process and building of clusters was of critical importance (Boyatzis, 1998; Dusi, 2022; Dusi & Stevens, 2022). The process of clustering provided direction as to where the data was traversing through participant experience, while holding myself accountable to the dangers of pushing my own narrative. Throughout, I kept reflective notes, tasking myself to interrogate the *why* of my decisions in forming clusters. As each case elucidated the components of experience within the situational school context, the following case was then analysed. Each was considered on an individual basis, with the exploration of meaning within the data being extrapolated and explored before it was coded into emergent themes (Braun & Clark, 2021; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Dusi, 2022; Smith & Osbourne, 2022). Table 3.4 shows the clustering of codes which emerged under the *Mainstream vs ASN* theme which captured the nature of a dichotomy which arose in

participant reflections (the raw codes which emerged under each emerging theme are shown in Appendix 10).

Each cluster represented an emerging commonality within the participants' data. These connections were then brought together in *Looking for Patterns* as the cross-case synthesis formed. Through engaging a broader thematic analysis, the intricacies of the data were more accessible while representing collective experiences. While clustering allowed initial components to blossom, the emergent themes reflected meaning and depth. The initial themes drawn from coding were effective in setting the stage for the data, beginning to showcase participants' meanings and experiences. The influences emerging within participant data in building the themes were fluid, pulling the data in different directions. Developing the final themes allowed me to embody the lessons from Charmaz (2017) in building a justified comprehension of the data which embodies the experiences and voices of participants. The process of pattern recognition meant that the codes and themes which emerged had credibility and reliability (King et al., 2019; Saldana, 2021). Exploring the context of schools as institutions and places of experience through the cross-case synthesis allowed for broader insight into misfitting, challenging the system, and navigating space.

3.9 Lessons from the Pilot

Engaging with reflexive practice allowed for a strong engagement with the pilot session, which involved Molly and her parent accompanying her as a named individual for support. While the session began with the formalities of passing out introduction and information sheets before receiving written and verbal consent, the session took a direction which I had tried to avoid through prior reflective praxis. Power distributions became disrupted throughout the session. I also failed to be present and reflective of my position *during* the pilot session. As the researcher I held power in the process. While I endeavoured to follow guidance from Oakley (1981; 2016) and Thwaites (2017) in empowering the participant, I instead found my anxiety refrained my ability to share this power. A Foucauldian perspective on power situates it as a creative and shaping constitutive force, rather than a destructive or oppressive one (Rawlings, 2017). Power was initially placed in my hands, since I am the researcher guiding the process. It was initially hoped that through

drawing on a power-balanced interview structure that participants would feel and be empowered. Through reflecting on the pilot, it was clear that the power had inadvertently been placed on the named individuals voice, disenfranchising the participants voice

Understanding and researching gender as a male academic is a balancing act (Henrickson et al., 2020). One must remain attentive to the imbalance of privilege and power while trying to rebalance this. Within the pilot session, attentiveness to gender in practice proved a different and difficult task. Throughout the process, looking back at the transcript, two large flaws became obvious once I had taken a step back: the process wasn't creating a space of empowerment for participants; and gender wasn't accounted for within the interview (a breakdown of these is shown in Appendix 13). Reflecting on the pilot session indicated several components missed. Firstly, how I engaged and failed to centre the focus and power from the named individual (participant's parent) displaced the participant, their voice and reflections. The involvement of the named individual took voice and power from the participant, shifting discussion more towards the parent's focus. As I moved to interpret the position given to the participant, clarity on how they were displaced was apparent. While I guided and attempted to centre back to Molly, the parent pushed back and spoke over and for her. At times I failed to move these reflections back to reinterpretation to centre the understanding of her experiences. As the session progressed, there were instances where I redirected the answer back to the participant. Overall, however, the session failed to embody and empower participant voice through parental and research disruptions.

The second missed element is reflective of the haste I felt as a researcher in the initial session. Gender is a vital, foundational element of this research study. The overarching research question *How do autistic girls create and navigate spaces in the Scottish education system?* embodies a need for gender to be a core component of reflections. The participants' reflections *could* indicate gendered components of school experiences. There *could* be wholly different elements of their own experience which are missing from outside literature pertaining to autistic boys' experiences. These aspects were taken for granted throughout the session. Gender is not immediately an identity which is inherent in how individuals see themselves and others, or an immediate component which forms experiences when discussing school. Gender has been constructed through many different lenses. As a performance

(Butler, 1999), as a *becoming* (Beauvoir, 2011[1949]), as a confrontation to oppression (e.g., Garcia, 2018), as a source of empowerment (Rawlings, 2017). During the pilot session, I drastically overlooked gender, not accounting for the ways in which these experiences were formed, in part, due to gender and gendered perceptions from the participant and others.

Woven throughout the justification for this research were the gendered components of autism's construction and process for diagnosis which has created difficulties for autistic women and girls to access diagnosis (Hull et al., 2017; Loomes et al., 2016; Mandy et al., 2017; McCrossin, 2022). Comprehending how autistic girls navigate space in schools requires an interrogation of gender, engaging with voice, and reflecting on my position as a researcher. Each of the interviews which followed reflected different challenges of their own. As I took time following each session, I could see and feel the adaptations which emerged and were built upon the previous session. Through engaged reflection I was able to better embody the ethos and aims of the research while developing the space to become more adaptive and reactive to the needs of participants rather than attempting to pre-empt them. Progression towards the final case showed how the lessons from the pilot rebalanced power into participants' hands.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Power within ethical research expands to all angles of involvement (Brooks, Te Riele & Maguire, 2014a; 2014b), from the researcher, to participants, to methods, and the overseeing body. Within these power plays are the virtues, or morals, which influence researchers' practice and approach in developing and carrying research from its conceptualisation to completion. Virtues, as an ethical standpoint or construction, build on the precipice of individual development and application of morality (Hursthouse, 1999). Finding their roots in Aristotelian constructions of morality, virtues are more than individual behaviours, and rather a 'disposition to act [...] a disposition to act for reasons, and so a disposition that is exercised through the agent's practical reasoning', as part of positivity of character and reflection of a righteous self (Annas, 2006, p. 2). Translating Annas' concepts into research as a theoretical concept and practice would see the creation of research which holds the values, or virtues, which researchers see as important.

An ethics of care is founded on ‘the ontological assumption that the more connected the self is to others, the better the self is’ (Tong & Williams, 2011, in Brooks, Te Riele & Maguire, 2014a, p. 21). Care forms the central moral ground of the above discussed *virtues* with respect to ethical considerations. Feminist ethics aims ‘to understand, criticize, and correct’ the intersections of gender within virtues and practice (Lindemann 2005, p. 11), expanding to the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of both the contentions and approaches to research. These are in no way a uniform or universal proposition of ideas or knowledge (Koehn, 1998), rather part of a larger project of feminist theory that ‘attempts to account for gender inequality in the socially constructed relationship between power—the political—on the one hand and the knowledge of truth and reality—the epistemological—on the other’ (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 147, in Maeckelberghe, 2004, p. 319).

Dimensions of power within research have typically placed the role of power in the hands of the researcher (Ackerly & True, 2008). Recent conjunctures in autism research have positioned the means and needs for better ethical approaches in ethical research and autism. Certain perceptions may be drawn from social othering or belief of impairment and a perceived need for improvement or cure in the individual (Gray, 2002). For many autistic girls, the stigmatising discourse associated with autism intertwines autistic identity and gender identity, reinforcing perspectives of both vulnerability and inability. Recurrence of such perspectives has gone so far as to suggest autism focused research should not follow typical ethical approaches (Dawson, 2004). Here the system and authority(s) values and the need to ‘normalise’ these individuals form into the virtues in which their ethical perspectives are drawn are central. Gender diversity may also place an individual within a vulnerable ethical consideration in relation to power balance in research, particularly where autonomy may already have been removed from autistic individuals. As such, ethical considerations required reflection on my own position and the creation of empowering space for participants.

3.10.1 Participants

There are those who would claim the vulnerability of all autistic individuals with respect to research, and a requirement for critical ethical considerations (Pellicano & Stears, 2011). While such a perspective is important for those who may require a level of support within their lives, with regard to consent, for others there may be a removal of autonomy and balancing of positional power within the research. Ethical considerations place children as vulnerable participants within research (BERA, 2024), requiring concise communication between the researcher and child participants as to the research processes (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Therefore, it would not be fair, nor pertinent, to automatically presume autistic children's incompetence regarding consent. While children between the ages of ten and 16 and required parental or guardian consent, autonomy for consent is still held in the hands of participants. The research must remain accessible and understandable, with participants comprehending exactly what is being asked of them and how they will participate.

Extended interview periods can become stagnant and distractive for younger participants (Ljusberg, Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007). Therefore, the possibility of yielding data which lacks depth becomes a likelihood. Research involving typically developing children has reflected upon the need to include open questions where individuals can expand their own thoughts on broad subjects, to aid understanding and enhancement of voice. In ensuring research isn't leading or moving an objective thought in a single trajectory, open rather than closed (a statement requiring a response such as yes or no, ranking) questions are typically preferred. When looking to the involvement of autistic pupils, differences in processing within stressful and 'loud' (dependant on individual experiences of sensory processing this could be noisy or bright/busy) environments require consideration of pupils' comfort. Autistic individuals are typically placed in the realms of vulnerability by ethics committees, due to the stereotyping of their identity. From reflections of autistic individuals who have participated in past research, the need for formats which have a level of guidance in the questions to aid concentration and to work for the individual has been highlighted to create more accessible (Cridland et al., 2015).

In moving to both counter potential vulnerability and accommodate participants, I shared questions ahead of time, allowing participants to control which were asked and the

content discussed. Throughout each session, participants were given a rebalanced level of power and agency. Each session was structured to follow the participant's pace and context. Additional support was offered through participants having the option to include a safe or familiar individual at the online interview. While, as discussed in the pilot section above, this created its own issues, the inclusion of a known individual allowed familiarity and comfort in a one-off interview. Throughout each session, participants were given power, with the ability to move on or leave questions unanswered depending on their comfort level. While some ethics committees automatically label autistic participants as vulnerable (Cridland et al., 2015), I endeavoured to focus on vulnerability with respect to specific subject matter. As such, the reframing of sessions progressed the potential for power balance, moving to negate the potential of harm to participants.

3.10.2 Risk

Research has suggested that autistic girls encounter great difficulty within school environments (Stewart, 2012) compared to autistic boys and neurotypical peers. Such research is troublingly minimal regarding autistic individuals of different gender identities. Reflective research has highlighted detriment and emotional reflections when looking to past experiences (Cook & Barnett, 2018; Carpenter, Happé & Egerton, 2019; Simone, 2010). While such impacts can be seen for typically developing girls (Rawlings, 2016) and disabled girls (Cin, 2017), the extent of this remains unexplored outside of very recent research (e.g. Wood, 2019). As such, there is potential for participants to experience upset or discomfort.

Each participant was offered the foci and questions beforehand and given full control of the content to be discussed throughout the interview. Each session began with a short discussion on the content of the interview, and any aspects participants felt uncomfortable discussing. Throughout the session, regular reaffirmation was given to participants being able to veto anything causing discomfort, as well as the ability to remove consent at any point and terminate the session. Removal of risk was also approached through engaging with the ethical consent for the research. Each session was guided by ethical considerations, as well as the guiding literature. Through taking a stance of participant empowerment, the research was enabled to empower participant agency throughout each session.

3.10.3 Consent

Obtaining consent from children can be a difficult task (Spriggs, 2010), requiring adaptive and creative mediums (Arnott et al, 2020). Informed consent may be more difficult to attain from the autistic children themselves (BERA, 2018). While arguments on the vulnerability of autistic children posit that they can consent (McNally et al, 2025), there were elements of consent I navigated. Parental consent was sought to meet the ethical requirements of the University - participants under the age of 12, or over the age of 12 and fall under the category of a vulnerable community required parental or guardian consent. The critical component of the research focused on autistic voice and agency and as such, participant consent was key. Forced participation without consent would prove unethical, immoral and counter to the basis of the thesis. Participant consent was then initially sought and renewed at the beginning of the session and throughout the interview.

Fluid consent related to more than just being in the session. Informed consent required full disclosure on the research processes and reasoning. The language pertaining to the research in the information forms (shown in Appendix 5), being precise and focussing on language which is accessible and manageable for participants of a younger age. The details focused on exactly what the research process involved and what was being asked of participants to engage. To ensure that consent was a continuous process, participants were given platform to remove any questions, not answer any questions they were uncomfortable with or leave at any time. Further, disclosure of my own identity was vital to creating power balance and to allow for informed consent. These were discussed at the beginning of the session, allowing any potential issues arising from my cisgender identity to be explored, while balancing power and privilege that come with being a white male (Karcher & Caldwell, 2018; Karnieli-Miller, Strier & Pessach, 2009). As such, the girls were able to engage and consent to the research with full clarity on what this entailed.

3.11 Conclusion

The current chapter has given a detailed justification of the methodology drawn upon and utilised for this research study. Throughout the chapter, I endeavoured to explore the questions and challenges which guided me towards my final approach. The methodology chapter has set out how the decisions reached allowed for an exploration which centred and nuanced school experiences through participants' epistemic authority. Within the chapter, I also gave critical insight into the reasoning and rationale for utilising a case study design with thematic analysis to centre voice and experience. Each of these components has built on the foundations of the early research stages, solidifying the place and need for such approaches. The chapter which follows explores each of the cases individually, discussing associated emergent themes and justifying a cross-case synthesis.

Chapter 4: Participant Cases and Individual Themes

4.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure

The previous chapter grounded the research within an exploration of situated knowledge and misfitting. The current chapter engages each participant's case through an individual exploration. With the thesis positioned towards understanding, and empowering, autistic girls' experiences of school spaces, the individual cases were critical to achieving this. With the data from the individual cases interrogated through thematic analysis, the individual emerging themes pushed forward messages and narratives from participants. Each case held decisive and impactful reflections on the school experience. Entangled within were narratives on space, relationships and manoeuvring school environments. As such, these opened avenues to understanding and beginning to answer the broader research question *How do autistic girls create and navigate spaces in the Scottish education system?* Throughout the cases, elements of the three sub research questions emerged in terms of situating epistemic authority of voice and gendered autistic experiences. Individual thematic maps are used throughout the chapter to highlight and visualise how the data emerged in the cases, with examples of the clusters of codes that framed these underneath each theme. Within the exploration, the subjective and objective nature of the participant narratives is highlighted, entwining the reflections within the emerging personal themes. The chapter then proceeds to justify a cross-case synthesis based upon commonalities among the themes.

4.2 Case 1: Molly

The first participant, Molly, was 14 years old and attending a mainstream school in a local authority in the North of Scotland. Molly had recently received an autism diagnosis at the age of 12. Within Molly's case, five themes emerged, which represented a critical insight into her experiences of school, as shown below in Figure 4.1. The thematic map for Molly shows the five core themes as they emerged from her reflections. Molly's session proved tricky, as her mother attended and at times spoke over or for Molly (this was explored in depth earlier in section 3.9). Rapport-building and interjecting to ask for Molly's perspectives

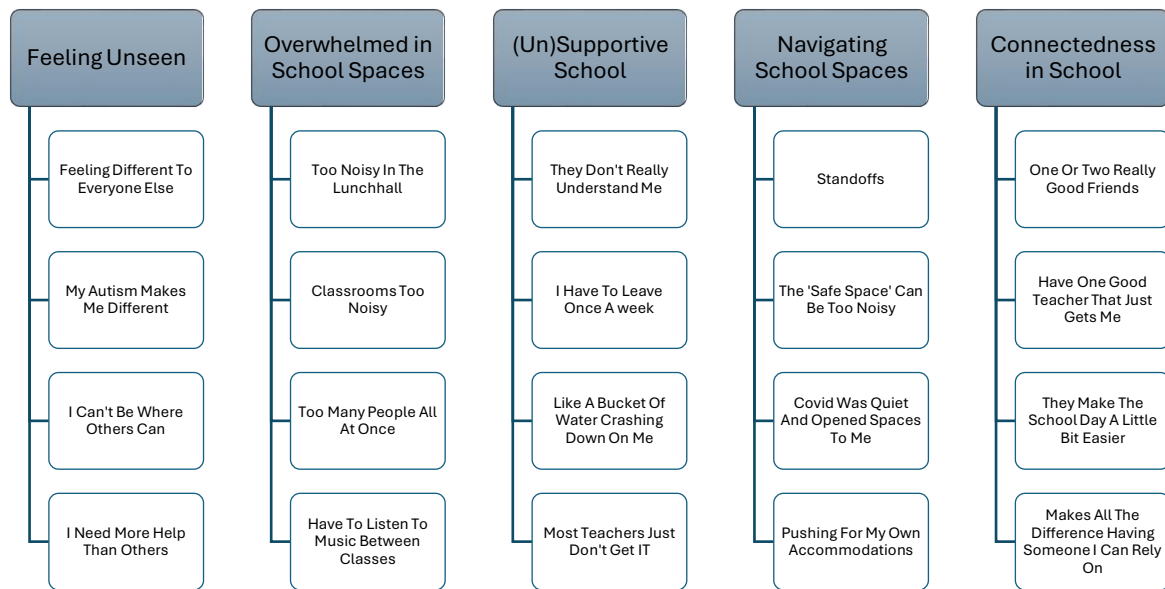


Figure 4.1: *Molly's Thematic Map*

directly became an essential part of the session. Extracting the data from Molly's interview was a slightly different process to the rest of the cases which follow, as each reflection was filtered to discussion between myself and Molly. Filtration involved extracting Molly's reflections where they weren't directly tied to the named individual's statement or guidance. As such, it took time for Molly to take power in the session and lead the narrative confidently. The reflections used for her case are therefore mainly drawn from the section of her interview that she guided. Memo-writing and reflexivity were core to drawing on Molly's data to ensure her voice was centred. These reliability checks ensured that the case presented below accurately reflected Molly's account, and not that of the parent.

4.2.1 Feeling Unseen

Being autistic was an identity Molly had held for many years, as well as having family members who are autistic. Critically, these insights gave Molly a sense of what she needed and where she saw school failures emerging. From her own understanding and family experiences, Molly expressed the school's perceived inability to understand her needs and autistic identity. Part of Molly's struggle within secondary school related heavily to changes from primary school, with the environment and sheer numbers of other pupils being a decisive factor;

It was so much more busy, I think in high school, you know, in primary school, you had a group of 30 people say and you didn't, you know, you didn't have to swap classes, you didn't have to go through these big, full, busy corridors.

Transitional issues in schools have been a consistent focus of school-based reflections in autism research (Billington et al., 2024; Goodall, 2020; Tomlinson, Hebron & Bond, 2021). Molly's unease and tension when relating to feeling different highlights components of misfitting through marginalisation. Struggles with transitions were expressed as feeling pushed to the side, as Molly didn't outwardly show them. Arguably, Molly's diagnosis at age 12 wouldn't equate to having prior support in primary school. However, exploration of her struggles highlights where her reflection intersects with autistic girls' voices (Sproston et al., 2017). Molly exemplified the need for support tailored to a more robust understanding of autism, reflecting the value of autistic voices as epistemic authority (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Milton, 2014; Mullaby et al., 2024). As shown in Figure 4.1 above, a sense of disempowerment framed the core of Molly's thematic map, as narrated across the emergent themes.

4.2.2 Overwhelmed in School Spaces

Overwhelmed in School Spaces connected Molly's reflections on the difficulties involved in transitions. The hustle and bustle of school placed an extreme amount of stress on Molly, with the lunch area known as 'the street' being a 'no-go' area. Navigating stressors at school proved difficult for Molly, though some support options were in place, offering a brief respite. Molly indicated that she had access a room in the resource base at school, which she could use when class became too much. This small accommodation wasn't enough to abate the pressure and stress Molly felt every week in school. Taking her agency back, she left school unsanctioned on a Thursday when the pressure reached a peak, elaborating on her reflection of how she experiences these afternoons:

say a big bucket of water and it's seeping and it's about to fall on Thursday afternoons. It just collapses. And that's kind of how that is. And I can't go to classes. It's too much.

Such a powerful metaphor described her understanding where she needed to empower her agency, while visualising the impact of the stress and pressure of mainstream school. Here, Molly exemplifies the internal struggles of being autistic in joint or predominantly non-autistic spaces (Belek, 2023; Farahar, 2022). Navigating systemic barriers while facing sensory overload increased the emotional toll felt by Molly. Her overall school experiences was one of inescapable stress; *'No breaks, because break and lunch are stressful'*, forcing her to physically leave the school. Choosing absence from school shows the impact the space had, mirroring broader findings on barriers to school support and attendance (Moyse, 2021). Molly thus portrayed disempowered at school through being overwhelmed in school spaces.

4.2.3 (Un)Supportive School

Disempowerment impacted upon Molly's understanding of the school institution. Being overwhelmed by noise was a consistent factor impacting Molly's school experience. However, how the school approached accommodations highlighted the institution's inability to meet her needs fully. While Molly had a card to let her out of class when she was overwhelmed, using it left her feeling centred as different:

So just, just, put your [...] this card on the teacher's table, and you can leave. But again, you have to go to the front of the class. It's something on the teacher's desk and then you even you've got the rest of the class and everything.

Here, Molly experienced a sense of unease, tying together feelings of difference and disenfranchisement. Despite appearing as a form of support, going to the front of the class instead highlighted her struggles to her peers. As such, rather than being supported, Molly became further marginalised. Through being highlighted, she unintentionally misfitted from

peers, furthering her disempowerment and frustration with the unwritten social rules and standards.

Anxiety and frustration extended to how Molly perceived the support given to her in school. While Molly had access to a room in the resource base, the area had strict limitations on what was expected and allowed. Music and headphones allowed Molly to cope with navigating the spaces within school, a salvation when becoming overwhelmed in joint spaces. Unfortunately for Molly, the base didn't allow the use of phones or headphones and became a joint space with other pupils, with conditions put on its use. Through initially using the quieter space and music, Molly challenged othering accommodations and navigated her needs within school spaces. Such a challenge is empowered through subtle actions (Rouse, 2009; Walker, 2021), fighting back against the unseen systemic barriers to access and space. Despite these strategies, the resource base gradually became a space with limited accessibility and little relief for Molly, mirroring the broader, unsupportive school environment.

4.2.4 Navigating School Spaces

The fourth theme from Figure 4.1 above, *Navigating School Spaces*, highlighted how a sense of self and a push against systemic barriers emerged for Molly. Barriers to accessibility shaped Molly's perspective on school space accessibility. Molly had been informed that the school wouldn't offer support until an official diagnosis was given. However, she continued to face a lack of support after giving the school this confirmation. The implications Molly felt were reflected in the sadness and hint of envy within her tone. She saw the school as holding a troubling framing of autism, reflecting broader issues that remained unaddressed. Molly reflected teachers' understanding of autism as being one of inability based on stereotypes. Needs were framed from outsider perspectives, meaning that where she felt support was warranted didn't align with teacher perspectives. As a result, the epistemic value Molly felt she could offer regarding where accommodations could be made was ignored. Here, it is helpful to understand Molly's narrative through the concept of misfitting. While outwardly Molly fit the material norm, her autistic identity misfitted the social (Garland-Thomson, 2012) and neuro-norms (Stenning, 2022). Supports and

accommodations were then put in place, which failed to allow for a comfortable school experience, furthering her disempowerment.

To begin navigating school spaces, Molly explored using her own experiences and strategies to begin voicing her needs to teachers. Trying to regain control over inaccessible spaces, Molly pushed for suggestions to help her better cope with school. While Molly already left on Thursday afternoons to abate these feelings and pressures, she suggested regular timetable breaks and a quiet place to go when overwhelmed. Further empowering herself and taking control, Molly expressed a desire to go to one of the music rooms to play the drums, as music helped her release stress and pressure. Molly's overall reflections here were standoffish with the school as a system and process. She took a lower, more docile tone at first when considering barriers, though fierceness and determination emerged in her reflections when discussing accommodations. Molly held a level of resentment towards being disempowered and pushed to the school's margins, one which she moved against to conceptualise the more positive aspects of her experience.

4.2.5 Connectedness in School

The final theme in Molly's thematic map above shows a movement towards the positive aspects of her school experience within empowering connections. Molly reflected on the 'right' type of friendship, having '*got better friends*'. While one of these friends was a longstanding, trusted friend, Molly's newfound friendships held an understanding that past groups hadn't: '*at lunch we sit in a classroom. It's just become three of us now we just sit in class, and that's better*'. These connections with friends allowed for a slight alleviation of Molly's anxiety during lunch and break, though still meant that she was unable to fully relax during these periods. Further connections of value for Molly related to some of her teachers. While there were many teachers Molly felt didn't understand autism or her needs, there was one teacher she described as '*very nurturing ... she's just lovely*'. This understanding teacher represented to Molly what many teachers could be for other autistic pupils. Connections within school enhance empowerment by nurturing and supporting emotional and practical needs (Fox, Williams & Asbury, 2024; O'Hagan & Hebron, 2017). For autistic pupils, a nurturing teacher can reframe and enhance their perspective of school (Hummerstone &

Parsons, 2021). Such empowerment can enhance access to accommodations through a voice of authority. Entwined with the epistemic authority of autistic voices, these connections can further enhance understanding of autism and support needs, a factor which Molly went on to explore.

A degree of empowerment and positivity remained within Molly's tone and body language, an almost alleviated moment compared to the other points of reflection. As the connections in school were explored, Molly also captured the need for stronger connectedness with autistic voices and knowledge in schools. Molly moved through a range of emotions during her reflection, offering a nuanced perspective as to how she experiences her school and the elating and deflating aspects of her journey. Looking at her final thoughts, Molly had a message for teachers supporting autistic pupils:

I think it would just be good for all teachers to understand that stereotypes aren't everything [...] And I think it's just getting past those stereotypes is kind of the first step to these things.

Through a lens of situated knowledge, here Molly began to show her epistemic authority, pushing for lived expertise grounded in experience as a foundation for autism knowledge. Autistic voices have begun to empower their school narratives and knowledge in research and practice (Chandaroo, Strnadova & Cumming, 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). However, many voices reflecting on autism and gender have been utilised conceptually rather than practically. Across the cases that follow, a level of connectedness emerged, linking themes and narratives.

4.3 Case 2: Chloe

Chloe was 14, attending an ASN school in Glasgow, and received her autism diagnosis at the age of six. Chloe held a different perspective on her experience from the other participants, one grounded in fears for her future by being in ASN schooling. As such,

her exploration highlighted five themes which reflected the nature of her experiences, and which differed significantly from those of other participants. A thematic mapping of Chloe's case is shown in Figure 4.2 below.

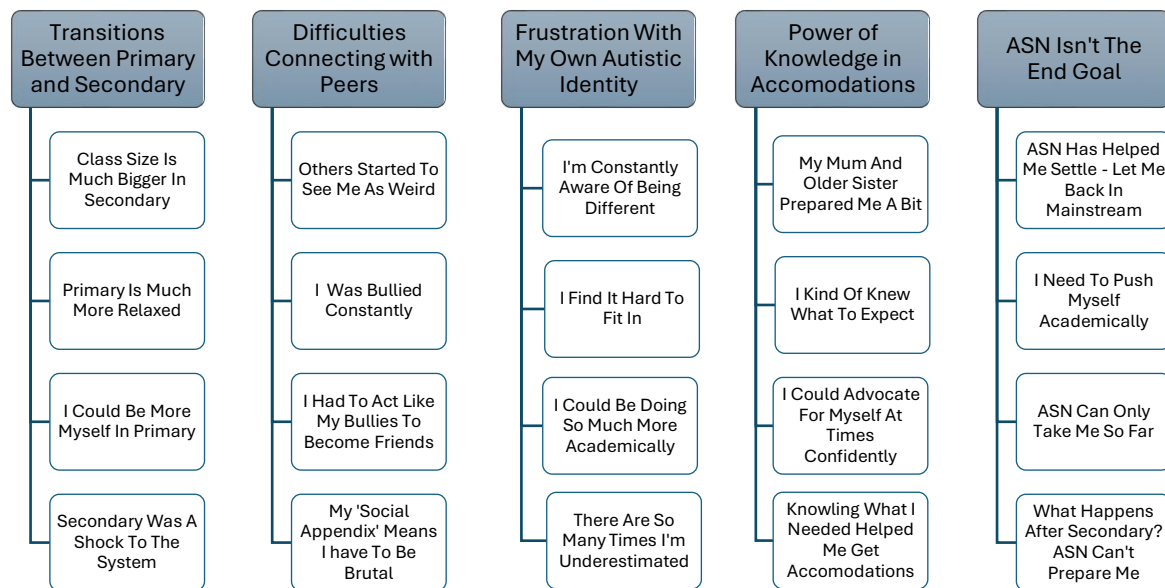


Figure 4.2: *Thematic Map of Chloe's Session*

4.3.1 Transitions Between Primary and Secondary School

Chloe noted that she required a level of support when moving onto secondary due to social difficulties culminating in bullying from peers. However, the support offered was not enough for Chloe to ensure her academic success. Chloe began the interview by exploring the challenges she faced in her primary to secondary school transition. The routine of primary, *'we all had to sit in the same place and eat at the same time – which is a bit odd'*, offered a level of sameness which Chloe felt helped her manage her anxieties and expectations. From her reflection, the actions of being a collective was one which Chloe didn't fully see the point of. Arguably these may form connections and subtly remove difference for primary school children (Calder, Hill & Pellicano, 2013), however here it is reflective of the unspoken social rules which many autistic pupils find difficult to untangle (Hamilton & Roberts, 2025). These small, subtle unspoken rules impacted how Chloe felt unsupported during her transitions into secondary school and unprepared for the environmental change.

The environment of primary for Chloe was one that could be accommodating and simultaneously isolating. In the playground in primary, Chloe would lie down and read, initially finding this grounded her and alleviated the pressures of school. Here, Chloe showed a more natural embrace of her own needs by taking time and control in a busy, joint environment. The larger transition into secondary proved difficult, with the strategies she previously used now unable to aid in combatting the sense of being overwhelmed. These differences were recognised by peers, with Chloe being bullied and then moved to an ASN school. The move from mainstream into ASN settings caused further frustration for Chloe. She moved back into joint routines which she already conceptualised as struggling to see the need or reason for these. The move from consistent routines in primary school has been conceptualised as creating barriers to access for autistic pupils (Hebron, 2017; Makin, Hill & Pellicano, 2017; Rainsberry, 2017). Here, Chloe highlighted the nature of these routines as not feeling natural, more so when the reason wasn't explained. Critically, diverging from the broader narrative allows current knowledge to be challenged. Additionally, Chloe's reflections begin to tie in with those of Molly, connecting on issues of school size and transitions across school levels. For Chloe, issues with transitions between mainstream and ASN schools arose, with these being hindered by the connections she tried to make with peers.

4.3.2 Difficulties Connecting with Peers

Part of Chloe's reflections on school transitions connected to her relationships with peers. While Chloe had initially been in mainstream secondary, due to bullying she was moved to an ASN school. When discussing the transitions and difficulties, Chloe moved to talking about her peer relationships. She became quieter when discussing the friends she had in primary, more withdrawn, with a sense of regret taking over her tone:

I didn't realise until recently that to make friends in primary school I had to be mean, I had to be brutal and I still am to this day and I don't like it.

Within the exploration of friendships, Chloe indicated the difficulties she experienced in schools had as being both a reason for peers to target her and a result of being bullied. Chloe

elucidated that the friends made in the mainstream primary and ASN secondary '*were my bullies*'. Throughout the session, Chloe continued to embody the sense of frustration she felt towards peers, teachers, and the system itself. These stemmed from the nature of masking and fitting in, which Chloe drew on to align with the norms of her peers and the school. Masking for Chloe involved mirroring the negative and bullying behaviour of her peers to fit in. Doing so made time at school easier, as the bullies became her friends, though Chloe remained aware of the impact her actions had on others. Masking allows autistic people to fit social norms, passing as neurotypical (Tierney et al., 2016). Here, Chloe masked to both fit in and avoid being bullied. Autistic pupils are more likely to be bullied (Ochi et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020), as they misfit the social norms of neurotypical peers. For Chloe, masking was about more than manoeuvring through social difficulties; it was how she navigated her autistic identity.

4.3.3 Frustration with My Own Autistic Identity

As shown in Figure 4.2 above, peer connections led into the third theme and how Chloe saw her autistic identity. As tensions within Chloe's experiences were explored, these linked to frustration with her own identity. Where she saw herself fitting into gender roles, and the impact gender roles had in the classroom formed part of these tensions. Chloe's perspective on her autistic identity was guided by the stereotypes she saw. Critically, she saw herself as outside of both autism and gender stereotypes but still impacted by both in school. Chloe embodied a sense of rejection of her autistic identity, seeing it as a disadvantage to both herself and her education. Seeing disempowerment in autistic identity diverges from the core facets expressed by neurodiversity affirming narratives (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022; McGill, 2020; Stenning, 2024). However, Chloe embodied a sense of misfitting, which framed her sense of disempowerment through being different.

The push to voice her disempowerment and move against the gendered social norms of her school and peers was significant for Chloe. She saw her gender identity as being a girl, though not rooted in actions of femininity. Reflecting on her own interests, she highlighted enjoying gaming, researching and reading. Critically, she saw these as actions other girls performed, such as watching her favourite gamers streams who were also girls, and set these

as her own benchmark on what being a girl means. While a small action of challenge, the implications are reflective of the cultural changes which embody gender (Bragg, Renold, Ringrose & Jackson, 2020). Chloe's awareness and pushback highlighted her challenge to the systems she saw as causing the need to fit social norms. She subconsciously embodied values and morals which fought for equality throughout her time at school. Invoking the feminist standpoint lens, Chloe's epistemic position frames challenges to the androcentric positioning of autism. Moving against social strata was a way for Chloe to begin to understand and embrace her autistic identity. While potentially contradictory, she became empowered through the difference she fought. Chloe's awareness of feeling different and having her needs framed in terms of stereotypes entwined the emergent themes together.

