



*“I Want to be Supported, but I Need to
be Independent”:*

Exploring the Views and Experiences of
Autistic Girls Accessing Post-16
Education in England

Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology
School of Humanities & Social Sciences

Ella Wakefield

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Declaration

This thesis is being submitted for the award of Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology from Newcastle University. I declare that this work is my own and has not been previously submitted for any other purpose. I have acknowledged where material used is the work of others.¹

¹ Chapters 1 and 3 have been prepared for publication and are presented in the style of papers typically published by the British Educational Research Journal.

Dedication

*This thesis is dedicated to my Granny Hedgehog,
who taught me to grab life with two hands,
and to say “yes” to every opportunity.*

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Special thanks to Etta, Megan, and Chloe for being so open in sharing your views and experiences. Your passion for this project and for improving educational outcomes for other Autistic girls really kept me going through the difficult moments. It was an honour and a privilege to hear your stories.

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Thank you to my parents for your unwavering support and always pushing me to follow my dreams. You taught me that things worth having are not always easy and the importance of pursuing a career that you care about and enjoy. Thank you for always welcoming me back “home” with open arms and a fresh perspective.

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Overarching Abstract

Government initiatives within England have changed the way young people access post-16 education and training. Whilst educational transitions during adolescence are recognised as potentially challenging for all young people, literature suggests they may be particularly complex for Autistic students. Moreover, research which explores the educational experiences of Autistic girls is limited. This thesis explores Autistic students' experiences of post-16 education, including the support available to them during the transition from secondary school. It is comprised of a systematic literature review, bridging document, empirical project, and reflexive chapter.

Using meta-ethnography, five papers were synthesised to create a model of transition into post-16 settings for Autistic students. The literature review has links with Gale and Parker's (2014) characterisations of transition: Induction, Development, and Becoming. At a time of developing independence, the role of parents and person-centred support is highly valued. However, systemic and resource constraints impact upon the availability of individualised, developmentally appropriate post-16 transition support for Autistic students.

The empirical research involved interviews with three Autistic girls about their experiences of post-16 education, beyond the initial transition. Interpretative phenomenological analysis resulted in a model suggesting Autistic girls make sense of their post-16 experiences through Practical, Psychological, Organisational, and Systemic factors. These factors are explored with reference to existing theory and research. Empirical findings are viewed as being consistent with those from the meta-ethnography.

This research suggests that post-16 settings can provide a supportive environment in which Autistic girls can pursue their interests and goals. However, staff need access to professional development around Autism and girls, and the voices of the girls, themselves, must be centred within any offers of support. Given the widening of their remit to include 16-25 year olds, this thesis advises that Educational Psychologists are well positioned to facilitate a greater understanding of Autistic girls within post-16 and other educational contexts.

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Chapter 1: Systematic Literature Review

How do Autistic Students Experience the Transition from Secondary to Post-16 Education?

1.1 Abstract

Government initiatives within England have changed the way young people access post-16 education and training, and how they may be supported in the transition away from secondary education. Whilst educational transitions during adolescence are recognised as potentially challenging for all young people, literature suggests they may be particularly complex for Autistic students. Moreover, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice extended the remit of Educational Psychologists' work to people aged 16-25, thereby providing opportunities to support young people, families, schools and communities beyond secondary education.

This chapter offers a meta-ethnographic review of qualitative literature, asking '*How do Autistic students experience the transition from secondary to post-16 education?*'. Five qualitative research papers are reviewed and synthesised, developing a line of argument on what can be important for Autistic students during this transition phase. The final model links with Gale and Parker's (2014) three characterisations of transition: Induction, Development, and Becoming. At a time of developing independence, the role of parents and person-centred support is highly valued. However, systemic and resource constraints are currently impacting upon the availability of individualised, developmentally appropriate post-16 transition support for Autistic students.

The findings of this qualitative systematic literature review offer a unique interpretation of synthesised research. The generated constructs are grounded in the words of participants and subsequently discussed in reference to psychological literature and UK education policy. It is hoped that the emerging model may support the work of educational professionals, including psychologists, when seeking to support Autistic students transitioning from secondary to post-16 education.

1.2 Introduction

1.2.1 Legislative and Political Context

In September 2015, UK legislation raised the age of compulsory participation in education or training to 18 years old (Department for Education [DfE], 2016). The UK Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice (SEND CoP) recommends that support for young people extends through adolescence and early adulthood (DfE/Department of Health [DoH], 2015). With a focus on person-centred long-term aspirations, the document espouses the importance of collaboration between local authority (LA) professionals, education settings, young people, and their parents/carers. LA professionals, including Educational Psychologists (EPs), have a duty to support the preparation for adulthood for those young people who have an Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP), from Year 9 onwards. This involves exploring the young person's views and aspirations and implementing targets within EHCPs that focus on this next step of their journey (DfE/DoH, 2015).

Subsequently, the UK Government published a Post-16 Skills Plan which has been considered the largest reform to post-16 education since the introduction of A Levels (DfE, 2016b). This introduced technical qualifications (T-levels) across 15 areas of industry and described post-16 settings as “centres for business development and innovation” (DfE, 2021, p. 26). The reforms recognise that some students may need tailored and flexible support to access T-levels (Foster & Powell, 2019). The document states that this ‘transition year’ could benefit a large proportion of students with SEND and described the new courses as “accessible, inclusive, and sufficiently flexible” (DfE, 2016b, p. 30).

Yet, it is important to note the potential political agendas underpinning such reforms. The intention of the Post-16 Skills Plan was for young people to develop skills in key areas of industry to increase post-Brexit productivity (Hazell, 2017). It could be argued that striving for all students to obtain academic or technical qualifications contributes to a neo-liberal, capitalist agenda. This neo-liberalist approach, in which individuals are valued for that which they can contribute to society, contrasts with inclusion, whereby each person is valued for exactly who they are (Done & Murphy, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). The emphasis on person-centred, aspiration-based approaches in the SEND CoP is, perhaps, at odds with some of the wider post-16 legislation in which young people may be encouraged to align their futures with government agendas.

1.2.2 Educational Transition

The transition away from secondary education has been considered a significant life event for young people (Ball et al., 2013; Hodgson & Spours, 2020; Scanlon et al., 2019). The curriculum significantly narrows and levels of independence increase, meaning that young people experience more choice and responsibility (Crane et al., 2021; Vidal Rodeiro & Vitello, 2021). This occurs at a time during which identities are being developed, and many adolescents experience periods of uncertainty and self-doubt (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2018). Successful post-16 transitions have been linked to positive long-term outcomes (Shaw & Dukes, 2013) and are understood to involve many interrelating factors within a young person's ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dunlop, 2017).

Yet, there exists no universally accepted definition of the key terms. Within education, transition has traditionally been considered as the movement between one stage of schooling to the next (Dunlop, 2017; Fontaine et al., 2017; Harper, 2016; Hebron, 2018). However, there also exist differing conceptualisations of transition as a process. Different theories are understood to “lead to different ideas about how to manage or support transitions” (Ecclestone et al., 2010, p. 5). Gale and Parker (2014) propose that transition literature often aligns with one of three characterisations. Researchers exploring ‘*Transition as Induction*’ are said to view transition as a journey from one context to another, experienced through distinct, sequential periods (Furlong et al., 2011). ‘*Transition as Development*’ researchers are thought to consider transition as a transformation of identity best understood through individual developmental trajectories (Ecclestone et al., 2010). Finally, scholars taking a ‘*Transition as Becoming*’ approach may recognise transition as a subjective experience across the entire lifespan, throughout which personal and political factors are inextricably linked (Gale, 2012). Although their work focused upon university transition, Gale and Parker (2014) argue that these characterisations need to be applied to a broader range of transitions, particularly research which captures students’ lived experiences at different ages.

Within this systematic literature review (SLR), the traditional definition of transition as movement between stages of education was used as a parameter for searching and screening papers.

1.2.3 Adopting a Neuro-Affirmative Approach to Language

Historically, pervasive definitions of Autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder have derived from clinical diagnostic criteria (World Health Organisation, 2018). This has led to terms such

as ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder/Condition’ being frequently adopted throughout medical, psychological, and educational literature (Sedgewick et al., 2019). However, in recent policy updates, professional bodies recommend that practitioner-psychologists adopt a community’s choice of language and honour their preferences to communicate respect and solidarity (British Psychological Society, 2021).

As a neurotypical researcher and practitioner, it was important for me to carefully consider the language I adopt throughout this thesis. ‘Neuro-affirmative’ refers to approaches which are supportive, collaborative, inclusive, and celebratory of all neurologies. The term is currently spearheading a rapidly evolving area of research and practice with new learning occurring every day. Therefore, the language used in this thesis is grounded in recommendations made by the Autistic community and what was understood to be best practice at this moment in time. Within this thesis, Autism is conceptualised as a way of experiencing the world characterised by differences in social communication and relationships; different sensory experiences; preference for predictability and familiarity; passionate enjoyment of interests and hobbies; and a strong ability to hyperfocus on interesting tasks (Hartman et al., 2023).

The following terms and definitions (see Table 1) will be used henceforth and result from extensive reading of neuro-affirmative literature, most notably Hartman et al. (2023), Bottema-Beutel et al. (2021), and Kenny et al. (2016).

Table 1 - Definitions and Language Guide adapted from Hartman et al., (2023)

Term	Definition
Autistic	An individual who has an Autistic neurotype. Identity-first language will be adopted rather than person-first terms such as ‘ <i>girl with Autism</i> ’.
Autistic Community	A community of people who are all Autistic.
Autism Community	A community that includes Autistic and non-Autistic people, (e.g., parents).
Neurodiversity	The broad variety of different neurotypes within the human population.
Neurodivergent	An individual whose neurotype differs to the perceived majority.
Neurotypical	The majority neurotype of the human population.

In addition to these defined terms, I will use language such as ‘Autistic characteristics’ (rather than ‘symptoms’), ‘Autistic/neurotypical developmental trajectory’, and ‘co-occurring challenges’ (rather than attributing all difficulties to Autism). By adopting these language preferences, I aim to avoid an ableist approach to this research and written thesis.

1.2.4 Autism and Post-16 Transition

Research suggests that educational transition can be challenging for Autistic students, particularly moving to post-16 settings where neurotypical expectations of independence appear to soar (Wei et al., 2016). The demands of post-16 transition, i.e. managing new environments and routines, somewhat independently, contrast with a preference for familiarity which many Autistic students express (Neal & Frederickson, 2016). The importance of the first year following secondary education has been emphasised for subsequent engagement and wellbeing (Shattuck et al., 2012); yet, this is a time during which a 'tick-box approach' is often applied to supporting Autistic students (Shepherd, 2020). Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising that participation in post-16 education or training is significantly lower for Autistic students than their neurotypical peers (Toor et al., 2016; Wehman et al., 2014).

The DfE funded 'Finished at School Programme' (2015) aimed to improve post-16 transition support for young Autistic people (Cullen, 2015). This was followed by the 'Succeeding at College Training Programme', which highlighted the importance of person-centred transition planning for Autistic students. Rather than viewing Autistic adolescents as a homogenous group and developing guidance without their involvement, the voices of young people were considered integral to both programmes (Ambitious about Autism, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this SLR was to build upon academic, legislative, and practice-based literature to explore the experiences of Autistic students during this tricky transitional period beyond secondary education.

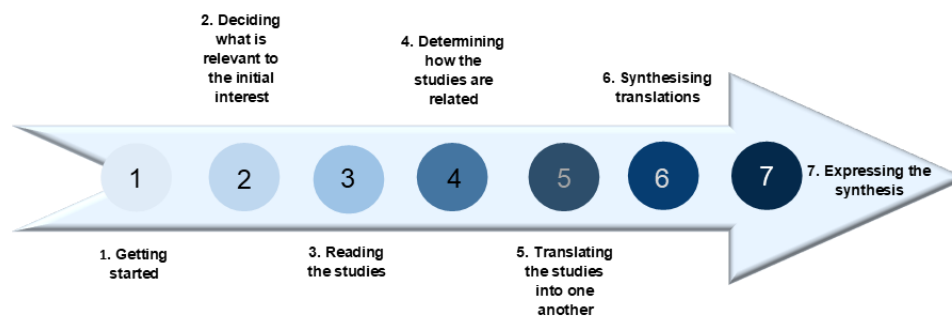
1.3 Method

This SLR addressed the question '*How do Autistic students experience the transition from secondary to post-16 education?*' Qualitative studies were deemed essential, given the research focus on personal experience and my aim of developing meaning in context (Atkins et al., 2008; Mishler, 1979). Meta-ethnography provided a methodological framework to synthesising multiple qualitative primary research studies (Britten et al., 2002). It was hoped that engaging in a meta-ethnography could provide insight into how Autistic students experience their post-16 transition and how this may interact with the support available to them during this period. The papers included in this meta-ethnography were deemed similar enough to effectively synthesise without losing their integrity (Mays et al., 2005).

Noblit and Hare's (1988) seven stages of meta-ethnography (see Figure 1) is one of the most frequently used methods for qualitative synthesis within education and psychological contexts

(France et al., 2019). Researchers use the process differently according to the methodology and ideology of their primary studies, their research question, and their own philosophical standing (Xiao & Watson, 2019). In line with the fluid nature of meta-ethnography, some stages were conducted in parallel and, therefore, written as such below (Lee et al., 2015). I engaged in reciprocal translation using Schutz' (1962) notion of first, second, and third order constructs (as cited in Atkins et al., 2008; Britten et al., 2002; Xiao & Watson, 2019).

Figure 1 - Noblit and Hare's (1988) Stages of Meta-Ethnography



1.3.1 Getting Started and Deciding What is Relevant

To assess the range of studies available, a comprehensive search was conducted between August and October 2021 in databases relating to both Psychology and Education. Five databases were examined: British Education Index, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), PsycInfo, and Web of Science. Several search term combinations were trialled, with varying degrees of success. In acknowledging that not all research has adopted a neuro-affirmative approach, I included non-preferred terms such as 'disorder' to ensure that my search was sufficiently broad. The final search criteria included the terms:

- *autis** OR *asd* OR *asc* OR *asperger**
- *transition** OR *chang** OR *mov** OR *adjust**
- *'Post-16'* OR *'sixth form'* OR *college* OR *'further education'* OR *'post-secondary'* OR *'tertiary'*

This resulted in 658 studies across the five databases. This was reduced to 475 following specifications for peer-reviewed papers published between 2014-current (as per key legislative publications). Removing duplicates further reduced the results to 205 and,

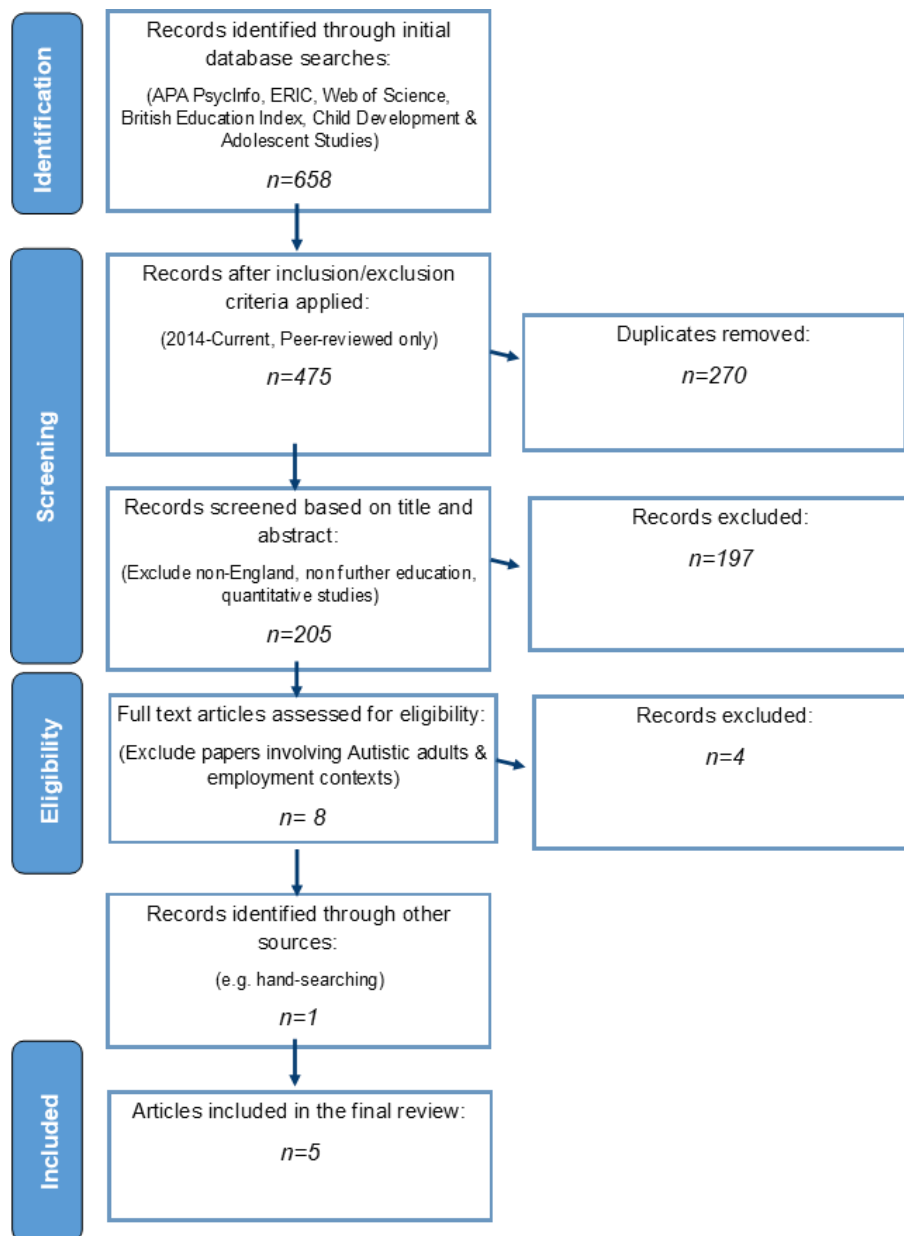
thereafter, titles and abstracts were screened according to inclusion criteria (see Table 2). Eight articles were read in full to assess their eligibility for synthesis. At this stage, four were excluded due to focusing on Autistic adults or being conducted within an employment, rather than education, context. A further paper was found through backwards-chaining, resulting in five papers being deemed suitable to include in the subsequent analysis. See Figure 2 for a PRISMA diagram of this process.

Table 2 - Inclusion Criteria for SLR Searches

Inclusion Criteria	Reason
English language only	For ease of access to written text.
English studies only	Relevant to the English education system in which the researcher works.
Published 2014 onwards	Following pertinent changes to the Children & Families Act 2014 and SEND Code of Practice 2015.
Focus on Autistic students' experiences of post-16 transition	In line with the research question.
Peer-reviewed	Quality assurance.
Secondary to post-16 transition only (excluded University-based studies)	Relevant to the local authority EP role within post-16 settings. Potential 'gap' in support identified through initial reading.

It is at this stage that many quantitative SLRs engage in quality assessment of the papers to be included within the final analysis. Applying quality appraisal tools to qualitative research is a matter of debate and there exists no consensus on the appropriate procedure (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019; Mays & Pope, 2000). Papers within this meta-ethnography were published within peer-reviewed journals and, therefore, the assumption was made that they met certain quality criteria. Moreover, use of quality appraisal tools, which appear to be underpinned by concepts of scientific rigour, seemed antithetical to my philosophical beliefs and inclusion of papers which focused on exploring individuals' experiences and views (Atkins et al., 2008; Britten et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2015). Instead, I subscribed to Noblit and Hare's (1988) notion that the value of each study is determined in the process of achieving a coherent synthesis (Britten et al., 2002).

Figure 2 - Process of Systematic Database Searches



1.3.2 Reading the Studies and Determining How They Are Related

This phase involved repeated reading of the five papers. Information on the participant demographics, settings, methods, and theoretical underpinnings are recorded in Table 3. This demonstrated the methodological similarities between the key papers and provided further justification for my use of meta-ethnography as a synthesis tool (Mays et al., 2005). Where possible, the words of the participants themselves as ‘first order constructs’ were recorded, alongside the authors’ interpretations of these as ‘second order constructs’ (Schutz, 1962).

Accessing first order constructs and using them within the context of a meta-ethnography has been criticised as the participant quotes have already undergone a process of selection from the full dataset (Atkins et al., 2008). As a reviewer, I am only able to offer an interpretation of those quotes that the primary researchers *chose* to publish. Author interpretation of the participants' words (i.e. second order constructs) can offer further insight, sometimes through a specific theoretical lens, to the chosen phenomenon (Atkins et al., 2008; France et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the existence of double hermeneutics within this meta-ethnography. I am offering an interpretation of information that has already been interpreted by the primary authors (Heidegger, 1962; Palmer, 1969; Ricoeur, 1981). This meta-ethnography makes no claims of uncovering the 'truth' about post-16 transitions for Autistic students. Rather, it aims to offer a unique perspective on the topic through collective interpretation of available research.

