

**Listening to Unheard Voices:
Examining the Daily Transition between Home
and School for Young Autistic Girls**

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Abstract

Mainstream primary schools can be overwhelming places for autistic girls with many camouflaging in response to these busy, sensory stimulating and socially demanding environments. Conforming in this way to meet the expectations of mainstream environments, results in poor mental health, low self-esteem and lost learning.

This emancipatory research explores the daily home-to-school transition to examine this embodied transformation, drawing upon the experiences of four young autistic girls, their parents and their teachers, thus addressing a paucity of research. Data collection utilised drawing and talking interviews with the girls and walking interviews with parents and teachers, thus enabling participants, through critical dialogue, to reflect, co-construct and share insights of this daily transition.

Findings reveal that in moving between home and school, external presentations of these girls became more muted, as they sought to 'fit in,' hide or as a form of 'armouring'. Influential moments in the transition included dressing for school and crossing boundaries, where negotiating sensory demanding spaces, anxiety around surveillance and adjusting to the pace of others were all challenging. Difficulties in switching focus, managing micro-transitions, and sensory processing necessitated additional time and flexibility from parents and school staff.

Across the study, participants shared the importance of friendship for validation and protection but also the need for adults to be sensitive and attune themselves to the girls' needs and support with co-regulation, particularly when crossing boundaries. Where autistic girls might have historically be viewed as having limited agency, each participant found ways to disrupt, resist and have their needs met across the transition. The responsiveness of the girls to side-by-side research methods further emphasises the importance of creative approaches to listen and respond to previously unheard voices in research and practice.

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List of Abbreviations

DfE – Department for Education
EBSA – Emotion Based School Avoidance
ELSA – Emotional Literacy Support Assistant
NAS – National Autistic Society
NHS – National Health Service
PDA – Pathological Demand Avoidance
PE - Physical Education
SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENCo – Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SPDs - Sensory Processing Difficulties
TA – Teaching Assistant
UNCRC – United Nations Conventions for the Rights of the Child

1. 'Written in the Scars' – Origins, Reflections and Position

These lines of one of mine and my daughter's favourite songs, 'Written in the Scars' resonate with my understanding of how this doctoral research has been born:

*"In every wound, there is some glory.
And every scratch is a new tattoo.
Cause those lines on your face, they tell a story.
Of how you became... you."* (Frampton et al., 2017: 365)

In this song, these lines depict how the embodiment of past wounds and traumas become woven into our present selves. The challenges I have personally experienced as an autistic child and adult, and as a parent and teacher, have left lasting impressions, scars or tattoos. This dissertation, like many before and many yet to come is a personal passion project, born out of my own personal and professional experiences. As noted by Bochner and Ellis (2016: 50) "Many of us were drawn to a life of research by our lived experiences of emotional epiphanies that changed or deeply affected us. We believe these experiences are worthy of observation, examination, and reflection." I personally believe that true objectivity is impossible within research. Recognition must therefore be made of the researcher's position to provide a transparency on the pre-dispositions of the researcher, specifically sharing how "personal identities, emotions and values shape the nature of the research" (Cloke et al., 2004: 365). Positionality, however, is complex and it is important to recognise the intersecting, inseparable multiple aspects of my positionality as an autistic woman, parent to an autistic child and as an education professional.

Similar to many autistic women, I diagnosed late in life. Difficulties around the recognition of the traits of autistic women meant that for many years I was unaware of an explanation for my neurological differences. As a child, at home I presented as a confident, talkative elder daughter and sister, with a love of music, art and a zany sense of humour. Yet within school, I was often silent and fearful; I retreated inside myself as I found the school environment challenging and there was a recognition within me that I was 'different' and did not 'fit in'. I felt at odds with my environment and those around me, experiencing intense bullying from peers. I felt that there was something inherently 'wrong' with me, as is the case with many autistic women as explained by Camilla Pang (2020) who shares:

“When you know that you can’t tolerate your environment, or your environment can’t tolerate you. You feel like something is off... There is an inherent dysrhythmia that you feel you have with you and connecting with fellow humans and you start to question why.”