4.3.4 Power of Knowledge in Accommodations

The impact of secondary school wasn't wholly unexpected for Chloe, as she received advice as to what to expect from her mum and her autistic sister. Having witnessed the accommodations and needs of her sister being advocated for, Chloe emulated this for herself. These were framed as suggestions of when she would need to leave the classroom and how she could do this with teacher support. While some teachers were not understanding of Chloe's needs, there were those who she found that were part of this sense of empowerment she explored. The ability for teachers to offer a space during lunchtimes, a time which Chloe found to be too noisy and overwhelming due to the number of individuals and the smells of so many different foods at once, was key to Chloe's social explorations in school. While the meanness Chloe saw as key to making friends overshadowed many of her relationships, the space away from the lunch hall during lunch allowed her to explore friendships through roleplaying games. Chloe reflected more positively on building relationships with a small number of peers through similar interests. Here, Chloe showed the value that epistemic authority through lived experience can have - empowerment through self-advocacy and lived expertise to push for change.

4.3.5 ASN Isn't the End Goal

Building on empowerment through knowing accommodations, the final theme shown in Figure 4.2 above diverged from the core narrative of the other cases. Core to Chloe's

frustration was the perceived need for her to be in ASN when she felt she belonged in mainstream school. Throughout discussing the tension she felt with the school system, Chloe focused on the impact of attending an ASN school. Prior to the transition to ASN, Chloe had overperformed in mainstream and believed that the ASN environment and approach hindered her progress. Concluding the session, Chloe reflected a message that embodied her wish to return to mainstream and really push herself academically:

ASN isn't always the end game – some of us only need a little from it, and then we're ready for the world.

Chloe's final words reflect her overall perspective and position her case differently from others. Though aspects of empowerment, conformity, and marginalisation were both subtle and explicit in Chloe's reflection, these final words denoted a deeper issue. While pupils frame ASN as more beneficial for autistic pupils (Goodall, 2020; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2021), Chloe embodies movement against such perspectives. She worried her academic journey would be hindered by not being in a mainstream school. Craving academic challenge framed much of the negativity of Chloe's experiences. A need to empower herself in moving to mainstream disturbed the status quo of some cases, mirroring other autistic girls' narratives about being pushed out of schools (Billington et al, 2024; Sproston et al, 2017).

4.4 Case 3: Emily

Emily was 13, attending an ASN school in the Glasgow City local authority. Emily faced additional barriers related to English being her second language and received her autism diagnosis at the age of five. Throughout the session, Emily's reflections conveyed uncertainty about the school and her place within it. From the uncertainty, five themes emerged, as shown in Figure 4.3. The session was shrouded in tensions, some reflected in Emily's sense of space and confidence, and others within the research setting on both sides of the camera.

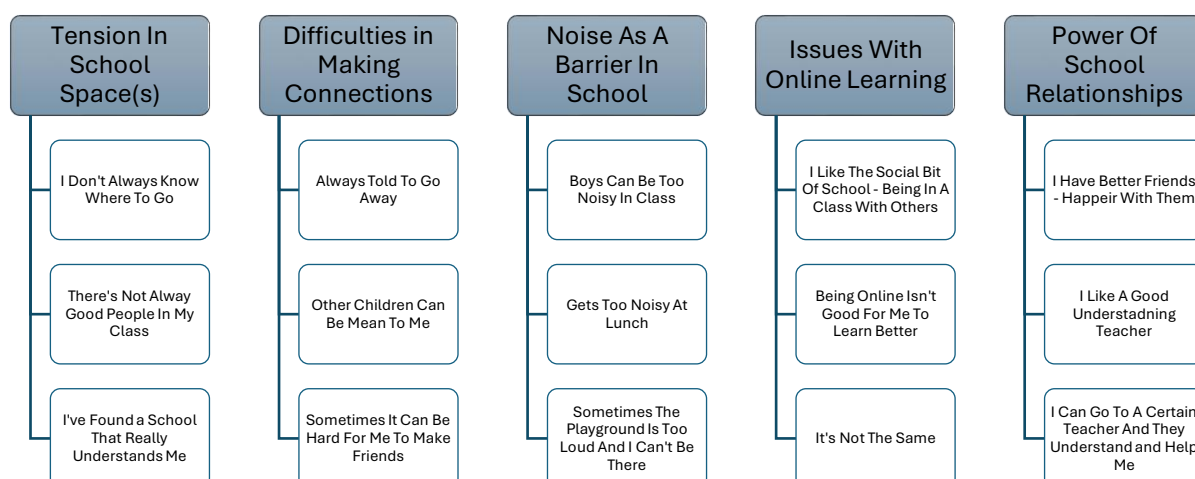


Figure 4.3: *Thematic Map of Emily's Session*

While Emily explored various tensions throughout her interview, the tensions surrounding both the research and school spaces were evident from the start. Figure 4.4 shows these core tensions, which were cyclical throughout the interview. These started with the researcher and research space, with Emily in the school duty room on an online call with an unknown person, while a teacher was present in the space. Tensions arose from my position as a researcher – a stranger to Emily and a potential authority figure. While rapport-building and power balancing were utilised to try to relieve these tensions (Oakley, 2016; Thwaites, 2017), the interview also explored them. Throughout the session, when topics arose that Emily seemed inclined to present in a more negative light, she became visibly tense and looked towards the teacher. During the session, other pupils would knock on the door at points to pass work to the teacher. Each of these moments furthered tension, as Emily explored the difficulties she already had with peers and the risk of being further marginalised. Of note, Emily had a strong sense of school justice, which was infringed upon by others using the space at times when it was specifically allocated to her. This sense of justice led to Emily seeing being bullied and others disrupting class as so impactful. As such, the session itself became rooted in the tensions Emily experienced, which led to the first emergent theme.

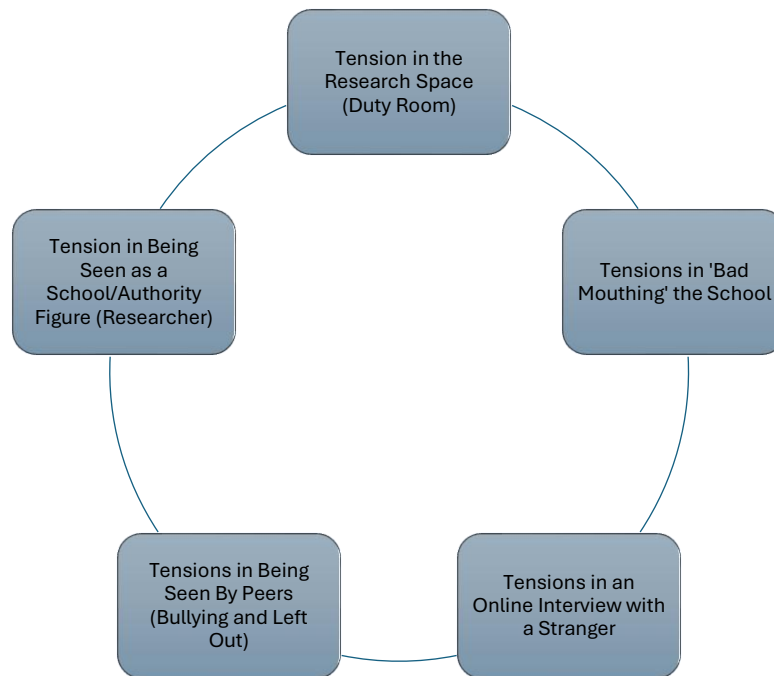


Figure 4.4 – *Tensions in Emily's Session*

4.4.1 Tension in School Space(s)

The first component of Emily's thematic map focused on the tensions she felt in school spaces. Initial tensions represented Emily's own sense of being within the school. Early in Emily's session, when reflecting on her experiences of school, there was a distinct focus on being unsettled or uncertain due to consistent movement between spaces and establishments. Emily had been in two primary schools, one additional needs resource base, and one secondary school. These transitions furthered Emily's sense of disempowerment, furthering systemic barriers. Emily faced further contortions of accessibility, reminiscent of disempowerment explored within misfitting (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Stenning, 2022). Emily's access was built upon the androcentric perspectives her teachers held. It was clear that Emily felt like an outsider, one who fit certain stereotypes (Stenning, 2022), but was denied access to specific spaces and peers. As reflections explored the accessibility of spaces, there remained consistent uncertainty about which spaces were available for support. Beyond the duty room, Emily felt there were no places she could go to or access when things became overwhelming. Additionally, Emily felt the difficulty of being uncertain about how to further socialise within smaller school spaces. Of the schools she had attended, Emily felt the *'size of the LCR [past ASN base within mainstream school] was too small and noisy, while where I*

am is bigger for me - more socialised'. These tensions expanded into Emily's reflections as she explored her relationships with peers.

4.4.2 Difficulties in Making Connections

From the first school attended to the time at the school they attended during the interview, Emily indicated, *'it wasn't nice in primary, I got bullied'*. Bullying was something Emily faced throughout her time at school, as she struggled to fit in and find a space, and when she attempted to join in, *'some of them ask me to go away for no reason'*. This struggle in finding a social space hadn't deterred Emily from seeking relationship with her peers. The friends she had made in her current school seemed a more positive element of her experience: *'I mean they are more kind than the ones before'*. However, Emily had been a victim of bullying throughout her school journey. Institutionalised bullying forms a significant component of autistic school experiences. Marginalisation from peers is linked to aspects of misfitting (Lekić, 2019). Emily didn't fit the systemic autism stereotypes, which are rooted in heteronormativity, resulting in bullying at previous schools. Though Emily's friends formed part of her support network, the environment itself, alongside the given supports, enacted a barrier to a more positive experience within and outside the classroom. The subtle empowerment Emily showed resulted in aspects of tension within these relationships. Each of these were school-situated and dependent on her ability to fit with the norms expected of her peers. As such, there remained a guardedness in her body language, adding complexity when discussing the impact and type of relationships Emily had with these peers.

4.4.3 Noise as a Barrier in Schools

The school environment itself further exacerbated the systemic barriers Emily faced. The impact of the school environment became a point of focus as noise quickly overwhelmed Emily. Noise formed a broader component of the barriers Emily faced. When the subject of support or inclusion was approached, Emily indicated that noise was the main barrier she faced. While classroom noise was generally manageable, the ever-present potential for overwhelming noise put Emily on edge. When discussing her earlier schools, Emily *'found it noisy in XX [...] There were too many people and it's difficult for me to learn when there are too many people and a lot of noise'*, although this wasn't a singular experience. The current

school Emily attends also presents barriers. Emily's experiences within the playground and making friends were hindered by *'too many children. There are too many children [...] It can be too noisy'*. When discussing supports, Emily indicated using headphones or ear-defenders outside of school, though such support items were prohibited in school: *'I can't do that in class because it's against the rules even if I need them'*. The systemic barriers Emily faced reflected broader practical issues in the school. Emily faced inaccessibility of school spaces due to noise, making access to joint spaces difficult. In turn, she experienced further marginalisation from peers through their disengagement. Linking to broader narratives, joint spaces tend not to be autism-friendly (Cunningham, 2022), though here the impact upon Emily was the creation of further tension. The importance of socialising for Emily overshadowed these narratives. The routine of school spaces offered Emily comfort and opportunities to socialise. Emily then moved to examine the negative experience of online learning, which had become part of her school routine post-COVID.

4.4.4 Issues with Online Learning

Emily's focus on and enjoyment of the social aspects of school and class were affected by the pressure and detriment of the change due to COVID. Emily's experiences in the classroom were focused on more than the processes of learning, as she *'like[s] being around people'*. The aspects of the social space in the classroom created and fostered an experience that Emily hadn't felt in her past schools, as she had earlier spoken of the positivity and improvement in her current school. As such, the movement to Zoom and online space was a factor she really felt *'because I wasn't in the classroom'*. She further elaborated on the situation, indicating where she felt the changes were detrimental to her learning:

sometimes online learning can be not socialised much and we have, I mean, we have more videocalls and there were not much socialised for me.

The components of online learning removed the enjoyment Emily felt in the classroom, eliminating the structure which formed a sort of 'safety net'. Adaptive school environments seek to meet pupil needs. However, the lack of stability can disrupt and trouble autistic school experiences to the pupil's detriment (Nuske et al., 2019). Emily found more creative outlets

for engaging in her own learning, finding playing the drums and art to be more valuable because she was *'able to do my own expressions'*. Emily found these creative outlets *'more enjoyable'*, and they helped her learning to feel more structured, something she found both enjoyable and valuable compared to more structured classes such as maths or English. Emily's focus on creativity reflected a sense of empowerment within her more open body language and confident tone. Exploring creative outlets helped her to build confidence and adopt a more positive outlook on her experience. Empowerment through the small glimmers of joy Emily found at school was vital to creating positivity. Here, Emily's narrative frames the divergences of misfitting as requiring her to take control to create space, which was part of the structuring of positivity, linked to the final theme that emerged from Emily's interview.

4.4.5 Power of School Relationships

Emily found the constant adaptations, changes and restricted movement between spaces over the past few years difficult. Despite this turmoil, Emily found some solace in her relationships and engagement with teachers. Emily's movement between mainstream and ASN school spaces had limited this engagement and her ability to build strong connections. The movement and (limited) spaces within the school were points of contention and uncertainty. Despite these, Emily found her teachers in the current school to be engaging; *'They understood me a bit more. They understand me better'*. Such positivity allowed Emily to bring together her experiences, move past negative ones, and see the value in herself within both the classroom and school spaces. Emily subconsciously explored a distinct level of empowerment here. Her tone and body language were more open and confident than earlier in the session. Despite the difficulties and marginalisation caused by reductions and insecurity in accessible spaces across the school, Emily remained steadfast in identifying positive elements and pushing for the support she perceived herself as needing. Emily found the overall school experience varied, with her struggling to do what she wanted the most – to socialise. Emily found it difficult to express herself fully at times during the interview. Despite such difficulty, Emily still voiced much of her experience and portrayed the mixed elements which formed her overall experiences. Emily's only wish from teachers was to *'help me to learn better'*.

Emily's session included some familiar themes, such as noise/being overwhelmed and the importance of and difficulties with making connections. These began to take shape as part of a broader narrative that was emerging across the cases. While at the stage of analysis, following Emily's interview, only the first three cases had been individually analysed, the emerging commonalities suggested more lay within the data (Cruzes and Dybå, 2011; Dusi, 2020). The broader messages of school tensions, difficulties, and emerging positivity fed into the need to draw broader messages from the data. Throughout the next two case analyses, I will explore the emergent themes, linking these to the earlier cases before leading into the justification for a cross-case thematic synthesis.

4.5 Case 4: Rosie

The fourth case, with participant Rosie, offered a unique perspective on both the school experience and comprehension of gendered differences, within both autistic experience and the school setting. Rosie was an autistic young woman nearing the end of her journey in secondary education. Rosie was 16, had received her autism diagnosis at the age of 14, and was attending an all-girls' school. Rosie's interview gave insight into the unique perspectives on education from outside the mainstream and beyond additional support needs settings. A sense of empowerment and almost wonder formed the basis of Rosie's reflections on previous school years. Throughout her session, Rosie maintained a sense of her own voice, though she also saw herself as one of many in the school. Rosie's case represented an interesting and nuanced perspective on school, built on gendered nuances in understanding self, space, and autistic being across different school spaces. The themes emerging from Rosie's reflections are shown below in Figure 4.5 and explored in detail in the following sections.

4.5.1 Entwining Gender into School

Rosie began the session by focusing on gender and its impact on her current school experience. Being at an all-girls' school brought a sense of pride to Rosie's tone and the way she spoke of her experiences there. As she began to flow into discussion, there was a clear development of tension and frustration in her body language and tone as she focused on the

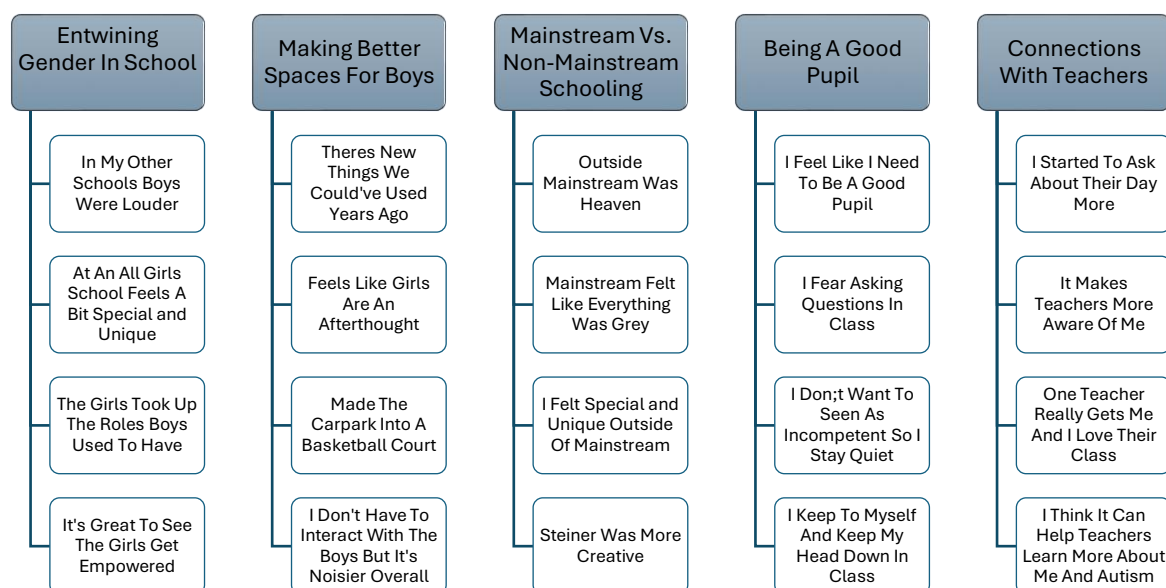


Figure 4.5: *Thematic Map of Rosie's Session*

changes she faced at school. Rosie began to reflect on the impact that bringing boys into the school was having and how her perspective of the school had begun to shift:

I feel like the school used to feel, like different [...] It was different and a bit special, but now it's just like every other Catholic school now so [...] Yeah it's lost that special feel.

The impact of gender wasn't one Rosie outwardly felt or thought about in school. However, as she reflected on her primary and secondary school experiences, she began to perceive the gender dynamics differently.

Rosie contemplated what she saw as typical gender roles in the school, with boys being noisier and rowdier both inside and outside the classroom. Looking at her all-girl environment, Rosie commented that these roles were naturally picked up in the classroom

and at school by the girls with louder personalities. The gendered roles and bodies within Rosie's reflections on school both filled and troubled the stereotypes she assigned. Gender contentions in school roles have been explored almost as an eventuality of institutional practice (Kollmayer, Schober & Spiel, 2018). Within the theme, the roles historically assigned to boys in school were taken up by the girls in Rosie's class. Troubling of gender roles highlights a deconstruction of the systemic stereotypes expected in the classroom setting (Wolfe et al., 2024). Critically, these were linked with other participants' perspectives on gender identity and roles in school - Emily saw the boys as noisier, while Chloe saw them as more likely to bully or disrupt classes. However, Rosie saw gender as less contingent on roles at her school (and in her identity) prior to boys being introduced into the school community.

4.5.2 Making Better Spaces for Boys

Looking at the thematic map for Rosie in Figure 4.5, the connections and differences between *Entwining Gender* and *Making Space for Boys* are evident. While exploring gender revealed nuances in how Rosie and her peers challenged heteronormative gender roles, making space became a point of contention. Beyond the reflections of the other participants, Rosie challenged and explored the expressions which influenced her feelings. While other participants embodied a more negative emotive force, Rosie also held a sense of wonder, pride and elation. Throughout the session, Rosie also showed her emotions in her reflections. Reflecting upon the impact of gender disruption at school, Rosie voiced her frustration at seeing changes such as a nurture room and more quiet spaces now being introduced. To Rosie, one particular change stemmed from gendering spaces, with a basketball court being added to the carpark leading to Rosie challenging the gendering of the space: '*I don't, eh, like again I don't think its deliberately sexist but...*'. Hetero-norms furthered Rosie's sense of disempowerment, showing the need to trouble and challenge systemic norms with respect to gender roles. While Rosie saw little need to engage with the boys, as they were in the years below her, the disruption still had an impact. Similar to Emily, there was an aura of tension building around there being more noise in school spaces, which Rosie had begun to recognise. Rosie shared Emily's strong sense of justice, which filtered into her frustrations with changes and disruptions affecting herself and her peers.

4.5.3 Mainstream Vs Non-Mainstream Schooling

Much of Rosie's discussion focused on the different dynamics of her schooling experiences. Rosie began her primary education at a Steiner school, seeing it as '*magical*' compared to her later experiences. Rosie then moved into a mainstream primary school, reflecting on this time with frustration and a strong emotional reaction. The move from Steiner to mainstream saw Rosie feeling different and like an outsider as she struggled to fit in with the teaching methods and other pupils. When Rosie moved between homeschooling and the all-girls' school, she felt a stronger sense of belonging, though this proved short-lived as she struggled with communal spaces.

As such, Rosie began to take time out of school when she could with peers, and voiced frustration with the system which failed to understand her autistic identity and needs. Disempowerment in mainstream for Rosie mirrored the reflections of other participants, suggesting the emergence of a shared theme around difficulties in mainstream schools. Rosie emulated Molly and Chloe in taking time out of school during the week due to pressures and sensory overload. These reflect institutional failings in maintaining a suitable environment for pupils, while aligning with messages about the epistemic authority of autistic pupils in developing accommodations (Billington, 2024). Understanding of school environments as disempowering links to broader autistic narratives. Here, rather than challenging the system outright like Chloe, Rosie took a subtler approach through smaller actions.

4.5.4 Being a Good Pupil

The final two themes for Rosie, as shown in Figure 4.5 above, link together the components of frustration and displacement in how she challenged and overcame barriers in classrooms. Being a good pupil was at the core of the tension surrounding Rosie's reflection. She encountered difficulty in speaking out when needed to get the teacher's attention, as doing so would make her the centre of attention: '*I'd be too scared to ask and get really stressed about it because of the noise and that attention moving to me, and then be too much of a pussy to say it*'. Rosie's anxiety became apparent through her visible discomfort when reflecting, showing the tension she felt in the moment. Such anxiety was explored further with respect to the classroom where she felt that teachers misunderstood her autistic process

as laziness and absent-mindedness at times. Neuro-normative stereotypes surround how autistic girls perceive teachers' knowledge of autism (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2020; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2020). Rosie didn't readily fit these, so support wasn't easily available, and the possibility of leaving class when needed was negotiated on a class-by-class basis. Here, Rosie emulated misfitting as she disrupted both social and neuro-norms. Rosie didn't readily fit the androcentric formulation of autism, troubling the way in which autism stereotypes are framed. Concurrently, she disturbed the social norms of peers as she misfitted systemic and social stereotypes. As such, Rosie's worries focused less on the accommodations which could be made. Rather, her empowerment emerged from being seen as good and productive. To achieve this, Rosie pushed her social boundaries with teachers beyond her comfort zone, further misfitting as autistic empowerment (Stenning, 2022).

4.5.5 Connecting with Teachers

Here, Rosie described the difficulty she faced in being the centre of attention and risking being othered or marginalised by peers. Rosie's biggest fears related to being seen as a bad pupil and sticking out among peers. Abating these fears involved pushing herself to meet social norms at times and avoiding seeking support in the classroom. One teacher Rosie discussed quickly became her favourite, a light within the issues she faced with teachers in the school. Rosie became happier and more relaxed, and her tone was more positive when discussing this teacher. The approach the teacher took was key to Rosie believing that school could be a more positive place:

she will explain the task and go round to each table to check that we understand the task and are going the right way to get the right answer [...] yeah, she's just caring and wants to help.

The value of a nurturing teacher often enhances autistic school experiences (Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021). The final theme ties into the narratives in the cases above, focusing on connectedness with peers and teachers. Rosie inverted the approach by subtly using her misfitting as an advantage, challenging androcentric, institutional stereotypes of autism.

Rosie's construction of her experience portrayed a unique journey, involving different learning processes related to different philosophies and physical environments. Despite Rosie seeing and exploring the difficulties she faced, there were also points of positivity and joy. Rosie's interview featured elements of empowerment and reclamation. While Rosie experienced elements of disempowerment and displacement - both physically and institutionally – she remained hopeful about her experience and enacting change for the future. The nature of Rosie's experience also highlighted the value epistemic authority holds through unique lived expertise.

4.6 Case 5: Ashley

Ashley was 16, having received her diagnosis at the age of eight, though she had been in additional support bases throughout her early and primary education. As in the pilot session, Ashley was accompanied by her mother, who offered clarification on school names and times and provided support throughout. Having an accompanying parent was a support that Ashley expressed a desire for in our email communication, as she felt she might go off topic or become emotional during the session. Progressing from the pilot, I felt trepidation. However, once I ensured that Ashley did not feel these tensions related, I was able to adequately share power within the interview. Throughout the interview, I ensured questions were directed towards Ashley, seeking to offer the empowerment which feminist standpoint perspectives from Harding (2004) and Harraway (1989) offer for marginalised group and experiences. Concerns over the suitability of the space and the need to ensure Ashley had a voice were short-lived. Ashley almost immediately took command of the session, interjecting herself where she saw her mother speaking on her behalf – at points interjecting with *'no, it's okay, I can tell it'* or *'let me tell it'*.

Ashley's command of the session set the standard for where any prompting or guidance would be needed, with interjections required mainly to explore depth in the reflections. The research space was then solidified as one that empowered Ashley, one vastly different from that during the pilot. Through gaining power over the session, Ashley began with confidence, though also with an agenda. Ashley's session was almost split in two, with the first half being fully led by Ashley, and, to a lesser extent, the named individual with

Ashley, who helped when the topic began shifting away from Ashley's focus, and reflecting on the schools with the second half being more nuanced in exploring these in-depth and offering context. The emerging themes which were drawn from Ashley's reflections are shown in Figure 4.6 below.

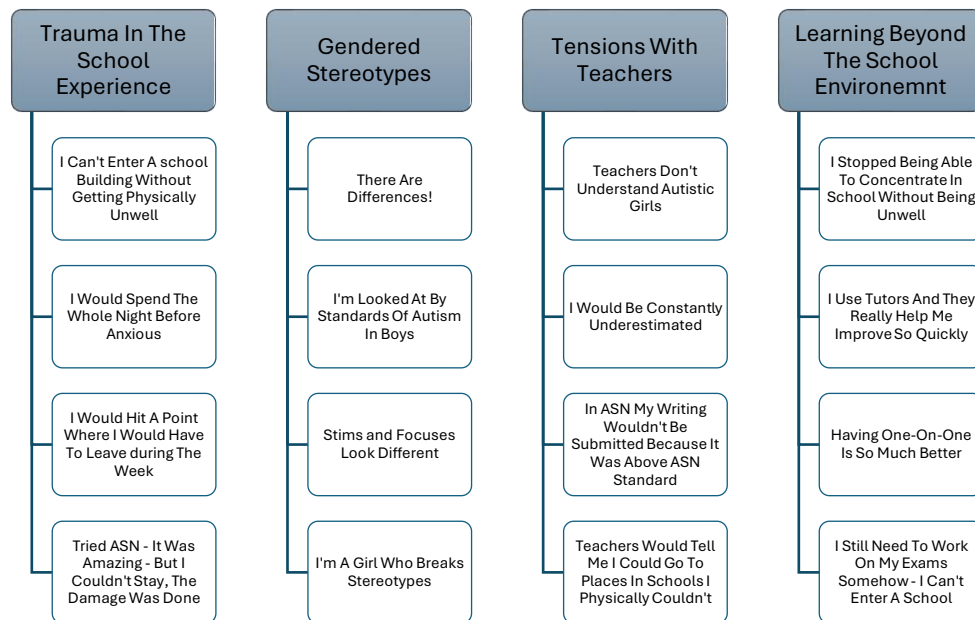


Figure 4.6: *Thematic Map of Ashley's Session*

4.6.1 Trauma in the School Experience

Ashley began by contextualising her different school transitions and the impact these have had in one statement:

It's gotten so bad that I can't enter a school building without being sick! I get so worked up and so anxious because of my past, and it just overwhelms me, and I end up being so ill, and it can last for days...

Commencing her reflection with such a powerful statement seemed to put Ashley at ease, with her body language less tense and more confident, suggesting she was taking control of the session. School trauma can relate to a sense of disempowerment (Shkedy, Shkedy & Sandoval-Norton, 2020), a consistent factor across all cases. Critically, the impact of trauma

leads to complete disengagement from school settings, mirroring other autistic girls' reflections (Moyse, 2021).

Ashley discussed her experience in nursery before progressing to primary school, moving chronologically through her school journey. An overarching emotional component framed Ashley's reflections, though not one of nostalgia, but more one of tension and frustration. In self-reflecting, Ashley pointed to immediately feeling different due to her personality and voice:

I have an American accent, and I've never been! And I don't know where I got it from! I just sort of have it and no one knows why! It's kind of cool and I like it but it made me weirder and I'd get bullied for it.

The tension Ashley showed in this moment reflected how she saw her overall experience across the different schools she had attended. Ashley's school experiences were more fluid than many would go through. Beginning with a mainstream primary, Ashley transitioned to homeschooling in primary six before attending an ASN primary, followed by a mainstream secondary. As Ashley progressed to discussing the mainstream secondary, she stated that her first-year experience was hindered by feelings of negativity and anxiety. Ashley's experiences continued to be erratic, transitioning to home learning with COVID, being home-schooled by tutors for third year, attempted another secondary school, then transitioning to fully online learning with tutors.

4.6.2 Gendered Stereotypes

Ashley perceived her ability being continually scrutinised in school due to her autism diagnosis, reflecting the detrimental impact this had on feeling safe and included in the school system. Ashley's sense of space was merged with her perspective of autism and being both a gender and autism misfit in teachers' eyes. Within both ASN and mainstream schools, Ashley expressed frustration at not having her needs and diagnosis understood as *'[t]hey kept saying I couldn't be autistic because I was social, because I didn't do what other autistic boys*

did'. Being autistic, yet not fitting stereotypes, led to Ashley's frustration and anger at the school system. Misfitting the stereotyped norms led to a level of understanding of her ability and autistic identity as empowered (Stenning, 2022; 2024).

Throughout the discussion, Ashley's body language and emotional tone reflected her feelings about the people and environment, as *'it was just so negative, the people were awful, and no one understood me'*. When discussing the experience, Ashley again became quite tense, reflecting on the feeling of *'this bubble in my stomach'* which she experienced in school. The physical representation of anxiety which she seemed to embody, and which showed up as tension, was critical for two reasons. Firstly, it showed the physical manifestation of the pressures and trauma which Ashley experienced. These manifesting expanded due to added stressors in being unseen and misunderstood as autistic. As such, the reflection mirrored aspects of broader literature (Hamilton & Roberts, 2025), while adding nuance to the outcome of trauma these stressors can have. Secondly, the nature of gendered stereotypes were reflected here. While Ashley received support in mainstream school through sensory rooms and small accommodations, these were underestimated due to her gender. Ashley reflected on misfitting the stereotypes teachers associated with autism and gender. As such, she mirrored broader narratives, though brought novelty through showing where she challenged these and felt a sense of empowerment. The emotion Ashley embodied, whether deliberately or subconsciously, enhanced the subjective process of her session. When discussing negative aspects, Ashley's tone was angry and frustrated, while happier experiences elicited more elation. A more relaxed body language when discussing the more positive aspects of her experience highlighted the dichotomy which dictated Ashley's experiences of moving between feelings of enrichment and detriment.

4.6.3 Tensions with Relationships

Throughout her discussion, Ashley highlighted points of contention she experienced with peers, both autistic and neurotypical, and teachers. An overriding tension surrounded how Ashley felt her teachers saw her. Being autistic was not necessarily a central point Ashley reflected on when exploring her identity, though she saw it as impacting her relationships with teachers. Throughout her interview, Ashley highlighted the nature of

connecting with peers and teachers as difficult through being misunderstood, underestimated and pushed aside. Ashley pointed specifically to her American accent as an example, citing having never been and not knowing herself where it emerged. In school, she became othered and mocked, reflecting that peers saw her as lying to gain attention.

Critically, these were aspects of her personality which were embraced by peers in primary settings, becoming points of contention with peers in secondary. Further, Ashley highlighted her stimming being a cause of othering in secondary, creating tensions on how she understood her autistic sense of self. Throughout her reflection on peers in both mainstream and ASN schools, Ashley reflected on understanding why peers bullied or ostracised her, as she did not fit 'typical' gender roles in school. Ashley also saw her peers' understanding of autism as contributing to being bullied. However, she placed the fault with the adults for not educating them on autism rather than directing her anger towards other pupils. Such reflections furthered Ashley's frustration, an indication of the empowerment she began to feel whilst being outside of physical school building.

4.6.4 Learning Beyond the School Environment

Ashley closed out the session by focusing on the differences and excitement she feels when learning online or with tutors at home. A sense of contentedness lies in Ashley's learning and being outside the physical school environment. Although Ashley remains registered with a physical school, she is working closely with her family, and the Local Authority, to make this move permanent. A need to be outside of school settings emerged from the trauma she experienced throughout her school journey. The pressures of the physical environment have continued to hinder her academic progress, particularly during examinations. Ashley reflected worryingly on this, looking to future prospects and feeling more of an outsider by falling behind her peers. A positive change in her body language and tone took over, however, when she spoke of the implications from tutor learning:

Obviously we didn't have as much time as at school, but they listened to me and actually helped when I was anxious or when things were getting too much. They didn't see me as a stereotype or make me feel different!

The small verbal exchange Ashley reflected on was at the core of her experience and, in her eyes, marked the difference between the hostile, detrimental environment of her schools and the way she believed schools could be. Drawing on the research's conceptual framing, here, showed that Ashley embodied a sense of empowerment through being heard and seen. Critically, on reflection, these linked back to the other cases through actions, identity and (re)claiming self and space. Ashley differed through being more pointed, sharing a greater sense of hope. Throughout her reflections towards the end of the session, a sense of empowerment and (almost) reclamation of her journey, and more importantly self, emerged. The subjective nature of her reflections took on a tone of hope and happiness that was not present at the beginning, and their depth was greater than in the pilot session.