Table 3 - Summary of SLR Papers

Study	Sample	Setting	Data Collection & Analysis	Additional Information & Theoretical Stance
Essex & Melham (2019) <i>Experiences of Educational Transition: Young Women with ASD, and the Staff Supporting Them, Speak</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 Autistic female students. • 4 members of staff supporting these students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two mainstream secondary schools. • One independent secondary school. • One post-16 college. • South-East England. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured interviews. • Thematic analysis. 	<p>Authors adopted a “phenomenological psychological” approach, i.e. how the phenomenon of transition was experienced as it occurred.</p>
Gaona, Palikara & Castro (2019) <i>I’m Ready for a New Chapter’: The Voices of Young People with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Transition to Post-16 Education and Employment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 Autistic students with EHCPs. • Aged 16-19 years old. • 10 males, 2 females. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One mainstream secondary school. • 3 specialist educational settings. • One post-16 college. • Greater London, England. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured interviews. • Thematic analysis. 	<p>Explicit focus upon understanding changes since the implementation of the 2015 SEND Code of Practice. Phenomenological approach adopted.</p>
Mitchell & Beresford (2014) <i>Young people with High Functioning Autism and Asperger’s syndrome Planning For and Anticipating the Move to College: What Supports a Positive Transition?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 Autistic students. • Aged 15-25 years old. • 14 males, 4 females. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixture of mainstream and specialist educational settings. • England. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured interviews. Some participants engaged before transition, some following transition. • Thematic analysis. 	<p>Part of a larger study involving professionals and parents. This paper focuses upon young people’s experiences. No theoretical stance explicitly stated.</p>
Park & Mortell (2020) <i>Using the Grid Elaboration Method (GEM) to Investigate Transition Experiences of Young Autistic Adults</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 Autistic students. • Aged 18-23 years old. • 3 males, 1 female. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All participants had completed their transition into mainstream post-16 colleges. • England. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grid Elaboration Method adapted from the principles of ‘free association narrative interview’. • Thematic analysis. 	<p>Explored the support that Autistic students <i>without</i> EHCPs receive during post-16 transitions. Position of researcher acknowledged. Reflexive stance adopted.</p>

Study	Sample	Setting	Data Collection & Analysis	Additional Information & Theoretical Stance
<p>Shepherd (2020)</p> <p><i>Beyond Tick-Box Transitions? Experiences of Autistic Students Moving from Special to Further Education</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 Autistic students with co-occurring “intellectual disabilities”. • Aged 16 years old. • Further interviews with parents/carers and educational staff. • 5 males, 1 female. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All transitioning from specialist secondary education to mainstream post-16 college. • England. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured interviews during the final term of school and the second term of college. • Thematic analysis with reference to the social model of disability. 	<p>Longitudinal, case study design. Part of a larger scale study. ‘Transition’ approached through social model of disability. Constructionist stance implied.</p>

1.3.3 Translating the Studies into One Another

The accounts in each study were deemed directly comparable, so I engaged in a process of 'reciprocal translation' (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p. 38). During the reciprocal translation, first and second order constructs were compared across the studies. This supported my own interpretation of the data (i.e. third order constructs) and the development and organisation of the information into further constructed themes (see Appendix A for example).

This was an iterative process and involved regular reference back to the table of study characteristics (Table 3) and the papers themselves, to contextualise my comparisons and new interpretations. Maintaining a research log in which I recorded my thoughts through a philosophical and theoretical lens was also important in acknowledging my role as a researcher upon this process (Doyle, 2003). Through my wider reading and thorough engagement with the five key studies, I began to see how some constructs within the papers aligned with Gale and Parker's (2014) characterisations of transition as induction, development, and becoming.

1.4. Findings

1.4.1 Synthesising the Studies

The reciprocal translation resulted in seventeen third order constructs. Table 4 demonstrates each paper's contribution towards these. The constructs were then further synthesised into seven overarching areas and treated as new data (see Appendix B). This created a line of argument of how Autistic students experience the transition from secondary to post-16 education. The process of construct → interpretation → synthesis is detailed in Table 5.

Table 4 - Contributions of each SLR Paper to 3rd Order Constructs

3 rd Order Construct	Research Paper					No. of Papers Contributing to this Construct	Construct Synthesis
	Essex & Melham, 2019	Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019	Park & Mortell, 2020	Mitchell & Beresford, 2014	Shepherd, 2020		
Parents as transition coordinators	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	Parental Role
Relationships between parents & students		✓		✓	✓	3	
Young people's voice	✓	✓	✓		✓	4	Person-Centred Support
Tailored & individualised support	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	
Independence as an aspiration		✓	✓	✓		3	Developing Independence
Independence as a process	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	
UK context & legislation	✓	✓	✓	✓		4	Systems & Resources
Limited resources	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	
Gap between guidance & practice	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	
Practical preparation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	Transition as Induction
Develop relationships	✓	✓	✓			3	
Staff understanding of Autism	✓			✓	✓	3	
Adolescent developmental trajectories	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	Transition as Development
Importance of social connections	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	
Consistent, holistic support	✓	✓		✓	✓	4	
Community & belonging	✓	✓	✓			3	Transition as Becoming
Reconceptualisation of success	✓		✓		✓	3	
No. of Contributions of each Paper	14	15	14	13	13		

Table 5 - Meta-Ethnography Constructs, Interpretations, and Synthesis

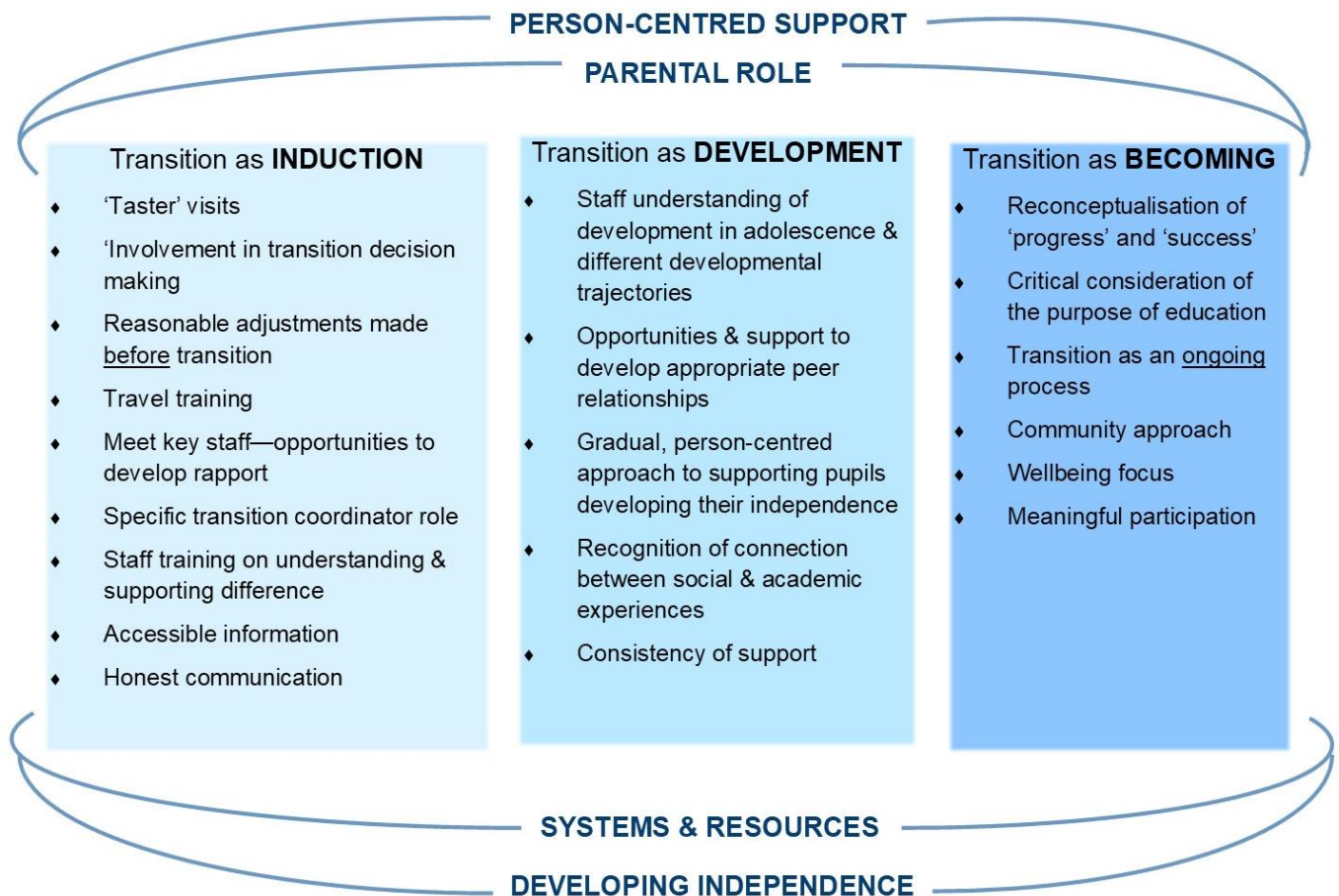
Construct	Interpretation	Synthesis
Parents as transition coordinators	Across all papers, parents were reported to have played a “significant role” in the day-to-day lives and transition planning of their children. In the absence of comprehensive transition support from both schools and colleges, parents were often left to “fill in the gap” and take the role of transition coordinators, i.e. arranging visits, conducting travel training, liaising between settings. All student participants reported close relationships with their parents and acknowledged the value of their support; this relationship, however, did not seem to afford the same recognition from schools or colleges.	<i>Parental Role</i>
Relationships between parents & students		
Young people’s voice	The involvement of students in the decision-making and planning of their post-16 transitions appeared tokenistic; many participants reported feeling confused about the processes and unsure if they were even receiving any support. Furthermore, feeling that their strengths, needs, and goals were understood and accepted appeared important to students with several expressing a dislike of “one size fits all” approaches to support.	<i>Person-Centred Support</i>
Tailored & individualised support		
Independence as an aspiration	Autistic participants expressed a desire and motivation to develop their independence whilst transitioning from secondary to post-16 education. However, they also recognised that this would be a gradual process and that they would, perhaps, need extra support to attain these goals. The increased expectations for independence within post-16 education were frequently referenced as were activities, such as travel training, which aimed to address this. It appears that there may need to be a balance in allowing Autistic students the freedom to develop their independence as adolescents, whilst also providing person-centred support during this process.	<i>Developing Independence</i>
Independence as a process		
UK context & legislation	Pertaining to the UK context of the research, all papers referenced the Preparing for Adulthood agenda and other relevant legislation that impacts upon post-16 transition for Autistic students. There was recognition of statutory processes and resources attached to Education Health and Care Plans that some Autistic students have. Students expressed a desire for more support within their pre and post transition periods and acknowledged the impact of limited resources of the availability of this. Educational settings must address the gap between policy guidance and practice, particularly in reference to ensuring young people are part of decision-making processes.	<i>Systems & Resources</i>
Limited resources		
Gap between guidance & practice		

Practical preparation	Students valued practical support such as prior knowledge of their timetable, travel training, and taster visits. These activities appeared to reduce feelings of uncertainty. Similarly, chances to meet key members of staff and develop initial relationships with them before the transition to post-16 education was seen as beneficial. The final important aspect of transition as induction was staff having received training to develop their understanding of Autism and how it may impact upon students' abilities to integrate and engage in a post-16 community. This was also echoed by some parent participants who sometimes felt that staff understanding was lacking.	<i>Transition as Induction</i>
Develop relationships		
Staff understanding of Autism		
Adolescent developmental trajectories	Transition for Autistic students to post-16 education can be understood through a developmental lens. Within the synthesised papers, there was recognition of the leap between expectations of secondary and post-16 education as well as the challenges of adolescence for those with neurotypical and neurodiverse developmental trajectories. It appears to be important for post-16 settings to understand how development may differ in Autistic students and to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate for these. One universal construct throughout all papers was the importance of social connections for students and the impact these can have upon developing independence, sense of belonging, confidence, and academic engagement. Again, Autistic students may need additional support and opportunities to develop these connections with peers and staff. It appears that, currently, post-16 support focuses upon academic progress whereas students and parents seemed to value social and emotional support.	<i>Transition as Development</i>
Importance of social connections		
Consistent, holistic support		
Community & belonging	Within the synthesised literature there were regular, implicit and explicit, references to the psychological constructs of sense of community and belonging. Young people hope to feel included, supported, and accepted for who they are by all other members of their post-16 setting. Opportunities to participate meaningfully and contribute towards positive change in their communities were valued highly. Similarly, it appears that students' and parents' conceptualisations of 'success' within the context of post-16 education were dichotomous to current government policies and agendas. Participants viewed success as feeling independent, connected, and emotionally secure.	<i>Transition as Becoming</i>
Reconceptualisation of success		

1.4.2 Expressing the Synthesis

The synthesis offered above in Table 5 reflects my new line of argument and involved “making a whole into something more than the parts alone imply” (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p. 28). In developing and expressing the synthesis, it was also important to consider the relationships between the newly developed constructs. Through this, a visual representation of the final synthesis was developed in which the constructs are presented as distinct but connected to each of the others (Sattar et al., 2021), see Figure 3.

Figure 3 - A Model of Secondary to Post-16 Transition for Autistic Students



Gale and Parker's (2014) typology suggests three broad conceptions of transition as induction, development, and becoming. Although their three categories are fluid, they propose that studies into educational transitions will align more closely with one than the other two. In the line of argument developed through my meta-ethnographic synthesis, I interpreted elements of all three characterisations of transition across and between the five papers. This provides support for Gale and Parker's (2014) typology within an English, post-16 context and with Autistic students. In the synthesised model, above, experiences of transition as 'induction', 'development', and 'becoming' are mediated by the presence of the other four constructs: parental role; person-centred support; systems & resources; and developing independence. Hence, these are depicted as wrapping around the characterisations within Figure 3.

Central to students' experiences of post-16 transition across the three transition categories was the role of their parents. For example, in Mitchell and Beresford's research (2014) one participant commented that his parents "*mostly did like the phone calls, calling the people and stuff*" (p. 15) in the absence of any specific transition support from his school or college. Where parental voices were explored within the original studies, they often argued for a reconceptualisation of success: "*I think... that we should be measuring progress in terms of independence, communication and wellbeing*" (Essex & Melham, 2019, p. 101).

Similarly, the importance of a person-centred approach to post-16 transition for Autistic students was evident throughout the studies and within each category. One pupil in Shepherd's (2020) study stated, "*I think every person is an individual and the way their Autism affects them is very different from one child to the next*" (p. 7). Staff taking the time to get to know each pupil as an individual was valued highly, as were attempts to tailor transition plans to support their needs and aspirations.

Yet, all studies recognised the impact of systems and resources on the possibility of offering bespoke support. There appears to be a gap between best practice espoused in legislation and the realities of post-16 transition for Autistic students in England. One of Park and Mortell's (2020) participants observed "*They finally brought in a learning support assistant... who helped every single person in class. I needed somebody just assigned to me*" (p. 201). Moreover, despite government policy stating that young people must be included within decision-making processes, many students seemed unaware of any ongoing or previous transition support: "*I'm not sure on the process... it's quite secretive. I would have liked more transparency*" (Gaona et al., 2019, p. 8).

Finally, the idea of developing independence permeated all three categories of transition, pertaining to the age and expectations of the adolescent participants. Becoming more independent emerged as an aspiration for many students: “*I think I can go a bit further in my independence*” (Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019, p. 6). However, participants and authors recognised that they may need some extra support with this aspect of transition, particularly given that it can often be underpinned by neurotypical expectations.

It is important to note that some of the interpreted third order constructs were based not on participants’ experiences of transition, but in what they communicated about how they *would like* to have been supported during this period. By including their wishes within the analysis, I hope that the model may act as a tool to inform the support of Autistic students during post-16 transitions in the future.

1.5 Discussion

The new line of argument, as depicted in Figure 3, was developed from reciprocal translation and meta-ethnographic synthesis of available qualitative research. Gale and Parker’s (2014) characterisations of transition were developed from reviewing Australian, American, and UK-based literature on university transitions for neurotypical students. This SLR extends their model to post-16 contexts and centres Autistic students’ lived experiences, as per the authors’ recommendations for future research. The findings of the present review suggest that elements of induction, development, and becoming, may be present in the secondary to post-16 transitions for Autistic students in England. This section will contextualise my synthesis in psychological theory, research literature, and governing legislation.

1.5.1 Transition as Induction

Transition as Induction encompassed three constructs; ‘practical preparation’; ‘developing relationships’; and ‘staff understanding of Autism’ (see Table 5). These constructs appeared balanced in their placement of responsibility within the individual vs. within the educational settings. This aligns with previous research suggesting transition requires “varying degrees of adjustment” (Beasley & Pearson, 1999, p. 303) from both the institutions and individuals involved. Participants expressed willingness to engage in induction activities provided they were appropriately supported to do so. Supporting students’ engagement in their new setting prior to transition through induction activities, taster visits, and staff-pupil rapport

building, can foster a sense of belonging and acceptance (Thomas, 2013). These opportunities can allow students to understand the 'cultural capital' of the new institution (Bourdieu et al., 1977) and, if conducted meaningfully, encourage professionals to get to know their incoming students for exactly who they are (Thomas, 2013).

Educational research and policy promotes comprehensive and person-centred induction procedures for post-16 transitions, particularly for neurodivergent learners (DfE/DoH, 2015). Professionals are encouraged to recognise the individuality of students and include their voices within agreed support plans (Bell et al., 2017; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Yet, there appears to be a "gap between rhetoric and practice, as individuals with [Autism] continue to face exclusion" from these processes (Gaona et al., 2019, p. 3). This gap may be, partially, explained by resource constraints and the frequent absence of a specific transition-coordinator role (Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Mitchell & Beresford, 2014; Park & Mortell, 2020).

This lack of coordinated transition induction may provide justification for many Autistic students reporting "that their parents had assumed that role" (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014, p. 14). Parental advocacy and involvement in support processes is well-documented for Autistic people across the lifespan (Boshoff et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2021; Lei & Russell, 2021). Data have indicated a positive impact of parental involvement on educational, developmental, and social outcomes for their Autistic children in school (Kurth et al., 2020; McRae et al., 2018). However, during adolescence and post-16 transition, there appears to exist a 'push and pull' of parental roles; parents can find themselves torn between supporting the wellbeing of their children and promoting the development of their independence (Gaona et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2021).

As the familial role has been described as crucial in supporting post-16 transitions for Autistic students across all studies within this SLR (see Table 4), it is important to consider the connotations of parents who are not as readily able to offer this support and the implications for their children. Inequalities of opportunity based upon parental financial and social capital are pervasive within the literature and not limited to the field of Autism research (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 2019). Although individual experiences will differ, there appears to be a correlation between parental capital (i.e., wealth, education level, social connection) and parental advocacy. This relationship is mediated by race, gender and other socio-systemic factors within neo-liberal, heteronormative, white-privileged cultures such as England (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020). It could be argued that secondary

and post-16 settings should explore ways of engaging families and students from all backgrounds within transition and other educational processes.

1.5.2 Transition as Development

Transition as Development was synthesised from three constructs: 'adolescent developmental trajectories'; 'importance of social connections'; and 'consistent, holistic support' (see Table 5). This appears consistent with Gale and Parker's (2014) notion of 'transition as development' as capturing social, developmental, and identity-based aspects of transition. Understanding transition experiences of Autistic students through a developmental lens recognises that often "the rhythms of the young people's learning lives do not synchronise with the set time frames offered to them" (Quinn, 2009, p. 122). This aligns with the 'stage-environment fit model' whereby low correspondence between individual experiences and contextual expectations can impede adolescents' adaptation during educational transition (Hill & Wang, 2015; Kiuru et al., 2020). Autistic students' developmental trajectories may not correlate with the normative timelines of secondary and post-16 education (Hartman et al., 2023); hence, support must be person-centred, consistent, holistic, and go beyond access to academic learning.

One universal construct throughout all papers was the importance of social connections for students and the impact these can have upon developing independence at a time of uncertainty. The positive impacts of social interaction on wellbeing are pervasive and thought to be heightened during adolescence when identity formation becomes more closely linked to the social context (Resnick et al., 1993; Tomova et al., 2021). Social interaction appears to be a complex and nuanced phenomenon when understood in the context of Autism. Despite medical diagnoses stating social communication difficulties as an underlying trait, Autistic people have communicated the desire for connectedness, acceptance, belonging, and social safety (Ochs & Solomon, 2010; Pinchevski & Peters, 2016). The neuro-affirmative approach adopted throughout this thesis argues that Autistic people may have *different* ways of being social, but that this should not be seen as 'less than' neurotypical interactions (Hartman et al., 2023).

Participants in this SLR discussed the importance of their secondary-school friendships, the difficulties of leaving friendships behind, and anxieties of developing new peer relationships. As timetables and curriculums adapt to reflect the increased expectation of independence throughout post-16 education, the opportunities for peer interaction change and reduce (Le et al., 2018). This necessitates a pro-active role in staff facilitating social

opportunities between Autistic students and their peers, particularly in times of transition when feelings of uncertainty can be intense (Rossetti, 2012). Kluth states “students with Autism are increasingly asking teachers to facilitate the development of friendships and provide them with access to social opportunities” (2003, p. 91).

Transition as Development recognises adolescence as a key time of identity formation (Erikson, 1972; Waterman, 1982) and the impact educational settings can have on this process (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). Research suggests several ways education staff can influence the identity formation of adolescent students, including exploratory learning, reflective activities, and supportive classroom climates (Verhoeven et al., 2019). For Autistic students transitioning to post-16 education these opportunities to develop a new identity need to be intentional, consistent, and accompanied by support which accounts for Autistic developmental trajectories and varied levels of independence (Shepherd, 2020).

1.5.3 Transition as Becoming

Transition as Becoming incorporated two constructs; ‘community and belonging’ and ‘reconceptualisation of success’ (see Table 5). Gale and Parker suggest that this approach offers a “more dynamic account of student transition” (2014, p. 744) as an “ongoing and evolving” process (Shepherd, 2020, p. 10) characterised by the interconnection of public and private issues. This links to the impact of systems and resources that were ubiquitous throughout participants’ words and authors’ interpretations. Also aligning with Gale and Parker’s characterisation was the relative lack of reference to ‘Becoming’ elements, as compared to ‘Induction’ and ‘Development’. It seems that ‘Transition as Becoming’ remains a hopeful proposition in both post-16 and university contexts, and for Autistic and neurotypical students.

A sense of belonging was raised within Transition as Induction and Transition as Development as a peripheral concept. Within Transition as Becoming, community and belonging was interpreted as a key construct that relates to the general ethos of educational settings and wider systems. Sense of belonging has been defined as the extent to which an individual feels accepted, included, and supported by their social environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and is considered a fundamental human need across the lifespan (Maslow, 1943). Within an education context, sense of belonging involves students viewing themselves as a valued part of the school community and positively correlates with academic, social, and psychological outcomes (Arslan, 2019).

Establishing a sense of belonging at times of transition has been found to mediate students' adjustment to their new setting and underpin wellbeing, particularly during adolescence (Kiuru et al., 2020). For Autistic students, there can be a complex relationship between their diagnosis, identity, and school sense of belonging: where some young people felt connected to their Autism diagnosis, engaging in psycho-education of their peers as a way to establish belonging, others discussed the stigma of the label, feeling more able to belong to a peer group once detached from their Autistic identity (Berkovits et al., 2019; MacLeod et al., 2018; Park & Mortell, 2020). Literature states that many Autistic students in secondary and post-16 education are motivated to establish a sense of belonging "but experience pressure to... minimise their differences in order to gain acceptance" (Miles et al., 2019, p. 8). As in Transition as Development, this may link to the staff role in facilitating peer connections (Rossetti, 2012) alongside staff understanding of Autism and person-centred support.

There appears to be a link between 'community & belonging' in Transition as Becoming and the wrap-around theme of 'systems and resources'. The recognition of sense of belonging and drive towards 'inclusive education' has been included within UK legislation since the reforms of the Warnock Report (Department for Education and Skills, 1978) and 1981 Education Act. Within these publications 'inclusive education' refers to the extent to which young people understood to have 'SEND' access mainstream schooling (Lindsay, 2007). Although it is beyond the scope of this SLR to explore the contention of inclusive education, it is, perhaps, worth noting that Autistic adolescents have conceptualised inclusion as *belonging*, arguing that "inclusion is a feeling... not a place" (Goodall, 2020, p. 1306). Adopting a needs-based approach to the inclusive education of Autistic students has been argued to deepen sense of belonging and have positive implications for overall wellbeing (Croydon et al., 2019). Yet, others suggest that this aligns with an individualised model of disability which neglects to examine the potential structural, systemic and cultural barriers to inclusion (MacLeod et al., 2018).

Participants discussed the need for a broader idea of what constitutes "success" within transitions and education as a whole: "*progress doesn't always have to be academic... we can measure progress in terms of independence, communication, and wellbeing*" (Essex & Melham, 2019, p. 101). Autistic university students have shared their conceptualisations of success include personal transformation, embracing failure and perseverance towards individual goals (MacLeod et al., 2018). It seems that for many within the Autistic community, "success" is framed by an awareness of their difference and an achievement of their aspirations alongside their diagnoses.

However, this neuro-affirmative conceptualisation of personal success is not shared by all. Mistaken expectations and assumptions regularly limit the opportunities of Autistic people. These underestimations “can prove extremely difficult to shift” and may “cause more damage” than under-recognition of need (Howlin, 2004, p. 335). Perhaps this pervasive view of Autism is a way of homogenising individuals, placing the deficit, and therefore the responsibility for change, *within* the person rather than acknowledging the need for a radical, systemic overhaul (Hartman et al., 2023; Shakespeare, 2013). MacLeod (2016, 2018) argues that ‘success’ involves power and ownership. More needs to be done at research, policy, and systems levels to amplify Autistic voices in an effort to understand success beyond neurotypical expectations and the contributions one may make to a capitalist society (Done & Murphy, 2018).

1.6 Conclusions

1.6.1 Summary and Limitations

Morris and Atkinson (2018) suggest that little is known about the post-16 transition experiences of students with different support needs. Consequently, this SLR offers a collective interpretation of qualitative research into Autistic students’ transitions beyond secondary school. The synthesised data proposes that Autistic students experience their post-16 transitions across three categories: Induction, Development, and Becoming (Gale & Parker, 2014). The role of parents was valued and necessitated by a lack of coordinated transition support. Autistic students appear to rely more heavily on parental support than their peers, and this is best understood through a lens of different developmental trajectories. Where person-centred support was experienced, this was appreciated; however, tokenistic approaches were more common despite the principles espoused in governing legislation. This gap between guidance and practice is, perhaps, a result of systemic and resource constraints, the impact of which was highlighted across all studies.

As this review was conducted by a single researcher, it is important to acknowledge the role that my assumptions and beliefs had upon the final synthesis. It is likely that other researchers will have developed different interpretations. I also recognise the high level of inference involved in meta-ethnographic synthesis of qualitative research, including the presence of double hermeneutics (see Section 1.3.2). To account for this, I aimed to be transparent and detailed about the research process. Although the initial stages of analysis involved inductive processes and were grounded within participants’ words, there were also

deductive elements when linking my interpretations to the existing characterisations from Gale and Parker (2014). Some may argue that this could have limited my engagement with participant voice. However, France et al. (2019) suggest that “a priori theories can be used to inform analytic synthesis” (p. 10) particularly when reviewing a new topic, in a new context, or with previously under-researched participants. It is rare for qualitative reviews to be purely inductive or deductive (Atkins et al., 2008), as these concepts exist on a continuum. My interpretation of four other constructs beyond Gale and Parker’s categories demonstrates a balance between inductive and deductive approaches, which supported the development of a coherent synthesis.

1.6.2 Implications for Research and Practice

Papers in this review indicated a potential gap in support for Autistic people between the ages of 16-18, given current systems (Shepherd, 2020). Future research may focus upon the experiences of Autistic students in post-16 settings, beyond the initial transition period. Whilst one of the papers in this review specifically focused on Autistic females (Essex & Melham, 2019), almost all other participants identified as males (see Table 3). This reflects the wider context of Autism research and ideas about the ‘gender disparity’ of Autism diagnoses, which are beginning to be challenged (e.g. Matheis et al., 2019). Recent literature argues for a better understanding of the experiences and needs of Autistic girls within UK educational settings (Gray et al., 2021). Working with Autistic girls in post-16 contexts may be a useful premise for further research and one that I have chosen to undertake as a result of this meta-ethnography (see Chapter 3).

The expressed synthesis includes participants’ ideas about how they would like to have been supported during their post-16 transition. I suggest that my framework offers a starting point from which educational professionals may base their transition support, grounded in pupil, parent, and staff views. The EP role in this area was highlighted prior to the 2014 SEND reforms (Barrow, 2013; Craig, 2009; Hayton, 2009). With an understanding of adolescent development, experience working alongside neurodiverse students, and access to systemic-level working, I argue that EPs are well-placed to support post-16 transitions of Autistic students. EPs could provide support across all seven constructs outlined in this SLR. This supports an emerging body of research emphasising the EP role in relation to post-16 education (Morris & Atkinson, 2018) following the widening of the remit to 16-25 year olds.

Chapter 2: Bridging Document

This chapter aims to link the SLR with the empirical research. In doing so, I acknowledge the subjective process of engaging in a qualitative research project and reflect on my philosophical stance. The bridging document offers an opportunity to consider the ethical implications of the empirical study and provide methodological justifications.

2.1 From Literature Review to Empirical Project

Through a meta-ethnography synthesising the findings from five qualitative papers, I explored '*how Autistic students experience the transition from secondary to post-16 education*'. Research highlighted the importance of a supportive transition for subsequent positive experiences in post-16 education (Essex & Melham, 2019). It appears that the expectations placed on post-16 students are often underpinned by neurotypical developmental trajectories and, therefore, neurodivergent young people can lack support during this key stage of adolescence and education. The literature review emphasised the importance of listening to the voices of Autistic young people and the dearth of research that actively involves this group. Moreover, most participants within the five papers were male, further indicating a research gap for studies including Autistic girls. Building upon the SLR, my empirical project had two main purposes. Firstly, to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Autistic students within post-16 education, considering how school staff and EPs can offer support beyond the initial transition. Secondly, to contribute to the limited research involving Autistic girls, providing them with a space to share their views and experiences and aiming to improve wider understanding of this previously overlooked group. The empirical research is, therefore, entitled:

*'Exploring the views and experiences of Autistic girls
accessing post-16 education in England'*.

2.2 Philosophical Perspectives

To ensure coherence throughout this research, it is important to reflect on my philosophical perspective and the influence this has had upon methodological decisions (Grix, 2002). Axiology, within qualitative research and as a practitioner-psychologist, refers to a person's underlying values and motivations for engaging in work in certain ways (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016). As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, my values align with the concept of

'inclusion' as accepting and appreciating each individual for exactly who they are rather than for what they may contribute towards a neo-liberalist agenda (Done & Murphy, 2018). Moreover, I have approached this project from a 'social justice' perspective; I hope that this thesis may support the equality of opportunity, understanding, privileges, and resources for Autistic females, as compared to Autistic males and others in our society (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019).

Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 1975) is the overarching paradigm in which both the SLR and empirical project sit. This is grounded in ontological realism: the belief that there is a real world which exists independently of human perception. Epistemologically, critical realism adopts a constructivist perspective, recognising that there can be multiple subjective views of the same complex reality (Collier, 1994). As such, critical realism rejects the correspondence theory of truth; rather, critical realist researchers believe that any 'knowledge' about truth is mediated through human experience and interpretation (Danermark et al., 2019). I am approaching this research from the assumption that Autism is real whilst recognising that different conceptualisations and experiences of Autism exist. Moreover, critical realists believe that "good research means we can understand the world better" (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2018, p. 201). I propose that by listening to how Autistic girls make sense of their post-16 experiences, professionals may better understand how to offer support. This thesis aligns with the view that social research can aim to *explain* but cannot *establish* universal truth (Byrne, 2009).

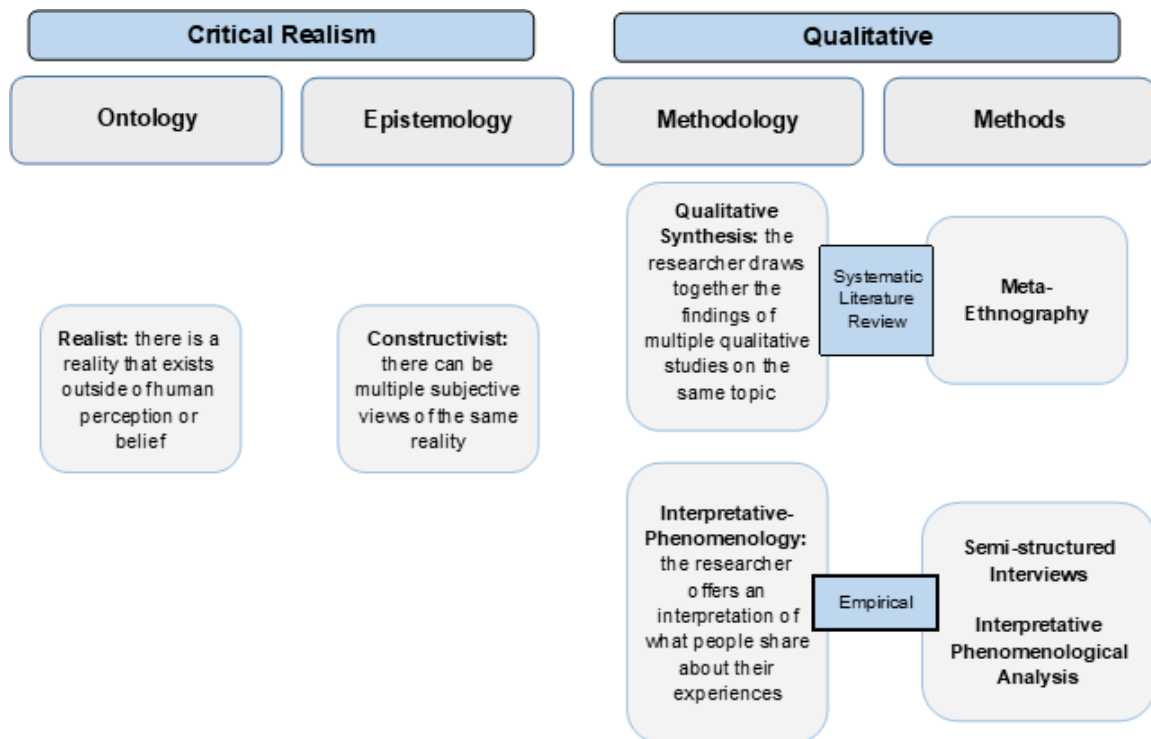
Critical realism offers a general philosophical research framework, but "is not associated with any particular set of methods" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 182). Rather, methodological decisions are thought to "depend on the nature of the object of study and what one wants to learn about it" (Sayer, 1992, p. 19). To remain consistent with my research focus on exploring Autistic girls' experiences, I approached this empirical study from a qualitative paradigm and used Interpretative Phenomenology as my theoretical basis.

Phenomenology seeks to understand how the world is experienced by human beings in different contexts (Willig, 2013). It is concerned with understanding lived experience from *within* and how phenomena can appear to conscious beings (Tuohy et al., 2013). Interpretative Phenomenology goes beyond description of experience, assuming that the researcher is not a detached observer; rather, their interpretations are inseparable from the research process and outcomes (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). This aligns with my view that it is not possible to approach research without the influence of my own assumptions, experiences and beliefs. Interpretative Phenomenology also acknowledges that

experiences are linked to social, political, and cultural contexts (Flood, 2010) which supports my aim of exploring Autistic girls' experiences of a specific educational setting, following changes to governing legislation.

Figure 4 offers a basic outline of my philosophical beliefs and impact upon methodologies within this thesis.

Figure 4 - Philosophical Perspectives and Methodological Decisions



2.3 Methodological Decisions

2.3.1 Data Collection

Maxwell (2013) posits that data collection decisions are influenced not just by the research question, but also by what is likely to support engagement with a unique set of participants and within a specific research context. Semi-structured interviews were, therefore, used for the following reasons:

- Initial conversations with prospective participants indicated that they would feel more comfortable engaging solely with me, as a researcher, rather than additional unknown people (e.g., in a focus group).

- Participants also shared their preference for knowing what to expect in advance. Hence, an interview schedule was shared ahead of time. Participants were made aware we could stray from these questions to follow their stories.
- Similar studies involving Autistic young people have supported the use of semi-structured interviews with this population (e.g., Goodall, 2020).
- Interpretative semi-structured interviews position the participants as the 'knower' or the 'expert', which aligns with my values (McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

Visual stimuli have been suggested to facilitate research interviews with young Autistic people, particularly when they are able to manipulate the materials themselves (Scott-Barrett et al., 2019). Visuals may act as a memory aid (Preece & Jordan, 2010), provide structure to help the process feel more manageable (Shepherd, 2015), and support communication and collaboration (Parsons et al., 2017). After careful consideration of possible visual methods, I decided to use a 'Fortune Line'. This tool provided a structure to represent time and experience across two axes. Researchers have found fortune lines beneficial in reducing perceived power differentials, eliciting personal life stories, and facilitating the recall of additional relevant information (Berends, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2011).

In this empirical project, participants plotted key time-points throughout their education against their personal constructions of feeling "supported" (see Figure 5). The fortune lines were left on the screen throughout the entirety of each interview. Participants were in control of when and how they wanted to add a time-spot onto the fortune line, often as it corresponded with their story. At the end of each interview, the fortune line was revisited and summarised, giving participants the opportunity to amend, add detail, or elaborate on any points. The fortune lines were not included as data within final analyses; rather, they acted as an aid to facilitate communication.

Visual techniques, such as fortune lines, can work well in both face-to-face and virtual contexts (Shepherd, 2015). Research attests that online platforms can support Autistic individuals to feel more comfortable in engaging in interviews by alleviating some of the anxieties that may derive from face-to-face interactions with a new person (Brosnan & Gavin, 2015). It is important for researchers not to impose their own assumptions on how participants may choose to engage in projects (Scott-Barrett et al., 2019). Therefore, participants in this study were given the choice of whether to complete the interview face-to-face or through a virtual platform. All participants chose the virtual context.

Figure 5 - Example of Fortune Line used in Empirical Project



2.3.2 Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse transcriptions of the three semi-structured interviews. Phenomenological studies focus upon how people talk about and interpret their lived experiences, rather than describing phenomena in relation to pre-conceived ideas, labels, systems, or criteria (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This approach felt particularly aligned with my research focus on Autistic girls' experiences given that, historically, they have been overlooked or viewed through a male-dominated lens (Gray et al., 2021). Within IPA the researcher acknowledges their own assumptions and beliefs, engaging in a process of double hermeneutics: "trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). The analysis is seen as inextricably linked to the relationships between the researcher, the participants, and the data, which fits with my underlying philosophical perspectives.

IPA is used when the researcher is working with small numbers of participants, emphasising full appreciation of each individual's perspective, rather than focusing on general accounts of a whole population. It aims to "capture something of what is important to [the person] in this context and with this topic at hand" (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 10). One-on-one, semi-structured interviews, as used in this project, are the most common data collection method for IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Symbolic interactionism, i.e., emphasis of the *meanings*

that people give to situations, underpins both IPA (Howitt & Cramer, 2020) and the focus of this empirical study. Finally, research suggests that IPA and its commitment to amplifying participant voice can highlight the experiences of Autistic people (Howard et al., 2019).

2.3.3 Research Relationships

Maxwell (2013) proposes that the researcher and their developing relationships with participants and gatekeepers is a key methodological decision. These relationships are continually re-constructed and require attuned researchers to make effort in maintaining them. Similarly, reflecting on my position as a researcher and how this may impact upon processes and participants could be considered a matter of transparency, validity, and ethicality (Arruda, 2003).

The research relationships within this empirical study began with my initial contact with participants, and subsequent conversations throughout the recruitment phase – see Section 3.3 for more detail on this. Within the interviews, I drew on the interpersonal skills I often use in practice to continue to foster these relationships. Devoting time for informal, personal conversations before and after the interview provided opportunities for genuine connection as people, rather than in the role of participant or researcher. Respecting and communicating across perceived differences can be a helpful way of conceptualising the space between a neurotypical researcher and Autistic participants (Scott-Barrett et al., 2019). I understood this aspect of research relationships with Autistic people through Milton's (2012) 'double empathy' lens; the responsibility for adapting communication and being empathic towards each other as people was explicitly shared. I believe the open and honest conversations I had with participants during the interviews were facilitated by this relational approach.

Willig (2013) warns against viewing relationships with participants as solely for the benefit of obtaining data. I valued the connections I developed with the girls beyond their contribution to this thesis, but for the enjoyment of our reciprocal interactions and our shared interests and goal in improving understanding of Autistic girls' experiences. I hoped to ensure that participants felt they had been part of a meaningful and positive process, and that our relationships had a wider purpose. This involved two follow-up conversations with each participant about our ideas for taking the research forwards and possible dissemination.

Yet, the continuation of this communication also needed to be carefully considered. Transparency about the research intentions and a clear start/end to the research relationship can partially mitigate the risk of developing ‘fake friendships’ (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). This can be particularly important for Autistic participants who may appreciate clear parameters and expectations around relationships. Scott-Barrett and colleagues (2019) suggest that researchers address two aspects of navigating the endings of research relationships. Firstly, the need to establish a “shared understanding of the nature and timescale of the research process” (p. 174). This was communicated through the initial information pack and in subsequent discussions with participants. Secondly, communicating gratitude and the value that participants have added, both to the process and outcome of the project (Scott-Barrett et al., 2019). By engaging in reflective conversations about how participants experienced the interviews and including them in follow-up discussions about potential dissemination, I hoped to convey how valuable their voices, views, and experiences are to me, as a person, and to the wider field. This helped bring the research relationship to a close in a supportive manner.

Finally, issues relating to power dynamics were given forethought but also necessitated me being “ethically attuned throughout” all my participant communication (Willig, 2013, p. 26). Coming from a Foucauldian perspective, Shumway (1989) proposed that power afforded to educational professionals is bound in the assumption of exclusive expertise. Moreover, the use of IPA emphasises the researcher’s interpretations in reaching a final explanation or model (Webb, 2003), further placing the balance of power in my hands.

The aforementioned methodological decisions were taken to position participants as agentic, and their individual experiences are valued in extending knowledge bases about the experiences of Autistic girls (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). Similarly, the intended beneficence of the research was discussed openly with the participants. Understanding the potential influence of their stories is considered an important part of any qualitative research, particularly projects which engage young people and more vulnerable groups (MacNaughton et al., 2007). I hope that forming positive relationships, offering choice, and adopting a flexible participant-led approach to the interviews went some way to mitigating these potential power differentials.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The empirical research received enhanced ethical approval from Newcastle University and adhered to the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018), the BPS Practice Guidelines (2017), and the HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics (2016). Participants received an information pack detailing the aims of the project, their rights as participants, data management protocols, and relevant contact information (see Appendices C-H). I sought written informed consent from participants and their parents, where appropriate, prior to data collection. However, discussions around consent were also embedded into the ongoing research process, rather than treated as a singular event (Loyd, 2013). Moreover, I was mindful of participants' wellbeing throughout the interviews, asking if they were comfortable to continue, checking if they would like a break, and using my skills as a psychologist to interpret whether certain questions were generating difficult feelings for them (Renold et al., 2008). Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw in both the initial information pack and at the start of each interview. Similarly, participants' right to request the removal of their data up to the point of writing the study was re-emphasised immediately after data collection, and in follow-up communication.

Ethical research involves respect for participants at every stage of the empirical process, including in the writing up and dissemination of results (Shepherd, 2020). In recognising my position as a neurotypical researcher, this involved conversations around participants' preferred terminology (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021) and exploring what Autism means to each of them. Each of the girls expressed a strong preference for the word 'Autistic' and shared that this was an important part of their identity. Hence, this language was adopted throughout any prior communication, the interviews, this thesis, and any future dissemination.