Table 4.1 – *Individual Case Themes*

Case	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5
Molly	Feeling Unseen	Overwhelmed in School Spaces	(Un)Supportive School	Navigating School Spaces	Connectedness in School
Chloe	Transitions Between Primary and Secondary	Difficulties Connecting with Peers	Frustration with My Own Autistic Identity	Power of Knowledge in Accommodations	ASN Isn't the End Goal
Emily	Tensions in School Space(s)	Difficulties in Making Connections	Noise as a Barrier	Issues with Online Learning	Power of School Relationships
Rosie	Entwining Gender in School	Making Space for Boys	Mainstream vs Non-mainstream Schooling	Being a Good Pupil	Connecting with Teachers
Ashley	Trauma in the School Experience	Gendered Tensions in Autism	Tensions with Teachers	Learning Beyond the School Environment	

4.7 Finding Commonalities for the Cross-Case Synthesis

While in-depth detail of the analysis processes was given in section 3.8.2, the current chapter offers a space to highlight the commonalities that led to the cross-case synthesis. Here, I will refer back to the earlier participant thematic maps as visual components which helped to shape the synthesis. Each theme held a cluster of codes which linked the data together. As I move to the cross-case synthesis, the individual themes are vital (Appendix 14 lays the themes out corresponding with the cases). The synthesis drew out the commonalities which emerged across the cases. While the raw data are shown in Appendices 9 and 10, which highlight the components of the cross-case synthesis, here I will focus on identifying commonalities across the case themes. To begin the process, each case was taken down to the clusters, which framed the emergent themes. Figure 4.7 below illustrates the process for ‘connections’ across the cases and how themes emerged. To detail the cross-case synthesis, I will focus on the process described in Figure 4.7.

To synthesise across the cases, I started with the emerging concept of ‘connections’. These were visually and conceptually influenced by the guidance of Cruzes and Dybå (2011). As shown in Figure 4.7, the clusters dichotomise experiences of connection into ‘positive’ and ‘negative’. The data clusters were analysed, and the resulting branches were organised alongside an emerging theme. Looking at the individual cases, each participant reflected on connections in school. Molly, Chloe, Rosie, and Ashley each held themes that focused on the difficulties of making connections with peers and teachers. Emily drew less focus on peer connection, though her case still offered insight into the nature of peers. Under the dichotomies of *positive* and *negative*, the framing of the clusters leading into themes took shape.

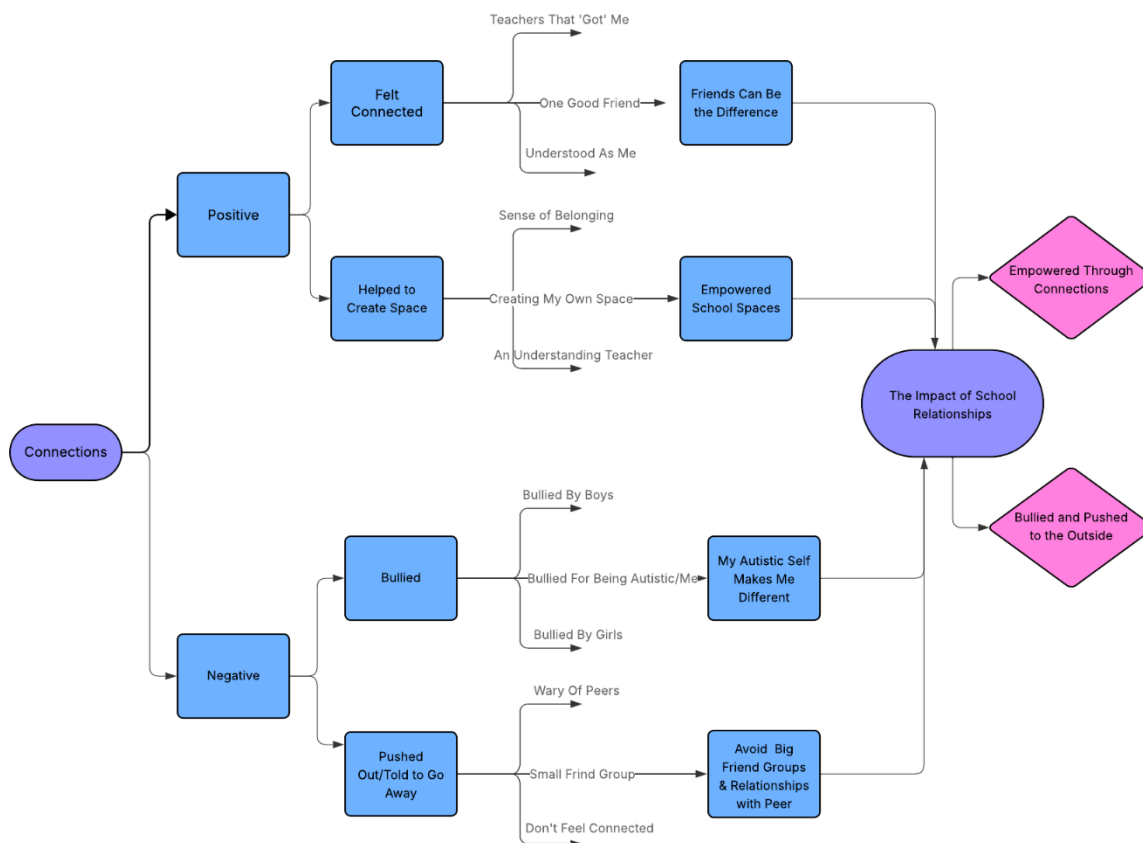


Figure 4.7 – *Flow of Cross-Case Synthesis Example*

Bringing these together, the clusters under these framed the branches ‘*Felt Connected*’ and ‘*Helped to Create Space*’ under the positive perspective, with ‘*Bullied*’ and ‘*Pushed Out/Told to Go Away*’ under the negative. From each of these, the clusters under them branched out; for example, ‘*An Understanding Teacher*’, ‘*Creating My Own Space*’, and ‘*Sense of Belonging*’ each stand alone as their own cluster of codes and collapse into ‘*Friends Can Be the Difference*’. From the four conceptualised initial themes, the interlocking elements were critiqued through inter-reliability checks with codes, before producing the higher-order themes. Further commonalities were apparent across the cases. Figure 4.7 above shows the general breakdown of the synthesis. From the 24 themes which emerged across the cases, common elements were apparent. As shown in Table 4.1, commonalities across the cases are evident. Aspects of autistic identity from Molly are intertwined with each case's focus on exploring and moving beyond stereotypes. Chloe furthered these by reflecting on her frustrations around being autistic, while Ashley and Rosie highlighted the disempowering impact of autism stereotypes in schools. These indicated a

more profound meaning within, justifying the broader analysis, as they filtered into a set of messages and challenges to autism stereotypes across the cases. Looking at the cases, each explored aspects of mainstream difficulty and ASN success. Chloe's difficulties at mainstream tied into Rosie's description of *heaven into hell*, highlighting a starting point where the other cases explored the nature of mainstream compared to ASN environments. These reflections dichotomised the nature of the school environment, meeting under the theme of mainstream vs ASN environments. From these commonalities, following the process highlighted in Figure 4.7 (with the breakdown shown in Appendix 14), the higher-order themes were justified.

4.8 Conclusion

This case study chapter detailed the exploration of the participants' individual emergent themes. These were framed by the research's conceptual framework, highlighting the nature of participants' experiences and building towards answering the core research question: How do autistic girls create and navigate spaces in the Scottish education system? Each individual brought forward the nature of their experience, offering insight into the unseen elements which construct their school realities. Commonalities were explored to justify the cross-case analysis and to identify higher-order themes. The chapter which follows will detail these themes, drawing connections to the conceptual framework and current literature.

Chapter 5: Troubled and Empowered – Cross-Case Synthesis

5.1 Introduction and Chapter Summary

Building on the individual cases in Chapter 4, the current chapter will explore the themes which emerged through data interrogation from the cross-case synthesis. As commonalities emerged across the individual reflections, the cross-case synthesis allowed the data to bridge and enhance these. The chapter begins with conceptualising and discussing the emergent themes. Each theme is highlighted and explored through the emerging subthemes, conceptualised under the research framework. Throughout the chapter, how these themes tie to current literature is explored. Table 5.1 below shows the emergent themes and associated subthemes under the core theme *Troubled and Empowered - Entangled in School Spaces*. While these at times dichotomise participant experiences, doing so offers nuance to how these troubled both the girls and the school system. Intertwining the concepts of misfitting, marginalisation, and the epistemic authority of participant voice ensures that the emergent themes provide insight into answering the core research question: *How do autistic girls create and navigate spaces in the Scottish education system?*

Table 5.1: *Troubled In School – Entangled in School Spaces*

Higher-Order Themes	Sub-Themes	Illustrations
A Dichotomy in Mainstream vs ASN Schooling	Pushed Beyond Our Limits in Mainstream	<i>‘It was just going back in was really, traumatic [...] spending most of the time in school in the bathroom, on this constant like, edge of feeling like I would meltdown’</i>
	Beyond Mainstream Was Heavenly	

The Impact of School Relationships		<i>‘It’s like heaven into hell. Because it is like heaven [...] they make it so magic but then normal...’</i>
	Bullied and Pushed to the Outside	<i>‘I did get bullied by the girls too, I just didn’t realise until later on because they’d be more sneaky about it by making sure I couldn’t join groups or making sure people wouldn’t be my friends. The boys took my things and were more likely to hurt me than the girls...’</i>
	Core Friendships and Empathic Teachers	<i>‘He was really interested in the subject, he would always try and get students interested as well and talk positively about the subject as well. I think everyone liked him as well’</i>
Manoeuvring School Spaces	Trying To Find Somewhere I Can Be and Belong in School	<i>‘Sort of like, I did kind of belong there, but not really’</i>
	Connections Help to Empower Spaces in School	<i>‘at lunch we sit in a classroom. It’s just become three of us now we just sit in class, and that’s better’</i>
	It is Always ‘Boys Will Be Boys’...	<i>‘They kept saying I couldn’t be autistic because I was</i>

Gender and Autism	Treated Differently Just Because We Are Autistic Girls?	<i>social, because I didn't do what other autistic boys did'</i> <i>'I think if one of the girls was to act that way or, like, have a meltdown it's treated so differently. It's really not fair. The teachers don't really understand how different boys and girls are [...] they need to [...] they need to know more...'</i>
Messages About Autism	Please Listen to Us and Go Beyond Being Tokenistic Learn From Our Voices and See Beyond Stereotypes	<i>'Like, I think some teachers aren't flexible enough. When they think that people with autism aren't. They don't see the issues sometimes.'</i> <i>'Like it's a spectrum not a slider. Like some people think that you can slide it and get autism 1, 2 or 3 and that's just stupid. Autism comes in all shapes and sizes and that's the whole point of it.'</i>

5.2 Theme 1: A Dichotomy in Mainstream vs ASN Schooling

The first theme elucidated the strength and pitfalls from participants' experiences between mainstream and additional support needs (ASN)/non-mainstream school settings. Rather than being interwoven, a dichotomy naturally arose in how participants spoke of these, interestingly situating a binary between the two. Each participant highlighted the impact the type of school environment had upon their mental wellbeing, learning and daily experiences. As such, the first theme begins progressing an answer to the core and the first sub question *How are the school experiences of autistic girl and girls situated?* Situating the girls experiences in tensions in mainstream and a sense of calm in ASN brings a sense of dichotomy to the theme. Through the subthemes, the epistemic value of voice from a feminist standpoint lens highlighted the contradictions in school systems and spaces. From the data, marginalised experiences are foregrounded through the epistemic authority of lived expertise (Cohen et al., 2022; Hartsock, 2019). Here, the value of seeking empowerment of voice through the feminist standpoint lens is enhanced by participant reflections. From the first theme, those which followed emerged through reflections on the systemic barriers and contradictions which were challenged and overcome.

5.2.1 Pushed Beyond Our Limits in Mainstream

The first subtheme to emerge was evident early on in each interview as these framed a starting point from which participants explored their school journeys. Each participant had spent some time in a mainstream school, ranging from being fully mainstreamed to communication or support-bases within these. One of the core issues with mainstream schools is sensory overload in joint spaces. The lunch hall was a collectively overwhelming experience for participants. Rosie progressed the idea of chaos, encapsulating the hectic nature of the lunch hall:

'the chaos of it all. So, all the year groups have to get their lunch at the same time and they're all running there because the queues are so long'.

Here, Rosie elucidated the stressors which surrounded the lunch hall. As a joint space, the sheer numbers of pupils being in one space together with wait times created an environment which she was unwilling to try and tackle. Molly further reflected the struggle with such a busy and noisy area: *'I hate it there, because most of the school's sitting there'*, while Ashley acknowledged the impact of the lunch hall and having to avoid the area altogether: *'complete sensory overload and throughout the whole time in first year I'd stay in this sensory room'*. Chloe also felt the pressure of the lunch hall, taking time in a separate classroom to avoid the noise and smell. Lunch halls emerged as a point of contention, where sensory overload was experienced by most of the girls. Reflections here evidenced a sense of disempowerment and disconnection through being overwhelmed in joint spaces. These acted as a starting point for exploring school struggles.

Reflections on spaces where participants felt disempowered highlighted the disconnect between inclusive practice as a concept and its implementation (Ballantyne et al., 2024; Goodall, 2020). Chloe began with nuancing the differences she felt in mainstream now that she was in ASN schooling: *'[my] other schools were mainstream and I hate them'*. The statement was initially a stand-alone, accompanied by a look and tone of resentment. When digging deeper into Chloe's reasoning for these feelings, she elucidated frustration with the teachers, peers and environment: *'They were loud. None of the teachers understood me. If I was very lucky maybe one or two would try and the students were really, really annoying'*. Emily echoed Chloe's sentiments about the number of pupils and the vaster school spaces as barriers to being seen. These reflections were by furthered Ashley who simply saw mainstream settings as a sensory *'nightmare'*. While overload and frustration were part of Ashley's overall experience, her voice and tone reflected tension while offering a visual representation of how mainstream felt for her:

Ashley: Well, it felt, it just felt off. It felt like there was a cloud over the teachers and the students...

O: What do you mean by 'a cloud'.

Ashley: Like, sort of like a cartoon cloud! That just hung over everyone. It was, kind of, overwhelming. Like everyone was miserable and it felt so negative [...] everyone just wasn't happy.

The image conjured what remained unseen by others in school, though was central to Ashley's experience. The sense of unease and a shadow which sat over the school mirrored how she reflected on her experience. From a conceptual lens, Ashley here embodies misfitting, capturing how the emotional toll of masking impacts her autistic identity (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018; Jordan, 2020). These were furthered through needing to be out of the physical mainstream environment.

As each participant contextualised the nature of their experiences, Molly, Chloe, Ashley and Rosie embodied the tension and pressure that built up to a kind of *crescendo*. Referring here to sensory overload and being pushed to crisis point, the strain of coping within school reached regular breaking points for each of these girls. Though each had a different threshold before hitting crisis, the impact was the same – a need to vacate the classroom or the school itself. Chloe gave the sense of a more supportive environment, with the ability to self-advocate, exemplifying the value of epistemic expertise as empowerment of knowledge and support. Chloe utilised a duty room during her late primary and early secondary experiences, and, as such, her breaking points were accommodated through teachers' understanding. Other participants, however, weren't as fortunate in getting such support.

As Rosie explored her crisis points, she reflected on the emotional and mental toll: *'I think it was "bad" subjects on those days, or I just felt overwhelmed and exhausted on Wednesdays.'* The impact was felt for Rosie from the start of secondary school, with difficulties in transitions leading to classroom avoidance:

I did used to ask to go to the toilet a lot and then just sit in the cubicle but I can't remember any particular situations. On Wednesdays [...] I also used to self-harm in S1 and S2.

While Rosie is now able to go home or access different spaces within the school, a midweek crisis point remains. Being pushed to self-harm reflects the insidious nature of being overwhelmed and isolated (Sabo et al., 2015), impacted by contradictory school practices and misfitting. Rosie fit within the broader social and classroom spaces, yet remained marginalised through misfitting in terms of her autistic needs. These needs were unseen as Rosie remained marginalised from both her autistic identity and the broader school community. Consequently, a sense of disempowerment was woven throughout her narrative. Ashley mirrored the experiences of Rosie and Molly, though avoidance and barriers furthered her disempowerment.

The sensory overload Ashley faced in school caused avoidance of classrooms in mainstream as she spent *'most of the time in school in the bathroom, on this constant like, edge of feeling like I would meltdown'*. Further to avoidance, Ashley spoke of the trauma these spaces caused: *'panic attacks in the morning and at night just thinking about school'*. There was a sadness mixed with the anger in her tone, alongside a physical component with respect to her wellbeing: *'[I]t made me inactive. It gave me eating and sleeping problems'* which bled into her home-life as she experienced a perpetual sensation of being *'numb and like "me" was gone'*. Ashley felt this anxiety as a physical sensation:

I had like this bubble in my stomach. I wasn't like, sick, it was so much anxiety and stress from every day and it just made this bubble bigger and harder and it wouldn't pop.

This build-up to sensory overload became consistent for Ashley, physically stopping her from attending school. Ashley's reflection embodies the severity of the impact school trauma can have on autistic girls' access to schools, reflecting broader accounts (Billington et al., 2024;

Simone, 2010; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2020). Such a significant impact shows the systemic contradictions between how inclusion and support are theorised and how they are practised.

Woven throughout her school journey, Ashley faced disempowerment through misfitting as her needs went unseen and unsupported. Together, these narratives frame the epistemic imbalance of power and access to mainstream spaces that autistic girls face. Stress surrounds accounts of mainstream schools. The sense of being and the climate and environment of mainstream schools pose difficulties and barriers for autistic pupils (Billington, Loucas & Knott, 2024; Mayes, Wolfe & Higham, 2020; Wolfe et al., 2024). Participants here reflected on the negative perceptions, sense of self, and feelings of exclusion imposed by mainstream environments. Feelings of isolation are mirrored (Billington et al., 2024), with participants reflecting on feeling othered within school. Ashley exhibited a more extreme impact of mainstream climates. While many, including the participants in this research, have built narratives around emotional and subjective senses of negativity, Ashley's reactions became physiological. Pushed, tested, and in a way broken, Ashley became unable to enter school buildings without becoming physically and mentally overwhelmed. Chloe, Rosie, and Molly also reached their breaking points during the week, resulting in leaving school midweek, with some instances of self-harm to break and manage the pressure. Within broader literature, removal of self from school or cutting school weeks down by choice are not rare circumstances for autistic pupils (Moyse, 2021; Munkhaugen et al., 2018; Ochi et al., 2020). Here, the research findings speak to the broader context, evidencing the emotional toll school can have.

5.2.2 Beyond Mainstream Was Heavenly

As shown in Table 5.1, the second subtheme of Theme 1 presented a binary opposition to the difficulties encountered in mainstream spaces. Beyond the walls of mainstream schooling, participants experienced a level of freedom and empowerment. Each participant saw a level of change and positivity in attending or accessing a non-mainstream environment. While Molly attended a mainstream school, she had access to and additional

support resource base within her school. She conceptualised this as being separate from the mainstream aspect, offering a more calming and inclusive space:

So it's slightly smaller, smaller and there's, you know, kind of opportunity for conversation instead of it being sit down and work. You can... It's a lot more relaxed and that sort of thing.

Interestingly, within Molly's reflections, an unspoken sense of freedom emerged in having the ability to go to a space of safety and regulate, on which created a sense of belonging. The resource base allowed her to listen to music and focus, unlike the noisier mainstream classes, while working at her own pace. These smaller spaces offered a more empowering space, where participants reflected on their voices being less marginalised. Valuably, these reflected the epistemic empowerment which comes with being seen and heard (Barbour, 2018). Both mainstream and ASN schools follow inclusive principles of access to education (Scottish Government, 2025), and across the data, participants saw ASN spaces as more nurturing and empowering.

While Molly found belonging in the smaller, secluded spaces of the school, others reflected on the aspects of ASN which they saw as an improvement from mainstream schools. Emily was more reserved in her session, showing uncertainty and reluctance to offer many negative perspectives, potentially due to the use of a joint space. However, her demeanour changed when she reflected on the ASN school she attended. Emily saw the ASN environment and approach as '*more socialised*', and as aiding in her learning. Emily's focus was on the size of the classes and space, comparing these to her mainstream experiences: '*I think the size of the LCR [mainstream] was too small and noisy while ASN is bigger for me, more socialised*'. These were critically important points where she found empowerment. Feeling seen and heard as part of the school community allowed Emily to move beyond the misfitting encountered in the mainstream environment. Paralleling this reflection, Chloe found herself to be seen and heard in ASN schools: '*Quieter, calmer and the classes aren't packed with 30 different personalities and background noises that are too loud a volume.*' The mention of personalities here is critical to exemplifying Chloe's frustration. The

number of pupils within mainstream detrimentally influenced Chloe's concentration and academic progress, something vital to her empowerment.

The potential which participants felt within the non-mainstream environment was key to building their narratives into a sense of a dichotomy. Rosie was extremely open in comparing her mainstream and non-mainstream experiences. Following her movement into mainstream, Rosie was enabled to see the difference in the spaces, approaches and impact that came with a mainstream environment.

O: ...do you remember how you felt when you moved to more, not 'normal' but mainstreamed schools?

Rosie: Oh yeah! It's like heaven into hell. Because it is like heaven [Steiner][...] they make it so magic but then normal [...] well mainstream schools just make you do things you don't want to. It's all grey pencils and blue pens [...] I don't know why you have to do that [...] There's so many unnecessary rules...

The idea of 'heaven into hell' was a vital one in untangling the subtleties which emerged from other participants' narratives. Rosie's Steiner experience was unique among the research participants. The perspective Rosie highlights dichotomised a sense of light and colour versus a more grey or opaque hue. The movement from magic to grey and blue showed the emotive nature and heavy impact Rosie experienced. Critically, the reflection here embodies the framing of empowerment through inclusion and feeling seen (Barrios et al., 2025; Holmes, 2024). While autistic girls have historically been marginalised due to the androcentric framing of autism, spaces in ASN allowed this to be somewhat lessened.

Ashley highlighted feeling a need to be in ASN environments, as it offered a nurturing and supportive space. However, she felt her achievement and progress within the ASN school warranted a move to mainstream schooling:

Ashley: I remember [ASN teacher], when we had to write something to send into the high school, stopped mine from being sent because she was worried they would think she told us what to write because it was so good. So I could do well in classes, especially at [ASN] because it was calmer and smaller classes and I could concentrate better on the work, but they thought I should be in mainstream. Sort of like, I did kind of belong there, but not really...

O: What do you mean by that?

Ashley: So, like [...] that I needed the different type of learning and classes [ASN] had, but I was finding the work too easy there to really push myself. So I did kind of belong there for that reason, but I was too different from the other kids.

Invoking the feminist standpoint lens here highlights the challenge that marginalised voices pose to the systemic contradictions of school spaces. While these are set up to be joint and inclusive, autistic epistemic authority sees them as exclusionary spaces. Throughout the first theme, participants' situated knowledge has evoked a need to examine the nature of disempowerment (Cohen et al., 2022; Hartsock, 2019). Here, Ashley ties together the epistemic experience, exemplifying the systemic imbalance autistic girls face in schools.

Broader narratives have long highlighted the precarity of mainstream schooling for autistic individuals (Billington, 2024; Goodall, 2020; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Sproston, 2017), equally highlighting positivity with respect to non-mainstream environments. From initial reflections within Humphrey (2013), a baseline seemed set as to the need for strengthened mainstream exploration. However, as narratives emerged in congruent literature, the nature of and need for mainstreaming were challenged (Billington, 2024; Birkett, McGrath & Tucker, 2022; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Hammel, 2012; Neal & Frederickson, 2016). A sense of oppression surrounds the narratives of autistic girls in school (Wolfe et al., 2024), with the system described as ineffective in meeting needs and eroding a sense of agency.

Where a state of dichotomy seems to arise throughout the literature, posing school experiences as binary good/bad, much of the nuance surrounding these can be lost. Chloe troubled this binary, seeing ASN as a stepping stone for support to enable progression back into mainstream. She saw an ASN education as potentially limiting her future and potential. Such thoughts are rarely explored within the literature. Within Wolfe's (2024) research, one autistic pupil highlighted the disconnect between their needs and identity and the schooling system. Broader reflections from autistic girls have failed at times to draw nuance to the issue, though they have brought forward elements of enlightenment. Within self-reflective accounts, such as those in *Spectrum Women* (Elcheson, 2018), the managing of self and school poses difficulty. Integrating a sense of wellbeing and autistic identity outside of mainstream environments posed the same difficulties, as reflected in the broader literature (Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022).

5.3 Theme 2: The Impact of School Relationships

Looking back at Table 5.1, the second subtheme linked participants' accounts of relationships to (dis)empowerment throughout their school experiences. Here, the reflections linked to the main research question, and first sub question, showing experiences as situated in tensions. As the conceptualisation of relationships within schools emerged, the contexts of these relationships differed. Detrimental experiences emerged through reflections on being bullied and othered in the classroom. These extended from different facets of the school, though were grounded in systemic contradictions of gendered actions. Overall, however, participants experiences weren't negative as connectedness created safety. Gems emerged where participants reflected on small, intimate friend groups and empathic teachers as changemakers in their experiences. While these may not have been expressed to the individuals by the girls, the changes in body language and tone expressed the positivity felt. These placed significant value on the impact a good friend and empathic teacher can have for autistic girls in schools.

5.3.1 Bullied and Pushed to the Outside

Throughout the cases, reflections on bullying or social othering emerged from each participant. These were typically shorter reflections by participants, surrounded by closed body language and negative emotions. Despite these shorter narratives, each offered critical insight into the issues of misfitting, marginalisation, and systemic gendered violence. These factors conceptualised the epistemic knowledge offered through participants' voices. As the topic was emotive and traumatic for all participants, there were subtleties which tied these experiences within the cases. Molly indicated the actions of being isolated and having items thrown at her by peers, seeing herself as limited in her peer network. Emily also reflected on the bullying being within mainstream: *'In primary I was bullied a lot'*. She saw this as due to her difficulties fitting in. The reflections from both Molly and Emily had an angry yet sad tone, and they became visibly uncomfortable as they explored these topics, so I did not push the discussion further.

Bullying had a gendered aspect for Chloe and Ashley as they were both bullied almost exclusively by boys. Chloe's experiences of bullying progressed whatever primary school she attended: *'it started in primary 2 up to primary 7. I've been in two primary schools and two secondary schools'*. The bullying had a direct impact on the need to transition across schools *'[S]o basically I was getting bullied, like worse than in primary and my mum wouldn't stand for it so she fought for me to get here'*. Chloe's experiences of bullying were perpetuated by boys in her class and school, with her tone and demeanour showing her frustrations and resentment when reflecting on these incidents. When looking at the actions of authority figures in the school, Chloe indicated her feelings:

I think they just don't get that because I'm a girl and I'm autistic and I'm smart that I don't do well in social situations. Like, teachers treated me different and they saw that and then I got bullied I think for that.

The repercussions for the bully were also insufficient in Chloe's eyes, as they received *'just a slap on the wrist'*. From these reflections, the impact of misfitting due to systemic power imbalances is evident. Being treated differently by authority figures in front of peers

marginalised Chloe further. Chloe's frustrations were aimed at the lack of accountability and the feeling that she wasn't taken seriously, mirroring the sense of disempowerment shown in the broader literature.

Further to the systemic injustice which accompanied bullying, Ashley faced gender-based violence in her time at school through her misfitting social perceptions of autism. Ashley also voiced feeling let down and the frustration showed in her tone: *'It got to the point I stopped asking the teachers for help because they made it like I was the problem, not the bullies'*. These frustrations were embodied in how Ashley recalled reporting the instances of bullying to teachers:

now because of my diagnosis they would tell me that I didn't understand and I was getting mixed up. Which was really frustrating! 'Hey, I'm getting bullied!'
'Well they're only bullying you because of your reaction, stop being so emotional and it'll stop! Start pretending they aren't bothering you, start pretending that you don't feel pain!' *'Now they're doing it even worse'* *'That's because you're not giving them a reaction and you're challenging them'*.

Though Ashley felt the boys bullied her *'because I was a girl but because I was different as well'*, the impact of neuro-misfitting emerged. Ashley experienced gender-based violence from both boys and girls, though discussed the gendered differences in how this was enacted:

I did get bullied by the girls too, I just didn't realise until later
on because they'd be more sneaky about it by making sure I couldn't join groups or
making sure people wouldn't be my friends. The boys took my things and were more
likely to hurt me than the girls...

Bullying by girls had a more isolating and restrictive impact on her space and movement within the schools she attended. Gender-based violence is underexplored and poorly defined for women. From a neuro-misfitting perspective, Ashley embodied a sense of being autistic

while troubling stereotypes (Lekić, 2019; Stenning, 2024). The resultant bullying emerged systemically from teacher and peer misapprehensions of autism. Bullying led each participant into a more emotive and frustrated or angered mind frame, embodying the impact they felt and venting their frustration.

Bullying is a common component of autistic school reflections. Starting with the early literature (Cappadocia, Weiss & Pepler, 2012), bullying was voiced as an almost daily occurrence for autistic pupils. Maiano (2016) highlighted an increasing number of autistic pupils who reported bullying throughout research. In the research, Emily, Chloe, Ashley, and Rosie highlight experiences centred on misconceptions about both gender and autism. Peer misinformation about autism has been identified as a contributing factor to bullying (Billington, 2024; Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). However, the perpetuation of stereotypes when intersecting with gender created a new barrier for participants. The girls in the current research saw an increase in bullying from peers, which focused on disempowerment relating to both autism and gender. Disempowerment through gender-related bullying has been based in misogyny, with girls highlighting sexualising and shaming (Cin, 2016; Rawlings, 2017, 2019). Autistic girls within the education literature have highlighted an increase in victimisation through perpetrators homing in on differences, as defined by neurotypical peers (Hwang et al., 2018). Bullying has also pushed autistic pupils into so-called 'school refusal' (Ochi, 2020). Entwinning the difficulties explored in the first theme's second subtheme, the breaking point of interviewees was exacerbated through experiences of bullying. These experiences of bullying align with the literature, yet here they evidence the complexity of how bullying manifests. Participants' reflections indicated a systemic failing, which reinforced, rather than challenged, disempowerment.

5.3.2 Core Friendships and Empathic Teachers

When exploring peer relationships, each participant reflected on a similar aspect – their friend groups were small, important and connections of weariness due to past experiences. The first case explored in Molly's interview provided insight into the factors that influenced her own choices of friends. Molly indicated her own introverted personality,

particularly within groups. Interestingly, this was evident across all participants' reflections and was a key factor in maintaining smaller friendship circles. Molly reflected on how she perceived herself in social situations when beginning to explore her relationships with peers: *'I struggle to fit in, I am very shy, I find groups difficult, I cope better with less people. That's difficult as everyone hangs about in groups'*, although she feels now that *'I've got, I've got better friends'*, who have a more positive influence on her day-to-day school experience. Emily also indicated feeling that her initial friendships weren't positive:

O: what are your friend groups like now?

Emily: Ehm, I mean they are more kind than the ones before.

O: In what way?

Emily: Like, ehm, before I don't think they were kind, not like they are here.

O: Fantastic! So what do you do together?

Emily: [shrugs shoulders] they're just more kind.

Emily gave short answers throughout the session and was at times quite withdrawn. However, in exploring this short answer, her mood lifted and she adopted a happier emotional tone when discussing the positive nature of her new friends.

Molly was equally positive, as well as more open in highlighting how her own reflection had changed her perception of friends and potential friends:

I've never really had great friends. I've had, you know, ehm, one kind of really good friend, overall. And I think I've tried and that certainly. And was in S1/S2 friends with the wrong people, they weren't great, that [...] they took advantage they weren't really 'good' friends.

Molly's experience was a familiar one throughout the group of participants. Ashley moved from discussing friendships, due to needing to be out of school regularly during her time at primary and secondary, as relations with peers who *'sort of started to keep their distance from me'*. Chloe and Rosie moved to exemplifying some of the values and self-reflection they felt when exploring friendships. Rosie's friend group remained small as she placed a significant value on those she saw as true friends:

I do not really have a friend group. I have some groups of people I hang out with sometimes, but I don't think they're my friends. I value true friends. If I make a friend I'll be friends with them forever. Well, not forever, but a very long time. I've lost very few friends so, and I'll always be loyal and I'll hang out on a regular basis and even if we don't see each other for like a year I'll always be there for them.

Placing such a value on friendships ensured that Rosie kept her circle small, meaningful, and valuable to her. Rosie was the only participant to highlight the value a friend could offer beyond the school environment.

In comparison to the other cases, Chloe remained pragmatic in how she viewed her manner of building friendships and the need for such attachments: *'I sometimes, like, segregate myself to get away from him and the attachment. Like people in general because I don't like forming attachments inside of school'*. Chloe's reluctance to build friendships in school meant that her circle was kept small, though not in the same way as Rosie or Molly. Building friendships was a proposition Chloe found unpleasant, as her friends in primary and secondary school *'were all my bullies before they were my friends'*, and *'are older than me'*. Keeping friends was also a task Chloe found difficult: *'[t]hey're nicer, but they're still weird and annoying sometimes to the point where I start to hate them and start to block them on snapchat'*. Chloe's perspective on building friendships was founded on copying the mannerisms of peers and the bullies who eventually became friends:

I didn't realise until recently that to make friends in primary school I had to be mean, I had to be brutal and I still am to this day and I don't like it. I just developed habits that made friends and I still have them even though I don't need them anymore. It's like the appendix.

Chloe indicated the level of frustration she felt in her self-reflection, becoming quite tense in her body language and using a tone of regret and almost disgust. While Chloe doesn't feel the need for friends within school, she indicates wanting the friendships she does have to be more positively founded. The struggle for Chloe extends from the repeated way in which she approaches these friendships, holding a level of distrust due to past experiences of bullying:

I still do it out of habit and I started to break it and then I had to do it and I still do it and I hate it, I try not to. But one of my friends thinks it's funny to tease me and get me angry to the point I do it again.

The difficulties surrounding friendships were considered by the participants through self-reflection, as to how they believed friendships should be formed and what these should mean to them. By placing a value on friendships, as Rosie does, there is value in being seen, as shown through Chloe's reflection and regrets while pushing for change. As each participant explored friendships and the empowerment they felt at school, the value of relationships with teachers emerged in the conversations. The small impact of one understanding teacher was of much greater value than could be first assumed. Emily felt comfortable following the beginning of the session, finding her voice more towards the middle of it. Her perspective on an understanding teacher was short, and she focused on the impact they had on her own experience:

Emily: Ehm, I think they helped me to learn.

O: So they were able to understand some of what you needed help with?

Emily: Yes, they helped me learn when it was difficult.