The interview questions were positively framed in order to pose a low risk of emotional harm. For example:

*“Think about a time at sixth form/college that you have felt very supported.
What was happening? What helped you feel like this?”*

However, I was aware that engaging in this interview could elicit some difficult feelings for the girls. Participants were signposted to appropriate services during the debriefing process and contact details for myself and my research supervisor were provided. Section 2.3.3 describes the relationships I have maintained with the girls since the interviews, with

the hope that any wellbeing concerns could have been shared during these check-ins. The wellbeing of doctoral students, such as myself, engaging in qualitative research must also be considered (Velardo & Elliott, 2018). I used my research diary to reflect, following each interview, and reached out to my support network to ensure I was safeguarding myself.

2.5 Validity

With many competing conceptualisations, I have decided to adopt Maxwell's (2013) 'common-sense' definition of validity as the ability to securely justify an interpretation, conclusion, or decision. This section will acknowledge potential 'validity threats' to this project but aim to provide justification for ways these threats were mitigated.

I accept that declining to engage with quality assessment frameworks could be viewed as a limitation of the SLR. As outlined in section 1.3.1, there is no consensus regarding the use of these frameworks within qualitative research (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Moreover, use of quality appraisal tools seemed antithetical to my philosophical beliefs and focus on exploring individuals' experiences and views (Atkins et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2015).

Similarly, the absence of any formal 'member-checking' process following the empirical interviews could also be criticised. Member-checking refers to gathering feedback on provisional conclusions from participants. It is thought to rule out any possibility of misinterpreting participants' words (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, the interpretative phenomenological approach adopted in this study posits that the researcher cannot be separated from the resultant findings. Interpretations are seen as 'valid' if appropriate methodology has been used (e.g., IPA) and if they are judged as plausible by the researcher. As such, it is my view that attempts to validate interpretations through participant feedback are not consistent with an interpretative phenomenological approach (Webb, 2003).

As an alternative approach to validity, I was drawn to Guba's (1981) concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006) this can be achieved through several processes that were present throughout this research, such as:

- Verbatim accounts of participants' experiences (i.e., verbatim transcriptions)
- Multi-modal data collection strategies (i.e., fortune lines)

- Informal conversations with participants to establish rapport and check understanding

In recognising the data as co-constructed between myself and the participants, I have aimed to be transparent about the interpretative and double hermeneutic elements of this research.

2.6 Summary

This bridging chapter has discussed the philosophical, methodological, and ethical considerations underpinning this thesis. It has acknowledged the influence of my values and experiences upon the research process and considered important issues of validity. Chapter 3 will focus upon the empirical project.

Chapter 3: Empirical Research

“I Want to be Supported, but I Need to be Independent” – Exploring the Views and Experiences of Autistic Girls Accessing Post-16 Education in England

3.1 Abstract

Research which explores the educational experiences of Autistic young people, particularly girls, is limited. Even less research has involved Autistic participants beyond secondary education, perhaps mirroring the potential ‘drop-off’ in support that Autistic students describe as they move through adolescence. Nevertheless, research and educational contexts are beginning to recognise the difference in experience between those who identify as Autistic females and males, and the impact upon the support made available to them.

This chapter offers an interpretative phenomenological analysis of three semi-structured interviews with Autistic girls either currently accessing or just completed their post-16 education in the North-East of England. The interviews explored participants’ experiences of post-16 education, focusing on what worked well, what they valued, and what could be built upon. Four Group Experiential Themes were interpreted, suggesting that Autistic girls make sense of their post-16 experiences through Practical, Psychological, Organisational, and Systemic factors. This appeared to be an important time of developing independence for the girls, in which they appreciated a balance between appropriate support and being trusted to know what works best for them.

This empirical research centres the voices of female Autistic adolescents and presents a unique insight into what may help or hinder their post-16 education experiences. The analysis is grounded in the words of participants and subsequently discussed in reference to psychological literature and English education policy. It is hoped that the interpreted model may scaffold the work of professionals, including educational psychologists, when seeking to support Autistic girls in post-16 settings.

3.2 Introduction

This section considers key issues in the context of Autism research and relevant background literature. Rationale for the empirical study is then presented.

3.2.1 Autism and Gender

To provide context for this empirical research, it is important to acknowledge the nuanced understanding of gender that is emerging within Autism research and wider society. Many people are moving beyond the historical binary split of being a cis-gendered (i.e., identifying with the gender you were assigned with at birth) male or female. There appears to be increased variation in gender experiences within the Autistic community compared to the neurotypical population (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019). However, questioning your assigned gender identity seems to occur, on average, around 9-years-old (Khadr et al., 2022). At present, binary gender is assigned to newborn babies by parents and medical professionals. Therefore, although there is an understanding that this person may identify as differently gendered as they develop, they are initially socialised as either a boy or girl. Within Western society, males and females are conceptualised and socialised in different ways which has strong influences on development and subsequent wellbeing (Solbes-Canales et al., 2020; South et al., 2021).

Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that boys are socialised to externalise their behaviours and it is more socially acceptable for boys to do this than girls (Solbes-Canales et al., 2020). As such, Autistic people who self-identify or are otherwise-identified as female face different social experiences which can lead to an internalised presentation of Autism (Pearson & Rose, 2021). People with internalised experiences of Autism (most commonly, but not exclusively, females) receive diagnoses and support less readily than those with externalised presentations (Carpenter et al., 2019). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve more deeply into the intersection of gender and Autism. However, participants in the current study were asked about both their gender and Autistic identities. When considering literature involving Autistic girls, henceforth, this will refer to people who have self-identified or otherwise been identified as female, and therefore socialised as such.

3.2.2 Autistic Girls' Educational Experiences

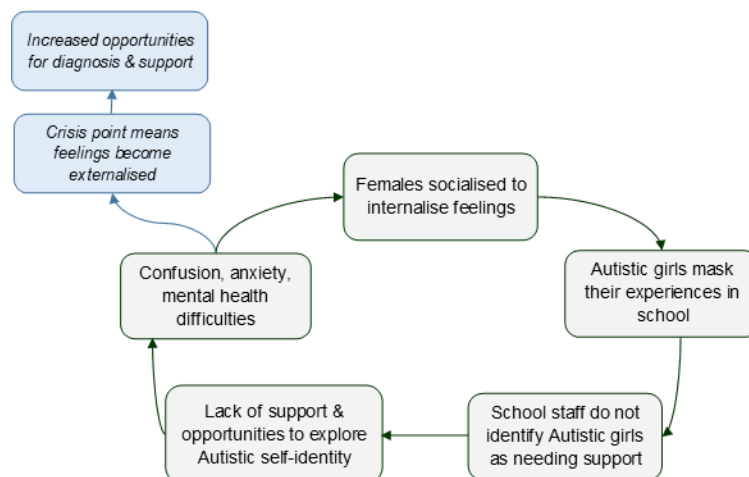
It is well-documented that Autistic students often have different experiences of schooling than their neurotypical peers, particularly with relationships (Calder et al., 2013) and the physical environment (Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022). There are many adjustments that schools can make to support the inclusion of Autistic students, such as: use of clear

language and visuals, reducing sensory input in the environment, and carefully managing transitions (Cook et al., 2018; Moyse & Porter, 2015).

For many Autistic girls and others with internalised presentations of Autism attending mainstream schools, the pressure to fit in can lead to ‘masking’. This refers to the conscious or unconscious act of hiding parts of oneself to keep oneself safe (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Similarly, ‘camouflaging’ has been defined as taking on a role in attempts to appear neurotypical (Mundy, 2022). Research has shown that many Autistic girls engage in masking or camouflaging throughout the school day, often being described by staff as quiet, well-behaved students (Tomlinson et al., 2020). However, consistently repressing their internal Autistic experiences can often lead to meltdowns or shutdowns once safe in the home environment. Masking involves high levels of cognitive load and can have significant impacts upon Autistic girls’ mental health (Mandy, 2019) and difficulties connecting with their authentic self-identity (Lai et al., 2017).

Moreover, masking in school can lead to differences in staff and parental perspectives about the challenges their daughters experience and the support they may need (Gray et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2020). Many parents of Autistic girls have shared their experiences of being dismissed by school staff, and their views that this is underpinned by a pervasive misunderstanding of Autism as the stereotypical externalised presentation. This, in turn, often results in Autistic girls not being identified or supported within school settings. Derived from the surrounding literature, Figure 6 depicts an interpretation of this cycle for those with internalised presentations of Autism accessing mainstream education².

Figure 6 - Interpreted Cycle of Masking for those with Internalised Presentations of Autism



² This visual is not intended to homogenise all those with internalised presentations of Autism. Rather, it offers one interpretation of the available literature combined with my experiences as a TEP. I recognise that others may have different experiences.

3.2.3 Involvement of Young Autistic People in Research

There is a lack of representation of people with an internalised presentation of Autism, often females, in Autism research, due to a reliance on historical diagnostic procedures to 'confirm' Autism before participants are recruited (D'Mello et al., 2022). Adopting a more community-based approach to Autism research, and involving those who have self-diagnosed, could stop the cycle of under-representation and improve the inclusivity of the field (Hartman et al., 2023). Beyond the 'who' of Autism research, comes 'how' to engage participants meaningfully. Recent shifts have repositioned the voices of Autistic young people as a central priority within studies, recognising that their views and experiences merit important consideration (Scott-Barrett et al., 2019). As understanding about Autistic experiences is changing and more neuro-affirmative approaches are being adopted, participatory research which centres Autistic voices is beginning to expand.

Although research involving Autistic females is rapidly increasing, there is still a lack of qualitative studies which actively involve Autistic girls in educational settings, particularly in post-16 contexts where many girls have only recently been diagnosed. The added complexities of identity development (Morgan, 2023) and increased levels of independence (Crane et al., 2021) are challenges that Autistic girls may face during post-16 education. Further exploration of Autistic girls' experiences within this context is warranted.

3.2.4 Rationale for the Empirical Study

In response to this identified literature gap, the empirical research explores the views and experiences of Autistic girls in post-16 education, from their own perspectives. Developing a deeper understanding of Autistic girls' educational experiences may be important to a range of professionals including EPs, school staff, and other LA support teams. It may also contribute to increasing the intersectionality and inclusivity of Autism research by highlighting the voices of those who have, historically, been overlooked (Cascio et al., 2021). Finally, in response to the findings in Chapter 1, this research explores experiences of post-16 education, as a whole, rather than focusing solely upon the initial transition phase. Research questions in IPA studies are, typically, broad and aim to explore experiences in one context. As such, the overarching research question, here, was:

How do Autistic girls make sense of their experiences in post-16 education?

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Research Context

The three participants attended a sixth form or college setting in three different local authorities within the North-East of England. Interviews were conducted in July 2022, when all Covid-19 related restrictions on educational settings had been lifted. However, two participants had transitioned to their post-16 setting whilst these restrictions were in place; therefore, their initial experiences were different, and they had to manage additional changes to their learning environment and timetable. On the other hand, Covid-19 restrictions led to a significant increase in the use of video-conferencing technology (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2021), and this was the platform chosen by all participants to conduct the interviews, rather than engaging face-to-face.

3.3.2 Ethics

This study obtained enhanced ethical approval from Newcastle University and followed governing ethical guidelines (BPS, 2017; 2018). Verbal and written informed consent was gained from participants and their parents, where appropriate. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw. Data were stored in compliance with GDPR regulations within a password-protected device. At the end of each interview, participants were asked what they would like to be referred to throughout the write up; all requested that I use their real names rather than a pseudonym. However, surnames and any other identifying information have been excluded to protect their anonymity. See section 2.4 for further ethical considerations made throughout this thesis.

3.3.3 Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and were self-selected by responding to my research flyer (see Appendix I). An extensive recruitment process was followed (see Figure 7). Potential participants were considered people who:

- Identified as both Autistic and female
- Were between the ages of 16-19 years old
- Were currently accessing **OR** had completed their post-16 education in the last 12 months
- Accessing/accessed post-16 education within England.
- Were comfortable with and able to engage in a verbal discussion about their experiences.

Three young people met the criteria and consented to participate, aligning with the small sample size suggested for IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2022). Table 6 briefly outlines participant information whilst maintaining their anonymity.

Figure 7 - Participant Recruitment Process for Empirical Research

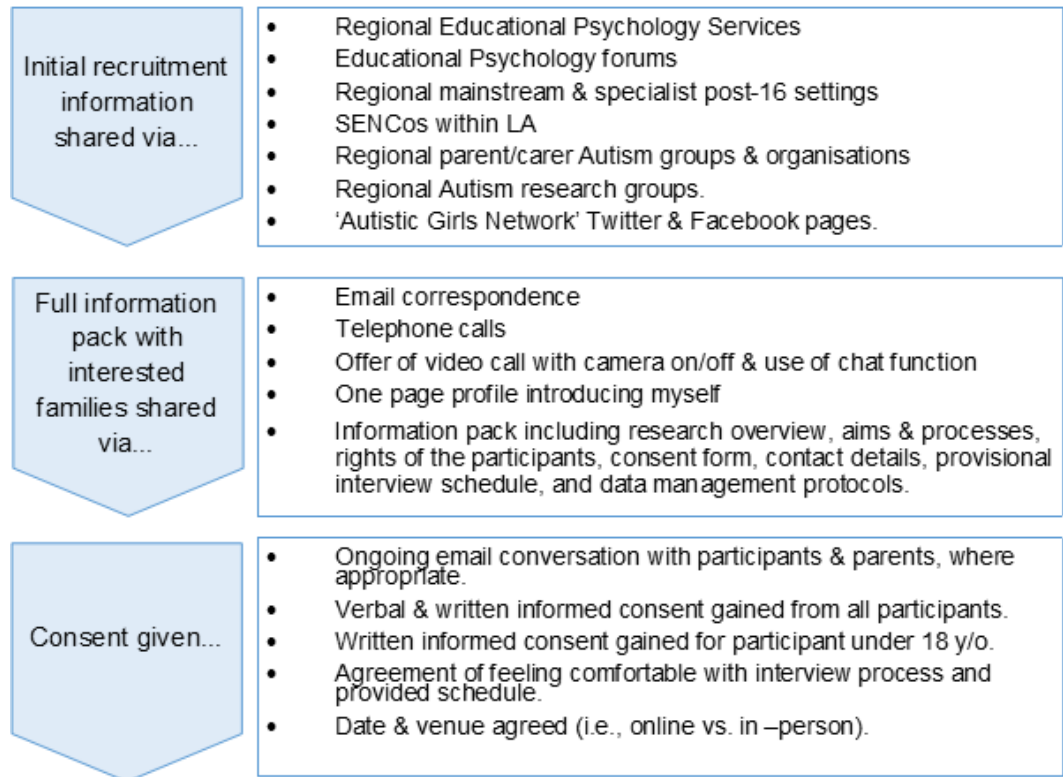


Table 6 - Participant Information for Empirical Research

Name	Age	Year Gp.	Educational Journey	Length of Interview
Etta	18	13	Mainstream primary, mainstream Y7 & 8, specialist Y9 – 11, mainstream college.	65 mins
Megan	18	13	Mainstream primary, specialist secondary, specialist sixth form.	63 mins
Chloe	17	12	Mainstream throughout.	57 mins

3.3.4 Procedure

During ongoing email communication with participants, a date and time to engage with the interview process was negotiated according to their schedule and preferences. All participants stated they would feel more comfortable interacting via an online platform compared with face-to-face. As such, all interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams with each of us in our respective homes. There are extra vulnerabilities to consider when working from home and sharing parts of that online (Hacker et al., 2020). The participants and I blurred the background of our video and used headphones to protect the privacy and anonymity of our homes, and the data we were constructing together.

At the start of each interview, information sheets were revisited, and opportunities were provided for questions or withdrawal of consent. I began with some informal conversation, such as asking about specific subjects they had mentioned via email, and checked that participants were still happy for me to record the interview. Participants were reminded that they did not have to have their video on and could leave the call, without giving a reason, at any point. Interviews ended once the questions had been exhausted and participants considered they had nothing else they wanted to share. Further opportunities for questions were provided at the end of the interview, alongside reminders of their rights and of next steps. I told participants that I would check in with them via email in two weeks' time. Interview recordings were entered into a password-protected transcription software which transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were checked manually against the recordings to ensure accuracy and to account for regional dialect differences.

Semi-structured interviews can support flexibility and depth of exploration and have been deemed the exemplary method for use with IPA (Reid et al., 2005; Willig, 2013). I sought a method which could provide some structure and predictability for the participants, but also allow for follow-up discussions. Interview topics (see Appendix H) were shared with participants once informed consent had been negotiated, approximately two weeks before each interview took place, and included information about the fortune line. The full interview schedule (see Appendix J) was developed based on the SLR findings, surrounding psychological literature, and methodological guidance (Smith, 1995b; Smith et al., 2022). Key authors suggest that developing an interview schedule in advance encourages researchers to explicitly consider what we hope the interview will uncover (Smith et al., 2022). Similarly, it prompts researchers to think about potential difficulties with question wording and how these may be adapted to aid ease of understanding.

In crafting interview schedules, IPA researchers aim for a balance between being clear about what the area of focus is and loaded or leading questions. Smith and colleagues (2009) suggest types of question which may be chosen by the researcher to elicit different responses and information from participants. Table 6 outlines the main question types for semi-structured interviews. In this study, descriptive, narrative, and evaluative questions were deemed most relevant to my broad focus on exploring experience.

Table 7 - Question Types used in IPA Methodology (Smith et al., 2009)

Question Type	Example
Descriptive	What do you...
Narrative	Can you tell me about how...
Evaluative	How do you feel when...
Circular	What do you think X knows about...
Comparative	How do you think your life would be if...
Structural	What are the stages involved in...
Contrast	What are the main differences between... and ...

Questions acted as a guide. Allowing each participants' story to flow was deemed more important than asking each question in a specific order. Fortune lines were shared on the screen throughout the entirety of each interview. See section 2.3.1 for more information on this aspect of the empirical procedure. The follow-up prompts below were used if they corresponded appropriately with what participants had spoken about. Other follow-up prompts were unplanned and came from my natural curiosity in wanting to learn more about a certain aspect of the girls' experiences. Prompts were positioned as a tool to enable open dialogue (Smith et al., 2009) and explore potentially salient points in more depth. Similarly, a funnelling technique was adopted (moving from broader to narrower focused questions) with the aim of building rapport and supporting participants to feel comfortable (Smith et al., 2022). Table 8 provides example interview questions and follow-up prompts.

Table 8 - Example Interview Questions and Prompts

Can you tell me a bit about your experiences of being diagnosed with Autism?

Prompts: *When were you diagnosed? How did you feel about that? How do you feel about being Autistic now?*

What does the phrase “being supported” mean to you? What does it make you think of?

Prompts: *You mentioned ‘X’, have you had any good experiences of that in college, so far? How might receiving this type of support benefit you? What do you think staff need to know about supporting Autistic girls?*

Think about a key adult in your sixth form/college who supports you – what are they like?

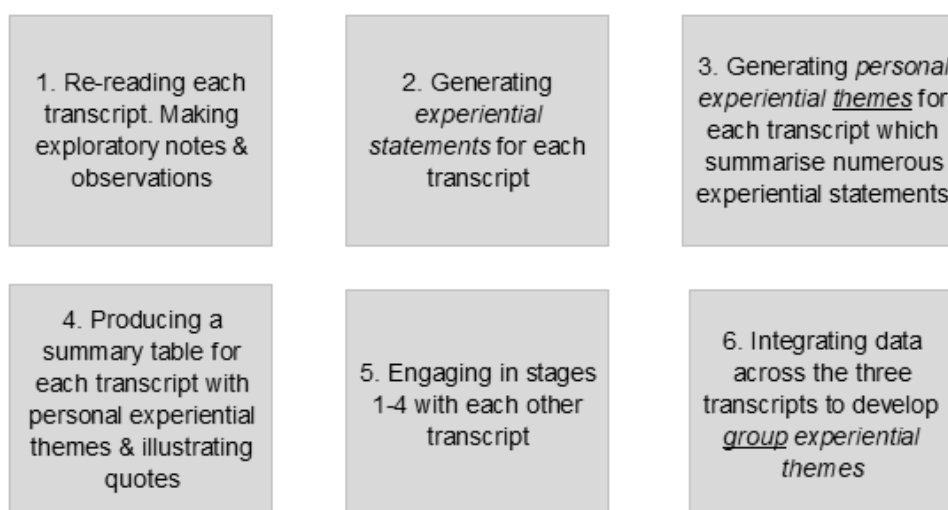
Prompts: *What do they do to support you? Why do you like them? What things could other staff learn from this person’s approach?*

3.4 Analysis

Data were analysed following Smith and colleagues’ (2022) guidance for conducting IPA. The first stage of IPA involves repeated listening of recordings and reading of transcripts, with the aim of immersing oneself completely in each individual account. During this ‘coding’ stage, I made notes on my observations of the interviews alongside my personal reflections and interpretations of the data (see Appendix K for example coded transcription). I commented on the topics of conversation, the language used, specific contextual factors, and highlighted distinctive quotes and any moments of seemingly prominent emotion. With each repetition, new comments would resonate with me, thereby endorsing the concept of hermeneutics.

Experiential statements (Smith et al., 2022) for each transcript were then identified based upon my initial notations. This involved a slightly higher level of abstraction whereby I attempted to generate concise phrases which, although grounded in participants’ words, would summarise my interpretation. From there, I began to construct commonalities across the experiential statements; these commonalities were clustered into personal experiential themes for each transcript. Stage 4 involved producing a summary table of each transcript, including the personal experiential themes and illustrating quotes (see Appendix L for example). Finally, I engaged in a process of integration across the three participants’ transcripts, generating an inclusive list of *Group* experiential themes. Figure 8 depicts the stages of IPA conducted in this research.

Figure 8 - Stages of IPA in Empirical Research



3.5 Findings and Discussion

The Group Experiential Themes aim to capture the participants' shared experiences of post-16 education, as Autistic girls. The final analysis is presented visually in Figure 9, offering a concise summary of the data and interpretations. As per Smith and colleagues' example (2022), I have combined the Findings and Discussion sections to triangulate participants' words, my interpretation of their experiences, and existing literature within the field.

The participants appeared to be making sense of their experiences in post-16 education through four overarching factors: **Practical, Psychological, Organisational, and Systemic**. I interpreted a relational link between many of the different Group Experiential Themes and sub-themes; however, within the visual model, I did not include arrows to indicate these relationships to ensure simplicity and ease of understanding.

3.5.1 Group Experiential Theme - Practical Factors

An important feature of the participants' descriptions of their post-16 experiences were practical factors that helped them to feel supported. These were discussed in several ways.

All three participants made direct statements on the importance of 'person-centred support'. Alongside having support tailored to them, the participants emphasised their desire to be included within personal and wider decision-making. Each girl gave an example of a time in which support decisions had been made on their behalf without their consultation. This

not only felt disempowering, but led to the implementation of strategies that were not beneficial or appreciated. Policy documents (e.g., DfE/DoH, 2015) and recent research suggest that person-centred support must involve meaningful co-production with young people as partners, going beyond traditional approaches of tokenistic ‘participation’ (Boswell et al., 2021). This has links with a range of positive outcomes for both neurotypical and neurodivergent learners, particularly within adolescence when many people are seeking increased autonomy (Mayer & McKenzie, 2017; Niner & Portman, 2021).

There was also an element of being trusted to know what works best for them, rather than staff having authority over decisions and support plans. For Chloe, this was characterised by a lack of understanding about different presentations of Autism (see Systemic Factors), and staff making assumptions about what would be supportive rather than engaging in her own ideas. This perspective correlates with those of other Autistic adolescent girls involved in research, who shared their views of staff not listening to them despite, at this stage in their development, being the person who best understands what support is beneficial (Jacobs et al., 2021).

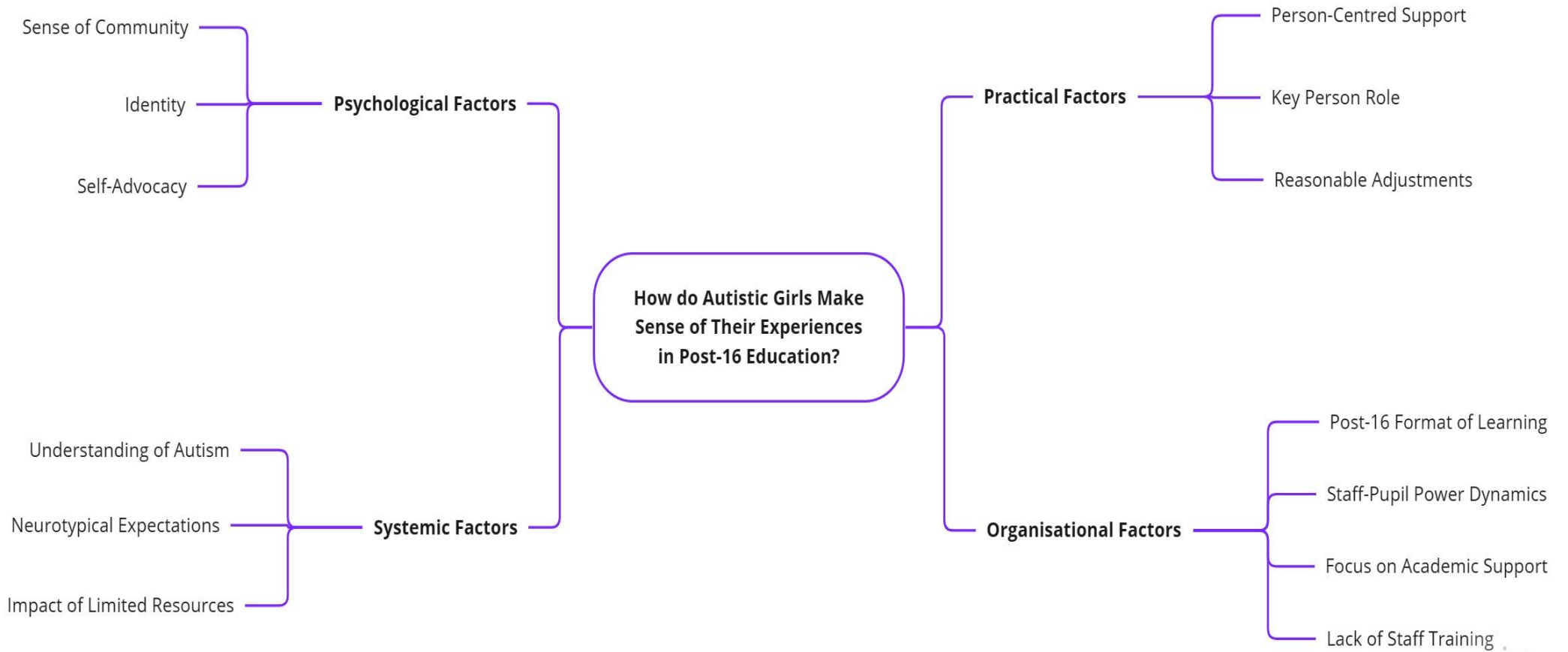
Support should be *“personal to everyone that’s receiving it... even if they [staff] can’t understand what we’re describing, for them to just believe it”* (Chloe)

The key-person role within their post-16 settings was valued by two Autistic girls in this study. Key staff-members seemed to provide a space for the girls to share their views and opinions, then use their position as staff to implement practical change on their behalf. However, Megan (who accessed post-16 education within a specialist setting), was not *“officially assigned a key person to go to”*.

“listening and responding to what I told her” (Etta)

“noise levels, extra rooms, things like that” (Chloe)

Figure 9 - Model of Findings: An Interpretation of How Autistic Girls Make Sense of Their Post-16 Experiences



Once the key person role had been established and maintained with some consistency, having one designated member of staff with who they had regular contact appeared to reduce Chloe and Etta's feelings of anxiety. Research suggests that Autistic females engage more frequently with support networks available to them (once trust has developed) than Autistic males (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2020). Moreover, assigning a key-person to Autistic adolescent girls has been a critical recommendation of research in this area (Jacobs et al., 2021). However, the initial assignment of a key-person within post-16 settings often relies upon diagnoses, which holds important implications for those with more internalised presentations of Autism or those with Autistic characteristics without a formal diagnostic label.

"She made sure that the support was in place, which was really comforting"
(Etta)

A final practical factor that impacted how the girls experienced post-16 education was the ease with which reasonable adjustments were made to accommodate their needs. They wanted to be able to engage with the learning in the same context as their peers, but with access to adaptations which made sense for them. Reasonable adjustments are written into statutory guidance (DfE/DoH, 2015) and have been described as "removing barriers... to make sure you get the same access to education as anyone else" (Scope, 2022, p. 1). Adjustments to the environment, communication, and format of engagement have been found to support Autistic people across their lifespan, without being detrimental to surrounding neurotypical populations (Petty et al., 2023; Shepherd, 2020).

"stay in the classroom at break and lunch times" (Chloe)
"stand at the back of the classroom, do my work at the standing desk" (Megan)
"sit, watch, and take notes, I didn't have to get involved in the discussion" (Etta)

3.5.2 Group Experiential Theme - Psychological Factors

Themes of advocacy, identity, and community were grouped into 'psychological factors'. These themes describe how the girls made sense of their post-16 experiences in ways that pertained to their personal feelings and intrinsic realities.

All three girls shared how being Autistic fits into their self-identity and the metaphorical journeys they have been on before, during, and after receiving their diagnoses. This is a complex and nuanced theme that links to the difference in understanding of externalised vs. internalised presentations of Autism (see Systemic Factors) and underpinned the other factors of advocacy and community. Identity formation is considered one of the main developments that occurs during adolescence (Erikson, 1968) and has been defined as “a person’s beliefs about... herself, including... who and what the self is” (Baumeister, 1999, p. 13). A critical way in which identity can be understood is through language and labels (Erikson, 1968). As in Morgan’s (2023) research, the girls in the present study discussed viewing themselves through a new lens of Autism following their diagnoses and spending time with other Autistic females. Being diagnosed with Autism gave external validation to their lived experiences and supported them to be able to accept this as an important part of their self-identities (O’Connor et al., 2018). This holds implications for those with internalised presentations of Autism who may not receive diagnoses or are diagnosed much later (Beck et al., 2020) and is something that all educational professionals must be aware of.

“I didn’t really acknowledge it [the diagnosis] for a few months... then I did some therapy about my diagnosis and the idea was to meet other people with Autism... there were girls there. It made me realise that... I can see myself in this now.” (Etta)

Where identity formation is already a complicated process for those that follow a neurotypical developmental trajectory, it can be even more complex for Autistic girls in post-16 education, many of whom may have received their diagnoses only recently (Lockwood Estrin et al., 2021). For the girls in this study, developing their identities at college or sixth form involved spending time with others in the Autistic or neurodivergent community. The “sameness of being different” seemed to construct the “in-groupness” (Morgan, 2023, p. 15) which had knock-on effects for their personal identities. Post-16 settings should understand that Autistic girls may be experiencing a process of constructing a self-identity as an Autistic person, but also of an adolescent pupil with interests and hopes for the future (Morgan, 2023). Settings which celebrate neurodiversity, have neurodiversity-based forums, and provide support beyond academic attainment have been found to facilitate positive identities for Autistic students (Rentschler et al., 2022). In this way, the interpreted themes of identity and community appear to be closely linked.

Self-advocacy was another lens through which the participants made sense of their post-16 experiences. Often necessitated by a lack of surrounding support, all three girls discussed the importance of advocating for themselves and proactively seeking solutions. For Etta, self-advocacy was a part of naturally maturing into a young adult and looking towards a future where these skills may be important. Whilst Chloe recognised that she did have to advocate for herself, she also spoke about the impacts of this and her preference for alternatives.

“I knew I had to really advocate for myself... if I had an issue, I had to say something otherwise it wasn't gonna get solved... it's just that kind of maturity from being a young teenager to turning 18” (Etta)

*“I don't want to have to stand up for myself... because that's just so taxing and so exhausting, and so demoralising”
“It is really nice to not have to constantly be the one standing up for yourself”
(Chloe)*

Within the current study, this theme of advocacy links to Systemic Factors of limited resources and understanding, and the Practical Factor of engaging in person-centred, co-produced support. Autism advocacy is rapidly expanding within research, health, education, and social contexts (Leadbitter et al., 2021), most prominently with adults. For younger children, much of the literature focuses on parental advocacy. There appears to be a gap in understanding how educational professionals can support the self-advocacy of Autistic adolescents, whilst also critically examining the wider context which necessitates this skill. It is also important to consider those Autistic adolescents who may not be in a position to advocate for themselves and the potential impact this may have upon their access to support (Hartman et al., 2023).

3.5.3 Group Experiential Theme - Organisational Factors

Throughout the interviews, the three participants referred to the structural differences between secondary and post-16 education. These included both pragmatic factors, such as timetables, and relational factors, such as staff-pupil dynamics. Termed 'organisational factors', these further illuminated how Autistic girls made sense of their post-16 educational experiences.

Self-determination theory posits that people need to experience competence, autonomy, and relatedness in order to develop and progress towards their goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy seemed to be an important aspect of the girls' post-16 experiences. Given the format of post-16 education in the UK, all three girls were studying subjects that they had explicitly chosen and had 'free' periods for extra study, support time with staff, or socialisation. This more flexible approach to education was associated with feelings of freedom, choice, and developing independence. For Megan, at her specialist setting, the autonomy required by the format of post-16 learning was built up gradually, which she appreciated. Beyond the pragmatics of timetabling, staff can support the development of autonomy with Autistic adolescents through strengths-based discussions, offering choice, providing safe opportunities for socialisation, and giving appropriate responsibility (Lei & Russell, 2021).

"we were never dropped in the deep end... it was a natural progression" (Megan)

"more control over your own learning" and "being able to do my own thing" (Chloe)

The concept of 'relatedness' (Ryan & Deci, 2000) was also present in these interviews. Participants made sense of their time in post-16 education through their relationships with staff, which seemed to hold a different dynamic to those they had experienced in secondary school. It seemed important to all three girls that they were *"not babied or belittled"* (Megan) and that their developing independence was respected. There can be experiences of disequilibrium when traditional power dynamics between staff and students are challenged; however, if staff are able to move beyond these difficult feelings and shed conventional notions of authority, there are many potential benefits to the whole learning community (Davis & Parmenter, 2021). For Autistic girls, who have historically held limited 'power' (Cascio et al., 2021), being treated as equal to post-16 staff had implications for their wellbeing, confidence, and advocacy skills.

"You are treated by your teachers more like adults and have a genuine relationship with them... there's not this just arbitrary respect... that's expected at secondary school. In college, they respect you and you respect them" (Chloe)

The organisation of post-16 educational settings in the UK appears to act as a bridge between the directive approach of secondary schools and the complete independence of university. The preparation of students for higher education seems to be a key priority for post-16 settings. When discussing the support they received at their post-16 settings, all three girls noted how this almost exclusively focused upon academic engagement. Although this was important to all of them, they argued that a more holistic approach to support, such as a focus upon wellbeing and general life-skills, would have been preferred. This aligns with other qualitative data in which Autistic young adults shared their desire for support beyond that focused on academic attainment (Accardo et al., 2019). By 'life-skills', Autistic young people do not mean learning to “*deal with your Autism in a way that doesn't affect other people*” (Megan). Rather, post-16 settings should adopt a neuro-affirming approach, supporting Autistic girls to understand and navigate current systems and develop the skills which are important to them in pursuing their own interests (Hartman et al., 2023). The Personal Skills Profile may be a useful tool for post-16 staff, and EPs, to continually align their practice with the Preparing for Adulthood framework (DfE/DoH, 2015; NDTI, 2022) and support the development of life-skills, beyond academics (Tomlinson & Oland, 2023).

“*They offered amazing support in academic regions, [but] never helped me with social and just life skills*” (Megan)

Finally, there appears to be a lack of training for post-16 staff in relation to Autistic girls, which the participants in this study were aware of. Linking to the focus on academic engagement, all three girls discussed initially not being supported as they “*appeared to be okay and [were] getting good grades*” (Etta). There were also experiences of meeting with staff who the girls believed did not understand their experiences or views. In the current context, given understanding of Autistic girls is still developing, “expecting teachers to know what to do to support Autistic girls . . . is unrealistic” (Critchley, 2019, p. 168). Rather, a comprehensive plan for professional development on neurodiversity, including different presentations of Autism, is warranted. Training staff in educational settings on the internalised presentation of Autism has been a key recommendation of several publications in this area (e.g., Cook et al., 2018).

“somebody who has an understanding of what Autism is... and has training in it with girls... It’s obvious when you go for support and somebody doesn’t know what they’re talking about” (Megan)

3.5.4 Group Experiential Theme - Systemic Factors

Participants all referred to the wider context of their experiences as an Autistic female, generally, and how they may impact upon their time within post-16 education, more specifically. Interpreted as ‘Systemic Factors’, these pertained to societal understanding and representations of Autism, as well as current austerity measures and resource constraints.

In this study, participants referenced the limited understanding of Autistic girls within wider society which, as previously discussed, had important impacts upon their identities and access to support. This appeared to be underpinned by a lack of Autistic female representation and the pervasiveness of the stereotypical externalised presentation. Megan, whose school-based presentation seemed to be the most externalised out of the three participants, was diagnosed significantly earlier than Etta and Chloe. They both discussed using masking as a strategy and subsequently struggling emotionally in the home environment. This echoes literature discussed in the chapter introduction (see Section 3.2.2) whereby females are socialised to internalise their feelings, which leads to many Autistic girls masking, and a consequent lack of understanding by school staff of their authentic, internal experiences (Tomlinson et al., 2020).

“I was diagnosed early because I had a lot of the male traits”.

“There’s rumours and stereotypes put around us and terrible representation in the media” (Megan)

“I looked for information, but everything I saw I didn’t feel represented in”.

“Go home and have meltdowns constantly because I was so exhausted” (Etta)

Associated with this limited understanding of Autistic girls was the neurotypical expectations that educational settings, including post-16 colleges/sixth forms, place upon their learners. Participants discussed experiences of sensory overload linked to the educational environment alongside firm expectations from staff around engaging in regular group work that they found uncomfortable. The structure, content, and delivery of A-Level qualifications was designed for neurotypical learners. Therefore, even inclusive settings may struggle to

actively meet the needs of Autistic post-16 students who are suggested to prefer a less collaborative learning format (National Autistic Society, 2021; Waddington & Reed, 2017).

The final systemic factor that was present throughout all three interviews was the impact of limited resources on the types and amount of support the girls were able to access. Many of the difficulties that participants discussed, such as staff training or engaging in self-advocacy, were linked with a lack of time and money available for post-16 settings to develop inclusive practice. The current socio-political context of austerity has wide-ranging and well-documented impacts upon education. Austerity measures have led to fewer and larger post-16 settings which have had to significantly reduce spending and spread their limited resources more thinly (O'Leary, 2017). This has impacted upon the support available for Autistic students through reduction in staff-pupil ratios, staff training, specialist resources, and multi-agency collaboration (Evans, 2022). For Autistic girls, austerity also appears to have created further barriers for accessing diagnosis and support (Thomas, 2022).

The learning support department “*was just a complete mess... there wasn't enough staff or enough money to actually allocate resources properly*”. She recognised this as “*a far bigger problem than they [the staff] could sort out by themselves*” (Chloe)

3.5.5 Summary

Through semi-structured interviews and IPA, I have interpreted a model which suggests Autistic girls make sense of their post-16 experiences through Practical, Psychological, Organisational, and Systemic factors. Current resource levels appear to be constraining the practical and relational support post-16 staff are able to offer Autistic girls, at this key period of developing independence and identity. This has led to a focus on academic achievement and necessitated high levels of self-advocacy for the girls to access appropriately tailored reasonable adjustments. The societal lack of understanding and representation of Autistic girls, or others with internalised presentations, seems to underpin many of the group themes explored here. This empirical research highlights the importance of engaging Autistic adolescents in projects that are important to them and demonstrates the richness of views and experiences that can be explored by giving this group a space to be heard.

3.6 Limitations

This research had a number of limitations. Firstly, due to the time constraints and pragmatics of conducting an empirical project as part of a wider practice-based doctorate, this study was small and included only three participants from one geographical area of England, thereby limiting the generalisability of the interpreted model. A future project that includes Autistic girls from a range of areas in England could support the construction of a broader understanding and, perhaps, highlight LAs that are supporting this group in different ways.

Whilst highlighting the voices of an often previously overlooked group, the participants who engaged with this research were all White British, cis-gendered, non-disabled, and with cognitive and linguistic strengths; therefore, they are afforded some privileges that do not extend to others in our society. Future studies may seek to include the perspectives of Autistic people who also identify as belonging to other marginalised groups in order to increase the diversity and intersectionality of the lived experiences represented. Mallipeddi and VanDaalen (2022) suggest that intersectionality is the next critical step for Autism research, particularly in relation to race and ethnicity.

As previously discussed, one of the main aims of this research was to provide a platform from which the voices of Autistic girls could be heard. Although I believe this aim was achieved, the participants could have been engaged more meaningfully as co-researchers within the process. I recognise that decisions regarding methodology and analysis were, largely, based upon my own perspectives and the girls were involved in a process that had already been decided. On the one hand, this was necessitated by pragmatic constraints; on the other, engaging in this project alongside the girls as co-researchers may have promoted different discussions and deeper understanding (Nicolaidis et al., 2019).

3.7 Implications for EP Practice

A lack of understanding of the internalised presentation of Autism seemed to underpin many of the participants' educational experiences and had significant impacts upon their wellbeing, identity, and access to appropriate support. EPs have a professional duty to continually develop their specialist knowledge and skills, and to remain well-informed about advances in research (BPS, 2018). Given the expanding literature base involving the voices

of Autistic females, particularly within educational contexts, EPs should be able to offer advice and training on Autism and girls to post-16 settings, schools, and wider LA colleagues. Although the negotiation of training can be a challenge for EPs with service-level agreements (Winward, 2015), increased dissemination of research that shares the views of Autistic girls may improve understanding and representation. This, in turn, may reduce the need for masking and contribute towards improvement in wellbeing.

The broader notions from this interpreted model, such as developing understanding of internalised presentations of Autism, are likely to benefit many girls. However, Autistic girls are not a homogenous group; the finer details of how each person prefers to be supported will differ and must be explored in the context of a trusting relationship. Rather than adopting a traditional role of mediator between the voices of young people and staff, EPs may be well placed to support post-16 settings to embed true co-production into their own daily practice (Boswell & Woods, 2021). Introducing co-production approaches into post-16 policies and upskilling staff to engage in this themselves may avoid 'tokenistic' attempts and ensure that the voices of Autistic girls, and other learners, are appropriately valued. However, it seems that the EP workforce may also need additional professional development on co-production, given that practitioner confidence in this area remains low (Boswell et al., 2021).