Emily's focus throughout her session shifted to how the school and teachers supported her learning. Though her session was overshadowed by tension and uncertainty about answering in a manner she would see as wrong, her focus on how she was supported to learn was key to her having a positive experience.

For the other participants, their focus moved to reflecting on good and supportive teachers, centring on their demeanour, attitude, and the confidence they felt in these teachers. Chloe felt that only one of the teachers she had encountered was a truly capable and inspiring one: *'He was really interested in the subject, he would always try and get students interested as well and talk positively about the subject as well. I think everyone liked him as well'*. The description of the teacher in question was accompanied by Chloe being happier and more relaxed in her tone and body language. There was a sense of relief when compared to her reflections on other aspects of her school experiences. Rosie also embodied a sense of relief and positivity when discussing her history teacher and their support and accommodation of her experience:

My history teacher said if I needed some time, because I did walk out of her class one time, she didn't shout at me she just asked me why I did. And I told her I just felt [a] little bit overwhelmed by everything and then she was like 'that's okay and you can tell me and step out when you need to', and I just stayed outside for like 10 minutes before going back into the class. So most teachers have more respect for me. I feel like that's because I've got more respect for them as well.

Here, Rosie's reflection involves more than just the teacher's outlook. Instead, there is a sense of both being given and taking control of the space in their own way. Being given a level of control also allowed Rosie to have a classroom space where she could maintain control over her attendance and participation.

Further, for Rosie the value of a supportive teacher was reflected in how they treated pupils and in their willingness to work with them individually as well as collectively. Having a teacher who *'treats us like adults! Well, not adults but like people'* and *'asks how our days been and she doesn't have a seating plan'* was significant for Rosie in building a relationship with teachers. Rosie faced a significant level of anxiety relating to being a 'good pupil' and not being seen in a negative light by teachers. Her struggles in the classroom sometimes led to her being seen as doing nothing, due to her worries about standing out when asking questions. As such, an accommodating teacher built a level of confidence in her schoolwork *'[she] will explain the task and go round to each table to check that we understand the task and are going the right way to get the right answer'*. Doing so removed a significant level of anxiety for Rosie and exemplified a teacher who's *'just caring and wants to help'*.

Molly mirrored Rosie's sentiment when exploring her own perspectives on a good and supportive teacher who she saw as *'very nurturing'*:

Yeah, I've got really good class and I've got a really good teacher. And I think that helps because, you know, it's not sit down and quiet and work, and it's more kind of, you know, that's what it's like. Another subject that is it is just it's very laid back. I still obviously get all the work done, but it's less serious. And I think that helps because a lot of the time, you know, things are so serious, it's harder to kind of get my head down and do things.

For Rosie and Molly, a good teacher who supports them is one who brings enjoyment to their learning, allowing them space to complete work while remaining supportive. The perspectives of a supportive teacher shifted towards academic supports, surprisingly, rather than accommodative supports. The change in participants' confidence and self-perceptions of their ability was positively enhanced by supportive teachers, as shown in the more positive and happier tone and body language.

Additionally, participants were able to embody a sense of empowerment and belonging through positive school connections. These expanded further than the other side of the desk. Rather, participants' reflections evidenced the *how* of empowerment. Nurture research has highlighted the value of pupils having positive relationships with their teachers (Gómez-Marí, Sanz-Cervera & Tárraga-Mínguez, 2022; Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021; Lindsay et al., 2014; Newberry & Davis, 2008), which build understanding and foster compassion and respect across the school environment. Teachers hold a significant level of power in how pupils see each other and learn to embrace or other their peers. Reflections in Simone's *Aspergirls* highlighted that teachers' outing and othering of the autistic girls caused peers to mirror these actions (2011). Literature exploring autistic girl's school experiences has discussed a sense of wellbeing as gained from teachers (O'Hagan, Bond & Hebron, 2022). Each research participant held a respectful, positive relationship with at least one teacher, with discussion of these teachers bringing a sense of being understood to the reflections. These teachers acted as a source of positivity, with some aiding in reaching points of adaptation in meeting needs.

Rosie further fostered her relationships with teachers by focusing on engaging in planned, daily, friendly chats with them. Rosie's strategy built awareness among teachers, allowing her to be noticed in the classroom(s) on her own terms. Interestingly, participants' reflections may differ from those of teachers. Here, the reflections echoed Losh's (2022) findings regarding the unique perspectives that can be held on either side of the desk. Losh (2022), conducted a qualitative comparison between pupils' and teachers' perceptions of their relationships. Their reflective data found pupils reflecting on relationships with teacher in emotive terms through feelings of anger and frustration as well as joy. Interestingly, the girls in this research elucidated similar sentiment, though nuanced these through a focus on how empowerment arose from these positive teacher relationships. A teacher was valued not only for taking the time to understand, but also for being willing to listen. Connection came through mutual respect, communication, and fighting for accommodations with the girls when needed.

5.4 Theme 3: Navigating School Spaces

Space became a precarious subject for participants, as the impact of spaces on daily school experiences could be either positive or detrimental. Participants placed different levels of importance on spaces within the school. Throughout participants explorations, there were differing levels of interrogation on where they could go within school to feel safe or when overwhelmed. Some were given through the school or understanding teachers, while others were created through connections and agency. Worryingly, the spaces given by the schools were bound by systemic contradictions, meaning there were unspoken rules placed on access. These proved to be unsuitable for the girls and caused a loss of trust. Within the third theme, answers to the core research question are added through synthesising the girls navigation of given and reclaimed school spaces. Critically, the second sub research question, *What do these reflections tell us about the way spaces are created and navigated within schools?* is given significant address. Here, the girls conceptualise school spaces as navigated through challenges to systemic contradictions, through misfitting, and through empathic connections. Within the first subtheme below, the exploration of struggling to find a sense of belonging and inclusion is elucidated. The second subtheme offers critical insight into how spaces were created and reclaimed, highlighting empowerment through connections and agency.

5.4.1 Trying to Find Somewhere I Can Be and Belong in School

Finding a sense of belonging was a difficult endeavour for the girls in the research. The inaccessibility of supportive and joint spaces created a sense of detachment and displacement for participants. Inaccessible spaces for Ashley inhibited her ability to make use of accommodations and spaces where she found solace. Accessible space for Ashley was ultimately removed for a time due to the actions of peers:

in first year I'd stay in this sensory room and then they changed the location of it. And some kids started messing around in it, which took away the quiet that I needed and the school closed it.

While advocacy from Ashley and her family led to the reopening of the sensory room, the location was changed to an inaccessible location for Ashley, down a red corridor, which caused her sensory overload: *'I couldn't walk there. I'd just feel so sick and feel like I couldn't figure out where I was going'*. Though Ashley could go down the hall quickly and straight into the room, she was unable to do so, as access was possible only with staff. The comprehension of staff impacted the accessibility of the sensory room for Ashley as they would *'try to force me to go that way'*, despite this *'making me feel so much worse, so sick and anxious'*. Ashley's sense of safety and control were removed through a small, tiny adaptation made by the school. What may have seemed insignificant to outsider perspectives caused upheaval for Ashley's sense of equilibrium in the school. As such, Ashley lost her sense of belonging and safety in the school due to systemic stereotypes on autistic needs and ability. Throughout her interview, Ashley's reflections subconsciously embodied the impact of misfitting in school spaces. Interestingly, Ashley's reflection reads as an extreme scenario yet frames the deep emotional impact felt which emerge across daily school lives. Despite having an autism diagnosis, Ashley faced systemic discrimination by misfitting from autism stereotypes. Critically, Ashley's reflections connected to the other girls in the research though engaged openly with elements the other girls left ambiguous.

Through changing accessibility, an unspoken rule had been placed by the school which hadn't been discussed and disrupted the girls' spaces in school. Interestingly, each participant reflected on the initial sense of belonging that given school spaces created, being part making a more positive day. The impact of having these removed through unspoken rules or reasoning broke the trust the girls had in the school. Emily also felt the impact of inaccessibility through the unspoken rules imposed by staff and the school. Emily was aware of her ability to access the duty room, though when asked when she could use it, she replied, *'I think I'd say to my teacher'*, meaning the decision as to her need for access to a space was at the teacher's discretion. Here, Emily further elucidates the impact of systemic authority versus epistemic authority of autistic voices with respect to support needs. Both Chloe and Rosie felt the accessibility of space in their mainstream primaries was limited by a misunderstanding of their abilities. Chloe drew on the impact of teachers not understanding her social abilities, which she saw as infringing upon her access to quieter spaces during lunchtimes. Conceptually, Chloe evidenced the experience of misfitting through systemic

oppression. While outwardly she embodied the social ‘norm’, internally her struggles went unseen, and were ignored when she expressed them to authority figures.

For Rosie, however, the inaccessibility of regular classroom space stemmed from mainstream teachers' misunderstanding of her Steiner education. Rosie reflected on feeling ostracised in her first mainstream primary school, finding no space where she felt a sense of belonging or inclusion. Though Rosie’s initial experience was isolating, she later moved to homeschooling, which rapidly enhanced her academic achievements, decreasing her sense of isolation and difference. Removal from systemic environments highlights the contradiction in school environments, with feelings of disempowerment and academic underestimation in the mainstream quickly abating when she moved beyond these boundaries. These were sentiments which shone through in Ashley’s reflections. Ashley felt she had to try to fit in, to belong and to be part of peer and school spaces to be seen as successful:

Ashley: Just because it seems like we’re fine doesn’t mean that we are. We mask, and masking became the cause of my problems. So try and help stop my problems rather than push me away.

Masking ultimately impacted their ability both to feel a sense of belonging and to fit in with peers. Throughout her exploration of space, Ashley misfitted the neuro and gender norms through which authority figures framed autism.

Conversely to broader literature and explorations, which see masking as unseen by outsiders (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018; Corscadden & Casserly, 2021), masking wasn’t perceived by Ashley as something unseen by teachers. Rather, Ashley saw masking as a strategy teachers would recognise pupils using if they paid close attention. As she explored her sense of belonging in school spaces, the overall tone of the reflection was one of frustration and sadness. Being underestimated in mainstream and overestimated in ASN spaces led to Ashley masking to try to succeed in both. Such an endeavour had a negative impact:

It did affect me in a negative way. The waiting made things more difficult made it harder for me to mask and to fit in. I felt more pressure to not seem different or weird but I ended up doing the opposite.

Pushing themselves to fit in and merge into spaces within the school was a predominantly detrimental experience for the participants – a sentiment that emerged both separately and concurrently, shaping a shared experience. Ashley felt the impact of disempowerment strongly. Understanding where she misfitted from neuro and gender norms gave a succinct awareness of where she didn't fit with peers, but also where she could find a sense of belonging.

For autistic pupils, a sense of space in school is influenced by the climate and collective school culture (Mayes, 2020; Wolfe, 2024). Space was precarious for the participants, with familiar and set spaces being removed without notice. Such precarity in autistic spaces being retracted and disassembled is well documented in the literature (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2013; Ringland, 2019). School spaces lack nuanced consideration in autism-centred literature (Birkett, 2022; Horlock, 2019). Much of the gendering of spaces continues to be drawn from heteronormative perspectives according to participant reflections. Assumptions of autistic needs are based on masc-presenting connotations of autism characteristics within participant experiences. As such, access to safe and considerate spaces is limited. Participants therefore took control and moved beyond the school's spaces.

How autistic girls have been included is centred throughout research reflections (Billington, 2024; Dillon, Underwood and Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick and Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond and Hebron, 2022). According to Goodall (2020), acceptance and inclusion shaped how autistic girls perceived their identities, ultimately shaping their space within school. Participant reflections offer a critical understanding of how intricately school climates and systems impact upon space. Each participant explored a level of feeling isolated and unwanted within mainstream

environments, reflecting the broader research context. Inclusion should foster a sense of belonging - a vital component of a school community. However, autistic pupils consistently reflect on being othered throughout their school journeys (Billington, 2024; Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022; Wolfe, 2024). Overcoming disempowerment entailed participants taking control and disassembling spaces - though doing so required connections within the school.

5.4.2 Connections Help to Empower Spaces in School

The second subtheme progressed from disenfranchisement into empowerment where participants reclaimed power through spaces. Looking at Table 5.1, the subtheme here links the second and third themes together through highlighting where empowerment in space meets connectedness. Perspectives on place shone through participants' reflections and tone as they explored these elements. Spaces which were valued by Chloe were those which they found to be positive, either given spaces by the school or adapted spaces they pushed for themselves:

Chloe: Okay. I like the SET classroom and head teacher's office.

O: Were these set times or were they places you could go to 'get away' or...

Chloe: I was only, we could only be allowed the SET room once a week but it was my favourite place in the school. And the deputy head teacher, whenever we had a hard time with other people in the school we were allowed in her office.

The given space, allowed and allocated by the school, provided a safety net of sorts different from the duty room. Focusing on the perceived need to access the space when having 'a hard time', there were other times they felt the need for such space. Molly navigated difficulties relating to space by moving to a smaller space and creating a more calming environment with friends: 'at lunch we sit in a classroom. It's just become three of us now we just sit in class, and that's better'. Ashley also inhabited a separate space and created something more accessible and meaningful by using a large classroom cupboard during lunch: 'I did get to

invite my friend in. It wasn't like a tiny cupboard it was like a small room. And it was such a relief to be able to have space away from everyone else'. While both participants were able to claim and make space within the school, the gesture in Ashley's case felt wholly tokenistic. Space, which was bridged on a precarious ledge, as easily taken as it was given, was discussed in a tone of frustration. The ability to begin making space and creating a more meaningful place outside busy environments was linked to connections within the school.

The impact of peer connections wasn't solely seen in negative terms. As above, the ability to bring friends into these spaces helped to create meaning and connection. Throughout the discussions with participants, there remained a sense of excitement and joy in building meaningful connections in meaningful places within the school. The value of these places did not pass participants by; rather, the above explorations were similarly discussed by other participants within the research. In creating her own place in school, Rosie saw the value of connections with friends had upon their progression:

I've got one friend – well I've got more than one friend – but I've one I hang out with every day and we, at lunchtime, we always go out and go to the park [...] yeah I kind of have to make my own space with my friend...

During their exploration of school spaces, Rosie noticed the differences between navigating space with friends or alone. While much of her discussion focused on feeling different in school and how she felt they embodied difference in their various school settings, her statement here was powerful. Making space through shared connections was not limited to friendships. The power held by authority figures within school was influential in creating spaces and a sense of belonging for the participants.

The short discussion on the positive impacts of a good teacher shifted the atmosphere of the research space to one of hope. An air of positivity surrounded Ashley's reflections on a valuable teacher. Ashley expanded on their own feelings of frustration with their interactions

and relationships with teachers. Their sense of frustration stemmed from the gendered stereotyping of autism they saw teachers holding:

They just didn't get that I needed a different kind of help but because I wasn't the stereotype they just didn't understand me [...] And one time, because I was so well behaved they put me at a table and it had all my bullies and they were all boys because I didn't really fit in with the girls they thought I'd fit in with the boys.

Ashley felt such disturbance of space to be attributable to a miscomprehension of their needs, leading to a more negative perspective of them as both a pupil and an autistic girl.

Conceptually, the account here frames the impact of misfitting neurologically and socially. Ashley elucidated that masking led to being filtered into gendered spaces, where she then misfitted peer norms, furthering her misfitting from neuro-norms when overloaded.

To build connections and understanding to have more inclusive spaces in her class, Rosie pushed for change through engaging and positive actions. Rather than blend in and mask, Rosie made herself seen by exploring different to build relationships with teachers:

Rosie: ...a strategy that I did come up with was to try and make friends with my teachers and try to become a bit of a TP [teacher's pet] because ehm. Not in that way, but just to get to know them a bit and them get to know and maybe understand me a bit better. So like go and see them at lunchtime randomly and be like 'hi, how are you?' and usually when they hear me talk they don't think I'm that dumb they – well it depends what the conversation is. But usually it changes their perception of me for some reason [...] it takes a lot of that pressure away.

Achieving a level of control was vital to both Rosie's empowerment and sense of belonging, an element more subtly discussed by prior participants. Throughout participants' reflections, there was a looming sense of isolation, frustration, and negativity, intertwined with some more positive feelings. The intricate nature of a teacher's impact on their sense of belonging

was linked to the feeling of being treated as an equal. By embodying their experiences of school space, an enlightened insight into the nuances of how they fight and claim spaces in school.

Friendships and teacher relationships were vital components in creating and navigating school spaces. Access to groups and joint spaces often meant physically manoeuvring through triggering environments. Trying to join after-school groups meant navigating the cacophonous lunch spaces. For Ashley, a safe space was offered by the school, a sensory room, which was moved to an inaccessible space. For Molly and Chloe, classroom spaces were given for lunchtimes, before being removed. As such, the precarity of autistic-led spaces was reinforced (Birket, 2022). Navigating and troubling the joint spaces served as a form of self-empowerment for the participants. Empowerment came from the re-taking and troubling of the school system and space. At times, this also meant taking control and leaving school to develop their own spaces with peers. Participants found that school connections allowed access to space which could be adapted to meet their needs. Teachers became part of the context which empowered participants. These reflections intersected with broader literature, where autistic pupils' needs were better understood by familiar teachers (Gómez-Marí, Sanz-Cervera & Tárraga-Mínguez, 2022; Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021; Lindsay et al., 2014; Newberry & Davis, 2008; O'Hagan, Bond & Hebron, 2022). This might then result in a more accessible school environment. For the research participants, this positivity then expanded confidence and built connections in which space was empowering.

5.5 Theme 4: Gender and Autism

Across the cases, clear connections emerged regarding how stereotypes were perceived in schools. With the thesis positioned on autistic girls' exploration of space being under addressed in the Scottish context, how gender and autistic identities intersect are key to building comprehension. As such, the girls' exploration of gender and autistic identities were framed through the impact on a sense of self and belonging. The first subtheme which emerged merged gendered actions with stereotypes pushed by teachers and the school system. Here, the nature of boys as noisy, taking time with teachers away from others and disrupting school spaces were framed critically, with the girls exploring how these impacted their

experiences. The second subtheme exposed the nature of gender and autism stereotypes, linking the reflections to the conceptual framework of the research. Through naturally, and at times deliberately, misfitting the neuro-norms of autism, the girls highlighted their struggles with being seen as autistic and as autistic girls. As such, the reflections on gender and autism elucidated clear moments of disempowerment. Additionally, the fourth subtheme links with the first research subtheme, illuminating on where autistic girls school experiences are situated. These subthemes show these as situated in tensions and frustrations at being doubly misunderstood identities at the intersections of autism and gender stereotypes. Linking autistic and gender identities highlighted components of being misunderstood through systemic stigma.

5.5.1 It is Always ‘Boys Will Be Boys’...

The first subtheme captured the gendering of school roles, rooted in systemic stereotypes. Here, these reflected the social injustice involved in the treatment boys received compared to girls. These reflections emphasised the attitude they believed teachers took, expressing the idea of ‘*boys will be boys*’. The first to reflect on these, Emily, saw boys as a source of potential sensory overload, irritation and distraction within the classroom:

Emily: The noise of the other children. I want to leave the classroom when it's too noisy.

O: And is that from the boys and girls in your class?

E Yes, but it's mostly the boys.

O: Why do you think that is?

E: [shrugs shoulders] They are noisier maybe?

O: How does that feel in class?

E: It annoys me, it doesn't help me learn.

O: Are the girls noisy too?

E: [shrugs shoulders] Sometimes. Boys are noisier I think.

O: And what does the teacher do to help?

E: Ehm, they sometimes tell them to be quiet but they don't really listen. It can annoy me. I don't like a lot of noise.

O: So how are boys and girls different?

E: Ehm, boys get in trouble more maybe? Girls are quieter I think? I'm not sure [...] It can sometimes get too much noisy.

Emily here constructed an overview of boys as noisy troublemakers, more likely to get into trouble than the girls in her class. While Emily's reflection could be perceived as simple, there is a beauty to it which embodies the immediate roles which Emily sees boys as holding. Here, the gendered roles in the classroom are taken up, while being rooted in systemic heteronormative performance. As such, the barriers these create for Emily repressed her voice and position within the classroom, reflecting the marginalisation of autistic voices. This is also a key starting point for other participants' reflections.

Linking to the earlier subtheme of bullying, Chloe felt that the gendered stereotypes of 'boys will be boys' was a key factor in her bullying not being addressed or believed to be as serious as she felt it was:

Chloe: It was just a 'boys will be boys' attitude, like it's what they do because they don't understand girls or know what to do around them. It's a bit embarrassing to be honest...

O: And why do you think the teachers said that?

C: They don't [...] I think they just don't get that because I'm a girl and I'm autistic and I'm smart that I don't do well in social situations. Like, teachers treated me different and they saw that and then I got bullied I think for that.

Critically, the reflections on gendered social violence elucidate the systemic imbalance of power felt by autistic girls (Sharma, 2025). From social violence, the sense of further

marginalisation carried on throughout the school environment. These also emerged in other participants' data. Rosie also experienced an attitude of 'boys will be boys' when her experience of bullying was put down to boys not understanding how to talk to girls:

[he] picked on me a lot but not in the, like 'oh he likes her, that's so cute' way like when boys don't know how to show they like girls. Does that make sense? But it was a nasty way.

Ashley brought a more profound sense of the role of boys when compared to that of girls within the classroom, though remained attentive to the fact these roles were not singular to any gender and the potential for filling them was risky:

Because we don't cause a scene we don't get the attention. Like, girls that I know and were at school with weren't as loud as the boys in the special schools or in mainstream. It was the boys who would cuss out teachers and throw things about. Unless they weren't in a group! When we did group work and the noisier boys were split up it was calmer and easier to concentrate. So, yeah, girls aren't as problematic and loud, but they can still be bullies and still be nasty.

The gendered barriers in this example highlighted the systemic contradictions in the inclusion of pupils regardless of gender or neurodiversity.

Linking with the earlier themes, marginalisation of autistic girls through misfitting of gender norms exacerbated their sense of disempowerment. For Ashley, such disenfranchisement is linked to the taking up of space by boys in the school:

It did seem like the teachers favoured the boys, they'd help them more in class and give them more attention when they disrupted class instead of giving them into trouble like some of the girls got.

The taking up of space almost summarised the other cases and participant experiences. The classroom is a key space in school, and the disruptions caused by boys, as reported by participants, affected the support they received from teachers. The bullying, disruption, and the consistent challenge of navigating these difficulties were a difficult part of the girl's experiences, one that was emotive and heightened the tension in sessions.

The notion of 'boys will be boys' permeated the girl's narratives, emerging across differing school environments and circumstances. Through classroom actions, bullying, socialising, and broader gendering of autism, each participant felt penalised due to their gender. The gendered differences in autistic boys and girls were not perceived by teachers, according to participant narratives. Rather, the behaviour of boys/young men in classrooms and schools was readily dismissed. An attitude of 'boys will be boys' has been exemplified throughout literature. From earlier work by Kenway (1998), girls felt the impact of bullying and victimisation due to gendered norms. With continued explorations of gender in school, gender equality would be expected. However, the perpetuation of the 'boys will be boys' discourse has significantly undermined girls' school experiences. Rawlings's work (2017, 2019) on bullying highlighted gendered violence from male peers. Mirroring aspects of Cin's (2017) work, the perpetuations of the 'boys will be boys' trope enabled misogynistic behaviour to go unchecked. Throughout the research, the girls mirrored the gendered imbalance and disempowerment faced by others (Billington, 2024; Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022). These lay within actions perceived as troubling or as gender performance. As such, these girls have personified the nature of 'boys will be boys' to extend into autism stereotypes. As such, the school climate embodied and perpetuated disempowerment, thereby maintaining the status quo.

5.5.2 Treated Differently Just Because We Are Autistic Girls?

The second subtheme offered two factors: firstly, it linked to the gendered experiences of autism in school; secondly, it linked the themes across the research, nuancing the gendered components while tying together the broader messages of autism that follow in the final

theme. Understandings of gender and self were conceptualised and understood in terms of both school and social norms. Rosie's construction of gender actions saw them more as social formalities rather than attributes of identity:

O: ... how did it feel going from those schools to an all-girls' school?

Rosie: Annoying, I quite liked boys. I usually have issues with girls. I also found that when there's boys and girls in class the boys usually take up a lot more space and get a lot more attention. And, so it's a good opportunity to for the more confident girls to take up that role, or that opportunity

She reflected on how the roles of noisier and rowdier individuals are taken up by girls in the absence of boys. Rosie also conceptualises a form of space reclamation for girls in the absence of boys in the classroom. The constructions of gender explored by participants were based around social norms, whether subconsciously or deliberately.

Participants' understanding of gender was also overshadowed by efforts to define gender and determine what these foundations actually accomplish in their eyes. Chloe gave an in-depth perspective on the differences in gender and the expected stereotypes:

So there's certain things that boys are expected to do, like some might play more sports or boys my age will play online. I think girls are expected to be more social, like more in groups [...] like that just doesn't make sense because everyone's online. I mean, I watch loads of gamers and loads of them are girls so I don't get the whole 'boys do this, girls do that'...

Chloe framed the idea of gender stereotypes, looking to the typical expectations she encountered throughout her school journey before challenging them. Though rooted in heteronormativity, Chloe's expression held a hint of sarcasm about how girls were expected to be more social. These small, subtle challenges to the systemic roles of performance

allowed Chloe to trouble and progress her own identity and actions beyond these. Part of Chloe's reflection on autism and the impact of stereotypes was rooted in questioning the systemic norms of gender:

They just have that 'boys will be boys' attitude. It's like they expect it and accept it. But I think if one of the girls was to act that way or, like, have a meltdown it's treated so differently. It's really not fair. The teachers don't really understand how different boys and girls are [...] they need to [...] they need to know more...

Chloe voiced her frustration about the level of misunderstanding her teachers held with respect to autistic girls when looking at the social stereotypes of autism and boys. By foregrounding the issue of meltdowns and the reactions teachers have had to her own, Chloe highlights the need for more robust engagement with marginalised voices and lived experience.

Within Rosie's interview, she showed a level of confidence in exploring space which was lacking in the other interviews. She also held a unique position within the group of participants, as she attended a single-gender school and had experienced distinct school environments. They felt and expressed frustration with how isolating and inhibiting joint school spaces can be. A sense of isolation and stress within school environments further developed the tension surrounding trying to fit in and belong:

*I think there aren't really any places I fit in at school. Like, I'm with other girls all the time but I never really feel like I'm one of them. We're just so different [...]
Sometimes I feel more [...] like, I don't know like I'm kind of an outcast so [...]
Sometimes I feel like I can get on better with teachers [laughs] that's kind of sad though.*

Rosie's explanation expanded to reflecting on the perception of their own self-worth and value. Rosie embodied the nature of misfitting, indicating the gender and neuro-norms that

she troubled. Throughout her school experience, Rosie was marginalised by peers and systemic imbalance, disempowered through being autistic, and not fitting into autism stereotypes. Inequality within these spaces intersected with teachers' understandings and pushed them to the social boundaries, leaving them with a feeling of ostracisation rather than belonging. The final sentiment they offer, a colloquial term, *'kind of sad though'* highlighted the sense of isolation and sadness underpinning her reflection.

Ashley began to question the nature of needing a stereotype and the impact of teachers seeing gender and trying to place pupils into gendered groups, though in her own words: *'And one time, because I was so well behaved they put me at a table and it had all my bullies and they were all boys because I didn't really fit in with the girls they thought I'd fit in with the boys'*. Throughout Ashley's case, there were tones of frustration and confusion surrounding not fitting in and feeling different across the various schools she attended. The gender stereotypes Ashley observed were also a source of frustration, leading to a change in the tone of her session. Fitting in was a point of contention for Ashley, a tension which ran across her reflections. When conceptualising gender roles and her self-perception, Ashley vented these frustrations:

It's weird because I wasn't like a tomboy or a girly-girl, I didn't play football or sports and I didn't like pink or bands so I didn't understand why they would all push me out so much. I think they saw I was different and did struggle more socially so I was a target...

I think I break a lot of stereotypes!

Ashley's reflection here elucidates how misfitting gender norms further marginalises pupils within schools. Mirroring the broader gender-based literature, Ashley highlights how holding the identity of being a girl doesn't necessitate grasping heteronormative stereotypes. Instead, Ashley presents the impediments that can be faced and overcome when branching out and challenging heteronormative roles. Ashley also experienced being treated differently due to how teachers perceived autism in women and girls: *'they kept saying I'm not autistic. I was too social to be autistic. I could do the work so how could I be autistic'*. Ashley explored the

reasoning for this experience, seeing that her teachers *'didn't really understand what an autistic girl was like'*.

The miscomprehension of autistic girls and their needs was a factor embedded in these participants' interviews. Stereotyping of autism led to missed support, missed accommodations, and miscomprehension of the capabilities of these girls. The frustration, anger and tension expressed within their sessions reflected the impact of and missed opportunities for support in not being seen as autistic or taken as seriously as male peers. There was, however, a sense of retribution when speaking about pushing back and having a space to vent the confusion they felt. The challenge to these stereotypes was critical to creating a turning point in reclaiming their own emotions and narratives. Actions and the performance of gender can be elements of mirroring enacted from an early age (Gansen & Martin, 2018; Paechter, 2007; Renold, 2005). As such, within societies rooted in perceiving gender through the heterosexual matrix, disempowerment is all too common. For participants within this study, disempowerment became perpetuated through their gender. Removal of agency through misogyny and androcentric perspectives of authority and peers has been widely explored in the literature (Cin, 2017; Mayes, 2020; Rawlings, 2017, 2019; Wolfe, 2024). The girls in the research mirrored factors explored by Mayes (2020) and Wolfe (2024). Facing othering within schools, unfortunately, is not a novel occurrence for autistic girls.

Throughout school, the participants became disenfranchised due to both their gender and autistic identities, facing difficulties in creating relationships and feeling included. The miscomprehension of autism and gender led to participants experiencing these difficulties. As such, how these girls were treated was unlike that of their autistic male peers. Support needs, and even diagnosis, were challenged and at times withdrawn. Teacher comprehension of autism in the literature aligns with these findings (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018; Azad & Mandell, 2016; Conn, 2018; Ravet, 2018). However, nuance is drawn from reflections beyond current literature as to how participants untangle these experiences. School experiences have centred on a generalising of gender within the autism field. Those which have diversified to explore gendered experiences embodied a sense of negativity and hopelessness (Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & Mackenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022; Whitlow, Cooper &

Couvillon, 2018). Nevertheless, participants here embody and promote a sense of empowerment through their identities and often push back against the system.

5.6 Theme 5: Messages About Autism

The final emergent theme was derived from the girl's interpretations of their experiences, becoming was based around messages about autism and gender, and messages for teachers. Each of these subthemes tied together the thematic findings, while critically addressing the third research question, *What knowledge and messages can be drawn upon to enhance comprehension and expand on creating space for autistic girls in schools?*. These were grounded within the conceptual framing of the research, showing the value and need to centre the epistemic authority of the autistic girls. Looking back to Table 5.1, the themes each link to the conceptual framing of the research and the research sub questions. Through experiences of marginalisation, misfitting, and systemic oppression, the girls brought together messages which nuance and place challenges for future knowledge bases to address. The first subtheme highlights where tokenistic approaches are used, how these are received and the impact these ultimately have on autistic pupils' sense of value and inclusion. Progressing to the end of the messages and data, the second subtheme embodies the sense of misfitting neuro-norms and the need to see beyond stereotypes. Progressing from earlier narratives of marginalisation, here the girls centre their narratives through agency and voice. Ultimately, the girls challenge the systemic contradictions of schools and the need to see beyond stereotypes.

5.6.1 Please Listen to Us and Go Beyond Being Tokenistic

The first component focused on being acknowledged, highlighted the perception that teachers needed to see and understand more of the struggles the girls faced. Here, participants focused on a more general sense of frustration with teachers who do not understand their needs and fail to gauge their capabilities. Molly approached the topic with a level of trepidation and caution, a tone of frustration, and stumbling through her response to find the right words:

Well, I don't know, that, I don't question, but I don't know, really. I don't really see much of. I think they, they know some of them know I struggle a bit more, but I don't really know much more. I don't really see much support ...

Molly evidenced more within her tone here than her words portrayed. Reflecting on support, Molly struggled to see where she felt these needs were seen and understood by teachers. Molly's frustration was mirrored in Ashley's reflections. Ashley saw the misconceptions of autism through a reflection on the anger and frustration she felt due to her past experiences in school, impacting her ability to receive support within the classroom:

They kept saying I couldn't be autistic because I was social, because I didn't do what other autistic boys did like line things up and I wasn't into things like trains or cars, and they were. But I lined all my pens and pencils on my desk the same way every day. ... they did just assume I was 'normal' for most of primary, just a bit weird.

Here, the misunderstanding of autism was overshadowed by an androcentric framing of it, one which Ashley misfitted as she did not fit either gender or neuro-normative stereotypes. Ashley continued to embody the frustration of her experiences through her tense body language, almost aggressive tone, and another example:

And I remember getting into trouble for looking at my knees when [autistic boy in class] got to sleep on the floor in class because they didn't believe I was autistic and that I was just being lazy. Like, he was physically snoring on the floor and I looked at my knees. It's ridiculous!

Here, Ashley highlighted the sense of disempowerment she experienced due to gendered stereotypes of autism. By being seen as different from her male autistic peers, Ashley misfitted the social performances expected of autistic pupils. As such, she was left further marginalised through systemic stereotyping.

Reflecting on how teachers perceived autism, Chloe portrayed a message she felt would help change perceptions of supporting autistic pupils: *'don't excuse autistic pupils' behaviours*'. How Chloe saw teachers' understanding of autism was further impacted by the discussions she had with teachers in her ASN school:

Eh, teachers not to say that everybody's a little bit autistic! I've had two teachers say that in this school and it's very, very annoying and I can't talk back or I'll get in trouble.

This statement further broke down Chloe's trust in teachers, as she began to express more frustration with stereotypes and what she saw as teachers' inability to understand autistic pupils' needs. Approaching perceptions of teachers' understanding of autism, Rosie moved her focus to one that she was able to offer a nuanced insight into due to her time at an all-girls' school after being in a joint mainstream and non-mainstream environment:

there are probably a lot more autistic girls that people don't know about [...] that haven't been diagnosed [...] and teachers should ehm, look into it more or be taught a bit more about what to look out for. I know that's a lot, but, like, if someone seems really shy they might not just be shy...