Embedding co-production may be part of a wider strategy of scaffolding the developing independence of Autistic girls in post-16 education. The girls in this study all discussed their identities as a maturing adolescent with a voice and hopes for the future. As Megan, and the title of this chapter, states: "*I want to be supported, but I need to be independent*". This is, perhaps, a key difference in the support that Autistic girls in mainstream post-16 settings seek, as compared to younger or older Autistic females. There appears to be an important balance between support and independence during adolescence that is even more complex for Autistic girls who may have only recently been diagnosed (Lockwood Estrin et al., 2021). Alongside co-production, EPs may support post-16 staff to better understand Autistic developmental trajectories and forego neurotypical expectations. Providing opportunities for the neurodivergent community to connect and moving beyond academic engagement as the focus of support may benefit Autistic girls' life-skills, self-identities, and confidence.

In sum, this research suggests a number of ways in which EPs can facilitate a greater understanding and level of support for Autistic girls, which are grounded in their own words, views, and experiences.

Chapter 4: Reflexive Synthesis

This chapter will provide a reflexive account of the professional and academic learning I experienced throughout this research journey. It aims to cover the implications for myself, as a researcher-practitioner, the academic field, and the practice context in which EPs work with schools, young people, and families.

4.1 Personal and Professional Motivations

Darlaston-Jones argues that “one cannot ignore the role of the person in the research process” (2007, p. 25). This section briefly outlines the personal and professional motivations underpinning this empirical research.

My interest in Autism and girls initially developed from personal experiences. Somebody I know well was diagnosed with Autism in her early twenties. Having struggled throughout her education, she described finally understanding herself as Autistic as “life-changing”. I was intrigued by the systemic and societal factors which potentially influenced her experiences. Working alongside both Autistic males and females within a specialist secondary school alluded to the gender disparity in relation to diagnosis, support, and identity. My interest was further developed as an Assistant Educational Psychologist where I was involved in research exploring educational and parental perspectives of Autistic girls in mainstream schools (Gray et al., 2021). This project indicated the lack of understanding of an internalised presentation of Autism and highlighted the impact this can have upon girls and their families. As such, from a social justice perspective, I wanted to promote gender equality in the understanding, diagnosis, and support of Autistic people. Moreover, I hoped to give space for the voices of Autistic girls themselves.

The focus upon post-16 education was borne out of placement experiences and developing an understanding of systems and legislation within England. Changes to the SEND CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015) broadened the EP role to include working with young people from 16-25-years-old. However, my own experiences as a Trainee EP (TEP) and discussions with colleagues suggest that EPs’ work beyond secondary stages of education is limited. I hoped to use this empirical project to explore why this might be the case, perhaps developing a practical model which could promote EPs’ role in this area.

4.2 Reflections of a Neurotypical Researcher

Research on neurodiversity, including Autism, has long been the privilege of white, male, neurotypical academics (Grant & Kara, 2021). In the 1980s, as the field gradually extended to involve neurodivergent people as researchers, the separation of Autistic people into groups based on “level of functioning” was deeply entrenched. This promoted the concept of ‘othering’, whereby people are perceived as less than due to their differences (Woods et al., 2018). Although twenty-first century projects are beginning to value the lived experiences of Autistic people, overall, Autistic participants share that they still do not feel adequately included in research (den Houting et al., 2021).

Nind states that inclusive research will be “conducted *by, with and for*” people with a range of differences (Nind, 2017, p. 279). I aimed for this research to be done *with* and *for* Autistic people. As I will discuss in section 4.5, the project holds important implications for a range of contexts which, I hope, will lead to more inclusive and positive educational experiences for Autistic students, particularly those with internalised presentations. It goes some way in adding to the limited research in this area which includes the voices of Autistic adolescents (Scott-Barrett et al., 2019). Moreover, steps were taken to try to make the research process as accessible and comfortable for participants as possible (see section 2.3).

Yet, I experienced tension around not collaborating with the participants more meaningfully, and my role as a neurotypical ‘outsider’. Although my wider reading highlighted Autistic girls’ experiences of post-16 education as a potential research gap, methodological choices were made by me, without the involvement of any Autistic person. Throughout this project, I have questioned my role as a neurotypical researcher-practitioner in holding space for the voices of Autistic people, themselves, without acting as their voice. Research has found that both neurotypical and neurodivergent researchers, and members of the Autistic community, want to engage in more participatory research; however, deeper philosophical and practical understanding, training, and resources are needed to conduct this in ways which are equitable and meaningful for all (den Houting et al., 2021). In future projects, where time constraints and resources may, perhaps, be more generous, I would aim to work alongside neurodivergent co-researchers and be guided by the agenda of the Autistic community, valuing their lived experiences to inform methodological decisions. The AASPIRE practice-based guidelines for including Autistic people as co-researchers may offer a good starting point (Nicolaidis et al., 2019).

4.3 Applying Learning as a Practitioner

Eodanable and Lauchlan (2009) argue that the process of doctoral research creates practitioners who are more adept at using their research skills to improve outcomes for those they work with. I believe the skills I have developed through this research project have benefitted my practice in all other areas of the EP role (Scottish Executive, 2002).

The first step in undertaking any element of EP practice is to explore the focus of the work and establish questions to be addressed. Developing a conceptual framework and determining specific research questions informed methodological and procedural decisions (Willig, 2013; Smith et al., 2022). This correlates with the way in which I approach practice situations as a TEP, using initial consultations to explore what the hopes and expectations are for my involvement and negotiate ways forward accordingly. In the dynamic, interpersonal, often “messy” context of working with humans (Mellor, 2001), developing a clear remit from the outset can support stakeholders’ wellbeing and practitioners’ consideration of the psychology that may be applied.

Work in both research and practice contexts can involve the bringing together of different conceptualisations to develop a more holistic understanding. Within the SLR, I selected appropriate databases, used systematic searching strategies, and synthesised data from five relevant papers. My empirical research also involved collating many data and interpreting shared experiences across three individual stories. These are important skills which I have drawn upon in my practice as a TEP. During consultations and assessments, I aim to explore the views of all key people involved in a situation and glean information from different contexts using a variety of tools. Taking this holistic approach recognises the complexity of any given situation and can provide a deeper understanding of influencing factors, thereby leading to more tailored recommendations (Wagner, 2017).

Conducting the literature review and empirical project developed my understanding of how to access and interpret psychological theory and literature. The process has reinforced the importance of being well-informed about advances in evidence-bases, noted as a key competency of practitioner-psychologists (BPS, 2018). These research skills also allow us to espouse ‘big ideas’, such as the concept of neurodiversity, to support positive change at a wider level (Cameron, 2006). Specifically, I have been able to offer safe challenge to a school about the implementation of an ableist, social skills intervention that lacked evidential support. Instead, I used my research skills to source and explain literature which suggested an alternative approach involving a whole school appreciation of ‘difference’.

4.4 Applying Learning as a Researcher

Although research is considered one of the five core functions (Scottish Executive, 2002) and distinctive contributions of the EP role (Cameron, 2006), only a small proportion of the profession conduct research regularly (Topping & Lauchlan, 2013). Completing this thesis has illuminated the power and purpose of research to me and strengthened my resolve to ensure it is a part of my future practice. As such, I will use this section to consider how my practice skills may impact my engagement with future research projects.

My conceptualisation of the EP role acknowledges dialogic, relational, and personal influences on all our interactions. Similarly, the qualitative approach I adopted throughout this research recognises the role that my values, experiences, and decisions, and those of the other people involved, have had upon the process and outcome. Moving away from traditional notions of scientific rigour, the foundation of my own approach to this research is that psychology can support us to explore “meaning and interpretation” (Arruda, 2003, p. 341). Throughout this thesis, I have denoted how concepts are referred to in the literature, or how people make sense of their experiences. This project has reaffirmed the subjectivity of research processes and the subsequent provisionality of any suggested conclusions.

As a TEP, being flexible and adapting to changeable situations is crucial. Whilst being aware of my own personal assumptions, I aim to approach each practice situation with an open mind, being guided by the views and information presented to me as stories unfold. Moreover, when working with people and complex systems, things do not always go according to plan; on placement, I regularly improvise, drawing upon my skills and previous experiences, to respond appropriately to wherever I find myself. Flexibility and fluidity are also important within research. For instance, whilst conducting the SLR, I had to adapt my research question and searching strategies in accordance with database results. Participant recruitment for the empirical project was also tricky and necessitated frequent reworking and attempts in different contexts. For me, Carla Willig’s famous description of “research as an adventure” (2013; pg. 4) encapsulates the importance of an adaptable approach which I aim to apply in future projects and practice.

Interpersonal skills are considered a key component of effective and attuned EP practice (Jackson Taft et al., 2020). Similarly, many researchers have transferable skills in facilitating open communication and supporting participants to feel safe in sharing their stories. Within this empirical project, I used the ‘soft skills’ I have developed throughout my placements in attempts to establish rapport with the girls and reduce any perceived power differentials.

Shumway (1989, p. 161) proposes that power afforded to educational professionals is bound in the assumption of “some kind of exclusive expertise”. In my conversations with Etta, Megan, and Chloe I prioritised their views and experiences, aiming to position them as the experts within their own lives. I believe that my pre-interview communication, active listening, and flexible approach to the interview schedule supported participants’ engagement, despite the virtual context. These are skills which I will aim to bring to every interpersonal interaction, having seen the benefits within practice and research situations.

4.5 Taking the Research Forwards

4.5.1 Implications for the Wider System

In smaller ways, I hope that this research was meaningful for the girls with whom I engaged. They each shared that they found the conversations powerful; in reflecting on their educational experiences, they were able to see the trajectory of their identities, wellbeing, and advocacy skills. I hope that by creating the space for their views to be shared and disseminating these widely, they may recognise that their voices *do* matter in a context that has, historically, overlooked them. I felt honoured to talk with these girls about their experiences and be alongside them through their open and honest accounts. Speaking with Etta, Megan, and Chloe caused me to reflect on my own educational experiences and the privilege afforded to me, just by being a person that equates to what society considers “normal”.

EPs may work within many of the different levels depicted by the models developed out of this research. As practitioners, we can contribute to the person-centred approaches that are valued by Autistic adolescents, using our skills to ensure conversations are accessible and voices are heard. EPs could encourage the implementation of the practical strategies within our local education settings, perhaps offering training on topics such as creating calm spaces or the key-person role. Furthermore, there is a remit for EPs to reframe conventional deficit narratives and offer an alternative, neurodiversity-affirming lens through which educational staff may engage with their students. This could, in turn, emphasise the voices of previously eschewed groups, such as Autistic girls.

For schools and post-16 settings, both the literature review and empirical models offer simple, practical strategies to support the transition and educational experiences of Autistic students. Yet, within the current context, individual staff may struggle to introduce these in

the way they were intended. A top-down approach in which education and inclusion is a governmental priority and appropriately funded is necessary for many of the changes suggested by this research to be enacted. The empirical research indicated practical, psychological, organisational, and systemic factors that impact upon Autistic girls' post-16 experiences. The findings offer some suggestion of what is important to Autistic girls as they navigate this new stage of education and increased independence. As outlined in section 3.6, future research could make use of more participatory paradigms, working alongside an intersectionality of neurodivergent people to highlight a range of stories.

4.5.2 My Next Steps

Beyond engaging in this research to complete the doctorate course requirements, I wanted to produce something that was meaningful and had real-life practical implications. As previously discussed, the idea was borne out of my placement experiences of limited work within post-16 education. As such, I hoped that the findings would contribute to a better understanding of this context and of Autistic girls within that, alongside consideration for the EP role. In February 2023, I presented the models generated by my literature review and empirical research to EP colleagues within my placement service. In facilitating this discussion, I gained a range of perspectives about how we, as a team, could implement the findings into our specific context. It was helpful to hear from EPs with decades of collective experience and to draw on their understanding of the systems surrounding neurodiversity and post-16 education. From this, I considered more deeply how my findings correlate with elements of the Preparing for Adulthood agenda. I thought that explicitly linking my work to this existent and pervasive model could, perhaps, benefit the dissemination and broader understanding of my work.

As such, following the submission of this thesis, I plan to embed my models into those that are already being used in educational and LA contexts, aiming to make them more accessible, whilst not losing the voices of the participants. I have arranged to present my research findings to the LA SEND team, post-16 service, and two post-16 providers in Autumn Term of 2023. From there, I hope to collaborate with wider colleagues to consider how to best support the transitions and subsequent experiences of neurodivergent learners in this post-16 context. Finally, I hope to publish both my literature review and empirical study to develop further understanding and promote additional research in this area.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Meta-Ethnography Stage 5 – Example of Reciprocal Translation

1st/2nd Order Constructs	Reciprocal Translation into 3rd Order Construct	3rd Order Construct Synthesis
<p>“Transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education is one element in UK government’s Think Autism strategy” (Essex & Melham, 2019).</p> <p>“Participating in decision-making and extending provision for SEND beyond the boundaries of compulsory education constitute key components of the changes introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014, and place transition-planning in a central position” (Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019).</p> <p>“The Equality Act 2010 is clear that all education providers must make “reasonable adjustments” to ensure disabled learners are not discriminated against” (Park & Mortell, 2020).</p> <p>“Young people with an [EHCP] are eligible for statutory transition planning processes in the years leading up to their transfer from children’s services, including planning around leaving school” (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014).</p>	UK context & legislation	Systems & Resources
<p>“If transition is going to be successful, it should be acknowledged and afforded better resourcing, so that it can be done systematically over an extended time frame” (Essex & Melham, 2019).</p> <p><i>“The teacher in the class helps other children... I think she helps everyone in the class”</i> (Gaona et al., 2019).</p> <p><i>“They finally brought in a learning assistant, but that assistant was a bit like an assistant when you go into school who helps every single person in the class; I needed somebody to just be assigned to help me”</i> (Park & Mortell, 2020).</p> <p>“Evidence from young people’s accounts suggests that [taster visits] are opportunities which are often reduced or cut in response to constrained resources and cost-saving environments” (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014).</p>	Limited resources	

<p>“Careers Advisors’ involvement was limited both in terms of their understanding of Autism and in the resources they had to address the needs of these young people” (Shepherd, 2020).</p>		
<p>“Recommendations of teachers... are unheard by outside agencies because current educational policy is more concerned with the financial cost of education, rather than with the benefits that the most appropriate education could provide both to the individual child and society as a whole” (Essex & Melham, 2019).</p> <p>“There is a gap between rhetoric and practice, as individuals with ASD continue to face exclusion in decision-making, consultations, and research” (Gaona et al., 2019).</p> <p>“Despite government policy concerning the inclusion of young autistic people in the development of provision, there is little evidence to suggest they have had much voice in this” (Park & Mortell, 2020).</p> <p>“Access to advice and support from young people’s services is now dependent on local decisions in terms of the type and extent of service offered” (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014).</p> <p>“Although there were orientation visits to local colleges, the frequency and intensity of these varied; this appeared to relate less to the needs and preferences of the student and more to the strengths of the links the school had with colleges” (Shepherd, 2020).</p>	<p>Gap between guidance & practice</p>	

Appendix B – Meta-Ethnography Stage 6 – Synthesising Constructs Map

First order constructs are presented in italicised fonts inside quotation marks. Second order constructs are presented in normal font.

Essex & Melham, 2019	Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019	Park & Mortell, 2020	Mitchell & Beresford, 2014	Shepherd, 2020
Parental Role (3 rd order)				
<p>The burden of planning for transition frequently falls on parents who are offered limited support to negotiate this area.</p> <p>Parents/carers were playing a crucial role in coordinating and driving forward transition planning.</p> <p>All but one of the students in this study said that their parents had helped them with transition planning.</p> <p>Staff valued parental input, recognising their unique understanding of their child.</p> <p>Parents were required to recognise what was in their daughter's best interests and to fight for it.</p>	<p><i>"I'd go first to my parents, because they are more responsible and probably they have more experience about the problems I have"</i></p> <p>All participants recognised the significant role their families play in their day-to-day lives.</p> <p>Young people reported choosing their parents to assist them, acknowledging parental experience and knowledge as key to support them.</p> <p>Participants seemed to face the 'push and pull' of parental roles; parents were portrayed in a dilemmatic position of letting go and promoting autonomy, whilst also protecting their children from harm.</p>	<p>Families play a key role in statutory assessment and planning processes, particularly at key times of transition.</p>	<p><i>"Parents helped with like contacts and stuff, they mostly did like the phone calls, calling the people and stuff"</i></p> <p><i>"Teachers don't really know as much as my Mum... cos they don't, they, my Mum understand me most cos she lives with me"</i></p> <p><i>"It was taken upon my mum to take records [of the meetings] and then explain them to me more simply and at a time when I was less stressed"</i></p> <p><i>"My parents... helped me figure out the bus, how, what buses I needed to take, how much it would cost and stuff"</i></p> <p>Almost all participants reported that their parents had played an important role. No evidence was found that parent's support was not welcomed.</p>	<p><i>"Maybe he's doing a skydiving course or something, I haven't the faintest idea"</i></p> <p><i>"The college travel trainer shouted at me. He said parents like you don't want their children to grow up and have independence. Don't you want him to have a girlfriend and have a job? Don't you want him to have a normal life?"</i></p> <p>Autistic students have higher parental dependency than their peers.</p> <p>Institutions need to recognise the interdependence of autistic students with their parents or carers.</p> <p>Parents drew on their caring role for their children to illuminate aspects of their children's experiences.</p>

			<p>For some families, the extent of parental involvement had been influenced by a lack of support from statutory services.</p> <p>It was parents who had been the primary source of emotional support.</p> <p>Parents understood them, their individual needs, and the impact of Autism on their lives.</p> <p>Parents were consistently portrayed as being indispensable. Two key roles emerged: information-gatherer and sharing the decision-making process.</p> <p>Parents helped their child find alternative solutions (to issues that arose) <i>before</i> starting at college.</p>	<p>Institutions made assumptions about autistic students' abilities to be independent from their parents.</p> <p>Prior to their children starting at college, parents/carers in this study were used to receiving daily communication about their child. They struggled with the lack of information from college and felt it undermined their ability to be able to support their children.</p>
Essex & Melham, 2019	Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019	Park & Mortell, 2020	Mitchell & Beresford, 2014	Shepherd, 2020
Person-Centred Support (3 rd order)				
<i>"I think we went to a transition meeting... I don't really know what's going on with that though"</i>	<i>"Well, because in my opinion they just want me to do other stuff. They don't focus on the near future I would like to have"</i>	<i>"I don't think anyone should let anyone else define who they are. I think that we should just learn to work with"</i>	<i>"Yeah, so she understands which makes a big difference to people like me."</i>	<i>"I think every person is an individual and the way their Autism affects them is very"</i>

<p>Participants said that they hoped that if staff were aware of their Autism, its affects upon them and the support they needed, it might help them manage better in class.</p> <p>Students not always involved in their own transition planning.</p> <p>When asked if there had been a transition planning process, three young women denied any knowledge of such a process.</p> <p>The data indicated that support is not tailored to the participants' needs and is not flexible or responsive in the way that it needs to be.</p>	<p><i>"I'm not sure on the process... it's quite secretive. I would have liked more transparency"</i></p> <p>Schools need to incorporate practises to elicit the views of children and young people with Autism in a meaningful way to co-construct and develop provision that reflects their aspirations.</p> <p>Agencies need to work jointly in the delivery of ecological transition planning that recognises the individuality of each young person.</p>	<p><i>these people who are different."</i></p> <p>Stephen highlighted the importance and value of having access to tailored support.</p> <p>Findings highlight the important of flexible and individualised transition planning for young Autistic people.</p> <p>It is most important to know what works for each individual.</p> <p>It is vital to hear from these young people's perspectives and to establish the kind of support that is most useful to them.</p>	<p>The young people did not appear to have much knowledge of this [transition support] process.</p> <p>The young people were very clear that practitioner support was most effective when the practitioner knew them well, particularly the way their Autism manifested itself and their strengths and weaknesses.</p> <p>One young person commented that open-mindedness and a willingness to listen was needed.</p> <p>The young people disliked it when practitioners made presumptions about their specific needs and situation based on ASC generalisations.</p>	<p><i>different from one child to the next..."</i></p> <p>Limited understandings were also reflected in transition plans that constructed Autism as a deficit and located the difficulties within the individual.</p> <p>The communication needs and preferences of Autistic students must be taken into account, and corresponding adjustments made within the transition planning process. Adjustments were not necessarily made to accommodate the distinctive capabilities and scaffold the support needs of the students, perhaps because these were not always well understood.</p> <p>[Participant names] would all have benefitted from a more individualised curriculum that better addressed them as learners and social actors, recognising their strengths and difficulties.</p>
<p>Essex & Melham, 2019</p>	<p>Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019</p>	<p>Park & Mortell, 2020</p>	<p>Mitchell & Beresford, 2014</p>	<p>Shepherd, 2020</p>
<p>Developing Independence (3rd order)</p>				

<p><i>“Actually, we should be measuring progress in terms of independence, communication, and wellbeing”</i></p> <p>Success needs to be reconceptualised... about becoming a confident individual, capable of functioning as independently as possible.</p> <p>The almost exclusive focus on education excludes other needs... such as developing independence with travel.</p> <p>Some of the support may no longer be necessary as students mature and become more independent.</p>	<p><i>“I think I can go a bit further in my independence... um, like learning to make a meal on my own, for myself, with no help.”</i></p> <p>Findings suggest that at the time of transition young people with ASD want to become increasingly more independent.</p> <p>For youth with ASD and their families, this can be a challenging time as they leave the comfort of the education system with less experience of autonomy and independence than those expected of youth transitioning to adulthood.</p> <p>Participants referred to independence when discussing the topics of mobility and the use of transport, domestic life, and self-care, and was alluded to as an achievement, or as goal for the near future.</p> <p>Six participants mentioned that, although they wanted to move around independently, they did not go out on their own without a parent/carer.</p>	<p><i>“Erm, the [college name] gets the students used to doing practical and independent skills for if they want to do stuff by themselves.”</i></p> <p>The idea of transitions offering the possibility of growth and development was a recurring theme, including through growing independence.</p> <p>[Participant name] described how learning new skills at college and having access to reasonable adjustments had contributed to his growing sense of autonomy and independence.</p> <p>Part of the transition planning that [name] experienced at high school was to support students to go out into the local community with increasing independence.</p>	<p><i>“[Bus buddy] would go with me on the bus, at the beginning but as I got more independent she'd park out there and she'd wait”</i></p> <p>There are expectations of increased independence, greater demands for self-directed learning, self-management of time...</p> <p>A lack of confidence in their social skills may compromise their ability to... manage expectations of independence and self-reliance.</p>	<p>There are increased expectations for young people to assimilate independent 'college student' identities.</p> <p>Normative expectations of adolescence and independence by educational institutions can marginalise the lived experiences of autistic adolescents.</p> <p>Basic independence markers had all been compromised by not having a peer group and limited access to social lives.</p> <p>Experiences highlight a failure to acknowledge the more varied and complex trajectories of young people towards independence, and a wider need to recognise an alternative interdependent state in which adjustments are made to support independence that acknowledge their Autism.</p>
<p>Essex & Melham, 2019</p>	<p>Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019</p>	<p>Park & Mortell, 2020</p>	<p>Mitchell & Beresford, 2014</p>	<p>Shepherd, 2020</p>

Systems & Resources (3 rd order)				
<p><i>“Currently the view is about gaining qualifications, whereas... education... should have a wider remit... but that’s not really what the current government think education’s about”.</i></p> <p>Transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education is one element in UK government’s Think Autism strategy.</p> <p>Many ASC students in mainstream education are not in receipt of an EHCP... and they receive very little in the form of care and support from adult Social Services. Students without an EHCP are unlikely to receive any formal help with transitioning, with the result that students with ASC and their families are poorly supported at this time. A poorly planned transition can then lead to further exclusion from facilities and services.</p> <p>Most staff said they found it difficult to gain accurate information about new students or to pass accurate information on.</p>	<p><i>“The teacher in the class helps other children... I think she helps everyone in the class”</i></p> <p>Participating in decision-making and extending provision for SEND beyond the boundaries of compulsory education constitute key components of the changes introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014, and place transition-planning in a central position.</p> <p>There is a gap between rhetoric and practice, as individuals with ASD continue to face exclusion in decision-making, consultations and research.</p> <p>Three participants highlighted that they sometimes did not feel they received the support they needed. This was referred to as teacher unavailability to spend ore time supporting her due to the duty to support many students simultaneously.</p>	<p><i>“They finally brought in a learning assistant, but that assistant was a bit like an assistant when you go into school who helps every single person in the class; I needed somebody to just be assigned to help me”.</i></p> <p>The Equality Act 2010 is clear that all education providers must make “reasonable adjustments” to ensure disabled learners are not discriminated against.</p> <p>Despite government policy concerning the inclusion of young autistic people in the development of provision, there is little evidence to suggest they have had much voice in this.</p> <p>Finished at School Programme – a two year Department of Education-funded project with the aim of improving the transition from school to college for young autistic people.</p> <p>In line with the government agenda of person-centred planning, it remains vital to</p>	<p>Young people with an [EHCP] are eligible for statutory transition planning processes in the years leading up to their transfer from children’s services, including planning around leaving school.</p> <p>The extent of parental involvement had been influenced by a lack of support from statutory services.</p> <p>Participants who did not have an [EHCP] did not report markedly different transition planning experiences or levels of support from school/college staff and other practitioners compared to those with an [EHCP].</p> <p>Evidence from young people’s accounts suggests that [taster visits] are opportunities which are often reduced or cut in response to constrained resources and cost-saving environments.</p> <p>Many young people with Autism will not be under statutory transition planning and support processes within SEN provision, nor will they be eligible for wider</p>	<p>Careers Advisors’ involvement was limited both in terms of their understanding of Autism and in the resources they had to address the needs of these young people.</p> <p>Although there were orientation visits to local colleges, the frequency and intensity of these varied; this appeared to relate less to the needs and preferences of the student and more to the strengths of the links the school had with colleges.</p> <p>There was an abdication of institutional responsibility over the summer break.</p> <p>Pressures for travel training could be seen as arising from an economic imperative to reduce transport costs, rather than emerging from an individual’s need to develop their independence.</p> <p>Both [participant names] experiences reveal the inflexibility of college systems and a restricted view of academic progress.</p>

<p>It appears to be a loose collection of <i>ad hoc</i> arrangements that provides no clarity for teacher, student, or parents.</p> <p>If transition is going to be successful, it should be acknowledged and afforded better resourcing, so that it can be done systematically over an extended time frame.</p> <p>Recommendations of teachers... are unheard by outside agencies because current educational policy is more concerned with the financial cost of education, rather than with the benefits that the most appropriate education could provide both to the individual child and society as a whole.</p>		<p>hear from these young people's perspectives.</p>	<p>transition support from children's services.</p> <p>Access to advice and support from young people's services is now dependent on local decisions in terms of the type and extent of service offered.</p> <p>Research into the cost-effectiveness of this aspect of planning and preparing for the move to post-16 education would be useful in terms of guiding practice and service delivery decision-making.</p>	<p>Research demonstrates why the locus of attention must shift towards educational institutions and their adaptations for autistic students rather than locating the 'problem' within the student.</p> <p>Need to question what capabilities institutions have, or need to develop, to enable students to navigate change in ways that ensure that all students can thrive.</p>
Essex & Melham, 2019	Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019	Park & Mortell, 2020	Mitchell & Beresford, 2014	Shepherd, 2020
Transition as Induction (3 rd order)				
<p>Beyond these generic preparation and induction activities, having a named member of staff responsible for transition enabled further transition work.</p>	<p><i>"I know I will be a little bit nervous because I don't know what is the timetable like there"</i></p> <p>The nature of this transition period also calls for schools and colleges</p>	<p><i>"They're very good at preparing their students for the next stage, and for the outside world"</i></p>	<p><i>"She [bus buddy] would go with me on the bus, at the beginning but as I got more independent she'd park out there and she'd wait"</i></p>	<p><i>"We're looking at young people being prepared for moving on"</i></p> <p>The dominance of a 'tick-box' approach to transitions emerged from the significant</p>

<p>A lack of specialist support and staff training in the area of HFA at the receiving institutions was noted, with the result that some of the broader difficulties may go unrecognised and/or the student's needs unmet.</p> <p>They hoped that if staff were aware of their HFA, its affect upon them and the support they needed, it might help them manage better in class.</p> <p>[Name] felt that it was essential that the student built at least one good relationship at the receiving institution.</p> <p>A transition worker encouraged students to attend taster days so they had an idea of what college would be like in its natural environment, with classes running and students present.</p> <p>At taster days, they were given a tour of the facilities and a 'mock' class or workshop. They were able to meet their subject teachers and the other students who would be entering their college with them. The young women reported that these were the most helpful activities, because they really got a sense</p>	<p>to liaise and create opportunities that prepare students for the change of setting.</p> <p>Although the majority reported being aware of how to deal with [bullying], six participants acknowledged not being sure of how to do so in their new setting.</p> <p>Assigning the young person a point of contact or key worker in the new placement prior to the change of setting could progressively help them establish a safe base as they learn to navigate their new setting.</p>	<p><i>"What the support team do for me is they just make sure that I understand things"</i></p> <p><i>"So I had to fill in this form, and that got done like, a month before college was due to start anyway, so when I, when I first started, support was already put in place."</i></p> <p><i>"It's a bit scary to start off with but you tend to get used to it and you get less and less scared".</i></p> <p>Planning for life outcomes and preparation for post-16 provision needs to be considered as an important factor in Key Stage 4 provision for young people on the autism spectrum.</p> <p>The importance of learning practical life skills such as interpreting a bus timetable and managing the journey into college when planning the transition from high school.</p> <p>Relationships with staff were reported by all participants as being key to successful transitions and experiences at college.</p>	<p>The need to develop travel plans with young people prior to college transfer is stressed.</p> <p>It was clear that knowing support arrangements had been made and confirmed prior to starting at college was helpful and reassuring to the young people as the anticipated this move.</p> <p>Moving on from school clearly generates the need for information about possible options and opportunities to experience post-school options were particularly welcomed.</p> <p>The young people in our study particularly valued repeat or extended visits.</p> <p>The findings from our study reiterate the importance of autism-awareness training.</p> <p>Access to professional support with skill development – social skills, travel skills - was highly unusual.</p> <p>Just one young person reported having received an identifiable and formally organized programme of transport</p>	<p>evidence of planning and preparation for the young person for them to be college-ready.</p> <p>Careers advisors' involvement was limited both in terms of their understanding of autism and in the resources they had to address the needs of these young people.</p> <p>Although there were orientation visits to local colleges, the frequency and intensity of these varied.</p> <p>Visits were fragmented and described as unsatisfactory by her mother who had to take her there.</p> <p>An institutional focus on transition as induction contributed to an absence of support over the summer holiday period. This was in part because of the way that transition was fragmented into two discrete time periods: leaving school in the summer term and starting at college in the autumn term.</p> <p>Transition planning can sometimes be described as a manual of expected behaviours</p>
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<p>of what it would be like to be attending college as a student.</p>			<p>preparation and training prior to college transfer.</p> <p>Opportunities to experience college life before the transfer were valued and seen as beneficial.</p> <p>These included the value of actually experiencing settings 'in action', seeing and getting insight into courses/options, and being able to talk to staff. The opportunity to visit more than one option and/or extended or multiple visits to the same college were viewed as particularly helpful.</p>	<p>in a new institution or, as described by several parents, a 'tick-box' exercise.</p> <p>For autistic students there can be a need for explicit and literal teaching of systems and structures making induction a necessary part of the transition process.</p>
<p>Essex & Melham, 2019</p>	<p>Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019</p>	<p>Park & Mortell, 2020</p>	<p>Mitchell & Beresford, 2014</p>	<p>Shepherd, 2020</p>
<p>Transition as Development (3rd order)</p>				
<p>It may be inappropriate for students to have identical support, in college, to what they had in school. Some of the support may no longer be necessary as students mature and become more independent.</p> <p>Every young woman raised the need to make new friends and meet new people as a concern when transitioning to college.</p>	<p><i>"I feel a bit sad, I am feeling a bit heartbroken because I have known [name of] school since I was a child, but not anymore... because now I am a teenager and I'm ready for a new chapter."</i></p> <p><i>"Making new friends in college. That could be quite difficult, never really made new friends for a while now."</i></p>	<p><i>"Happy. Cos you're making new friends, meeting new people, new experiences."</i></p> <p>The idea of transitions offering the possibility of growth and development was a recurrent theme.</p> <p>[Name] associated "transition" with learning how to manage and understand</p>	<p>For young people with AS and HFA, the changes and demands associated with this transition can be very challenging.</p> <p>A lack of confidence in their social skills, may compromise their ability to integrate into the new setting, develop social networks and manage</p>	<p>Transition is also highly likely to increase anxiety levels and render autistic students more vulnerable to difficulties particularly in adolescence where there are increased social demands.</p> <p>Trajectories through adolescence towards a more independent adulthood vary across student populations.</p>

<p>Similarly, all four staff commented on how difficult it was for young women with HFA to make and sustain appropriate friendships.</p> <p>The almost exclusive focus on education excludes other needs such as social and life skills, work experience and independent travel.</p> <p>Educational transition is recognised as a difficult process for many students but is even more challenging for those with ASC.</p> <p>As a result of the various difficulties experienced, those with ASC are likely to require more physical, social and academic support during transition.</p>	<p>For youth with ASD and their families this can be a challenging 3 time, as many individuals leave the comfort of the education system feeling unprepared for adult life at post-secondary education, for work or community living, and with less experience of autonomy and independence than those expected of youth transitioning to adulthood.</p> <p>Participants reported feeling excited, expressing wishes to become more independent and acknowledging that these changes are intimately related to growing up.</p> <p>They acknowledged feeling supported by their friends when dealing with problems or concerns, and recognised their relevance in sharing their free time and spending time together.</p> <p>Participants reported the realisation that moving to a different setting translated into seeing friends less frequently, and wondered about the future of those relationships as their life paths were taking different directions.</p> <p>All participants reported continuing in education and</p>	<p>his emotional responses and developing his social skills.</p> <p>Key protective factors facilitating a positive transition into further education which emerged from this analysis included the value of having healthy relationships with peers and with teaching and support staff.</p> <p>[Name] described the importance of forming new friendships in mediating feelings of anxiety about having a new start.</p> <p>Having friends transitioning with them was felt to be a helpful protective factor in supporting a successful transition.</p> <p>It is important not to underestimate the stress to which young people on the autism spectrum may be subject at times of major transition.</p>	<p>expectations of independence and self-reliance.</p> <p>High levels of cognitive ability and educational achievement may 'mislead' staff into assuming they are coping with the demands of further education.</p> <p>Coping with the social demands of college was a common cause of concern.</p> <p>None of the young people we interviewed reported receiving social skills support from a practitioner.</p> <p>Within our interview sample, feeling adequately skilled to manage the demands of getting to and/or being in a new and complex social situation were significant concerns.</p> <p>Providing opportunities or facilitating peer support is another option which deserves further consideration, including support through virtual networks.</p>	<p>There are also increased expectations for young people to assimilate independent 'college student' identities.</p> <p>Normative expectations of adolescence and independence by educational institutions can marginalise the lived experiences of autistic adolescents.</p> <p>There was little evidence of questioning of the appropriateness of normative expectations of adolescent trajectories.</p> <p>Her experience highlights a failure to acknowledge the more varied and complex trajectories of young people towards independence, and a wider need to recognise an alternative interdependent state in which adjustments are made to support independence that acknowledge their autism.</p> <p>These findings correspond to a narrow interpretation of transition, linked to a limited time period and an undifferentiated view of personal development.</p>
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	<p>training following the end of secondary school; however, the aspects of their future that most concerned them were related to everyday life activities and participation.</p> <p>Peer relationships are considered the most significant factor associated with quality of life during the adolescent period.</p> <p>These findings indicate the need for collaborative strategies and interventions which foster the development and continuity of friendships through and beyond the transition period, so that young people can progressively move towards adulthood with a sense of social support and connectedness.</p>			<p>Normative expectations around developmental processes may be particularly problematic for autistic students because of challenges in managing time, social interaction and having higher parental dependency than their peers.</p> <p>[Name] left college during the second term – her mother saying this was in part because she was unable to access the social support that she needed to interact positively with her peer group, this having not been part of her transition planning.</p> <p>The social needs of the six students were not sufficiently attended to in the transition process and this had an impact on their progress at college.</p>
Essex & Melham, 2019	Gaona, Palikara & Castro, 2019	Park & Mortell, 2020	Mitchell & Beresford, 2014	Shepherd, 2020
Transition as Becoming (3 rd order)				
<i>“Education was... probably one of the only social provisions that touched lots and lots of families and so ... should have a wider remit ... In terms of community</i>	The focus on participation and community living reported by participants is of vital relevance in the context of the new SEND Code of Practice, as	<i>“It feels good to help the community . . . I have made a massive improvement not only in myself but I think I’ve also helped, I myself have</i>		Mitchell (1999, 766) advocates a ‘more flexible perception of transition, one which acknowledges gradual changes within the life course’.

<p><i>support and supporting families but that's not really what the current government think education's about."</i></p> <p><i>"I think there also needs to be a bit more understanding at local authority level that actually progress doesn't always have to be academic progress ... And that actually we should be measuring progress in terms of independence, communication and wellbeing."</i></p> <p>Education needs to be understood as being concerned with developing as a person and finding a useful role for oneself in society.</p> <p>The interview comments highlighted the need for staff to reconceptualise success and see it as far more than the number of qualifications gained by a student; to see success as being about becoming a confident individual, capable of functioning as independently as possible and contributing positively to society in the manner that best suits them.</p> <p>The emphasis on gaining qualifications, rather than</p>	<p>independence, agency and participation in the community are central components in EHC plan reviews from age 14 onwards and constitute key elements of preparation for adulthood.</p> <p>This findings highlight the perceived need of young people to develop skills that would allow them to participate meaningfully in everyday life situations, as they leave the comfort of the school system and transition to the wider world.</p> <p>It appears essential to provide opportunities for young people and their families to get involved in a meaningful way in activities and social environments within their communities to strengthen their sense of belonging, reduce isolation and loneliness outside the school setting.</p>	<p><i>helped this college raise awareness for people who are different."</i></p> <p>For [Name], moving to college afforded the opportunity for him to become fully involved in the community and pastoral life of the college which led to personal growth, self-pride and a sense of belonging.</p>		<p>Transition planning was largely unresponsive to the diversity of lives of these young people, the lived realities of their experiences and their varied capabilities.</p> <p>Both [Name]'s and [Name]'s experiences reveal the inflexibility of college systems and a restricted view of academic progress.</p> <p>The locus of attention must shift towards educational institutions and their adaptations for autistic students rather than locating the 'problem' within the student.</p> <p>The research also supports the need for a deeper understanding of transition as a multi-faceted social, emotional and academic process, in which the diverse needs and preferences of autistic students are made apparent.</p>
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developing as a person and making a positive contribution to society, was seen as problematic by staff.				
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Appendix C – Initial Letter to Prospective Participants



Newcastle University
School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences

RESEARCH PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Hello,

My name is Ella and I am training to be an Educational Psychologist. This means I work with young people, families, and school staff to try to make education a positive experience for everybody.

I am doing a research project into **the experiences of Autistic girls in sixth forms and colleges**. I would love to speak with you about your experiences in your sixth form or college so far. I would like to ask questions about what staff or other adults have done that you have found helpful.

You could speak to me through the computer or in a room together. You could speak to me one on one (just us!) or with your parent/carer or favourite staff member there too. You could also be part of a group chat with other Autistic girls. How we do this is up to you! 😊

The conversation would last no longer than 1 hour. We may use some visuals or a graph tool to support our chat. Anything you tell me will be kept completely private.

Most importantly, you don't have to chat with me:

If you don't want to talk with me – **that's okay!**

If you say yes now but change your mind – **that's okay!**

If you say yes now, then we start our chat and you want to leave – **that's okay!**

If we finish the chat and you don't want your information to be included – **that's okay too!**

If you would like to ask me any questions or talk about anything before hand, you can email me on e.p.bownas1@ncl.ac.uk. Or ask your parent/carer or staff member to speak with me

If you would like to participate in the project, yourself or an adult can email me. I can then send you more information and a consent form to sign. We can meet each other or have a telephone call to speak more about it beforehand if you would like.

Thank you for reading and for being interested in helping with my project. I hope to hear from you soon.

Ella Bownas

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ella Bownas', enclosed within a hand-drawn oval.

Appendix D – Participant Information Sheet



Newcastle University

School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled: *“Exploring the views and experiences of Autistic girls accessing post-16 education in England”*.

Thank you for your interest in taking part. This information sheet is intended to give you a summary of the aims of the study and details regarding your participation. Please read this document carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

The study is being conducted by Ella Bownas of the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University. This project is supervised by Dave Lumsdon, Academic & Professional Tutor at the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University.

The Study:

- This study aims to explore the experiences of autistic girls in post-16 education. Questions will focus on positive experiences and what staff, or other adults, may have done to support you.
- You will be asked to take part in an interview with myself.
- The interview discussion will focus upon:
 - Your educational journey, so far
 - Your transition from secondary school to college/sixth form
 - The support you may have received at college/sixth form
 - The adults that may support you
 - Your views as an Autistic girl about what colleges/sixth forms may need to understand or improve
- As per our email discussions, the interview will take place online via Microsoft Teams at a time that suits you.
- Once the research is completed, you will have the option to receive a summary of its findings via email or post.

You are free to decide whether or not to participate. Even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason. You may also decline to answer any questions in the interview and can withdraw your recording up until the point of me writing up the project.

Your Data:

- To ensure accurate recording of your answers, the interview will be recorded via Microsoft Teams. You do not have to have your camera turned on. We will both blur our backgrounds and wear headphones so that our discussion remains private.
- This recording will be kept in a secure, password-protected folder and tagged with an anonymous ID number. Identifying information, e.g. your name and contact details, will be kept separately, meaning that anyone with access to the recordings will not be able to identify you.
- Your contact details will only be kept so that you can withdraw your data from the study at any time up until the data collection is complete, and for sending out the research summary at the end. You will not be identified in any report or publication resulting from this research, unless you specifically communicate a desire to be identified.
- Your data will be managed under UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Only the minimum personally identifiable information will be used.
- You can find out more about how Newcastle University uses your information at <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/data.protection/dataprotectionpolicy/> and/or by contacting Newcastle University's Data Protection Officer (Maureen Wilkinson, rec-man@ncl.ac.uk).

How to Contact:

- This study has been reviewed and approved by the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences Ethics Committee at Newcastle University (Date of approval: January 2022)
- If you have any questions, requests, or concerns regarding this research, please contact me via email at e.p.bownas1@newcastle.ac.uk.
- My supervisor can also be contacted at david.lumsdon@newcastle.ac.uk

If you would like to take part in this research, please sign and return the Declaration of Informed Consent and email me at e.p.bownas1@newcastle.ac.uk stating that you are interested and with some dates and times that you would be available to engage do the interview with me. I can then send you the interview questions and any other important information beforehand.