From her different experiences, Rosie was enabled to see where the difficulties in seeing autistic girls may lie for teachers. Within the subthemes, participants portrayed their frustration through their tone and body language. The understanding of autism participants saw from teachers held a clear, isolating impact, mirrored by how they perceived the school as failing to accommodate their needs.

Both Molly and Rosie saw their given accommodations as tokenistic and unhelpful in managing their anxiety and emotions within the school. Rosie explored her understanding of

her needs and how accommodations were seen as unnecessary by teachers. Being given a space to get away in her mainstream school was a vital accommodation for Rosie, although ultimately the space given didn't offer the opportunity to escape the noise and the sense of being overwhelmed. During her interview, Rosie expressed anger at being denied accommodations due to the teacher's misunderstanding of autism. She later offered her own insight into what could have been accommodating and supportive, such as specific subjects being removed and her timetable being more adaptive to her needs:

...I think they could've arranged it to be like a free period, not for like every period, like once a week just to let me have that break I needed. Maybe then I [...] I don't really know [...] It might have helped me with my self-harming and feeling exhausted [...] yeah...

Molly also had a card to get out of class when she needed to, though she found the teachers continued to remove accommodations she needed, so she took this into her own hands. Molly brought together her frustrations while also exemplifying how she navigated the rules and pushed for her own accommodations, mirroring Rosie. Ashley brought forward a sense of the tokenistic, and fluid, nature of accommodations by reflecting on how she was accommodated (for a time) during lunch away from the busier joint spaces:

I did get to invite my friend in. It wasn't like a tiny cupboard it was like a small room. And it was such a relief to be able to have space away from everyone else again because I was really struggling to cope. But then they told us we weren't allowed to eat in there, so I had to start trying to deal with the noise in the lunch hall again...

The relief Ashley felt was mirrored in her more upbeat tone. There was a brief sense of empowerment which emerged only a few times throughout her interview. Ashley was open about the precarity of accommodations and how they could be taken away at any time. Her extract provided a summary of the subtheme, also reflecting the perspectives of other

participants. The accommodations offered didn't feel genuine to participants, reflecting the systemic misunderstanding of autistic girls' needs.

Stereotypes surrounding autism have led to ableist and othering environments, both within and outside school communities. Autistic reflections throughout the literature have highlighted the negative impact that stereotyping can have (Mallipeddi, Dickter & Burk, 2024). However, participants in the research have highlighted further stereotyping. Each participant experienced a sense of othering through stereotyping. Though the stereotyping creates an 'anti-normativity', a stereotyped sense of what 'normal' autism is seen to be. Stereotypes are embedded in social schemas, identifying expected aspects of performance and labelling them as a particular identity. For the girls here, a sense of anti-normativity meant othering and pushback from the school community against their autistic identities and diagnoses. Teachers, according to participants' narratives, utilised knowledge grounded in androcentric perspectives on autism. As such, the stereotyping of autism here is still othered, though in a more nuanced way.

Support was withdrawn, which the girls needed, due to not fitting male peer behaviours. Stimming, socialising, and connections with peers and teachers can (and do) manifest differently for autistic women and girls (Elcheson et al., 2018; Hendrickx, 2015; Strang et al., 2018; Törnvall, 2023). As such, needs can be underestimated and support subsequently withdrawn. An apparent disconnect lay in teachers' autism knowledge and how the girls experienced being autistic, particularly surrounding gender. Such instances are noted within the literature. From early writing by Stewart (2012) to current conceptualising by Wolfe (2024) and Mayes (2020), autistic girls have faced underrepresentation compared to male peers. Lacking knowledge often progresses to tokenistic and unsuitable support/unmet needs. Across schools, these lead to negative perspectives and experiences (Carpenter et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2018; Whitlow, Cooper & Couvillon, 2018). As such, the literature lacks the nuance that the current subtheme offers. The insights into how stereotypes disempower lie both within and beyond schemas. Instead, autistic girls in schools find tokenistic and minimal support to be drawn from a different type of stereotype than is explored within more mainstream research.

5.6.2 Learn from Our Voices and See Beyond Stereotypes

The final component shifted from the idea of listening to that of learning. Setting the foundations of their experiences as lived knowledge, participants here offered messages for teachers. These messages were formed through experience, conceptualising how practices and educators can begin expanding autism knowledge. Emily's message was short, simple, though complex, as she felt teachers needed to help her *'to learn better'*. An important theme throughout her reflections, exemplifying what she felt she needed from school, which however remained lacking with respect to her needs.

Ashley put forward a message of teachers needing to know more, but understand beyond the stereotypes, and to be more flexible in their own approaches and understanding:

Honestly, I just think it should be added into where they go to learn to be teachers. Like, 'this is what to look out for this is what you need to know, occasionally you might have a student with autism and here are some things that might be an issue, not guaranteed to be an issue, but you need to know this anyway'. Like, I think some teachers aren't flexible enough. When they think that people with autism aren't. They don't see the issues sometimes.

The perceived inflexibility of teachers clearly affected Ashley's ability to gain access to accommodations and support throughout school. Ashley here reinforced the idea of looking beyond what could be part of stereotypes, a strong message mirrored by Chloe and Rosie. Molly elucidated more detail through her own experience, challenging the need for stereotypes and the limiting nature of lacking autism knowledge in schools:

I think, not just teachers, but what do they see - the stereotypes if they are not well enough educated about the topic. Yeah. And I think it's just getting past those stereotypes is kind of the first step to these things.

...

I think it would just be good for all teachers to understand that stereotypes aren't everything. And that, yeah, this is...

Conceptually, the nature of systemic oppression here invokes both the feminist standpoint and misfitting frameworks. The epistemic value of autistic voices lies in showing how stereotypes can oppress within schools. The imbalance of power towards school authority figures underscores the need for better engagement with autistic voices. The concept of misfitting neuro-norms filters into this. By challenging stereotypes, the girls are simultaneously marginalised and empowered.

Rosie brought a level of conclusion to this thought within her case, bringing together a sense of teachers needing to understand the differences which can lie between autistic girls and boys and how they can act individually:

... autism in girls can be different from autism in boys [...] Like, ehm, sometime we don't do the crazy stimming or stereotype stuff [...] but we still need [...] we still might need help. Like, with modern studies I seemed really good but, uhm, I really struggled, I think, and I didn't get that help...

The focus on stereotypes emerges in different ways, though ultimately holds the same message. The impact felt from stereotypes, being seen as a stereotype and underestimated because of these, influenced the overall tone of the sessions. The frustration and, ultimately, for Chloe and Rosie, confusion about being seen as a stereotype was an important change participants felt was needed to improve their school experiences, and one which could improve the experiences of others in the future.

Ashley gave an example of how she felt throughout her entire school journey, using *Lady and the Tramp* as a visual representation of where she was pushed beyond her capacity at times in school:

It's like, ehm, imagine, like a puppy at the start [of Lady and the Tramp]. Lady has to use the stairs to hoist herself on the bed because she's so small. And while she was doing that she had to jump. And when she got the energy the people at the top of the stairs were like 'you should be higher up hurry up'. There was always someone pushing me further than I could go.

Ashley's message was an interesting one. The image of being small, a pupil within the school, and the stairs as a support exemplified how schools start and how she began her journey. Throughout her journey, Ashley reflected on consistent issues and being pushed beyond her capacity, with someone always pushing her from behind. This visual offered insight into the exhaustion Ashley felt throughout her school journey, something felt in different ways by other interviewees. The final theme offered a summary of participants' experiences and where they see supports and attitudes requiring change within both the classroom and school.

The final message from participants resonated with the broader literature. Stereotypes don't make up the components which *are* autism. Instead, they are characteristics found within many autistic individuals and are stigmatised. As such, participants in both the current research and the broader literature have focused on the need to move past these (Billington, 2024; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022). Autistic girls' needs arguably remain largely unmet within schools (Carpenter et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2018; Whitlow, Cooper & Couvillon, 2018). Narratives highlight othering through miscomprehension of gender differences and diagnostic stereotypes (Carpenter et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2018; Simone, 2010; Tornvall, 2023). Within the research, participants voiced a need to be listened to. These narratives hold critical value in building future approaches and practices.

The need to advance how autistic girls are understood and viewed was clear within these narratives. Teacher-focused literature highlights the lack of autism knowledge within training (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018; Azad & Mandell, 2016; Ravet, 2018). A

sense of frustration and a lack of knowledge-building through on-the-job scenarios have led many to feel underprepared to meet the needs of autistic pupils (Conn, 2018; Emam & Farrell, 2009). Engaging autistic voices within teacher training and knowledge sharing has proven vital to expanding knowledge (Conn, 2018). There is an important context to meeting school needs, which was brought up by participants in this research. Autistic lives hold critical value in developing broader knowledge within the school community. Throughout the research, these girls have highlighted negative perceptions of autism and gender. Throughout their school journeys, a sense of not belonging trailed them. School-focused literature has focused on the value of friendships and connections (Sproston, 2017), while highlighting negative issues around autism and bullying. The literature is challenged by girls to encompass better a sense of where power can be enhanced. That these voices are engaged through research should be utilised to build better knowledge. The insights into gender clearly hold value in building teacher and school community knowledge. Nuanced accounts show the impact of repetitions throughout school accounts in both current research and literature. As such, the girls in the research seek accountability and the need for schools and educators to do better for autistic pupils.

5.7 Conclusion

Emergent themes were discussed under *Troubled and Empowered: Entangled in School Spaces*, elucidating participants' school experiences. The elements drawn from the themes within participants' experiences have brought nuance to the unseen, subconscious components of participants' schooling. Emergent themes reflected the messages and intricacies of participants' experiences, highlighting the challenges faced and overcome. These emergent themes brought a distinct level of knowledge to how school spaces are navigated. Each theme clarified the unseen components of school spaces. Within each theme, participants' narratives foregrounded the nature of autism, gender, and (mis)fitting the systems' perceptions of their spaces and place within school. The next chapter will proceed to a critical discussion of the findings, situating them within the literature and contextualising their implications.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction and Structure

As I progress into the discussion chapter of the thesis, I begin with Sprague's quote to remind myself and the reader of the value of participants' epistemic authority:

Working from the standpoint of the disadvantaged does not preclude studying the powerful. Rather, it involves problematizing power and advantage, asking about the mechanisms that sustain privilege and about the consequences of privilege for the broader society (2016, p. 61).

This quote highlights the value of interpreting and dismantling systems of power, an aim which I sought to enact via participants situated knowledge. Each reflection on challenges, barriers, and empowerment from participants nuances the current knowledge base. This penultimate chapter of the thesis will diverge slightly from the typical discussion format. Rather than focusing solely on answering the research questions, the chapter will delve into each component of the research, exploring their impact on current knowledge. I begin with an overview of the overarching research question and how the findings elucidate answers. Within the discussion chapter, each of the three core components is synthesised with current literature. I then move to a discussion of the value of embracing feminist standpoint epistemology and feminist disability ontology for autism research. As I conclude the chapter, I discuss the limitations of the research and its implications for future research.

6.2 Addressing the Core Research Question

In answering the core research question, '*How do autistic girls create and navigate spaces in the Scottish education system?*', participant narratives elucidated tensions and reclamation of agency. Throughout the reflections on school spaces, entanglements of gender and autism miscomprehension framed how the girls reclaimed a sense of belonging.

Primarily, the ways in which school spaces were explored highlighted the systemic contradictions in inclusion. While spaces given by schools were viewed as meeting needs, participants showed these to contradict the idea of safety and belonging. Being forced to share spaces when the goal was to escape from others in the classroom or school. Having safety taken away suddenly when small physical spaces were given by the school. These caused crises which were unseen by the schools, but catastrophic for the girls. As such, the core outcome from the main research question is twofold: Spaces are navigated with caution through systemic contradictions and tensions; Autistic girls school spaces are reclaimed through empowerment and challenging inclusion. The research also endeavoured to add nuance and knowledge to the current literature surrounding autism, gender, feminist, and disability studies. How autistic girls are recognised and, more subconsciously, stigmatised lacks nuance within research, aside from work focused on why autistic girls are absent or outside of school systems (Moyse, 2021). Throughout the discussion which follows, the key contributions to knowledge are discussed in three core areas; reclaiming space in schools, the impact of relationships, and autism gender and voice. Each of these are tied to novel contributions to literature, while linking to the reclamation of autistic girls voices and the safety of reclaiming empowering spaces in schools.

6.2.1 Reclaiming School Spaces

Navigation of school spaces proved a precarious endeavour, one that offers nuance but remains rooted in tensions. With little literature surrounding autistic girls' school experiences in the UK, the understanding of how school spaces are navigated is minimal. Novelty arose in the reflections on space, building a nuanced outlook on how autistic girls make, take and reclaim safety and agency in differing school spaces. Thus, the current research provides critical insight which brings new knowledge on autistic adolescent girls' and school spaces.

6.2.1.1 Agency in Space.

Novelty emerged in the reflections on space, building a nuanced outlook on how autistic girls took control through agency, creating and reclaiming spaces in schools. As discussed earlier in the thesis, the use of the term space focuses on small areas, both physical

and a feeling of belonging, through which the girl's claimed empowerment through agency. These spaces (such as separate rooms during lunch, sensory rooms and safety in friendships and teachers) contradicted the very nature of inclusionary practice. The girls found safety and agency in navigating points of tension by removing themselves from joint areas. By self-excluding, the girls were enabled to paradoxically be and feel included in the school community on their own terms. Throughout the reflections on spaces, the nature of systemic contradictions arose. Interestingly these were rooted in tensions and agency in school; tensions in relationships and agency in finding safety and calm.

Within the research, participants' navigation of space was situated within peer relationships and overcoming institutional barriers. Gendering has led to a strengthened sense of space and belonging for some (Massey, 2008; 2013). Indeed, integrating feminist thought into understanding space has been instrumental in building comprehension of where empowerment and a sense of belonging are located (Beebe, Davis & Gleadle, 2017; Massey, 2008, 2013). While literature on gender and human geography/ies has encapsulated the precarity of space and reclamation (Beebe, Davis & Gleadle, 2017; Massey, 2008, 2013; Valentine, 2001), extending this to autistic space is more complex (Ringland, 2019; Stackhouse, 2018). The difficulties which arose related to developing a sense of space which aligned with and supported their autistic identity.

Participants conceptualised joint school spaces as cacophonous, unrelenting, chaotic, and uncomfortable. Each participant was offered some space in school, though, interestingly, perceived these as unfit for support purposes by the girls. Chloe, Molly, Rosie and Ashley found initial solace within given spaces in school to avoid periods of noise and busyness. However, these safe spaces were shared with hidden rules and impacts which caused tensions. For Chloe, the duty room was shared with teachers and peers with no set rules on accessibility. She removed herself from the classroom and joint spaces to seek solace in being alone, yet others being in the space created further tension as she was unable to regulate and escape. Ashley, conversely, had sole access to a sensory room where she found initial comfort. An understanding of sensory needs for autistic pupils is vital to creating meaningful school experiences (Martin & Milton, 2017; Martin et al, 2019). However, the safety of the space was removed for Ashley when it was moved down a hallway she found inaccessible.

Feeling defeated, she capitulated the safety of this space and sought another instead. Despite finding positivity and a degree of empowerment within these spaces, each was quickly taken from them. With differing reasons as to why, the removal of these spaces left each participant with a sense of loss and pushing to create and reclaim spaces within the school.

Explorations of autistic girls' conceptions of belonging in school have mirrored such difficulties (Horlock, 2019), though the expansion of these explorations has lacked nuance beyond the work of Birkett (2022). The research participants began to push for space at lunchtimes and breaktimes, gaining access to classrooms with close friends, which offered them a more accommodating space. Despite such empowerment, the institutions failed to create truly accommodating, inclusive space. These then force autistic pupils, such as reflected by Chloe, into online spaces for safety. An abstract safety away from the systemic contradictions of the physical school became appealing, though not necessarily empowering. Autistic spaces, when constructed through a human geography lens, are predominantly engaged through the abstract physicality of online spaces (Ringland, 2019). These online spaces have been the source of connections, activism, and the embodiment of autistic identity, a place where many have found friendships alongside 'distance from the main-stream NT [neurotypical] world, which is seen as chaotic and alien' (Bertilsson Rosqvist, Brownlow & O'Dell, 2013, p. 373). The precarity and fragility of autistic spaces has been well documented in critical autism literature (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2013; Ringland, 2019), though the broader understanding of school spaces remains less fully considered. For example, the removal of meaningful space filtered into Ashley's expression of the need for better knowledge about autism in girls. Such reflections mirror those of other autistic voices (Honeybourne, 2015; Horlock, 2019; Sedgewick, Hill & Pellicano, 2019). Systemic barriers, as explored the participants in this research, infringed on navigation and the creation of spaces in school. A sense of empowerment can be achieved through adapting school spaces (Brinkett et al., 2022). The findings point to a new understanding of how autistic spaces are created and reclaimed in schools through self-promotion of agency, creating and taking areas with friends to regulate and find a sense of belonging.

6.2.1.2 Challenging a Dichotomising of School Spaces.

Components of challenging, and dichotomising, school spaces developed similarly to broader research, though brought novelty in conceptualising these as *hell* (Goodall, 2019; Kanakri et al., 2017; Sproston et al, 2017; Tomlinson et al, 2022; Wood, 2019). Interestingly, though the idea of a dichotomy emerged in the first theme, there are underlying tones to how this should be more broadly discussed. Both mainstream and ASN settings had similar impactors, such as the lunch halls and joint spaces, though were conceptualised differently. In part, attribution could lie in how detrimental mainstream was for the girls resulting in the negatives in ASN being overlooked. As such, the similarities in ASN environments could feel less impactful. Critically, the smaller student numbers and class sizes in non-mainstream schools could be further attributable to a more engaged sense of belonging. These sentiments were mirrored in Sproston's exploration of autistic girls in PRU settings (2017). Further, stakeholder perspectives in Scotland highlight ASN provisioning as being more inclusive (Scottish Government, 2023b). Tied to these is the ability to move beyond a failing system of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach which cannot address additional needs in mainstream environments (Scottish Government, 2025, Introduction section). Importantly, here I am not moving to dismiss or undervalue the participants' reflections. Rather, the interrogation and placing of this thesis suggests underlying factors that go beyond a simple dichotomy. Therefore, the research in this thesis contributes by conceptualising the impact of school spaces and how these are navigated. Doing so is accomplished through focussing on the implications of spaces in both mainstream and ASN environments.

Reflections on broader school spaces initially centred on a sense of chaos and cacophony, predominantly in joint mainstream spaces. Molly's navigation of space within mainstream school faced much tribulation, furthered by the insight into meaningful school spaces during COVID. COVID forced rapid adaptations to school spaces, with guidance on home-based and returning to school for autistic pupils suggesting engaging with positive and meaningful interests (Martin & Peacock, 2020). For the participants in this research, COVID proved a barrier to learning, such as Emily, and a source of empowerment for others, such as Molly. Molly found an enhancement in her understanding of what meaningful school space *could* be. She felt a sense of relief due to the reduction of other pupils in the school. During COVID, Molly moved to the library space within the school, with no more than 15 other

pupils. The reduction in numbers and move to a quieter space offered a sense of empowerment she hadn't experienced in school before. One which was, unfortunately, removed when restrictions were lifted, replacing the barriers created by the noisier spaces. Wood (2020), in their research on autistic pupils' engagement with the school curriculum in English schools, suggested that noise is a divisive factor in school engagement and enjoyment. Further, teachers in Wood's (2020) work noted and expressed concern about the impact of noise on autistic pupils. Shared areas within school, such as lunch halls, are 'often experienced as cacophonous and chaotic, and potentially overwhelming spaces' (Birkett, McGrath & Tucker, 2022, p. 6). Cacophony has been documented as triggering anxiety due to the increased likelihood of noise sensitivity for autistic pupils (Bogdashina, 2016). The findings in this thesis expressed these factors to be present and inhibiting in both mainstream and ASN schools. Though, arguably, noise limited the want and need to engage for autistic girls.

The research findings progressed beyond the impact of noise as a barrier, bringing novel insight into how autistic girls actively try to avoid these areas. Each research participant highlighted the barriers to belonging due to noise, regardless of the school setting. While accommodative items such as noise-cancelling headphones have been documented by autistic pupils and teachers as empowering inclusion within classrooms (Hellner, 2021; Ikutu et al., 2016; Kanakri et al., 2017; Pfeiffer, Erb & Slugg, 2019), Emily noted these weren't allowed in her classroom. As such, lacking accommodations began to limit her access to and staying power in the classroom and the school. Molly, Rosie and Ashley each found the school week overwhelming, reaching a point midweek where school became too much, and they had to leave or take time off. Such avoidance of school, influenced by emotional experiences of isolation and sensory overload, has been documented in previous literature (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018; Honeybourne, 2015). Factors influencing Molly, Rosie and Ashley's school avoidance included the tension created by pressures within school. Each had looked at timetable changes, though these weren't actioned by the school. As such, the thesis offers insight into the broader sense of school spaces and the systemic contradictions which frame these. To be included, for the girls in this research, meant being able to leave and disengage. Evidenced from these narratives is the need for a re-conceptualising of what inclusive practice in schools means and should look like.

Throughout the reflections, how autistic girls are understood and (un)seen, was grounded in the school support offered. The findings from the literature review of this thesis highlighted the infringement and repetitions which have been consistently noted by autistic girls and ultimately led to no change. Reflecting on how autistic girls are accommodated, Horlock (2019) recalled a statement made by one participant within their cohort:

I am a riddle – I heard them discussing it. I am puzzled. I am a problem. I try so hard to watch, to listen, to work it out, to get it right. I get it wrong every time (p. 48).

Molly, Rosie and Ashley each shared similar sentiments. They were misunderstood - their needs misconstrued, or altogether unseen. While not invisible, they began to fall into a state of uncertainty and emotional overstimulation. Ashley indicated a lasting trauma from the cacophony and sensory overload of school, leaving her physically unable to enter school buildings. As a result, she was unable to sit exams and was worried about her prospects. Such an extreme situation highlighted the inability of the Scottish education system to engage with and support autistic needs adequately. A scoping investigation in Scotland by Scottish Autism and the National Autistic Society, the *Not Engaged* report, highlighted autistic pupils being placed on reduced timetables as a regular occurrence within mainstream and ASN environments (2018). The findings from this thesis show the lived impact these have on autistic girls, highlighting the systemic contradictions of school inclusion as removing autistic space and sense of belonging in schools.

Within the exploration of school spaces ASN and mainstream were juxtaposed by participant narratives, reflecting broader positioning on mainstreaming. While some argue for the efficacy of mainstreaming (Larcombe et al., 2019; Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Roberts & Simpson, 2016), the participants in this research, and broader literature, expressed opposing views. Ravet concluded that teachers face complications as autistic pupils have a ‘unique and distinct way of thinking, communicating and interacting’ (2011, p. 676). Early writing in *Apsergirls* (Simone, 2011) highlighted issues faced in mainstream education, while Törnvall’s *The Autists* drew on historical experiences in Sweden to elucidate difficulties

in making sense of school (Tornvall, 2023). For every participant in this study other than Chloe, mainstream was *the* barrier to education due to a lack of accommodations. As such, a level of disempowerment surrounded the participants within mainstream through miscomprehension of needs and dis/ability. While the literature on gender and disability has documented detrimental impacts stemming from misunderstanding (French & Swain, 2004; Garland-Thomson, 2011; Stenning, 2022), progressive knowledge development indicates experiences similar to those of the research participants.

While the narratives on mainstream school spaces focused on negative experiences, one participant nuanced how these spaces can be understood. Contrary to other participants, Chloe's worries extended to the impact being outside of mainstream would have on her future: *'ASN isn't always the end game – some of us only need a little from it, and then we're ready for the world'*. Here, the potential of mainstream was almost emancipatory for Chloe, allowing her to progress academically without being misunderstood. Chloe's push towards a sense of educational justice mirrors a push for gender justice (Cin, 2017; López-Fogués & Cin, 2017). While Cin's work is located primarily within the Turkish context, their construction knowledge development through the capabilities approach of Sen (1999) and Naussbaum (2000) expands how barriers to needs are conceptualised. From Chloe's perspective, her capabilities were limited by both her gender and autistic identities. While Chloe recognised her own shortcomings in socialising, mirroring broader literature (Kanakri et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2022; Wood, 2019), she believed these were traversable. Critically, Chloe reflected the failings of mainstream environments with depth, while mirroring these criticisms in terms of ASN spaces. Doing so places the findings of the thesis as addressing missing perspectives on the complexities of engaging in mainstreaming. Vitally, showing the similarities conceptualises the issues as not limited to one type of schooling. Rather, this points to school environments as complex systems of contradictions which are inhibiting for autistic pupils.

At the centre of these contradictory systems of inclusion and accommodations are autistic girls who experience dysregulation and exclusionary practice in their daily school lives. The girls in this thesis elucidated the impact that detrimental school experiences ultimately have. These extended beyond needing to leave the classroom, conceptualising the

long-term implications of lacking autism knowledge in schools. Ashley's experiences show the often-unseen impact of school trauma, and how insidious these can be. Autistic individuals are at greater risk of depression (De-la-Iglesia & Olivar, 2015; Strang et al., 2012), self-harm, and suicide (Culpin et al., 2018). With the expanded detriment experienced in schools, there are clear implications on the current system in mainstream and ASN schools. Bullying, othering and consistently feeling unseen negatively impacted mental health in ways which went unseen. These reflected a significant influence on the sense of losing control, with a need to leave the school system. As such, the danger (and power) in school spaces lies in the unseen and unspoken for both the system and the girls.

Throughout the explorations of space, the girls showed the level of control which was reclaimed as they created their own small spaces with a sense of belonging. These moved from the broader and joint areas to conceptualise autistic space in schools as one of belonging through moderating inclusion on their own terms. Vital to current knowledge, the findings in this thesis highlight that systemic barriers to space are present regardless of the school environment. Mainstream and ASN environments both continue to misalign inclusion of autistic needs as being engaged with joint spaces. As such, autistic adolescent girls continue to navigate these spaces by challenging the system with caution, highlighting the paradox in which inclusion through self-exclusion can empower autistic spaces in schools.

6.2.2 The Influence of School Relationships

When space was explored as positive, the reclamation depended on the relationships which were forged with peers in school and teachers. Reflective of the findings within the literature review, the research drew upon both positive and negative outlooks and impacts with respect to these relationships. While the previous section focused on the nature of hidden changes and navigating joint and reclaimed school spaces, here I focus on the impact of relationships across school spaces. These are linked to empowering and othering experiences which framed the perceptions of school. Interestingly, these differed between primary and secondary environments, with the calibre of friends and their impact nuancing current knowledge. The outcomes of such attachment may act as an enabling and empowering process. According to Carter et al. (2013), connections during school help many adapt to communities later in life. The value of such relationships has a robust research

background within the literature (Newberry, 2010). The maintenance and formation of such relationships have a clear impact on the learners themselves (Yoon, 2002), with their manner and intensity varying between the teacher and learners (Newberry & Davis, 2008). The thesis findings highlight relationships as avenues of empowerment and disempowerment simultaneously. Current research highlights the importance of relationships for autistic pupils in schools (Fox, et al, 2024; Ryan et al, 2021; Sedgewick, et al, 2019). The thesis findings nuance these through systemic contradictions and showing where connections impact the creation of empowering spaces.

6.2.2.1 Empowered Through Connections.

My findings on the implications of teacher relationships with autistic pupils both resonate with and enhance current literature. Teacher-pupil relationships are pivotal both within and beyond the classroom (Brown & McIntosh, 2012; Hodge, Rice & Reidy, 2022). Bridging communication differences between neurotypical and autistic individuals (Crompton et al., 2020; Milton, 2014) proved vital to participants in developing positive school experiences. The primary model of how teachers perceive autism outlines their overall perception of it (Hodge, Rice & Reidy, 2022; Runswick-Cole, 2016; Vaz et al., 2015). Indeed, early research on inclusion proved somewhat problematic in its framing of autism. Throughout the research stereotypes infringed on participants' power and place within the classroom and the school. Being seen and understood creates a sense of belonging in school, an important factor underpinned by autistic girls narratives (Goodall, 2020; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).

The findings from this research nuance understanding of the impact teachers have on school experiences. The importance of relationships in schools for autistic learners can solidify their overall perception of school (O'Hagan & Hebron, 2017; Sproston, Sedgwick & Crane, 2017). The research participants highlighted a caring and nurturing teacher was one who reflected these attributes in their approaches to teaching as well as the pupils. The findings progress from current knowledge, by enhancing what an understanding teacher is for autistic girls. For each participant, one teacher became a glimmer of hope, either through giving or aiding in finding a safe space in the school. Mainly these were allowing use of the teachers' classroom during busier times or moments of being overwhelmed. However, these

acted as connections for the participants – connections being built with peers and feeling connected to the broader school community through self-exclusion. The precarity of these spaces lay rooted in hidden rules and subtle changes, which threatened access through systemic framing of inclusion. These spaces and connections therefore challenged what inclusion means; not physically being within the classroom or school but connected and belonging through empowerment and agency.

As such, these teachers became necessary as participants reflected on them seeing their inclusion and needs. Humphrey and Symes (2013) offered early insights into teachers' perspectives on inclusion, giving an initial, perspective on how relationships with autistic pupils develop. Indeed, both Humphrey's and Symes' work have expanded and nuanced comprehension of teacher and teacher assistant knowledge (Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Symes & Humphrey, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013). Within this research, however, the framing of autism was consistently set within the parameters of medicalised and deficit models and thought. Interestingly, the research findings reflect the nature of teacher connections beyond current literature. Participants reflections went beyond the importance of an empathic teacher to envision an aware and empowering teacher who understood their need for safe spaces. Conn's (2018) participants also reflected on the impact of teachers taking a supportive approach, one with an engaged and fluid understanding of autism and needs. The highlighted research elucidated an interesting perspective from the educator's narratives. Participants stated that teachers who engaged with them in a non-stigmatising manner were more open and positive. Rather than drawing on the professional development offered by the education system, the participants' knowledge developed more robustly from supporting autistic pupils. Wood (2022) observed expansions in teachers' understandings of autism through engaging with pupils at levels of intense interest within the curriculum. Molly, Chloe, and Rosie found a level of positivity through teachers bringing passion and an adapted approach to lessons. Critically, they expressed a sense of belonging through these teachers that wasn't explicitly shown in the classroom. As such, the nature of their needs were at risk of being misunderstood.

Perceiving autistic pupils as having low or no support needs can lead to infringements on the education they receive. Hummerstone and Parsons (2021) revealed the intersections

and differences as to what builds relationships, through interviewing autistic pupils and teachers. Aspects of such frustration and the impact of not being seen as having differing needs from others within mainstream classrooms were expressed by Hummerstone and Parson's (2021) participants:

You [the teacher] give me a little help and then it feels like it helps me complete that one question, and then I've still got a load of other questions to do. And then I get stuck within, like, the next two questions, and so on (p. 10).

Though meeting needs in the classroom can be seen as positive from a teacher's perspective, subtleties in learning from the pupil's perspective may differ. Engagement with space brought nuance to systemic disempowerment. (Im)manoeuvrability of space holds a vital insight into the autistic school experience. Each participant had spaces which were initially given by schools and later rescinded. As such, reclaiming space proved vital to empowerment, though it remained difficult depending on teacher knowledge and relationships. Empowerment developed through the reclamation of space. Participants each offered oversight into how space encapsulated restrictions. Restrictions on power and space negatively affected participants' perceptions of teachers, but power could be constructed through engaging these relationships and taking back space.

Conversely, the positive nature of relationships proved critical in providing foundations to build upon. Positive engagements with teachers have been shown by autistic girls in English schools to allow 'safety of trusting relationships' which allowed these participants to influence their support and space in school (O'Hagan, Bond & Hebron, 2022 p. 11). Engaging positive teacher relationships allowed these girls 'to feel listened to, understood and created a sense of agency' (O'Hagan, Bond & Hebron, 2022 p. 11). Participants in the research reflected upon teacher relationships as creating a sense of space and belonging within classrooms. Rosie focused on building a positive relationship with teachers to be seen as a 'good pupil', so she began greeting teachers briefly to show interest and build rapport.

While primary school saw many friendships of convenience and circumstance, the girls in the research found empowering friendships in secondary school. These friendships were framed by common interests, formed from knowledge of past experiences. Rosie and Emily both reflected that secondary school spaces allowed them to find ‘better friends’, ones who added more value to their experiences. Each of the other participants, however, related more to those in Sedgewick’s multiple works on friendship, focusing on one strong, intense friendship with another individual (Sedgewick et al., 2016; Sedgewick, Hill & Pellicano, 2019; Sedgewick, Leppanen & Tchanturia, 2019). From the findings in this thesis, the need for specific friendships was nuanced. Participants found these to be a source of empowerment and safety in space, enhancing their ability to cope at school. Ultimately, however, for the participants in this research, the spaces created through friendships were founded mainly on consequence and timeliness. Considering the intricacies of school relationships with peers, critical nuance exists. While past research has elucidated much on school relationships and bullying, participants in this thesis elucidated an understanding of navigating school spaces from the autistic perspective. Consistent awareness of the mannerisms of peers being impacted by perceptions of autism nuanced how these relationships are viewed from outsider perspectives. These girls saw the outsider perspective and brought this into their reflections. Awareness of their autistic identity, whether claimed or given by diagnosis, impacted upon how they navigated spaces with and against peer relationships.

6.2.2.2 The Impact of Bullying and ‘Bad Friends’.

Relationships framed perceptions of school. The overarching elements of negative relationships emerged from the exploration of bullying in terms of systemic and gender violence. Each participant reflected on bullying in some manner. Experiences of bullying told via autistic voices have been widely documented in the literature and readily expanded upon in self-reflective life writing (Begeer et al., 2016; Cappadocia, Weiss & Pepler, 2012; Humphrey & Hebron, 2015; Saggars et al., 2017; Van Roekel, Scholte & Didden, 2010). Within educational practice and policy, approaches to bullying aren’t always successful in supporting autistic pupils. Differing perspectives on autistic individuals being victims of bullying can confuse the impact of bullying through rationalising the social violence. Sterzing (2012) suggested that 46.3% of their cohort were highly likely to experience bullying victimisation, a likelihood also suggested by Maiano (2016). Others conclude that autistic learners are at an elevated risk of bullying within additional support schools (Van Roekel,

Scholte & Didden, 2010), while still others conclude that mainstream environments contain stronger risk factors (Cigman, 2007). Glances into the impact of bullying, as seen in later life within Milton and Sims, held a detrimental impact on the positive formation of autistic identity (Milton & Sims, 2016).

Nuancing current literature, the research participants attributed much of the bullying they experienced to peer ignorance of autism and gender. Rawlings' work exploring gender, social hierarchies, and violence in Australia has developed the understandings of the construction and enactment of how bullying is perpetrated and experienced (Rawlings, 2017, 2019; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). Rawlings' findings from focus groups in New South Wales exemplified distinct elements of bullying which positioned victims as a social other (2017, 2019). Bullying related to 'fitting in' (or in the case of the participants in this research, troubling norms within school), which Rawlings sees as 'complex, elaborate and dynamic processes that are constantly re-negotiated by students' (2017, p. 217). Norms which are in constant flux may be troubling and complex concepts for autistic individuals to navigate (Lawson, 2008). Within the research, the implications of being and feeling different to peers, even in ASN classes and spaces, influenced participants engagement with negative connections. Chloe, in particular, found that her attitude towards friends impacted her navigation of space. Chloe reflected that, when approaching friendship, she had a demeanour similar to that of her bullies, wherein she referred to friendship as an 'appendix' she wished to rid herself of. Chloe's reflection highlighted an aspect of masking or camouflaging, one of which she was not fully aware of its purpose and which was not fully under her control. Here, the relationships were a source of safety, creating space with peers through social negativity. Chloe saw the need to enact these as social 'appendix' – an unnecessary social organ, present but poisoned and something she wanted to remove.

Chloe's reflection added nuance to an already explored component of friendship motivation and navigation among autistic girls. Sedgewick's (2016) investigation in England highlighted several components of friendship motivation for autistic pupils; however, it was the interpersonal communicative elements that Chloe mirrored. Sedgewick's work highlighted the explorations of socially situated norms attached to girls' socialising, 'such as gossiping, being excluded, and having trust betrayed' (2016, p. 1303). Autistic girls in their

research highlighted conflicts within relationships with other girls as involving actions of ‘backstabbing, bitchin’ [...] people go and say something to one person and the other person goes around and tells another person’ (2016, p. 1303). Chloe’s small group of friends drew on these components not as conflict, but as part of the daily process of their friendships. From participant reflections, the need for specific friendships was nuanced, as participants found them to be a source of space and empowerment that aided their ability to cope at school. Ultimately, for the research participants spaces created through friendships were founded mainly on consequence and timeliness. Such masking brought a sense of space, allowing comprehension of motivations for friendships (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018).

Indeed, the subthemes *It's Always ‘Boys Will Be Boys’...* and *Why Are We Treated Differently Just Because We Are Girls?* bring troubling insights related to gendered social violence. Rawlings' collective work deconstructing the nature of bullying within Australian schools provides a nuanced understanding (Rawlings, 2015, 2019; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). Primarily, these were rooted in misogyny and violence towards girls (Rawlings, 2015, 2019; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). School bullying of autistic girls lies rooted within social misconceptions and systemic power imbalances. As such, isolation and social exclusion are entwined with reducing access to space (Massey, 2008). Such miscomprehension continues to filter through social stereotypes, as nuances in autism and gender remain absent from the broader knowledge base (Davidson & Tamas, 2016; Jack, 2014; Kourti & MacLeod, 2019). Experiences of bullying had negative impacts on school experiences, mirroring broader literature (Begeer et al., 2016; Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012; Humphrey & Hebron, 2015). Each participant experienced feeling ostracised or bullied by peers in school. Instances of bullying were almost systemic in nature, seeming part of the everyday school life. For the research participants, Ashley in particular, the traumatic nature of bullying and negative experiences with teachers were insidious to the point of forcing school absence. While aspects of Ashley’s experiences speak to current findings (Moyse, 2021), the overall nature of negative relationships highlights the extreme and subtle trauma these can cause. While the section above highlighted participants need to leave the collective school space at some point in the week, the nature of trauma within the school experience goes beyond these. Ashley has been left unable to attend a school, pushed out of the collective school space through negatives connections and associations with the physical spaces in school. As such, the nature of connectedness offered some empowerment, but not enough to offset the negatives for

Ashley's school experience. The girls in this research experienced bullying related to misfitting social and neuro-norms. The nature of bullying and isolation requires further exploration as the traumatic impacts from these remain under-explored.

6.2.3 Autism, Gender and Voice

In discussing the construction of autistic identity, participants highlighted the impact of being seen as other, leading to them masking their autistic selves. Masking is an effective tool for fitting in and hiding autistic identity within neurotypically dominant spaces (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018; Dean, Harwood & Kasari, 2017; Pearson & Rose, 2021; Tierney et al., 2016). The downside to masking has meant many who don't already hold a diagnosis end up missed or unseen (Bargiela et al., 2016; Duvekot et al., 2017; Goldman, 2013; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Penney, 2013). Only through engaging these voices has current knowledge adequately developed, though arguably more remains to be done. Masking has led to negative impacts on mental health and identity development, while in tandem furthering social ignorance of gender and autism (Botha, Dibb & Frost, 2022). Throughout the challenges faced within school, participants saw the miscomprehension of autism as rooted in systemic stereotyping. Throughout this section I will synthesise where participants narratives expand and add novelty to current research on autism and gender in school spaces.

6.2.3.1 Autism and Gender in the Classroom.

It has long been suggested that autistic individuals are likely to be marginalised through society's structuring of stereotypes (Milton, 2016; O'Dell et al., 2016). Interrogating these requires a feminist lens to interpret, challenge and empower autistic girls (Bumiller, 2008; Davidson, 2007; Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Davidson & Tamas, 2016; Stenning, 2022). Such removal of power can be seen to be further infringed through the historical framing of autism as an androcentric condition continuing to bleed into societal outlooks and stereotypes (Moore et al, 2022). Each participant within the research highlighted the experience of being disempowered due to misfitting the stereotype teachers held. For Ashley and Rosie, this misfitting of stereotypes centred on teachers not being knowledgeable about autistic girls. In particular, Ashley faced consistent pushback on her being autistic by teachers, as she didn't act and present like the autistic boys in her school. Rosie and Molly also faced a lack of support, infringed due to social misconceptions, as voiced within Strang's

research: 'There are a lot of times when you tell someone that you're autistic and they say you're not a white, cis male' (2018, p. 20).

Gender became a contingent factor, impacting how being seen as an autistic girl. As such, gender emerged similarly to Lyttleton-Smith's post-human analysis of gender development among nursery-aged children in Wales (2015). Within Lyttleton-Smith's (2015) ethnographic observations, spatial factors in environments and interactions were central to how gender emerged through participants' actions and perceptions. A similar emergence has been noted with interactions and actions being core to how gender is enacted from early school years (Gansen & Martin, 2018; Paechter, 2007; Renold, 2005). Interestingly, participants in the current research did not perceive gender as performative or heteronormative (Butler, 1900; Kourti & MacLeod, 2019). Participants' comprehension of gender aligned with literature on autism and gender-based literature (Bumiller, 2008; Davidson, 2007; Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Davidson & Tamas, 2016; Jack, 2014; Kourti & MacLeod, 2019). Gender was seen as being a more fluid concept, with gendered boundaries being seen as frustrating and nonsensical by the participants.

While Emily saw gender in the clothes worn and the physical actions of individuals, such as boys being noisier, the limiting nature of gender stereotypes confused other participants. In their exploration of the social practices which conceptualise gender from an early age, Gansen and Martin suggested formation is more complex than children 'just imitate adult culture and the world they are experiencing' (2018, p. 89). The participants' in this thesis mirrored these formations through actions which challenged heteronorms. Chloe, Rosie and Ashley saw the notion of gender as appearance and actions as convoluted. Of the three, Ashley's reflection summarised the others' feelings on gender:

It's weird because I wasn't like a tomboy or a girly-girl, I didn't play football or sports and I didn't like pink or bands so I didn't understand why they would all push me out so much. I think they saw I was different and did struggle more socially so I was a target...

I think I break a lot of stereotypes!

Arguably, autistic girls break the stereotypes surrounding autism and gender (Bumiller, 2008; Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Davidson & Tamas, 2016). Indeed, participants troubled gender dichotomies through their conceptualisation of actions in the classroom and school. Participant reflections mirror aspects of the broader literature, while challenging concepts of gender and stereotypes. Primarily, though boys were conceptualised as '*noisier*', '*louder*', and taking up time and space within classrooms, how these translated across gendered boundaries differed. Such conclusions about differences between boys and girls in classrooms hold a historic place in literature. From early constructions of the differences children perceive in gender (Kenway, 1998; Lloyd, 1992; Martin, 1998), a robust knowledge base has emerged regarding the construction of gender formulations (Paechter, 2007; Renold, 2005). Though barriers were removed for Rosie at her all-girls' school, the ghost of gender persisted in the actions of her peers.

Gender has faced many contentions in terms of its *nature* and *meaning*. Indeed the early feminist writing of de Beauvoir (2011) saw gender as in terms of emergence, with Butler expanding this to suggest that gender is formed of the 'cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation' (1986, p. 35). West and Zimmerman suggest the "doing" of gender is completed by women and men whose competence in society is hostage to its production' constructing a 'doing' of gender as 'an emergent feature of social situations' (1990, p. 13-14). Essentially, West and Zimmerman see gender as environmentally influenced, a context highlighted in the literature (Gansen & Martin, 2018; Lyttleton-Smith, 2015; Martin, 1998; Rawlings, 2017, 2019; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). Participants' perspectives were nuanced, particularly Rosie's. Rosie attended an all-girls' school. As such, her experiences of gender were more nuanced than those of other participants. Rosie embodied and explored her experience through the lens of being an autistic girl, though she did not see the point in holding a gender identity within the school. Working with a deeper construction of gender than her peers, Rosie embodied misfitting through the challenge she posed to the systemic hetero balance in school. Critically, Rosie poses challenges beyond the current research, holding implications for future research to be more fluid in its construction of gender. While the other participants saw themselves as fitting roles which challenged, though ultimately fit, systemic heteronorms (e.g. tomboy), Rosie

exemplified the fluidity with which autistic individuals tend to approach gender (Cooper et al., 2022; Kanfischer, Davies & Collins, 2017). Interestingly, when discussing gender and gendered norms in school, Rosie's construction of classroom roles highlighted greater awareness of these roles than of gender specifically. While boys were constructed as noisy, loud, and taking up time and space, Rosie saw these roles as filled by other girls in her classes. At points, Rosie (and the other participants) mirrored findings in Gill's (2016) research in all-girls' schools in Australia. Gill's participants reflections noted that gender in school 'passed almost unnoticed', as being around only other girls had 'become so every day it rated no comment' (2016, p. 127). Rosie's highlighting of her peers taking up boys' school roles was commented on with a 'good for them' attitude of empowerment. Critically, Rosie embodied an attitude towards gender which further elucidated autistic perspectives of gender as being rooted outside of social norms and troubling neuro-norms. Yet she remained unseen, her needs within the classroom and school remaining unaddressed as she masked enough to blend in. As such, my findings indicate that to understand and meet autistic girl's needs, the intersections of gender and autism require further address.

Each of the girls in this research were disempowered in school with varying consequences. These ranged from being unable to find or create space in the school to having to engage in joint spaces. For each of the girls the classroom was a displacing experience, pushing the dichotomy of mainstream and joint spaces as negative or 'hell'. These classroom experiences pushed the girls to mask. Such endeavours were mentally taxing, leaving participants unable to concentrate, learn, and garner meaningful support in the classroom. Emphasis in autistic reflections is placed on the importance of recognising needs (and a move away from forcing masking) (Bargiela, 2019; Tierney et al., 2016). From the perspective of capabilities (Naussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1992;), progression in one skill shouldn't readily assume ability in another. For the girls in the cohort, academic skills are associated with progression and competency in other areas (e.g. voicing support needs). Missing communication about support needs and overlooking the possibility that needs may not be met greatly underestimates and fails these girls. Personal narratives in both *Aspergirls* (Simone, 2010) and *Spectrum Women* (Cook & Garnet, 2018) reflect such misunderstandings of the different skillsets of autistic girls. Autistic girls within Humphrey and Symes' (2010) cohort highlighted a lack of knowledge and recognition within practice with respect to support needs, and the fluidity of needs and ability day-to-day. Education is seen as developing

understanding of the ways and reasons why communities and individuals interact with, and face, oppression (Cin, 2017). While a vital component in developing a sense of agency and equality for girls from a young age, education may not always fulfil this role due to social and political stigma (Murphy-Graham, 2012). Researchers have described this act of empowerment as having qualities similar to those of Nussbaum's capabilities approach. When addressing education through the capabilities framework(s), an acceptance of agency beyond societal bias is vital. Just as feminist actions have progressed across social and political stigma, challenging dichotomies of gender and social place, the capabilities approach(es) has highlighted how agency is often withdrawn through misunderstandings and dogmatic perceptions of an individual's abilities.

Strategies built upon the capabilities framework(s) in teacher training are being investigated with respect to teaching autistic learners (Fernandes, 2019). Reflections from Ainscow and Miles (2008) have drawn on the development of inclusive practice. Their reflections highlight the lack of collaboration between agendas within classrooms. In particular, stigmatised beliefs may prevent and hinder attempts to advance inclusion (Ainscow, 2007; Ainscow & Miles, 2008; 2009). Throughout the exploration of spaces in the research findings, the nature of inclusion emerged as one of exclusion. The girls felt misunderstood in their needs and not being able to actively leave the classroom or joint space without othering themselves through going to the teacher in front of the class or being followed when trying to leave. As such, barriers emerged from teachers' inflexibility and miscomprehension of autistic girl's needs. While Hart (2010) evidenced the impact of teacher flexibility and approach to learners as a strong indicator of capacity in learner development, current processes have not improved in the 15 years which followed. Acknowledging the evidence for resistance, through a non-medicalised and stereotyped lens, is gradually edging into teacher and researcher knowledge bases. Further, a consistent tone of vulnerability is *imposed upon* rather than *expressed by* autistic girls in this thesis research and beyond (Cook & Garnet, 2019; Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Whitlow, Cooper & Couvillon, 2018). These misunderstandings of agency and ability led to being overwhelmed and needing to escape, seeking a space where they felt belonging and calm.

That is not to suggest that social factors don't influence susceptibility through social disadvantage – there remain specific social scenarios that are difficult for some to read, as they are built on unspoken concepts and rules. Such an imposition of vulnerability can change perceptions of ability. Explorations of how teachers perceived the girls and how they were seen differently, nuanced current knowledge by framing these within neuro-misfitting. With little Scottish-centred literature on autistic school experiences in recent years emerging, the intersections of gender and autism within this research are vital to developing a foundational understanding. As each participant in the current research explored their perceptions of being seen as autistic pupils, the inclusion of gender (expectedly) complicated these findings. Being seen as autistic didn't automatically equate being seen as an autistic girl. However, nuance emerged in how gender was perceived. Those who reflected on gender within the research saw themselves as troubling or being out of line with social norms of gender. As such, this research could begin a process of comprehending misfitting through the autistic lens. Each participant challenged the gender norms and autism stereotypes which became systemic ways of seeing them. The data and findings nuance current knowledge through showing new ways are needed to comprehend autistic experiences of gender in the school and classroom. Comprehending autistic epistemic authority of voice through a lens of neuro-misfitting sets a foundation for reinterpretations of autism, gender and the classroom.

6.2.3.2 Building Inclusive Understanding Through Autistic Girls Voices.

Core to epistemic authority of voice is engaging these to influence current knowledge bases. The girls in this research pushed the narrative that greater autism awareness and training should be part of teacher training and continuing education. At the core, gender comprehension is entangled with teacher knowledge. Feeling a loss of support and power within the classroom, Rosie projected these frustrations, noting, *'teachers don't really understand how different boys and girls are [...] they need to [...] they need to know more...'* Ashley, in a similarly frustrated position, noted that teachers *'didn't really understand what an autistic girl was like'*. Such perspectives are reflected within self-authored literature (Carpenter, 2019; Cook, 2018; Simone, 2010; Tornvall, 2023). Beyond self-reflective work, literature highlights the value and impact teacher knowledge can have on pupil perceptions of them. Within Tomlinson, one participant noted a 'possible inconsistency of accommodations', as her education plan hadn't been read, as well as being told they were 'rude' for not engaging in forced socialising they felt was beyond their capabilities at that time (2021, p.

18). Such reflections from the findings in this thesis echo Lalvani's (2013) suggestion on teacher knowledge being consistently framed within medical perspectives. The research goes beyond these, nuancing how autistic girls disturb the epistemic outlook on autism. Beyond masking and fading to the background, the girls in this research show that understanding needs to see the individual needs both within and apart from the collective.

Within this research, the need to see the individual beyond autism stereotypes arose consistently. Literature expanding on teacher perspectives highlights the positioning of such knowledge and frustrations which mirror those of the research participants. McDougall's (2020) exploration of teacher insights into developing and maintaining autism knowledge, one participant necessitated background autism knowledge, mirroring those of the girls within the research:

You need an understanding of what ASD is but you also need an understanding of what that child's profile is [...] so what's the sensory needs, what are their strengths and weaknesses as an individual child? (p. 79).

Further, Anglim's research pinpointing the self-efficacy of primary teachers supporting autistic pupils in the English school context, one participant constructed a short, concise, yet worrying image that training '[was] pathetic really on special needs'. Further, other teacher participants indicated that the training provided 'no answers' on building autism support and knowledge (2018, p. 8). Within Symes and Humphrey's (2011) work, participants highlighted the limited efficacy of training, observing little of tangible value. Worryingly, another participant in Syme's work, with five years' experience, highlighted that their knowledge of autism in teacher training was unfounded, with no practical application. Participants in Rodden et al.'s study also consolidated the inadequate adaptations that training provided to educators, relying on misconceptions and stereotypes about autism (Rodden et al., 2019). Understandably, these frustrations are likely to affect practice, with potential for teacher burnout (Boujut et al., 2017).

Teachers' knowledge bases and experiences have been critical in developing educational outcomes for autistic pupils. As far back as Ivey's (2007) survey exploring teacher expectations for autistic pupils, the perspectives drawn have focused on outcomes beyond pupils' educational settings. The focus then shifted to life outcomes, emphasising the value that pupils, as adults, will offer to the broader community. The implications of Ivey's work, as reflected in a closed-question survey conducted almost two decades ago, are evident in the current literature and the findings in this thesis. A recent systematic literature review conducted by Gómez-Marí, Sanz-Cervera and Tárraga-Mínguez (2022) identified several implications in the literature that nuance teachers' perspectives on autism. The review drew on the international literature, highlighting broader issues related to schoolteachers and autism. Though Gomez's review took a global perspective, the implications from this thesis research and UK-centred literature expand upon it. Through a reflective and interrogative process, participants' outlooks on teacher knowledge are indicative of broader narratives in the literature which conceptualise the need for more teacher training on autism (Ballantyne et al., 2024; Rodden et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Teachers' indication of the lack of time for training and development on supporting autistic pupils highlights an urgent need to develop knowledge bases on autism. Additionally, conclusions made in Young, McNamara and Coughlan (2017) reflected an overall perspective that mainstream practitioners identify weakly with expertise on autism but strongly with being effective educators. Conversely, the research participants suggested that engagement isn't enough to make an effective teacher. The girls expressed difficulties in finding a teacher who understood their needs, leading to difficulties in finding a sense of calm and belonging in the classroom and broader school spaces.

Research extending back to the early stages of autism and teaching research evidenced that teachers' positioning may impact their understanding of autism (Soodak, Podell & Lehman, 1998). Rodden (2019) found that some teachers developed an understanding of pupils through the medical model of disability, and educators learning from such a model of deficits and inability is troubling. Conversely, Young (2017) concluded that respondents' knowledge centred on beliefs about behaviour and normalcy. Reflecting much of the thought that can be drawn from Rodden's work, Young (2017) and Anglim (2018) conclude that the knowledge of their participants is drawn from outside perspectives. Such thoughts and conclusions within research are not new. Past research has reflected an

understanding of autism drawn from outsider narratives, such as the media or stereotyped accounts (Hendricks, 2008; MacGregor & Campbell, 2001; Segall, 2008). A grounding in seeing autistic needs as similar to those of neurotypical peers may seek to enact a balance of power. However, such actions can take power from autistic pupils, removing their agency to seek support when needed (Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & Mackenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022; Whitlow, Cooper & Couvillon, 2018). From the participant voices, reflections built upon past notions of friendships, reflective of a quote from one girl who attended an all-girls' school in England (Carpenter, Happe & Eggerton, 2019):

Mainstream schools need to teach their kids that autism isn't an illness or a disease. It's a difference. That would have such a positive impact on autistic people – they would feel like they belonged. (p. 147).

As such, there remains a need for teachers to better comprehend how interactions between them and their autistic pupils shape their perceptions of needs and accommodations.

Despite a grounding in current literature, the implications drawn from participants reflect broader issues that fail to account for specific populations. Each participant described interactions with teachers who misunderstood their needs, portraying these in androcentric terms. Messages for teachers were not framed only around autism awareness, but also attentiveness to gender:

there are probably a lot more autistic girls that people don't know about [...] that haven't been diagnosed [...] and teachers should ehm, look into it more or be taught a bit more about what to look out for...

(Rosie).

Conceptualisations of gender as either categorising or enacting certain traits or behaviours from a heteronormative perspective weren't readily embraced by the participants. Instead, the challenge to gendered norms intersects with the current writing, suggesting the increased fluidity of gender for autistic individuals (Bumiller, 2008; Davidson, 2007; Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Davidson & Tamas, 2016; Moore et al., 2022; Stenning, 2022). Teachers' practice and knowledge seeks to educate and empower pupils (Anglim et al., 2018; Scott-Barrett, Cebula & Florian, 2019; Rodden et al., 2019). The findings in this research indicate a disconnect in teachers' attention to gender and institutional power from autistic girls' perspectives. Critically, these are indicative of a broader issue surrounding the expansion of autism and gender knowledge in school systems. Changes have clearly been made in autism knowledge when looking to the small changes which emerge across time in literature. Where these changes have been felt by autistic girls is reflected in both the findings of this thesis and the literature review findings. Repetitive elements remain across current literature, with the gendered expectations continuing to create barriers for understanding of autistic girls (Hamilton & Roberts, 2025). As such this thesis indicates the need for a more robust grounding of autism knowledge rooted in epistemic experience of autistic voice.

The knowledge developed through participant reflections has enabled a placing of voice and experience within a context of empowerment (Harding, 2009). However, imbalances in power distribution remain unaddressed in terms of autism and gender within the classroom. Such imbalances are reflective of a broader issue surrounding comprehension of the intersections of gender and autism, as well as the knowledge that teachers are given to support the growing autistic population within Scottish schools. Nuances were incorporated into the overall creation of space, seen as rooted in understandings of gender and autism among peers and educators. Participants have brought nuance to the knowledge base within Scottish schools, highlighting the unseen aspects of space that the institutions are neither aware of nor attentive to. These are the vital elements which can create positive school experiences. Understanding how the small, hidden rules and changes build and impact the overall school experience is both novel and vital. The reclamation of small autistic spaces in schools is vital to creating positivity in school experiences, though these are rooted in systemic challenges. Challenges to dominant neuro-normative perceptions of autism, gendered stereotypes and the very nature of inclusion. My findings indicate that spaces are

navigated and created through empowerment, challenge and systemic tensions which autistic girls face daily in schools.

6.3 Looking to the Future: Entangling Autism Research with Feminist Standpoint and Disability Theories

Throughout this chapter and broader thesis, I have expressed the intersections of autism and gender as being related to social and neuro-misfitting. While this speaks to broader literature (Lekić, 2019; Stenning, 2022), the intersections of class and race weren't as broadly discussed, though important. While these weren't systematically explored, there are intersections from these which are implications themselves. The nature of my findings are rooted in exploring the impact of gender and autistic identity in school spaces. Each of the schools were located in working class areas, though these weren't factors explored in the research. However, with the differing positions on mainstream and ASN environment, the findings imply aspects of provisioning may underline the level of autism knowledge. With stakeholders in a recent Scottish Government (2023b) report highlighting resource provisioning issues emerging almost subtly, a clear gap emerges. As such, future research could explore the impact and perspectives of differences in resource and provisioning across class and areas in Local Authorities.

The intersections of whiteness remained prominent within the research for this thesis. Each participant was white, with a predominantly Scottish background, apart from Emily, who was Romanian. In a thesis which seeks to empower gender and autistic identity conjointly, the nature of whiteness in power adds to such critiques of marginalisation. Of note, participants' whiteness wasn't explored within their narratives, though lends itself to the difficulties facing support and recognition. Each girl was given a level of support in school, despite troubling gender and neuro-norms. However, the difficulties faced in receiving a diagnosis and support highlight potential implications for non-white autistic girls. Non-white individuals may face further difficulties in accessing diagnosis. While research is branching out to meet these gaps (Gallin et al., 2025), the implications from the thesis are clear. Whiteness and autism don't necessarily equal easy access to diagnosis and support for gender

diverse populations. The difficulties white autistic girls face in accessing support and space in schools suggest non-white populations would face greater struggles in accessing support. Concisely, there is a clear need for both education and autism literature to embrace the epistemic authority of non-white voices with respect to adapting support and space in school and broader systems.

As shown throughout the findings, the conceptual framework increased attentiveness to the intersections of gender and autistic identities in schools (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Harding, 2009; Hartsock, 1989; Stenning, 2022; 2024). The framing of the research offers vital insight into where these nuance current literature, and where future advances can be made. Throughout this section I will elucidate the specific strengths that the conceptual framework offers to future research. Specifically, I will link the strengths neuromisfitting offers to exploring future gendered autistic experiences. Further, the value of the epistemic authority of voice as a focus to exploring school experiences is discussed. Finally, the section reflects on the lessons and gaps which emerge from this research, discussing where future research could build from these.

6.3.1 Autism, Gender and Misfitting

Participants' troubling of gender posited an interesting challenge to the conceptions of autism, which, despite advances, continue to prevail. As such, androcentric stereotypes continue to reduce recognition and understanding of autism and gender (Goldman, 2013). As such, how gender intersects with and shapes autistic lives from outsider perspectives in schools remains linked to stereotyped heteronorms. Research on autistic gender have drawn on feminist and queer perspectives to reinterpret the impact of social normalcy (Walker, 2021). These have extended as far back as Bumiller's (2008) seminal work conceptualising autism as a difference shaped by challenges to socially situated gender norms. Literature surrounding gender and autism highlights a disconnect with social concepts of gender, with autistic girls seeing themselves on the boundaries of different gender identities (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019). Within the work of Kourti (2019), autistic gender is conceptualised in terms beyond those of past literature, as an identity which isn't rooted in stereotyped performance. Gender has been constructed as performance (Butler, 1988), lying within the 'heterosexual

matrix' as a patriarchal tool of oppression. In this research, participants drew on the boundaries and inefficiencies imposed by stereotyped gender roles.

Participants' troubling of gender posited an interesting challenge to the conceptions of autism which lie within a patriarchal framing. The girls in the research experienced confinement and confusion as to where gender roles and definitions were situated. These mirror findings from Davidson and Tamas' (2016) exploration of autistic gender through reflective responses and autobiographical explorations. Through untangling the nature and what it means to autistic individuals to embody gender, a conclusion on gender reflected that "these 'things', gender and sex, are insubstantial, shadows built on shadows" (2016, p. 64). From this conclusion, the nature of gender being seen as an unnecessary social structure and performance can be seen. Critically, the findings of this thesis brings nuance to understanding where gender and autism stereotypes overlap, create barriers, and are overcome through challenge. Emerging from the findings were troublings of gender and autistic identity. The interrogation of school experiences, entangled within autistic reflections and manoeuvrings of space and gender, required theoretical backing grounded in feminist world interpretations. As such, drawing on an adaptation of misfitting proved pivotal in developing the interrogation and holds implications for future autism research.

Each participant indicated a process of misfitting norms within their reflections. Based on Garland-Thomson's conceptualisation of the material body as a source of knowledge that disturbs the dominant ideologies of dis/ability to afford individuals agency, the findings from participants expand upon the concept of misfitting (2012). Each participant reflected on how they saw themselves as different from their peers. Ashley, for example, saw herself as without a space in school:

So I could do well in classes, especially at [ASN] because it was calmer and smaller classes and I could concentrate better on the work, but they thought I should be in mainstream. Sort of like, I did kind of belong there, but not really...

To misfit as an autistic is to challenge, or trouble, the dominant ideologies of both social and neuro-norms (Stenning, 2022). Such explorations require comprehending marginalisation through the ableism pushed upon autistic individuals, ‘forced to question the validity of their experiences’, navigating the implications of socially imposed norms to untangle the ‘painful aspects of misfitting’ (Stenning, 2022, p. 2). Such a focus looks to the implications of environment, material and immaterial disability, and the impact on the individual. Within the research, participants challenged the dogmatic perspectives of gender and autism, simply through existing within school spaces.

Creating purposive interrogations within future research requires building on the narratives from autistic voices (Goodall & McKenzie, 2019). Autistic being within societal environments has typically been framed in terms of being non-neurotypical. From the reflections in this research, there is a need for future research to explore gender and autism (and autistic gender experiences) through a lens of misfitting. The physical body may mirror that of the ‘norm’ or able, with the differences relating to cognitive experience of the world. As such, to interrogate the future of research surrounding autistic girl’s school experiences, a comprehension of neuro-misfitting would move beyond factors of comparison with neurotypical peers. Such a perspective would enlighten the intersecting factors of autistic identities and experiences of the world. Through comprehension of autistic life-stories, shifting the lens used from one of difference through being non-neurotypical to one of empowerment through difference enhances knowledge produced through challenging structural social norms. Autistic girls can then be seen as ‘epistemologically disturbing’ rather than simply not conforming to social norms. The thesis findings suggests that future research enhance (neuro-)misfitting perspectives to reflect epistemic agency, power, and equality.

Despite the clear advances in engaging with the challenges autistic girls face in primary and secondary education, factors of importance remain unaddressed. A distinct gap lies where literature should meet with early childhood reflections of schools and equality from autistic girls’ perspectives in comparison to those of their male peers. The autistic girls participating in the five studies highlighted in the literature review considered indicated a need for further understanding of abilities, environmental influencers and impactors, and a developed understanding of sensory processes. Given the push from feminist activism and

research to advocate for gender equality and a balancing of gender power in education (Cin, 2017; Gill et al., 2016), it is disheartening to realise that the interconnection of practice, policy and autistic girls' experiences is so lacking. Argument has been made that inclusive policy risks overlooking and misinterpreting children's needs (MacIntyre, Stewart & Kendrick, 2026). As such, engagement with insider perspectives is vital for future and continued childhood research. Despite holding a significant insider perspective on where progressive adaptations and failings lie, these missing narratives are troubling. Despite increased attention in the literature, many of these girls' experiences remain unacknowledged. The research in this thesis has brought little-known knowledge to both the Scottish and broader contexts. Each case elucidated the emotive connection that lies within school experiences, nuancing current understanding of the daily struggles of autistic girls' navigation of school spaces.

6.3.2 Implications for Future Research

Collectively, the findings in this thesis point two core implications for future research. Firstly, there is a need to better interrogate and situate autistic girls' school experiences both in Scotland and in the broader UK context. The understanding of gender in the classroom remains tied to hetero-norms, in much the same way as gender and autism are tied to neuro-norms. Gaps lie in how autism knowledge rooted in systemic stereotypes can be reshaped to allow for the empowerment of autistic pupils. Future research should endeavour to incorporate participatory designs to begin reshaping school approaches and knowledge. Through engagement with autistic advisory panels and teachers, a nuanced interrogation of practice, policy and impact can be included. Doing so will enable a progression that empowers while challenging the contradictory application of inclusion within school systems. Secondly, the conceptual framing of the research offers a re-examination of where gaps lie and how they can be addressed. Through the embodiment of misfitting, autistic girls' voices held epistemic authority, elucidating critical new knowledge through their reflections.

The thesis also elucidated the complexities related to peer relationships and bullying in school. Broader research has highlighted the impact of friendships and the difficulty and intensity of developing these (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018; Sedgewick et al., 2019).

Interestingly, this thesis adds nuance to the understanding of social and gendered violence through participants' conceptualising of misfitting. Through challenging systemic gender and autism stereotypes, the girls were able to bring nuance to the autistic experience of school spaces. These nuance the findings in the literature review, which highlighted the repetitious nature of current research. While aspects of this research expanded beyond these, the continued emergence of similarities points to broader issues of context and where change can be made. Future research must draw on gender and meaning, incorporating autistic girls' voices throughout the research stages. Comprehending the impact gender and autistic identity have within school spaces requires a conceptual understanding of autistic identity and how this challenges systemic perceptions.

Throughout this thesis, I have referred to misfitting neuro-norms, a term which involves challenging the nature of both normalcy and stereotypes of autism, which have become normalised. Misfitting while being a misfit – being epistemically challenging while challenging epistemology. Reintegrating autistic epistemic authority of voice through misfitting will allow future research to explore autistic experiences more robustly. To move beyond repetitions, knowledge must also be produced to improve teacher knowledge. Engaging with participant voices independently has shown me that doing so must be co-productive to capture and portray the emotion and impact of school and knowledge to teachers. In outlining these implications for future research to include autistic girls throughout the research process, I am reminded of two quotes, both mentioned earlier in the thesis. Firstly, Mayes-Davis' call to be 'epistemologically disturbing' should remind future research to comprehend both the collective and individual nature of those who both have knowledge produced about them and who produce knowledge themselves. Secondly, a reflection from Rosie - a message which resonates with my own research position while exemplifying the self-awareness of more needing to be done:

there are probably a lot more autistic girls that people don't know about [...] that haven't been diagnosed [...] and teachers should eh, look into it more or be taught a bit more about what to look out for.

6.4 Limitations

As with all research, there are novel additions to literature as well as areas which limit the implications and scope of the findings. The research in this thesis is no different as several limitations require address to retain accountability and show areas of improvement for future research. The primary limitation of the current research lies in its sample size. Factors of stress and collective trauma surrounded the temporal setting of the research, due to fieldwork taking place immediately post-COVID, within months of the restrictions within public institutions being lifted. As such, contact through gatekeepers and recruitment processes was likely affected by the return to a 'new normal'. While recruitment was influenced by various factors that affected access to potential participants, engagement depended upon participant choice. Throughout the recruitment period, there were continuous barriers to overcome and attempts to overcome them. Despite the growing number of autistic girls accessing earlier diagnosis (Bargiela et al., 2016; Duvekot et al., 2017; Goldman, 2013; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Penney, 2013), there were limitations to school knowledge.