Many thanks again for your interest in taking part in this research. I hope to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely,



Ella Bownas

Appendix E – Consent Form

**Please note, verbal and written consent was obtained from the parent of the 17-year-old participant. The two 18-year-old participants were deemed responsible and able to give consent themselves.*



Newcastle University
School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences

Declaration of Informed Consent

- I agree to participate in this study which aims to explore the experiences of autistic girls in post-16 education and focus on what can work well in these contexts.
- I declare that I have read the participant information sheet and have understood the information provided, including the nature and purpose of the research.
- I understand that I may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study without having to give a reason and without any form of negative consequence.
- I have been informed that all of my responses will remain confidential and secure, and that I will not be identified in any publication resulting from this research, unless I specifically communicate that I wish to be identified.
- I am aware that the researcher will answer any questions regarding this study. The researcher's email address is e.p.bownas1@newcastle.ac.uk and they can be contacted at any time. The researcher's supervisor can be contacted at david.lumsdon@newcastle.ac.uk.

Any concerns about this study should be addressed to the School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences Ethics Committee, Newcastle University via email to ecls.researchteam@newcastle.ac.uk.

Date: _____

Participant Name (please print): _____

Participant Signature: _____

I consent for my daughter to participate in this research project:

Date: _____

Parent/Carer Name (please print): _____

Parent/Carer Signature: _____

I certify that I have presented the above information to the participant and secured her consent.

Date: _____ **Researcher Signature:** _____

Appendix F – Initial Letter to Parents/Carers

Newcastle University
School of Education, Communication &
Language Sciences



Dear Parent/Carer,

I am writing to you as your daughter has had previous involvement with an Educational Psychology Service and a diagnosis of Autism. My name is Ella Bownas and I am training to be an Educational Psychologist. I am training at Newcastle University and work on placement with XXX Psychological Service three days a week.

As part of my training, I am conducting a research project exploring the experiences of Autistic girls in post-16 education. I have previously been involved in academic research which explored parental and school perspectives on supporting Autistic girls in primary and secondary education. However, this lacked the voices of the girls themselves – something which I feel strongly should always be included. In my current project, I hope to give Autistic girls a platform to share their experiences and to influence the support that is offered within post-16 education settings.

In this pack, I have provided an introductory letter to your daughter which outlines the project. Her participation would be completely voluntary and only happen once she, and yourself, have given full informed consent. Your daughter would be free to remove herself and her data from the study at any time. I am suggesting that we do an interview that would last no longer than 1 hour and be supported by visuals. This interview would be recorded, but nobody apart from myself and my research supervisor would have access to this. Your daughter's data would be kept completely confidential and anonymous.

I understand there may be some anxiety or nerves around taking part. I have included a list of possible conversation topics and a flow-chart of what may happen, should your daughter want to be involved, so that she may feel prepared. I've also included a One Page Profile about myself.

If you or your daughter would like to express your interest or speak to me further about the project, please email e.p.bownas1@ncl.ac.uk. We could then arrange a telephone call, video call, or face-to-face meeting.

If you have any concerns, please feel free to get in touch with my research supervisor (david.lumsdon@newcastle.ac.uk) or service manager (***@***.gov.uk).

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I look forward to hearing from you or your daughter.

Yours sincerely,



Ella Bownas

Appendix G – Research Flow Chart for Participants



Newcastle University
School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences

Research Project – *Exploring the Experiences of Autistic Girls in Post-16 Education*

WHAT ORDER WILL THINGS HAPPEN IN?

1. You read through this information pack with your parent/carer. If you are interested or have any questions, you email e.p.bownas1@ncl.ac.uk

2. I will reply to your email and answer any questions you have. I can also email your parent/carer. We could arrange a telephone call, video call, or initial meeting to chat more about the project before you make a decision. Continuing to email is also fine if this is what feels most comfortable.

3. If you decide you would like to be involved in the research project, I will send you a **consent form** which you will have to sign. Your parent/carer may also have to sign this. We will then arrange a date and time for the interview around your schedule.

4. You can choose to do the interview wherever feels most comfortable for you. We could do it at your college/sixth form or do it virtually, using Microsoft Teams. The interview should last no longer than 1 hour. I will record the interview so that I don't forget what you said. You can choose to have your camera on or off.

5. After the interview, I will still be available via email if you have any more questions. I will email you two weeks after the interview to check how you are doing. You can still choose to have your interview recording deleted. If you are happy to still be involved, I will listen to your interview and add my own interpretations to what you shared.

6. I will see if there are common themes between your interview and those with other Autistic girls. Nobody else will be able to access your interview recording. I will not use your real name unless you tell me that this is your preference. I will write up my research project and submit it to Newcastle University.

7. If you want, I will share my finished research with you and your parent/carer. I will try to share it with colleges and sixth forms in England. I will also try to publish my research so that more people get to hear about your experiences and views.

Thank you for being interested and helping me with my project.

Appendix H – General Interview Topics Sheet for Participants



Newcastle University
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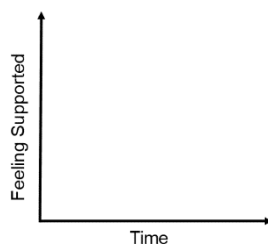
INTERVIEW TOPICS

It might help you to know what sort of topics we may cover when we have our interview chat.

I have provided a list of potential topics below.

However, if there is something that is important to you that you would like to discuss, I am happy to talk about that as well 😊 we can stick closely to this list or talk about other things.

- Revisit research information & check if everything is still okay to go ahead
- Autistic terminology, your journey to diagnosis, what does being Autistic mean to you now?
- Background information – your sixth form/college, your courses, your interests.
- Your transition from secondary school to sixth form/college.
- Your sixth form/college experience so far – how has it been? What have you enjoyed?
- Support – do you receive any extra support? Who supports you? Do you access any specific areas in sixth form/college?
- Think about a time when you have felt very supported within your sixth form/college – what was happening? What helped you feel like this?
- Think about a key adult in your sixth form/college who supports you – what are they like? What do they do to help you? Why do you like them?
- Imagine your sixth form/college won a prize for being the best at supporting Autistic girls – what would the staff be doing? What would the environment be like?



On the screen will be a timeline – you will be able to add any timepoints which feel important and discuss what they mean to you. The timeline will not be analysed. It will just help our discussion together.

Thank you for reading and for being interested in helping with my project.
Ella Bownas

Appendix I – Research Flyer

*See Figure 7 for where this was distributed.



CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF AUTISTIC GIRLS IN POST-16 EDUCATION

Hello, my name is Ella and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. I would like to speak to Autistic girls who are currently accessing or have just finished their Post-16 education in England.

I would like to talk to you about your Post-16 experiences, so far, including **who** and **what** has helped you feel supported.

You would be invited to a one-to-one interview chat with myself. This could be done in person or virtually, whatever you feel most comfortable with.

Our chat would last no longer than 1 hour and would be voice-recorded so I can listen back to it.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED OR KNOW SOMEBODY WHO MIGHT BE...

Please email e.p.bownas1@ncl.ac.uk and I will send you a full information pack. I can answer any questions & we could arrange a first chat.

*Please note:; I am not Autistic and want to make sure you feel comfortable with the words we use. If you participate, the words we use will be completely in your control.

Appendix J – Full Interview Schedule

Questions to ask Participants	Type of Question (Smith et al., 2009)	Extra info
Informal chat to settle in Clarify my role & research aims Obtain verbal consent Remind it is okay to stop at any time/have break Check okay to record Remind about camera on/off, blur background, headphones Start recording		
Share screen with blank fortune line on Revisit this, allow time for questions Remind it is up to them when/where/how they add a timepoint Check technology is working so that they are in control of the mouse		
Which words would you feel most comfortable in using throughout this interview to refer to Autism? Can you tell me about your journey to receiving an Autism diagnosis? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>How old were you?</i> - <i>What was the process like for you? Your family?</i> How did you feel when you were first diagnosed? How do you feel about being Autistic (*or preferred terminology*) now?	Descriptive Narrative <i>Prompts if needed</i> Evaluative Evaluative	Make sure preferred terminology used throughout. Monitor comfort of participant, may be a difficult/emotive topic. If feels appropriate, remind about presence of fortune line – may want to add a time point
Check about info gained through email communication, e.g., what stage of college now? What are you studying? Favourite subject? Interests... Can you tell me a bit about your journey through education? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Primary/first school</i> - <i>Secondary school</i> - <i>Experiences of support</i> - <i>How did this change post-diagnosis?</i> 	Descriptive Narrative <i>Prompts if needed</i>	To establish rapport & gently move topic onto education Allow participant to flow & make sense of their journey in their own way. Be mindful of fortune line during this discussion
Can you tell me about moving from secondary education to college/sixth form? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Did you receive any support around this transition?</i> 	Narrative <i>Prompt if needed</i>	Be mindful of SLR findings. May need to ask follow-up questions about taster visits,

<p>How did you feel when you first started at college/sixth form?</p> <p>What are the main differences between secondary school and college/sixth form?</p>	<p>Evaluative</p> <p>Contrast</p>	<p>travel training, role of parents etc...</p>
<p>How has your experience been at college/sixth form (so far, if still attending)?</p> <p>Has there been anything that has gone really well?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>What have you most enjoyed?</i> <p>How do you feel about being a post-16 student now?</p>	<p>Descriptive</p> <p>Descriptive</p> <p><i>Prompt if needed</i></p> <p>Evaluative</p>	<p>Questions focusing on the positive moments to prioritise participant wellbeing – however, ensure to follow their flow/story & where they want to take discussion</p> <p>Offer break*</p>
<p>Are staff in your college/sixth form aware you are Autistic?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>How did they become aware?</i> <p>What does the phrase 'being supported' mean to you? What does it make you think of?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>You mentioned 'X', have you had any good experiences of that in college/sixth form so far?</i> <p>Can you tell me about any support you receive at college/sixth form?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Where, when, who?</i> - <i>How do you think receiving this type of support benefits you?</i> <p>How did you first access this?</p> <p>What do you think staff need to know about supporting Autistic girls?</p>	<p>Circular</p> <p><i>Prompt if needed</i></p> <p>Descriptive</p> <p><i>Prompts if needed</i></p> <p>Narrative</p> <p><i>Prompts if needed</i></p> <p>Descriptive</p> <p>Circular</p>	<p>One of the main lines of questioning, remember it is okay to spend a lot of time on this section.</p>
<p>Think about a time when you have felt <u>very</u> supported in your college/sixth form. Can you tell me a bit about this?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>What was happening?</i> - <i>What helped you to feel supported?</i> <p>Are there any other feelings that you experience when you think back to this time?</p>	<p>Narrative</p> <p><i>Prompts if needed</i></p> <p>Evaluative</p>	<p>May be interesting to consider at what point this positive experience happened and how it may relate to the fortune line – was it right at the start? Was it a few months in once relationships were established?</p>
<p>Think about a key adult in your college/sixth form who supports you. Can you tell me about them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>What do they do to support you?</i> - <i>Why do you like them?</i> - <i>What character traits do they have?</i> 	<p>Narrative</p> <p><i>Prompts if needed</i></p>	

<p>- <i>What could other staff members learn from this person's approach?</i></p> <p>How do you feel when you are with this staff member?</p>	<p>Evaluative</p>	
<p>Imagine your college/sixth form won a prize for being the best at supporting Autistic girls – what would the staff be doing?</p> <p>What would the environment be like?</p> <p>What opportunities would there be?</p> <p>What would need to change from the current situation to get your college/sixth form to win this prize?</p>	<p>Descriptive</p> <p>Descriptive</p> <p>Descriptive</p> <p>Comparative</p>	<p>Drawn from Appreciative Inquiry. May be difficult for Autistic girls to engage in this type of thinking, may need to scaffold.</p>
<p>End of questions – is there anything else you'd like to share?</p> <p>Revisit the fortune line – summarise time-points, clarify understanding. Check if any amendments/additions.</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me? Check if feeling okay after doing the interview.</p> <p>Any ideas about with who/where this research could be shared?</p> <p>Reminder about right to withdraw & data storage</p> <p>Informal chat – plans for rest of the day, plans for summer, what's next for you...?</p> <p>Reminder I will check in with them in two weeks' time via email</p> <p>Thank participants & communicate gratitude for taking the time & being open</p> <p>Reminder of email address if they want to get in touch</p>		

Appendix K – Example of Coded Transcript

Ella 34:17
 Oh, how exciting! Okay, so we've talked a bit about about your you're taking a proactive role, about liking to know that the systems are there. If you do happen to need them, and about like, teachers making reasonable adjustments for you kind of as and when things might crop up. You did mention the Learning Support, is that a room or a base or...

Etta 34:54
 Yeah, it's a bit of a kind of, it's an office I guess, with kind of space for Students, it's kind of a bit of a random, like, it's it. I mean, it's that's what it's like for, you know, it's kind of built to be kind of a space that people can go to if they're struggling with lessons, but that's also where kind of you'll find that people who, you know, are in, who are like supporting students. *learning support room - good*

Ella 35:23
 Yeah. And you also mentioned that you before, and kind of during your exams, you had some, like, weekly meetings with somebody? And who was that? Did you have like a key worker person at the college? Throughout? Or was it just kind of put into place before the exams, that kind of thing?

Etta 35:51
 I think yeah she was kind of she was like, I think she was the lead of the Learning Support Team. And I think she probably was like, my key worker, because obviously, I was coming in with an (EHCP). I think we did have like, some regular contact, I think it was just about like, in the lead up to the exams, making sure kind of I was, you know, coping kind of thing. *importance of regular contact* *key person role* *substantive process* *emotional containment?* *exam anxiety* *initiative of staff?*

Ella 36:21
 Yeah. So can you tell me a little bit about this person. And what I know, it's hard, but if you can try and put into words, what it was that she did, or what it was, that was good about her, that made her a good person for you to talk to.

Etta 36:45
 And she just was very, you know, good at kind of listening and kind of responding to what I told her. So if there's been some sort of issues with a teacher, you know, that it was kind of dealt with, and it was somebody that I think I recognised as being somebody I could talk to, and because kind of, we'd got to know each other a little bit before I'd been like I'd started. And that made kind of a lot of sense. Yeah, to talk to her. I mean, you know, she arranged all kinds of exam access arrangements, and making sure that those for like, pretty much anyone in the college, she, you know, would; she did my EHCP reviews. And so would, you know, represent the school in terms of that, which, and so helped, because pretty much ever since I've left the SEN provision, the local authority have tried to take my EHCP away from me. And because, for the same reason why they said, I should never get one because I was too academic. And we managed to keep it until, like, I've left sixth form now. But so, and I know, you don't get to take it to university. So we knew that, but we just wanted to keep it kind of, so that it meant to sixth form were held accountable to supporting me. And she was fully behind that. So really helped, you know, make sure that, you know, it was clear that I may not be using the resources, you know, consistently, but they were there, and that they had, you know, had some use, and kind of taking that support away would be detrimental. *feeling heard* *what makes a good key person* *getting to know staff* *familiarity with staff* *LA not understanding academic focus* *practical role of key person* *key person advocating on her behalf*

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Appendix L – Example of Personal Experiential Themes from IPA

The following table depicts the Personal Experiential Themes (**BOLD CAPITALS**), Experiential Statements (left-column), and relevant quotes from one participants' transcript.

AGENCY		
Importance of Agency	<i>"Secondary school was... not as good as college. You have... more control over your own learning and how you do things".</i>	Page 3
Positive Impact on Behaviour	<i>"No-one really misbehaves at college at all, because... everyone's choosing the subjects that they want to do".</i>	Page 9
Importance of YP voice	<i>"I don't think they should have that much authority over what you do if you know what works for you and what doesn't".</i>	Page 10
Not Included in Own Support Decisions	<i>"I think my teachers got like a memo or something at the start of the year... but I didn't ask for that memo to be sent out".</i>	Page 10
Put My Words into Action	<i>"Why did I even fill out the form? Like why ask me if you're just not gonna listen to it".</i>	Page 11
UNDERSTANDING		
Won't be Believed	<i>"I didn't tell anybody about it [suspecting Autism] for ages because I was like, oh no, they won't believe me".</i>	Page 1
Media Insight	<i>"The documentary just kind of made me aware that it was a thing that exists [about Autism]".</i>	Page 2
Internalising Adult Narratives	<i>"I was constantly told that I just like wasn't resilient enough because I used to cry a lot. At the time I was just like, oh well, I guess I'm just a bit of a cry-baby... In hindsight, I was just overwhelmed all the time".</i>	Page 2
Initial Lack of Parental Understanding	<i>"When they [parents] first got the email... they didn't really believe it. I think to them I was just like quite quiet and sensitive and a bit weird".</i>	Page 2
Lack of Staff Understanding	<i>"They didn't think to like combine Autism and mental health, they sort of saw those as two distinct things".</i>	Page 7

Fixed Views of Autism	<i>"People have quite set ideas of what Autism is. And if you deviate from that... it just doesn't exist in their minds. It's difficult to change that... because, to them, you're one person compared to an entire life of being presented with stereotypes".</i>	Page 14
RELATIONSHIPS		
Parental Relationship	<i>"I think it [Autism diagnosis] improved my relationship with my parents because they were able to understand".</i>	Page 3
Rapport with Staff	<i>"Just sort of someone being nice to me and listening to me just made college far, far better".</i>	Page 3
Key Person	<i>"The way it's, in theory, organised is quite useful with having one person that you can talk to, that can sort things out for you".</i>	
Equality with Staff	<i>"You are treated by your teachers more like adults and have a genuine relationship with them, you call them by their first name and things like that".</i>	Page 8
Mutual Respect	<i>"There's not this just arbitrary respect and like deference of students to teachers that's expected at secondary school. In college, they respect you and you respect them. It's just a much more positive relationship that I think is beneficial to everyone".</i>	Page 9
Not a Burden	<i>"It's just as important... having people that... you can talk to and not feel like you're wasting their time. I think that's nice, just to feel like you're not taking up space".</i>	Page 11
NEUROTYPICAL WORLD		
Friendship Expectations	<i>"When you're in the younger years of secondary school... there's a lot of teachers actively trying to make you make friends. So like, I made friends, I just didn't really like them that much".</i>	Page 3
Reduced Social Pressure	<i>"Once I started... college... I could start sort of not placing as much importance on friendships which I didn't care about as much... it just made [college] a lot more pleasant"</i>	Page 3
Social Hierarchies	<i>"There's not the same social hierarchies that there are in secondary school. It just doesn't exist at all in college, and you can just do what you want. It's a lot more chill".</i>	Page 10

Masking	<i>"We do tend to be better at masking. So if you're not obviously struggling, then it's almost like you're not struggling at all".</i>	Page 14
ADVOCACY		
Proactive in Seeking Support	<i>"I contacted learning support back in February and March. Then I was like 'Can I actually speak to someone please?' So I did that. Then I was like 'Can I look around college before I start?' So then I organised that".</i>	Page 5
Need for Self-Advocacy	<i>"If I hadn't practically done anything, then like they wouldn't have reached out to me, I don't think".</i>	Page 6
Self-Responsibility	<i>"If you've missed out on that work... that's your problem to rectify. You don't have people just like constantly nagging you to do things".</i>	Page 9
Having an Advocate	<i>"It is really nice to not have to constantly be the one standing up for yourself and having someone approach you being like 'Do you need me to stand up for you?'".</i>	Page 12
Exhaustion of Self-Advocacy	<i>"I don't want to sit here and have to stand up for myself, and explain myself, because that's just so taxing and so exhausting, and so demoralising".</i>	Page 14
SUPPORT EXPERIENCES		
Lack of Transition Support	<i>"For transition, there wasn't any official stuff. I just got a quick tour of college. That was about it. And then just started".</i>	Page 5
Waiting for Support	<i>"They have a form that you just put everything that you need... I filled it out again in summer. Didn't actually get any proper support until probably about Christmas".</i>	Page 5
Inconsistency	<i>"I saw her for maybe just a couple of weeks... then she just got rid of our appointments. And then... I got someone else, but she was only filling in for maternity. And then the person she was covering for came back and I had one email with her... It took a while and a lot of flipping between people".</i>	Page 7
Practical Support	<i>"In a different class the noise levels were always just really high, so she sorted that out. And then like exam, extra room stuff, she sorted out".</i>	Page 7
1:1 Weekly Check-Ins	<i>"[Check-in session] was every Wednesday... up to half an hour... they have little booths which are relatively private. The setup of it is quite good".</i>	Page 7

Tokenistic	<i>"So the form that I filled out before I started... they had a load of boxes of things that you might need help with... and they just didn't listen to any of that".</i>	Page 11
IDEAL SUPPORT		
Reasonable Adjustments	<i>"My new form tutor was just... way more understanding. He'd let me stay in his classroom at break and lunchtime, so I could just read by myself where it was quieter".</i>	Page 3
Being Trusted	<i>"You're trusted to know what's best for you. Which is just so much easier than trying to justify to other people what's best for you".</i>	Page 9
Staff Initiative	<i>"He arranged a meeting with me and sorted out all the Learning Support mess... it was really useful. I don't even know how he realised that there was an issue that needed solving. But that was nice of him".</i>	Page 11
Personalised Support	<i>"The support that they're giving out would be personal to everyone that's receiving it".</i>	Page 13
Being Believed	<i>"Listening to autistic girls above what they think autistic girls should need, to just believe us, even if they can't understand what we're describing, for them to just believe it".</i>	Page 13
SYSTEMIC FACTORS		
Top-Down Impact	<i>"Teachers do not have the time or energy to support everyone which is obviously a far, far bigger problem that they can't sort out by themselves".</i>	Page 4
Class Size	<i>"Classes are obviously smaller at college... in terms of how you interact with other students and teacher, it feels like it is a lot smaller".</i>	Page 4
Limited Resources	<i>"A really small learning support department... without enough staff or without enough money to actually allocate resources properly. So it's just kind of a complete mess".</i>	Page 6
Staff Training	<i>"She couldn't actually help me because she wasn't qualified to deal with Autism stuff".</i>	Page 7
Lack of Support Available	<i>"I don't think there is much availability of support. In an ideal world... there would be enough resources that anybody, regardless of if they've like got any diagnoses, could just access. But that's not something that exists at the moment".</i>	Page 12