Throughout the recruitment process, schools, particularly mainstream, consistently indicated not knowing or being able to locate the number of autistic girls under their care. As such, the locations for potential participants were limited, with focus moving towards ASN environments. Hindrances to recruitment didn't solely lie in disparities in potential gatekeepers' perceptions of where participants should be and where they were. At the point of fieldwork, schools had begun to return to the classroom following COVID-19 restrictions. As such, there was a focus on returning to a 'new normal' and facilitating this as effectively as possible for all pupils. Ultimately, this meant that the research sought participants at a time of confusion, when pupil wellbeing and adjustment were key. However, it must be acknowledged that such research may not be of great interest to many potential participants and school gatekeepers.

A total of five autistic girls participated, giving reflections on their school experiences. While these reflections offer nuance to how experiences are comprehended and untangled, there are limitations to the range of these findings. Primarily, while critical nuance is evident in the reflections, the generalisability of the findings isn't extensive. The small

participant number means the data points to vital elements of experience, though it limits how much these conclusions hold sway. Looking at elements of creating and manoeuvring through school spaces is vital, with each participant engaging with their processes and strategies. These offer critical insight into where changes can be made. However, the lack of numbers offering such reflections can limit the data's ability to exert a robust influence. Schools are vast institutional environments, with many different social and formal processes. Participant reflections offer journeys into different school environments and comparisons between mainstream and non-mainstream schooling. These gave rise to themes which engaged the important elements of misfitting and navigating space. The rigidity of the themes that emerged could be argued to be lacking due to participant numbers, though the reliability checks throughout the analysis mitigate this to some extent.

While the research is limited by its smaller participant pool, the lack of diversity in participants may have further constrained the study. Failure to locate the voices of those who are more likely to face marginalisation because they utilise differing forms of non-verbal communication is a contentious point for the research. A vital component, which is often missed, involved bringing non-verbal autistic girls' perspectives into the research. Throughout the recruitment process, schools deemed these individuals too vulnerable to participate. While autistic girls continue to face disempowerment through being unrecognised and unseen within many school contexts (Goodall & McKenzie, 2020; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022), growing literature and advocacy are decreasing such divides. However, such disparities remain for individuals who utilise non-verbal communication. Whether these relate to miscomprehension of vocality equating intelligence and ability, or simply being seen as (unnecessarily) vulnerable, these individuals remained inaccessible. Without these experiences being added to the research, there are limitations to how my findings can translate into the support needs and messages these girls would promote. As such, a gap remains within the knowledge context that this research sought to begin to bridge but failed to.

Given the limited generalisability due to the small sample size, the research findings are presented as relevant solely to the Scottish context. While this doesn't limit how the findings can be utilised across other school systems internationally, it does limit their use to

their spatial and temporal context. As discussed above (and throughout the thesis), fieldwork took place immediately post-COVID-19. The impact of COVID on the exploration of experiences was resounding, while its impact on spaces within the school varied. For example, Molly found COVID offered insight into what her school could be and do to meet her needs – a short-lived reconciliation with her love of learning. As such, there was difficulty within the findings in differentiating between pre- and post-COVID impactors. While this may not matter in terms of comprehending these girl's school experiences, the research enabled exploration of immediate reflections on COVID within participant perspectives.

The limitations here are embedded within the frustrations and pressures of engaging with a 'new normal'. Each participant held an agenda of sorts, embedded in their frustrations stemming from later diagnosis, having already suffered under the school system. As such, contextualising the experiences within Scottish devolution entails comprehending the impact that policy and practice differences entail. These differed between local authorities, which offered varying levels of autism knowledge and support, as well as differing types of schooling. The approaches adopted in a Steiner school differ significantly from those in mainstream and ASN environments. As such, there remain aspects for future research to explore, with respect to how differing types of schooling impact the creation of inclusive environments.

Progressing the discussion of limitations, the nature of subjective exploration is limited by the researcher. In the earlier methodology chapter (see section 3.2), an exploration of my positioning in the research and the influence it may have was provided. I hold experiences of school, which have been influenced by my late autism recognition, and reflecting on points of contention and struggle. As noted, these may intersect with those of participants (though in no way are meant to claim a direct knowledge of their experiences). My experiences differ in terms of time (both in a temporal and policy/knowledge sense) and gender. The matter of time was discussed earlier in this section, though it remains relevant to the continued discussion of limitations. Interpreting the nature of gendered experiences is a difficult task, as my experiences are rooted in being cisgender. The argument for my suitability in interpreting participants' subjectivity lies in my misfitting. As a white cisgender

man, I have been privileged to experience less disempowerment than participants. Though I have manoeuvred through masking, my ethnicity and gender aided in avoiding the harsher elements of systemic oppression. My gender also played a role in restricting access and comfort with respect to schools and potential participants. The issues surrounding cisgender men investigating (and being able to comprehend adequately) the life experiences of girls, women, trans, queer, and non-binary lives expand into issues of power dynamics and patriarchal disempowerment (Scott-Barrett, Cebula & Florian, 2019). As such, my presence could have constrained the overall research findings.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has synthesised the research findings through discussion and by placing them alongside the current literature. The chapter engaged with the nuancing of knowledge relating to navigation of school environments. As engagement with challenging and empowering through navigation was deepened, the chapter solidified the placement and knowledge it provided. Throughout the participants' school journeys, the tumultuous nature of misfitting became a source of strength and resilience, despite remaining mostly unseen by others. As such, future recommendations were drawn promoting the efficacy of a feminist-based epistemology to better interrogate the structures which lead to an imbalance of power in autistic school experiences. The chapter which follows will offer concluding thoughts on the thesis.

Chapter 7: Concluding Thoughts

7.1 Introduction and Chapter Structure

Throughout the concluding chapter, I will reflect on the research process and findings, connecting these to the broader literature. The chapter begins by readdressing the research questions and summarising the conclusions reached. Following the research questions, the findings are synthesised with the current literature, offering insight and conclusions on the meanings that have emerged. Doing so then leads to contextualising the research through gender (mis)recognition, space, and relationships. The penultimate sections of the chapter and the thesis examine how the thesis can influence broader literature and research. Finally, the thesis concludes by indicating the potential futures of research into autistic girl's school experiences.

7.2 Answering the Research Questions

The research in this thesis has centred on a case study design with thematic analysis, comprising the school experiences of five autistic girls in Scotland, through a conceptual framework of epistemic authority of voice and neuro-misfitting. Schools can be a place of empowerment for pupils, where connections, understanding and a sense of community can be built (Wolfe, 2024). Throughout the research, the individual and collective narratives added nuance to current knowledge. Indeed, participants found empowerment through school connections – though they also faced daily challenges. Diversification of school space remained unaddressed throughout their time at school, which was particularly poignant when primary school had proved initially positive (Billington, 2024). As such, the reflections were simultaneously individual and collective in nature. Within the overall findings, a sense of repetition emerged that mirrored those in the earlier literature review. Through analysis, reflective accounts were drawn, which offered integration of subjective and objective experiences (Braun & Clark, 2022; Charmaz, 2021; Dusi, 2022). The subjective nature of participant accounts highlighted areas of importance, both emotionally and connectively.

Core to these areas of importance were the nature of repetitions across the findings of this thesis, and broader literature, and the navigation of spaces in schools. Repetitious instances of systemic and gender-based violence (Begeer et al., 2016; Humphrey & Hebron, 2015; Maiano et al., 2016; Park et al., 2020), social isolation (Kasari & Sterling, 2013), and uncertain access to school spaces and support (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson, Hebron & Bond, 2020) were framed throughout this thesis and broader research. The repetitions which arose were argued to stem from systemic miscomprehension and stereotypes. The nature of autism literature, understanding, and engagement with autistic voices has been in almost constant flux for the past two decades. As such, the broader representation of autism in women and girls extends to daily life, diagnostics, and society/ies (Elcheson et al., 2018; Hendrickx, 2015; Simone, 2010; Tornvall, 2023). Participants exposed the nature of gender and autism as being heteronormatively framed. As such, they expressed reflections which indicated disempowerment and systemic contradictions in the school environments and spaces.

Spaces and empowerment were more easily reclaimed within ASN environments, as the knowledge and experience surrounding understanding autistic girls was greater. Such perspectives are not unexpected, though the navigation of space remained contingent on broader social and school elements. School spaces were troubled within participant experiences at points, however, as they misfitted both social and 'autism' norms. Participants reflected being seen as not autistic at points due to their actions, social ability, and not mirroring of male autistic peers. From here, the contingency of space became rooted in outsider perspectives, leading to the reclamation of spaces through smaller, deliberate actions and friendships. The implications of subtle empowerment through self-driven and relationship-driven actions provided answers to the research questions.

7.2.1 Question 1

The first research question, *'How are the school experiences of autistic girl and girls situated?'* provided insight into the participants' overall school experiences. The girls' experiences of schooling were situated within tensions, repetitions, and reclamations through

subtle systemic challenges. Tensions are situated in each case individually and collectively through systemic and gendered violence, thereby connecting with the broader literature (Cin, 2017; Rawlings, 2019). Further, these tensions were situated in the connections with teacher misconceptions and how the girls misfitted and troubled school spaces, embodying the nature of neuro-misfitting (Stenning, 2022). The broader engagement with school systems situated participant experiences as negative within mainstream environments. Mainstream environments have been challenged with respect to their efficacy in supporting and educating autistic individuals (Hammel, 2012; Larcombe et al., 2019; Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011). Within ASN environments, these experiences held more positive connotations, reflecting autistic-focused literature (Goodall, 2020; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2021). Such dichotomising highlighted the repetitive nature of the findings when compared with the literature (Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022; Whitlow, Cooper & Couvillon, 2018). Despite the broader conceptualising of negativity, through misfitting and finding space, the girls were able to find empowerment and reclaim their identities throughout the school in small, subtle ways. These findings fed into the second research question.

7.2.2 Question 2

The second research question, *'What do these reflections tell us about the way spaces are created and navigated within schools?'* elucidated how misfitting and marginalisation affected navigation of school spaces and (dis) empowered autistic students. Participants highlighted the precarity of school spaces, how these were pushed for through struggles to be seen and understood. These struggles were reflective of the repetitions found in research, where knowledge has steadily advanced, but the impact of this remains unseen and unfelt by autistic pupils (Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021). According to the findings, spaces were created in schools through more subtle approaches. Engagement in peer and teacher relationships allowed the participants to create a level of space which empowered and improved their experiences. These school spaces are navigated with uncertainty and trepidation at times. Spaces given predominantly as accommodations were temporary. Those which were created were navigated with caution, though typically with close, trusted friends. Drawing upon the findings of the research, the second question highlighted important additions to the Scottish knowledge base. School spaces are lacking for autistic girls. With the nuance and development of knowledge already occurring within literature, a troubling trend

is the lack of accommodating spaces, which would not readily be expected. While literature can lag behind the progression of practice, nearly two decades of advancement through gendered autism research (Bargiella et al., 2016; Seer & Hogg, 2023), self-authored literature (Elcheson et al., 2018; Simone, 2010; Törnvall, 2023), and charity work (for example, the *Autistic Girls* network), should arguably have had an impact. The nature of space further enhanced the overall narrative surrounding knowledge, leading to the third research question.

7.2.3 Question 3

Tying together the thesis was the third question: *‘What knowledge and messages can be drawn upon to enhance comprehension and expand on creating space for autistic girls in schools?’* Within the findings lies a troubling mirroring of the repetitious nature of research findings on autistic girl’s school experiences (Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & Mackenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022; Whitlow, Cooper & Couvillon, 2018). As the literature surrounding autism, particularly that relating to autism in women and girls, has expanded, the adoption of valuable knowledge remains lacking with respect to its application. The research for this thesis has highlighted the impact that a lack of knowledge has had. Throughout the research, an emerging narrative framed frustrations about the knowledge needed to improve the school experience and, in turn, school spaces. From the nature of the findings, the third research question raises several implications for the future of autism-focused research in Scotland.

The nature of autistic school experiences is framed through systemic imbalances of power and social strata. Each participant highlighted the implications of the autism stereotype and how they were misunderstood because of it. Through misfitting, the nature of the school environment was shown to be a contradiction – inclusionary practice with exclusionary approaches to gendered neuro-misfitting. Power imbalances and miscomprehensions provide the current knowledge base with context to ‘reset’ Scottish autistic girls’ school experiences. Through reproach, a need for re-engagement in policy and practice is evident, though it requires greater depth of engagement with autistic voices. The nature of the thematic findings indicates both a repetitive, unacknowledged voice and a research focus that empowers autistic voices.

7.3 Key Findings

In this thesis there are two core key findings which have implications for current knowledge. The most novel finding focuses on the ways in which spaces in schools are given, created and reclaimed by autistic girls. How spaces of safety, belonging and peace were created offers vital insight for current knowledge through showing what autistic spaces in schools can and should be. Throughout the thesis findings, participants saw school spaces as rooted in tensions, exemplified most poignantly in Emily's session. Critically, mainstream and ASN environments didn't impact the sense of belonging in school spaces. Rather, the differing atmospheres in primary and secondary school were vital. The girls saw more collective and a sense of inclusion within primary as they were othered less at a younger age. As such, the nature of spaces in secondary school were rooted in systemic contradictions and tensions. Participants explored these as causing as othering and creating the misconceptions of autistic and gender identities.

From the reflections on space, the thesis findings nuanced current understanding of autistic spaces in schools. Throughout their school journeys, the participants were given spaces by teachers and schools which were subsequently taken or changed with no real indication or reasoning understood. As such, the spaces in schools became surrounded by tensions concerning where the girls could find space and where they could escape the school environment. These culminated in exercises of self-exclusion, primarily leaving the classroom or wider school building during the week. The conceptualising of autistic spaces in schools emerged as paradoxical in nature. Reflections from the girls showed that spaces were founded through close connections, and that a sense of inclusion and belonging converged through exclusion. Power over the need to regulate and leave when overwhelmed was a reclamation of agency and space for the girls. The nature of inclusive autistic spaces is systemically challenging – inclusive spaces for autistic adolescent girls in schools are reclaimed through self-exclusion and reclamation of power and agency.

The second core novel contribution lies in how the intersections of gender and autism in schools can be understood and interrogated. Within the research findings, a push to draw on the epistemic authority of voice to frame understanding of autism is consolidated. The

research offers a novel insight into how autistic girls school experiences can be conceptualised. As such, creating and reclaiming school spaces for autistic girls is framed through misfitting. Through understanding and challenging stereotype, the girls disturbed epistemology of autism and gender. Within this research, the girls reframed where gendered barriers can be reset through engaging autistic experience as expertise. The findings also offers a re-starting point for current knowledge on autism, gender and the Scottish school context. Through systemic contradictions of autistic actions as fitting a stereotype, the girls became often unseen within the classroom. These extended to the support needs they expressed being undervalued and unacted. As such the sense of disempowerment within joint spaces became insidious, tarnishing their school experiences. Through pushing specific messages for teachers, the girls took power on the perceptions of autism and gender, nuancing current knowledge. In the sections below I summarise the three core areas where my key findings emerge and nuance current research.

7.3.1 School Spaces

While the findings of this thesis reflect broader experiential narratives, there are critical insights that move beyond these. Participants highlighted the nature of school spaces as being largely inaccessible and lacking adaptability to meet autistic needs. The nature of school spaces was founded on precarities of rhetoric: Where are the spaces? When are they accessible? How accessible and adaptive are they? Each of these components allowed exploration of these school spaces through tensions, empowerment, and agency. The tensions of space are tied to disempowerment and attempts at reclamation. Through finding, making and reclaiming agency in space, novelty was added to showing the paradoxical nature of school spaces. The small physical classrooms and duty rooms were used to regulate agency and overload. Finding comfort with specific friends away from everyone else challenges systemic contradictions in what can be understood as ‘safe’ school spaces. Importantly for current literature, the paradoxical nature of inclusion and reclaiming space shows where misalignment occurs. Through self-exclusion, the girls were able to find safety, create spaces away from the main school body and gain a sense of belonging. These actions challenged the spaces given by schools, such as sensory rooms, as unsuitable to meet needs as they were ultimately joint spaces. The findings from this research have shown the navigation of school spaces by autistic girls to challenge the nature of school policies and practices. By disturbing

epistemology, whether actively or subconsciously, the girls created and reclaimed spaces in schools through empowerment and agency. These are phenomena which require future interrogation to enable lasting influence in educational practice, policy and support of autistic pupils.

The type of schooling engaged in had a significant influence on the girls' perceptions of positive or negative experiences. For each participant, some barriers extended across all school environments – whether mainstream, additional support needs, primary or secondary schools. Reflecting findings in Billington (2024), participants noted the divide between teacher and school approaches and the climate of primary and secondary education. While both were reflected upon as causing obstacles relating to cacophony (Birkett, 2022) and serious issues of bullying (Begeer, 2016; Humphrey, 2015; Maiano, 2016; Ochi, 2020), a sense of power and inclusion was more evident in primary schools. The nature of primary schools was more open and less complex than that of secondary schools (regardless of whether they were mainstream or not). Participants felt less othered, with less of a sense of difference, and saw their quirks as a positive part of their identity. This spoke to aspects of the current literature (Billington, 2024; Wolfe, 2024), though they offered nuance beyond the literature review findings (Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022). Participants' observations advanced beyond current literature, thereby expanding current knowledge. The impact of primary school was more positive due to differences in how autism was viewed and supported. Throughout their reflections participants discussed their ability to address their needs as they wanted, with fewer repercussions than in secondary school. Though bullying was mentioned throughout the reflections, participants were able to read in the playground and find other spaces and friends with greater ease. The emergence of bullying throughout each narrative troubled their positive aspects.

7.3.2 Autism, Gender, and Repetitions

Throughout the thematic findings, participants' narratives unearthed emotive accounts. The focus of these cases moved through school journeys, centring primary school vs. secondary school, gendered violence, neuro-normative stereotypes, and navigation of

school spaces. Through a situated case study design tied to thematic analysis, elements emerged that could prove useful for future research. The focus of future research should intertwine the personal and general to comprehend better the impacts upon autistic pupils of differing genders. Such research could begin to untangle the impacts of heteronormative ideologies and how these can be troubled and disconnected from school norms. The emergent themes highlighted a degree of overlap between the research and the external literature. Table 7.1 below shows the emergent themes, providing a refresher of the findings that elucidated participants' experiences. While repetitions centred the findings within the literature review, the repetitious nature of the findings were of concern for two reasons. Firstly, the repetitious nature suggests a collective negative school experience that is highlighted yet remains unaddressed. Such a suggestion highlights that changes have been slow or mostly non-existent since the first instances of these negative experiences emerged (Humphreys, 2011a, 2011b; 2013; Stewart, 2012). The nature of repetitions further points to a disempowering of autistic girls' voices within research knowledge bases. From the conceptual framing of feminist standpoint theory, repetitions elucidate autistic girls' epistemic authority in adapting school environments. However, despite substantial prior research and my current findings, these remain unaccounted for. The emergent themes highlight where repetitions align with current research, such as the implications of bullying and a growing sense of dichotomy surrounding ASN and mainstream schools (Rainsberry, 2017; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). With continuing repetitions, a disengagement from the epistemic value of autistic girls' voices remains within the Scottish and broader contexts.

Secondly, and potentially more troubling, is the proposition that research has failed to truly comprehend what is important to autistic girls' school experiences. One of the strengths of this research has been its conceptual framework. Adopting participant epistemic authority through feminist standpoint theory, empowerment through exploring voice enabled insight into the subtle challenges to systemic barriers. From the ontological perspective of misfitting (Garland-Thomson, 2011), the concept of neuro-misfitting, building upon the work of Stenning (2022), broadened the understanding of where autism and gender norms were troubled by participants. Throughout the findings, navigation of school spaces faced barriers with respect to both autism and gender stereotypes. Key to nuancing current research, the concept of neuro-misfitting provided critical insights into how these were challenged and experienced by participants. Drawing on participants' epistemic authority alongside neuro-

Table 7.1: *Troubled In School*

Higher-Order Themes	A Dichotomy in Mainstream vs ASN Schooling	The Impact of School Relationships	Navigating School Spaces	Gender and Autism	Messages About Autism
Subtheme 1	Pushed Beyond Our Limits in Mainstream	Bullied and Pushed to The Outside	Trying To Find Somewhere I Can Be and Belong in School	It is Always ' <i>Boys Will Be Boys</i> '...	Please Listen to Us and Go Beyond Being Tokenistic
Subtheme 2	Beyond Mainstream Was Heavenly	Core Friendships and Empathic Teachers	Connections Help to Empower Spaces in School	Treated Differently Just Because We Are Autistic Girls?	Learn From Our Voices and See Beyond Stereotypes

misfitting allowed for insight into where repetitions mirroring past research arose, while expanding upon aspects of school experiences. Through this, the research elucidated the nature of current repetitions while better foregrounding the subjective nature of autistic girls' school experiences.

Commonalities emerge across different research exploring autistic girls schools experiences, highlighting the nature of missed and misunderstood knowledge as continuing to surface. The nature of experiential research is rooted in exploring phenomena and untangling the emergent narratives (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Larkin, 2007; Smith & Osbourne, 2022). The emergent themes suggest a broader issue that extends beyond the Scottish context. Each participant shared insights into their school lives – those they had lived and those they were currently living. The overall climate of both hopelessness and empowerment brought forward moments of passion, both about what helps them to keep pushing, and around their challenge to school systems. Findings from the thesis set a path for progression. Within the Scottish school context, the research identifies failings and fills a gap by investigating school experiences. This also adds awareness to gaps where research must begin to be carried out. A 'reset' of sorts is needed to recentre future research towards the factors important to autistic girls. Within this reset, there remain components to address. Such negativity surrounding these experiences determines the need to envision and comprehend a trauma-sensitive exploration. Building factors around this requires a more robust understanding of the intersections of autism, school, and gender.

The findings from the research highlighted a clear discord between how educators and peers saw autistic girls and how participants experienced gender. Throughout the research, there were autism stereotypes rooted in heteronormative ideologies. As such, the knowledge of peers and teachers was based on gendered neuro-norms. The comprehension of autism and gender then placed the girls in a near-constant state of disempowerment. As such, participants offered messages for educators, peers, and future research. These messages focused on empowerment through acknowledging autistic girls' experiences. At the core of these messages, removing stereotyped perceptions and listening to learn from autistic young women were pronounced. As such, future research must be inclusive and focus on nuancing narratives.

7.3.3 Relationships Across Schools

The research holds broader connections than simply that with gender and school literature. Throughout participants' narratives, a sense of binaries emerged – hopeless/powerful, outcast/included, different/just me. These positioned the findings with respect to different directions within the broader research context. Aspects of nurture were explored through the positive relationships that developed between participants and teachers. Nurturing teachers were a source of power, giving the girls a sense of space and agency within the school community. Such findings are also reported in the current literature (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018; Azad & Mandell, 2016; Conn, 2018; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Ravet, 2018). Indeed, teacher-focused literature has highlighted the importance of positive relationships with pupils (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018; Azad & Mandell, 2016; Conn, 2018; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Ravet, 2018). Within autism-focused literature, teacher relationships with pupils proved crucial to developing knowledge and empathy on both sides of the desk. Throughout the research, a clear need for a more robust understanding of autism among teachers emerged consistently. In particular, participants highlighted the positive impact of teacher relationships, though there remains a lack of knowledge about them. Indeed, the broader literature focused on teacher knowledge suggests more is learnt on the job through supporting autistic pupils than during training (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018; Azad & Mandell, 2016; Conn, 2018; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Ravet, 2018). Within the research, a gap in knowledge within the nurture and teacher literature is identified, though not fully addressed. Participants expressed a need for greater understanding, though not solely with respect to autism. Patience, empathy and time should coincide with knowledge development. Considering these from participants' perspectives would enhance future training for teachers and experiences for autistic pupils.

The research spoke heavily to the literature which surrounds systemic gendered violence. In the literature review, bullying was a prominent factor (Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017; Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron, 2022). Bullying occurs consistently for pupils within schools across the world. A damaging and traumatic factor which influences school experiences, the impact lasted throughout their school journeys. Each participant highlighted bullying,

focusing on their identities – being autistic and/or female, though gender was troubled by their perspectives of not fitting others' stereotypes or categories. Participants misfitted from norms through their actions, leading to them being targeted by peers. Bullying centred on autistic pupils has been explored (Begeer, 2016; Humphrey, 2015; Maiano, 2016; Ochi, 2020), though little depth or nuance beyond male pupils lies within the literature. While bullying occurred for reasons of being, or being seen as, different, there were additions to current knowledge within the participants' reflections. Nuance emerged, through the continued bullying from autistic boys who were peers. These occurrences emerged due to misfitting both social and neuro-norms. Such norms are rooted within heteronormative perceptions on autism. While these have arguably adapted and become more gender inclusive, such changes are slow to be applied socially. Bullying from autistic peers lay within misfitting. Not acting or being easily slotted into a gender identity, as well as masking autistic needs, drew focus from bullies within mainstream and additional support environments. As such, the current literature is challenged to become more aware and knowledgeable about experiences of gendered bullying from autistic peers.

7.4 Evaluation of the Methodology

The above section and discussion have shown the key areas where data from participant reflections nuanced and built on current literature. Here I look to the successes and failures of the methodology. The research design of situated case studies (see section 3.4) and thematic analysis (see section 3.9) allowed the successful interrogation of autistic girl's school experiences while drawing rich context from the data. Drawing on the situated case study aligned with the conceptual framework to centre the epistemic authority of participant voice (Aragon, 2021). As such, a more robust understanding of autistic girls' navigation of school spaces was garnered.

7.4.1 Successes

From a methodological stance, justifying my position in conducting the research brought a level of strength. While section 3.2 gave in-depth analysis and discussion of my position, the approaches adopted throughout the analysis and write-up phases of the research

were vital. Through maintaining accountability of my perspectives, experiences, and where I saw these influencing the trajectory of the data the empowerment of participant voice was preserved. Doing so also ensured the conceptual framing of the research was consistently engaged in the stages of analysis. Through engaging feminist standpoint's epistemic authority of voice, the girl's reflections were consistently centred. As such, the aspects of misfitting were framed from the girls' perspectives of being an autistic girl in school. As such, the indications of where empowerment through agency and voice were consolidated within the methodological approaches.

Another success emerged from initial failure. The pilot session, through highlighting failures of the initial approaches, allowed the method and interviews to become successful in two ways; the sessions became re-focused on the girls experiences, and the power balance when a named individual was involved was restored. While the pilot session held some rich context in the data, the sessions which followed were more contextualised and driven towards exploring the girls school experiences. Tied with the power-balanced interviews (Oakley, 2016; Thwaites, 2017), the girls were empowered to reflect on experiences where they had experienced disempowerment and trauma. The situated case studies enabled the girls to reflect on their school experiences with a sense of power and reclamation. The re-balancing of the power in the interviews ensured the girls had their voices heard while showing how they created space through exercising agency.

7.4.2 Limitations

The research set out with the aim of exploring autistic girl's school experiences through interviews. From a methodological perspective, a semi-structured interview balanced for power structures is a sound concept (Adams, 2015; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Thwaites, 2017). However, the research in this thesis set out to investigate a topic which, from indications in past literature, was likely to explore negative and traumatic elements in a one-off interview. Each interview set out with a strategy to quickly build rapport and pass the control of the session over to the participants, tensions still emerged. A one-off, online interview created tension in not knowing the researcher, while using school spaces for the interview (as Chloe and Emily did) created tensions in being heard or a teacher walking in/being present. While restrictions in time and access to physical school spaces post-COVID

ultimately forced these decisions. As such, the small sample size and engagement may indicate methodological limitations in using one-off online rather than in-person interviews.

The data also emerged from one core Local Authority which is larger than many others in Scotland. While this wasn't a choice or aim of the research, there are still methodological implications. Some aspects of support and provisioning experienced by the girls may be more robustly funded than other Local Authorities. As such, there is a risk of the case studies being homogenous, reflecting only one part of the epistemology being explored (Murdock, 2021). While the use of the conceptual framework and accountability in data management were used to abate these conditions arising, some aspects of repetitions which are evident in current literature could be argued as having arose. Ultimately, it is acknowledged that the participants data are reflective of the specific times and places of both the session and recall of the negative and traumatic experiences of school. From this, there are implications that school-based research needs to address and better comprehend the root causes to really engage and improve autistic girls school experiences.

7.5 Looking to the Future

Oppression continues with respect to gender and autism, with the current social climate developing throughout the world exacerbating these pressures. Voices of authority continuously push stories of vaccine damage, othering, and narratives reminiscent of the changeling in European folklore. Such misrepresentation taints the critical work of autistic individuals and activists in pushing for greater knowledge and acceptance. In a similar tone, demonisation of gender beyond the heteronormative binary has grown through TV and social media representations. Social schemas related to both gender and autism have pushed autistic girls into social precarity. Such repetitive othering has proven a tiresome challenge for many. Autistic girls have long been forced to the boundaries of social thought and excluded from the broader development of autism knowledge (Goldman, 2013). The current research addressed a gap in both the overall Scottish context and the broader knowledge base. Navigating space was found to be difficult, treacherous, and precarious. Infringements on space were impacted by peer and teacher miscomprehension of autism and an inability of the system to garner an understanding of the types of space needed. Rules on who could join and

for how long access to safe spaces would be granted weren't discussed with the girls. Instead, they found the space was taken away as quickly as it was given. As such, the empowerment garnered from these spaces became one of precarity, granted and overseen by institutional power on a whim. Participant voices in the research highlighted the need for more inclusive and empathetic approaches to gender, autism education, and space.

Looking to the participants in the research, there is a clear need to understand and interrogate gendered experiences. It could be argued that the nature of misfitting is part of being autistic in a neuro-normative space (Farahar, 2022; Stenning, 2022), elucidated by participants' navigations of systemic school barriers. Within the school experience, however, gender intertwined with autistic identity, creating further complications. While being autistic is to trouble neuro-normativity, gendered norms are systemically applied to these. Each participant engaged with research which sought autistic girls, though Rosie interpreted the need for gender identification as complex and unnecessary. Though the school she attended was an influencing factor in seeing little need for a gender identity, Rosie presents a challenge that future research should embrace. As such, gendered research on school experiences should endeavour to incorporate an understanding of neuro-misfitting, but one which comprehends the fluidity of gender identity which autistic pupils may adhere to. Gender itself is a fluid concept (dependent on where one positions themselves). As such, research exploring future gendered autistic school experiences should consider this fluidity. Doing so will bring together comprehension of the gendered nature of the school experience while elucidating upon the navigation of school spaces.

The autistic girls in the research troubled, and created spaces for through misfitting and showing the embodiment of these experiences. Such space, however, remains largely absent from Scottish schools. Creating space is an expectation primarily put upon autistic girls themselves, as schools tend to hold spaces for clubs, groups, sports, and peer relationships. Autistic spaces are few and far between in schools, leading participants in the current research to reflect on the precarity of finding somewhere to belong. Though participants' voices in this research were empowered, with their misfitting explored and the ties that bound them troubled and broken, much work remains. The thesis represents a small sample within the Scottish context. The gendered impacts these girls experienced are

representative of a small sample, though they hold potential to begin reframing the research context.

Future research should endeavour to develop connectedness between autistic voices and educational experiences, both within the Scottish context and beyond. Doing so should be twofold. Firstly, a clear need to build advisory panels and participatory research involving autistic girls would strengthen engagement with voice through empowerment while conceptualising how autistic school spaces are experienced and conceptualised. Advisory panels and participatory design would allow autistic girls to shape and direct research through their experiences and epistemic expertise, which researchers may not have. Research shaped by autistic girls would also allow for new insights into how misfitting neuro-norms impact the experience of school environments. From the research, nuance was added to the comprehension of experiences of school space from these girls. The contingency of these spaces became rooted in teacher perspectives and expectations of autism in girls and girls, given and taken at the behest of autism understanding. Such perspectives were often rooted in a lack of knowledge, unnuanced by a field in constant flux, leaving many disempowered within their daily school lives. This research fills a gap while offering an opening for the empowerment of autistic girls. Additionally, it ‘resets’ the Scottish context with a small foundation to begin anew. The need to progress from repetitious findings requires a new call, for improved knowledge for teachers on autism and gender within the classroom. This call should involve *real* engagement with autistic girls to be co-producers on the content and context of this knowledge:

... What do they see - the stereotypes if they're not well enough educated about the topic [...]

And I think it's just getting past those stereotypes is kind of the first step ...

(Molly)

Secondly, there is a clear need for policy and practice reflection among teachers regarding their knowledge of autism. Future research should endeavour to understand educators' knowledge of autism and how institutions engage with and include autistic pupils. Advancement of educators' and peers' knowledge, grounded in autistic voices, is vital to

reduce stigmatised perspectives and expand spaces. Progressive knowledge requires progressive engagement with more than just autistic voices. Creating spaces with autistic girls which are autism inclusive requires future practice and research to engage readily with autistic voices and life experiences, but knowledge development for teachers and peers is also a vital component. Creating inclusive spaces requires current and critical knowledge, particularly when doing so involves creating gendered autistic spaces. As evidenced within the findings and discussion in this thesis, seeing more than gender and stereotypes is key to doing so.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Autistic Learner Numbers by Sex From 2018-2025

Number of Learners in Scotland with a Primary Autism Diagnosis by Sex (2018 – 2025), Extracted From Scottish Government Pupil Census Data, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-census-supplementary-statistics/>

Year	Female	Male	Total	Increase % Females	Increase % Males
2018	3443	13,950	117,393	25.0	14.0
2019	4121	15,580	19,701	19.6	11.7
2020	4772	17,048	21,820	15.7	9.4
2021	5474	18,222	23,696	14.7	6.9
2022	6307	19,548	25,855	15.2	7.3
2023	8067	22,112	30,179	27.9	13.1
2024	10,559	26,214	36,773	30.9	18.5
2025	12,463	28,822	41,285	18.0	9.9

Appendix 2: PRISMA Elements Drawn Upon (Adapted from the PRISMA Checklist, 2020)

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
TITLE			
INTRODUCTION			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of existing knowledge.	
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the objective(s) or question(s) the review addresses.	
METHODS			
Eligibility criteria	5	Specify the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review and how studies were grouped for the syntheses.	
Information sources	6	Specify all databases, registers, websites, organisations, reference lists and other sources searched or consulted to identify studies. Specify the date when each source was last searched or consulted.	
Search strategy	7	Present the full search strategies for all databases, registers and websites, including any filters and limits used.	
Selection process	8	Specify the methods used to decide whether a study met the inclusion criteria of the review, including how many reviewers screened each record and each report retrieved, whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	
Data collection process	9	Specify the methods used to collect data from reports, including how many reviewers collected data from each report, whether they worked independently, any processes for obtaining or confirming data from study investigators, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
Data items	10a	List and define all outcomes for which data were sought. Specify whether all results that were compatible with each outcome domain in each study were sought (e.g. for all measures, time points, analyses), and if not, the methods used to decide which results to collect.	
Study risk of bias assessment	11	Specify the methods used to assess risk of bias in the included studies, including details of the tool(s) used, how many reviewers assessed each study and whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	
Synthesis methods	13a	Describe the processes used to decide which studies were eligible for each synthesis (e.g. tabulating the study intervention characteristics and comparing against the planned groups for each synthesis (item #5)).	
	13b	Describe any methods required to prepare the data for presentation or synthesis, such as handling of missing summary statistics, or data conversions.	
	13c	Describe any methods used to tabulate or visually display results of individual studies and syntheses.	
	13d	Describe any methods used to synthesize results and provide a rationale for the choice(s). If meta-analysis was performed, describe the model(s), method(s) to identify the presence and extent of statistical heterogeneity, and software package(s) used.	
Certainty assessment	15	Describe any methods used to assess certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for an outcome.	
RESULTS			

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
Study selection	16a	Describe the results of the search and selection process, from the number of records identified in the search to the number of studies included in the review, ideally using a flow diagram.	
	16b	Cite studies that might appear to meet the inclusion criteria, but which were excluded, and explain why they were excluded.	
Study characteristics	17	Cite each included study and present its characteristics.	
Results of individual studies	19	For all outcomes, present, for each study: (a) summary statistics for each group (where appropriate) and (b) an effect estimate and its precision (e.g. confidence/credible interval), ideally using structured tables or plots.	
DISCUSSION			
Discussion	23a	Provide a general interpretation of the results in the context of other evidence.	
	23b	Discuss any limitations of the evidence included in the review.	
	23c	Discuss any limitations of the review processes used.	
	23d	Discuss implications of the results for practice, policy, and future research.	
OTHER INFORMATION			

From: Page, M. J., McKenzie, J.E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C.D. et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71. This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Appendix 3: Headteacher Information

Autistic Pupils Experiences of Education in Scotland: Understanding the Unseen

Ethics Approval and Reference: UEC21/79

Dear Headteacher,

I am an autistic PhD student, based in the University of Strathclyde, conducting research under the supervision of Chief Investigator Dr Anna Robinson and supervisor Professor Yvette Taylor. We are exploring autistic girls experiences of primary and secondary education in Scotland with the aim to co-produce a Professional Learning and Development event for teachers in Scotland who educate and engage with autistic girls.

Following approval from the University Ethics Committee, we are beginning the first phase of our research and we are looking to begin engaging with autistic girls between the ages of 10 and 16 who have attended school in Scotland. While we are aiming to work with a specific demographic in terms of age group and gender, our research incorporates the potential difficulties autistic girls can face in terms of diagnosis. **We are looking to work with autistic girls between the ages of 10 and 16 who have a formal diagnosis, are in the process of receiving a diagnosis or who are recognised as being autistic/self-identify as autistic.**

We are reaching out to **organisations and schools who support autistic girls and young women in specialised, resource based and mainstream environments to recruit participants for the study.** We are writing to you to ask if you would be willing to pass information about our study onto any pupils you know who may fit the criteria and any associated parent networks where potential participants may be contacted who may find the study to be of interest.

The project has been divided into two components. The first phase will involve autistic girls in interviews or focus groups co-producing a Professional Learning and Development event for teachers in Scotland. The second component will involve a Professional Learning and Development event for teachers in Scotland, built on the content explored and co-produced with these girls in the first phase. Within the first component, which I am contacting you regarding, autistic girls will form the participants for the first element of the research under the heading *My School Experiences*. **Participants will be offered the opportunity to take part online in an individual interview with Owen or to take part in an online focus group with other autistic girls of a similar age (aimed to be no more than 2 years older**

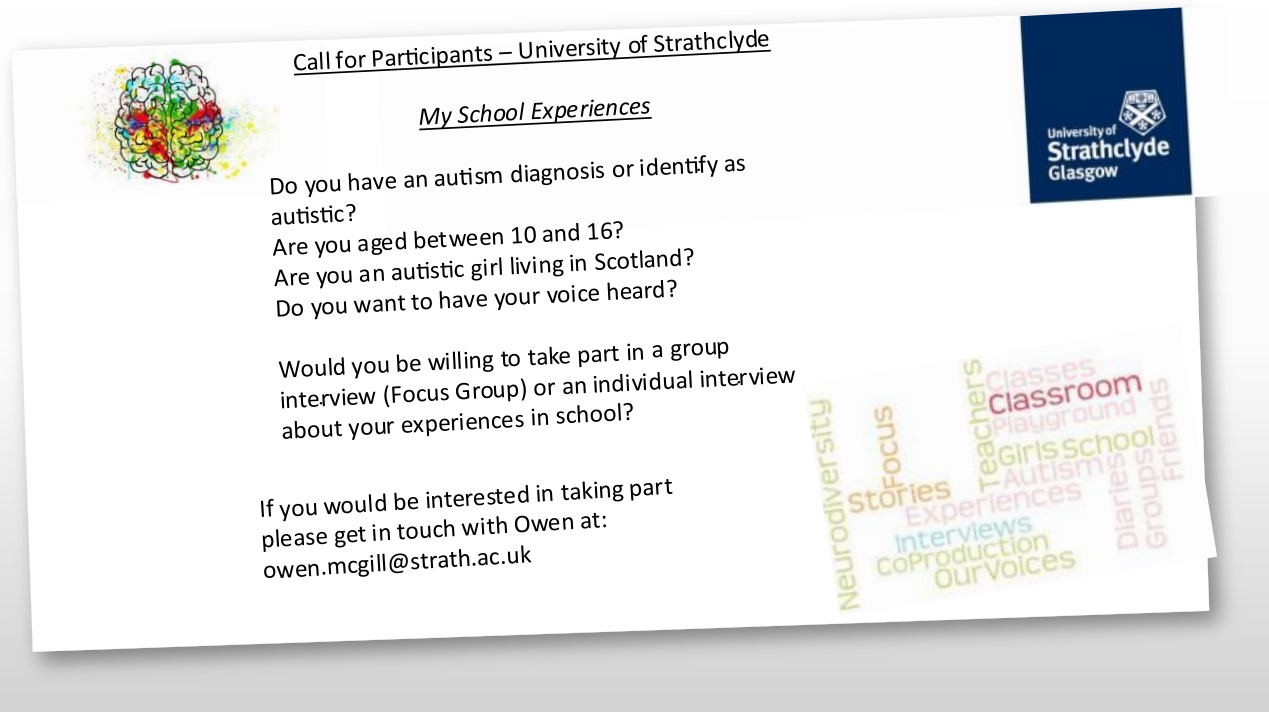
or younger and within the same school level – primary or secondary). These will be aimed to take place outside of school hours. The interviews and focus groups will explore participants experiences and time in education. We will discuss aspects of the classroom, experiences in school, friendships, the curriculum, inclusion, fitting in, support systems and meeting needs as well as anything which the girls want to discuss. **The first phase of our research is taking place between February 1st and June 31st, 2022.**

While there may be similar projects which have explored school experiences of autistic girls, our project aims to bring this knowledge directly to teachers and be explored in an applicable way which can aid practice and understanding. **The project also offers a unique opportunity for autistic girls participating to be at the core and co-produce a Learning and Professional event for teachers in Scotland.** Using the data from interviews and focus groups, Owen will work alongside participants to ensure that the knowledge discussed with teachers gives the message which participants wish to portray.

I have attached information forms for pupils and parents as well as an advert for the research. **I will be in contact as a follow up regarding this email and research in around one week 17/05/22.** If there is anything you would like clarified beforehand, please don't hesitate to get in touch on the address below.

Many thanks,

Appendix 4: Research Advert



Call for Participants – University of Strathclyde

My School Experiences

Do you have an autism diagnosis or identify as autistic?
Are you aged between 10 and 16?
Are you an autistic girl living in Scotland?
Do you want to have your voice heard?

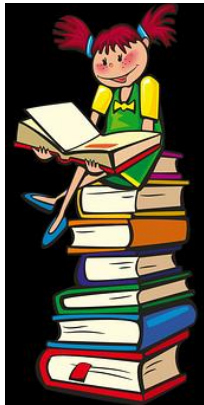
Would you be willing to take part in a group interview (Focus Group) or an individual interview about your experiences in school?

If you would be interested in taking part please get in touch with Owen at:
owen.mcgill@strath.ac.uk

University of Strathclyde Glasgow

Neurodiversity
Stories
Experiences
Interviews
CoProduction
OurVoices
Teachers
Classes
Classroom
Playground
Girls
School
Autism
Diaries
Groups
Friends

Appendix 5: Participant Information Forms



Project: My School Experiences

My name is Owen McGill and I am an autistic student from the University of Strathclyde. We are doing a project exploring autistic girls experiences of school in Scotland and are looking for autistic girls to help us find out what school is like for them.

Who can (and can't) take part?

You can take part if:

- you are, or identify as, a girl or young woman
- you are between the ages of 10 and 16
- Currently go to a school in Scotland
- Have an autism diagnosis or identify as autistic
- You can use a computer to get online, or can be supported by someone to get online

Unfortunately you can't take part if you are, or identify as, a boy or young man and if you haven't been at a school in Scotland for at least 3 years.

What you might do

We would like to find out what you like about school, how you feel in school and how teachers can help you in school. We will work as a group, or alone if you prefer, to hear your school experiences. We also hope to make some information with you to give to teachers to help them understand and support autistic pupils.

There are two ways you can take part. You could take part in a group interview. There will be 4 group interview sessions, every one or two weeks with other autistic girls the same age as you or between one and three years older or younger than you. The group talks will last up to 40 minutes each time. Being part of a group interview will mean you will need to consent to being audio recorded.

If you would prefer to take part alone you could do one discussion with Owen instead and you can have a parent, guardian or support worker with you if it would make you more comfortable. These talks will last around 30-40 minutes. You can be audio recorded for an individual discussion or Owen can take notes if you choose not to be recorded.

If you take part Owen will ask you if it is okay to record your interview or group talk on an audio recorder. You don't have to take part and if you change your mind at any time, you can tell Owen or ask your parent/guardian to tell Owen. You will need an adult to back up that you want to take part and if you want to leave at any point this is your decision and will be respected by Owen.

We want you to be comfortable and happy if you decide to take part, but you might talk about a time when you were upset or emotional. You don't have to answer any questions or talk about anything you don't want to. If there comes a point while you take part that you become upset you don't have to answer the questions.

Breaking privacy

While all of what you discuss will be kept private and under a fake name, there are times when Owen will have to share this information. If you discuss being hurt or feeling like someone like an adult or teacher may hurt you, Owen will have to stop the interview. Owen will also tell you what happens next and who has to be told.

What will happen to the recordings?

Any voice recordings will be saved under a password on Owens University server. When Owen writes the interviews up, he won't use your real name.

What happens afterwards?

We will work together with what you have talked about and pick the important bits out. Owen will then put them together into a talk or document for teachers. We will then see how we can help teachers to support other autistic pupils. Also, the project is part of a research project, which means Owen will try to share what is talked about with others by writing papers or giving talks to teachers and other researchers.

What happens next?

If you want to take part, or want more information, please email Owen:
owen.mcgill@strath.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Parental Information Sheet

Name of department: School of Education

Title of the study: My School Experiences

Introduction

My name is Owen McGill; I am an autistic PhD student at the University of Strathclyde under academic supervision of Dr Anna Robinson and Professor Yvette Taylor. I am conducting an investigation into the education experiences of autistic girls in Scotland.

What is the purpose of this research?

The research seeks to build on the gaps in current knowledge on how autistic girls experience, manoeuvre and are supported within Scottish schools. From engaging with these girls we hope to co-produce a resource for educators to improve support and understanding of autistic pupils.

Does your child have to take part?

Participation is entirely voluntary; no-one will be forced to take part or be required to participate. If you're child begins the process and wishes to withdraw, they are free to at any point and any data collected will not be used in the study.

What will your child be asked to do in the project?

Participation can be in one of two ways. Either an individual interview or a Focus Group.

Interviews will take around 30-40 minutes, with participants choosing the type of interview they are most comfortable with. Focus Groups will take part over 4 sessions, one session every week or two weeks.

Both of these options will take place over Zoom or Skype, with the addition of a possible telephone interview should participants feel more comfortable or an interview over Skype or Zoom messenger features.

What are the potential risks to your child in taking part?

There are no potential risks to participation in the study. Should you feel the need for support after the interview you may wish to contact an Autism Adviser from Scottish Autism or call on: 01259 222022. Or a non-autistic organisation such as the Samaritans on: <http://www.samaritans.org> or call: 116 123.

What information is being collected in the project?

All data will be held securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and UK GDPR. Data from the interviews and Focus Groups will be audio recorded, and stored in a protected folder on the Strathcloud server. Only the researcher and their supervisors will have access to the data.

All data will be kept for 5 years following the conclusion of the research for use in publication. When the data is being analysed and written up for the PhD thesis and potential publication, all names will be kept under pseudonyms and no identifying details used.

What happens next?

If you and your child feel it would be beneficial and wish to take part or have further question, I kindly invite you to email Owen regarding this and will be more than happy to arrange a video consultation or pass on details of a pre-arranged information session.

Researcher contact details:

Owen McGill

Email: owen.mcgill@strath.ac.uk

Chief Investigator/Primary Supervisor details:

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the investigation, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

Dr Anna Robinson

Email: anna.robinson@strath.ac.uk

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the research, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

Secretary to the University Ethics Committee

Research & Knowledge Exchange Services

University of Strathclyde

Graham Hills Building

50 George Street

Glasgow

G1 1QE

Telephone: 0141 548 3707

Email: ethics@strath.ac.uk

Appendix 7: Consent Form

Name of department: School of Education

Title of the study: My School Experiences

- I consent to being a participant in the project.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that the researcher will have a form of recorded conversations with my child about their experiences of school.
- I understand that the notes the researcher makes from Focus Groups/Interviews will not use my/my child's name or have any identifying details that would make others know it is you that is being written about.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information up until the write up of the PhD Thesis.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e., data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study's data analysis.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to being audio recorded as part of the project (Focus Groups or interview) or only having notes taken (interviews).
- I agree not to discuss participants reflections with anyone outside of the group.
- I agree that I won't screenshot or record any part of the sessions or any of the participants.

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	
	Date:
Signature of Parent:	
	Date:

Appendix 8: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule for Autistic Pupils

Elements to be built into exploration

School holds a diverse, varied yet individual experience. There are many elements that can be drawn together which intersect to give a rounded reflection of participant's experiences. The interviews and focus groups will centre on aspects drawn from current literature and anecdotal evidence below:

- General education experience(s)
- In-depth and individualised elements of their experiences
- Support systems and meeting needs
- Transitioning
- (Mis)Understanding needs and abilities
- Empowerment
- Inclusion from participant perspectives
- Differences between mainstream and ASN
- Fitting in or challenging norms

Questions for more structured interviews or Instant Messenger (via Zoom or Skype) interviews will be designed similar to the above questions. For Focus Groups it is aimed that the participants will lead the sessions, though the researcher will take into account the above elements which may frame the focus and content over the sessions.

The researcher will follow guidance from Oakley's construction of Feminist interviews by being reflective alongside participants on their own experience. With each interview, the researcher will endeavour to reflect on the process and seek to improve upon them.

The approaches used for creating dialogue may follow prompts and gentle guiding. As the framing of the interviews are being built from Oakley's construction of Feminist interviews, the research will aim to give autistic girls the power and control of the format, structure and any guidance which will be part of the research. Some of the prompts may be open, looking for a broader exploration from those who are more comfortable doing so.

Each interview and Focus Group session will begin with the researcher clarifying the process of the session, expectations and ensuring consent is discussed and addressed (this will be at the beginning of each Focus Group). As the interviews will be tailored to the individual, the

processes will differ. In the below table areas and example questions for both interviews and Focus Groups are detailed.

Focus Area	Examples of questions/content
Welcome and Introduction	- Covering the basis for the study - What we will do - Consent at the beginning of each session - Reinforce to participants they don't have to answer any questions they don't want to - Expected behaviours during the sessions – not speaking over others, keeping confidentiality (no sharing any content or recording/photographing any other participants or any of the session), being kind to others and respectful of their experiences and views, not being judgemental of others in the group - Use of sensory toys/items - What you can do if you become overwhelmed – leaving the session, muting your mic and turning off video, not engaging with some topics
General education experience(s)	- Let's start by telling each other a bit about ourselves – what school year are you in? Tell me a little about you. - What's your favourite thing about school? - Could you describe your classroom? What do you like about it? - Do you have places you like or don't like in school?
Support systems and meeting needs	- Are there times you feel like you need help or space? Are you given these? - What would you say are the things you might need some support in during school – not necessarily a subject, different areas in school.
Transitioning	- Do you move around different rooms or spaces in the school? - How have you found changing years (mobbing up in primary classes etc)? - Do staff/the school understand how changes can affect you? Are you supported in these?

• (Mis)Understanding needs and abilities	• What do your teachers and people in your class know about autism? What would you like them to know or understand better? • What do you think causes these differences in understanding? • What do you think we can do to improve understanding for teachers?
• Empowerment	• How do the teachers make sure you are part of the classroom and school? • Being autistic means different things for different people – how do you perceive autism? Do you see any strengths and/or weaknesses?
• Inclusion from participant perspectives	• Are there times you feel that you aren't part of the class or treated differently? What happens in these times? How can teachers begin to help you in these times? • Are there times you have chosen to be apart or away from the classroom? Could you tell me about these times and the reason behind them? • Could you tell me about your friends/friend group?
• Differences between mainstream and ASN	• Have you ever spent time in mainstream/ASN/attached units in the school? Tell me about your experience – what differences did you find? • Do you prefer one over the other?
• Fitting in or challenging norms	• School can have lots of different groups of friends and people. What's your group like? Where do you feel you belong?

Appendix 9: Clustering of Codes

The table below shows the codes which emerged from each case being drawn into the cross-case synthesis. The table is referenced in Chapters 3 and 4 to offer a visual representation of the individual codes which were convergent across the cases from the individual themes which emerged. These were then synthesised to represent the clusters under the initial low-order common themes.

Codes	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5
Bullied in Mainstream	X	X	X	X	X
Value of a Good Teacher	X	X	X	X	X
Good Friends in Secondary	X	X	X	X	X
Impact of Bad Teacher	X	X	X	X	X
Wrong Type of Friends	X	X	X	X	X
Relief of Diagnosis	X			X	
Noise as a Barrier	X	X	X	X	X
Positive Accommodations	X	X	X	X	X
Inaccessible Spaces	X	X	X	X	X
Feeling Different	X	X	X	X	X
Pushed Out By Peers	X	X	X	X	X
Primary More Structured	X	X	X	X	X
Secondary Was Chaotic	X	X	X	X	X
Crescendo/Build Up	X	X		X	X
School Is Too Much	X	X		X	X
Masking To Not Seem Overwhelmed	X	X		X	X
Space Outside Class Is Important	X			X	X
Pandemic Came As a Relief	X			X	
Don't Like To Be In School	X	X			X
Long Day – Need Breaks	X	X		X	X
Accessing Accommodations Draws Attention	X	X		X	X

Joint Spaces Inaccessible	X	X	X	X	X
Safe Space Removes Pressure	X	X		X	X
Mainstream Classes Too Big	X	X	X	X	X
Outside Mainstream Smaller Class Size	X	X	X	X	X
Better Friends in Secondary	X	X	X	X	
Positive Relationship Impact	X	X	X	X	X
Impact of Bad Relationships	X	X		X	X
Not a Stereotype	X	X		X	X
Uncertainty of Space	X	X	X	X	X
Teachers Should Know More (Autism)	X	X		X	X
COVID Changes	X			X	
Mainstream As Negative	X	X	X	X	X
ASN/Non-Mainstream As Positive	X	X	X	X	X
Masking to Fit In	X	X		X	X
Playground Too Much	X	X			X
Making Safe Space	X	X		X	X
Boys Take Up Space		X	X	X	X
Boys As Disruptive/Problematic		X	X	X	X
Loved Home-Schooling		X		X	X
Don't Feel Like A Person	X			X	X
Advocated For Me	X	X			X
Missing Out on Joint Spaces	X	X	X	X	X
Boys Will Be Boys		X	X	X	X
Teacher Ignored Bully Boys		X	X	X	X
Autism In Girls Unrecognised		X		X	X
Help Me Learn	X	X	X	X	X
Creative Outlets	X	X	X	X	
Teachers More Helpful ASN		X	X	X	X

Felt Left Out	X	X	X	X	X
Difficulty Making Friends	X	X	X	X	X
Gendered Differences		X	X	X	X
Boys Take Up Teacher Time		X	X	X	X
Accommodating Boys Better		X		X	X
Stims Seen As Disruptive					X
‘Too Social’ To Be Autistic	X			X	X
Can’t Regulate Properly in School	X	X		X	X
Need More Breaks	X	X		X	X
Deliberately Small Friend Group	X	X		X	X
Friends In Safe Spaces	X	X		X	X
Autistic Processes Misunderstood	X	X		X	X
Misunderstanding Capabilities	X	X		X	X
Safe Spaces Removed	X	X		X	X
Forced Into Uncomfortable Spaces	X	X		X	X
Where Is My Support?	X	X		X	X
Teacher Education	X	X	X	X	X
Online Learning Better	X			X	X
Teachers Need To Recognise Autism	X	X		X	X
Less Than a Person?	X	X		X	X
Socially Marginalised	X	X	X	X	X
Systems Against Me		X			X
See My Needs	X	X		X	X
Knowing Me Helps	X			X	X
Later Secondary More Positive	X			X	X
I Know My Needs	X	X		X	X

Listen To Me	X	X		X	X
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Appendix 10: Clustering of Codes Under Emerging Commonalities

This table offers a visual representation of the common themes which emerged and the clustering of codes which elucidated these. Through synthesising the nature of the data through these clusters, emerging themes were drawn. While these are not the final high-order themes, they show the level under these which emerged from the data. Each of the four emerging themes grew into the final higher-order themes through the clusters and depth of their meaning.

Mainstream Vs. ASN/Non-Mainstream	Relationships	Spaces in School	Gender	Teacher/Autism Knowledge
Noise as a Barrier	Bullied in Mainstream	Missing Out on Joint Spaces	Gendered Differences	Teachers Need to Recognise Autism
Feeling Different	Value of a Good Teacher	Safe Spaces Removed	Boys Take Up Teacher Time	Systems Against Me
Primary More Structured	Good Friends in Secondary	Forced Into Uncomfortable Spaces	Accommodating Boys Better	Less Than a Person?
Secondary Was Chaotic	Impact of Bad Teacher	Uncertainty of Space	Boys As Disruptive/Problematic	See My Needs
Crescendo/Build Up	Wrong Type of Friends	Joint Spaces Inaccessible	Teacher Ignored Bully Boys	I Know My Needs
School Is Too Much	Pushed Out by Peers	Safe Spaces Takes Off the Pressure	Boys Will Be Boys	Listen To Me
Mainstream As Negative	Deliberately Small Friend Group	Inaccessible Spaces	Boys Take Up Space	Autistic Processes Misunderstood

Playground Too Much	Friends In Safe Spaces			Teacher Education
ASN/Non-Mainstream As Positive	Masking to Fit In			Where Is My Support?
Teachers More Helpful ASN	Socially Marginalised			My Abilities Are Different
Felt Left Out	Difficult Making Friends			Stims Seen As Disruptive
Can't Regulate Properly in School	Advocated For Me			'Too Social' To Be Autistic
Need More Breaks				Can't Regulate Properly in School
Misunderstanding Capabilities In School				Help Me Learn
Where Is My Support?				Creative Outlets
System's Against Me				Autism in Girls Unrecognised
Later Secondary More Positive				
More Understanding of My Needs				

Appendix 11: Memo-Writing Examples

The examples given highlight the extraction of objective and subjective meaning as outlined within the methodological constructs of thematic analysis, grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz, Thornberg & Keane, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Smith & Osborn, 2022; Strübing, 2007). Each of these sought to extend the data and offer insight into the raw data handling process.

The first exemplifies the processes of drawing out the emotional meanings in Ashley's interview. The use of margin writing here allowed the extraction of depth of emotion when paired with the notes from Ashley's interview, reflecting on body language and tone.

The second image exemplifies drawing out the objective meanings attached to Chloe's session. Doing so was a secondary process to margin-writing, allowing the context to be separated and the raw data to focus on the actuality of the content.

My bully wasn't reprimanded
My bully got away with it

Owen McGill
Frustration and Confusion - why am I being treated differently?

Reply

...

Owen McGill
Teachers tried to stop my stims
My stims were an issue but the boys weren't

Owen McGill
Seen as different
Sadness
Anger

Reply

...

Owen McGill
Misunderstanding autism
Gendering my autism
Seeing autism from a male lens
I'm more social - I still need help

Owen McGill
Frustration
Deflated
Confusion

Reply

...

Owen McGill
Teachers need to know more
More than a stereotype
I need a different type of support

Owen McGill
Don't they understand autistic girls?
Frustrated
Confusion
Let down

K: Well, with the boy that bullied me has autism and they sort of let him off with a lot compared to me. So, when I would stim, one of them at primary was I'd raise my arm above my head and I was told I had to stop because I would hurt someone and one of his was pushing his arms out in front of himself but they didn't tell him to stop. So I think it was because I was more social and a girl they didn't believe I was autistic or they thought I could control my stimming and he couldn't. And I didn't bully anyone but he did. They just didn't get that I needed a different kind of help but because I wasn't the stereotype they just didn't understand me. And they never stopped the bullying from the non-autistic kids. It did seem like the teachers favoured the boys, they'd help them more in class and give them more attention when they disrupted class instead of giving them into trouble like some of the girls got. Boys. And one time, because I was so well behaved they put me at a table and it had all my bullies and they were all boys because I didn't really fit in with the girls they thought I'd fit in with the boys. But I did get bullied by the girls too, I just didn't realise until later on because they'd be more sneaky about it by making sure I couldn't join groups or making sure people wouldn't be my friends. The boys took my things and were more likely to hurt me than the girls...

P: It doesn't make it right or mean they should get away with it! Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I should have to deal with it... I mean just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I'm good with other girls or like, really social. And because I'm a smart girl they kind of assumed that I can figure it out...

O: So what was different then between you and the boys in your class?

P: Well I was really quiet, I read in the playground in primary school. I don't really like girly things, so I'm kind of tomboyish for that but I'm not into sports or anything like that... It's weird but I don't really fit what people see as a typical girl... But I wouldn't say I'm a tomboy either...

O: So what's... ehm, how do I put this... what would you see yourself as then?

P: Me... like, I know I'm a girl, but I don't fit stereotypes that people say... like girls love horses or pink... that's just not me. I'm just me.

O: And how does that feel in school compared to people... how you see other people in your class, like your friend earlier you said was seen as more, how did you put it...

P: feminine?

O: Yeah. What makes him feminine and other boys not?

P: Just how he spoke and acted was more like the girls in school than the boys, he was more into the things girls were. And he was different than the other boys so he was an easy target.

O: And do you think you being different in being autistic being a part of why you were bullied?

P: I think it all came down to not understanding me at all. Every single part of the bullying came down to it.

Owen McGill
Boys Getting Away With More

...

Reply

Owen McGill
Misunderstood Capabilities Being a Girl Doesn't Mean I Should Have to Deal With Boys Bullying

...

Reply

Owen McGill
I Don't Fit Gender Norms I'm Not a Girly-Girl But Not a Tomboy - Where Do I Fit

...

Reply

Owen McGill
I Don't Fit Gender Norms I'm Just Me

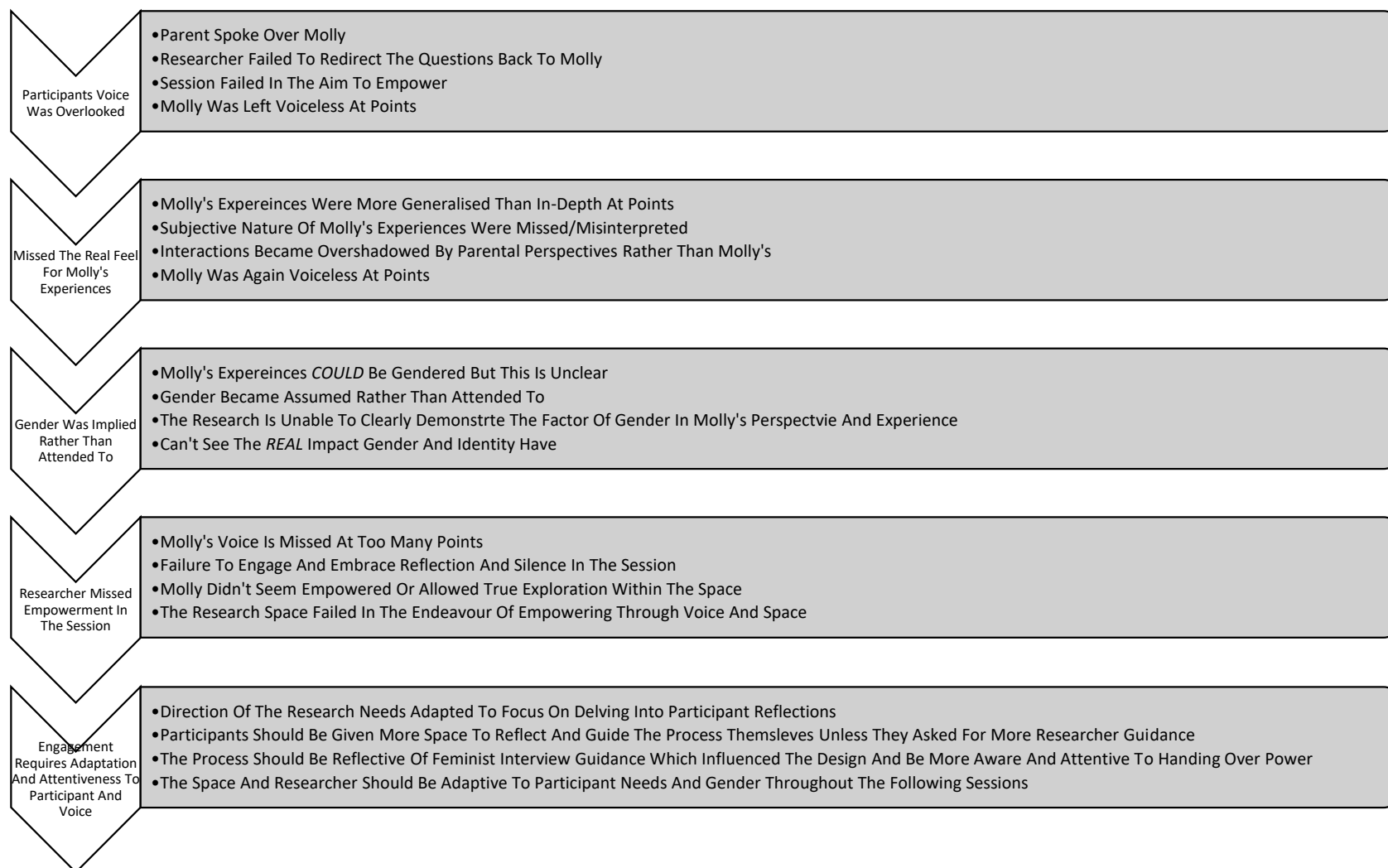
...

Appendix 12: Examples of Margin Writing Split

The figure below shows the splits which emerged from the data. Margin writing was utilised, following guidance from Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) and Flower and Larkin (2022). While these are IPA writers, the use of margin writing was valuable in the initial data process to ensure that my intrusion on the data was limited. With a small participant group, this was critical to ensuring reliability checks within the data. The participant reflections are shown in the middle of the figure to allow the data to be both centred and drawn from. The left-hand-side shows the workings of the subjective components while the right draws out the objective meaning.

Descriptive Elements Prompt: Difficult areas of the school? • Lunch hall as noisy • Joining space for the whole school • Everyone is there for lunch Prompt: Spaces to relax when overwhelmed and how? • Pupil support space to get away • Using a card that gets me out of class when needed • Areas less stressful • I can focus on my work • Having a brief distraction is sometimes quite good • Not 'get your head down and work' there	P: Ehm, I don't like the street, which is the name for it where we eat lunch, the main area and we go through the main doors. It's I hate it there, because most of the schools sitting there. Yeah, they tend to, is that like the big bit where everyone has that lunch as well. Yes. That's a vast majority of the school. So everyone's there. O: So are there places, you're then able to go all like if you were getting really overwhelmed and going between classes or other somewhere, particularly and able to go just to relax about, can you tell me a little bit about that as well? P: Well, there's pupil support. So I've got a card that means I can just go and you just you go with. And one of the rooms you can sit and do work. And I don't really know much about the other rooms because I don't really tend to go to those. Then I just do homework. I find less stress because it's not quite so 'Get your head down and work'. Yeah, but the only thing is, and you're not allowed your phone out there. Sometimes just sitting having something to look at that's not school work is sometimes quite good, but I don't really have that. But I think you're allowed your phone and other rooms. You know, I don't really know about other rooms.	Interpretation Para 1: Main lunch area is busy, filled with everyone from school. Aspects of feeling overwhelmed? Too noisy and busy? Para 3: Using card to get out of class when I needed to access quieter spaces. Only one room accessible, it's a more relaxed attitude to work which is needed when overwhelmed. Emergent Codes: • Issues with joint spaces • Main area as too busy • Accommodation • Get out of class when needed • Less stressed environment • Distractions from schoolwork needed
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Appendix 13: Mapping Reflections on the Pilot Session



Appendix 14: Process of Cross-Case Synthesis

(adapted from Cruzes and Dybå, 2011b)