I adopted in response, what I later understood to be a form of camouflaging, which is a potential contributory factor in the late diagnosis of autistic girls (Tubío-Fungueiriño et al., 2021). Through the daily repetition of the routines of schooling, initially at primary and then secondary school, my behaviour was formed, defined, and reproduced by being subject to the structures of these environments (Butler, 2011: 42), resulting in a feeling social isolation and anxiety. This aligned with other autistic women’s experiences where they need to mask difficulties (Wild, 2019) and ultimately had an impact on my mental health and wellbeing.

There have been multiple criticisms of the propensity for research *on* autistic people rather than *with* or *by* them (Fletcher-Watson and Happe, 2019) and a recognition of the importance of more participatory research (Pellicano, 2014), where autistic people make decisions about the direction and nature of research. This research is led by myself as an autistic female researcher and informed by my interactions within the autism educational community, a rare and valuable positionality.

As a parent, teacher, Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), advisor and latterly a lecturer in Higher Education, I have met with many diagnosed and undiagnosed autistic girls including my own daughter, who have struggled within a mainstream education designed for non-autistic children. Their experiences, although resonating with my own experience, were each unique and different, but there was a shared challenge or anxiety observed moving between home and school each morning. As I would walk or drive my daughter to school or meet with parents of autistic girls who shared their challenges with the morning drop off, I was aware of the repetitions of the past in the present, the unseen experiences of my own played out in the present. Humans are beings of praxis in that we act, reflect and then transform the world (Freire, 2017) and I am no exception. These shared experiences, like ghosts of the past evoke in me a call to demand justice for autistic girls of the past, present and those yet to come; and to find ways to transform these situations through reflection and action.

There is a danger of presenting a ‘tragedy discourse’ in autism research, where the very existence of autistic individuals can be presumed to be problematic (Beardon, 2023: 50). However, with my own understanding of autism as a neurological and behaviour difference rather than a deficit, I wanted instead to use a more affirmative approach. Instead, the focus

of this study are the girls' voices, where a platform is provided for their own empowered voices. The double empathy problem identifies that it is not that autistic people lack empathy or a theory of mind, which has been defined as the ability to understand the mental states of others (Rivero-Contreras et al., 2023), but that there is a mutual difference between autistic and non-autistic understanding (Milton, 2012). Consequently, there is a greater capacity for empathy between those who are autistic. As an autistic researcher, therefore, it is suggested that I can better engage with and represent the views of autistic participants than non-autistic researchers.

This doctoral study is informed by the emancipatory disability theory (Barnes, 2013) and is rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, specifically his *Pedagogies of the Oppressed* (2017) and *of Hope* (2021). Freire (2017) seeks to disrupt dominant discourses, humanise oppressed groups and raise critical consciousness to effect positive change and enable emancipation particularly within education. This study, therefore, aims to raise the consciousness of autistic girls, their families, teachers and the wider education community of the realities of these home to school transitions and enact positive change.

2. Introduction

Over nine million children cross the boundary between home and their place of education in England each day (ONS, 2025). Moving between these contexts can be problematic for some and increasing numbers of autistic children are withdrawing from school due to being unable to manage the demands (DfE, 2025). This is evident particularly for autistic children and young people in mainstream settings who are more likely to experience mental health difficulties (Boucher, 2022), school-related distress, bullying, sensory overload (Ward and Powell, 2025) and subsequent absence (Connolly et al., 2023) and exclusions (Guldborg et al., 2022) with classroom practices being harder to access (Mesa and Hamilton, 2023) .

Moving between home and school requires all children to “develop and negotiate a ‘school identity, which may differ in important respects from their home identity” (Hughes et al., 2009: 17)”, and then to reconcile these two identities (Wenger, 1998). For autistic girls who demonstrate a greater desire to blend in with peers (Cook et al., 2018), a complex set of cognitive and behavioural mechanisms are employed to adapt to the non-autistic world, hiding autistic traits and using imitation to blend in; commonly referred to as camouflaging or masking (Cammuso and Knapp-Ines, 2024). These behaviours are recognised as more prevalent in autistic girls than boys and can result in exhaustion and greater anxiety (Halsall et al., 2021).

My experience of working with autistic girls and their families over many years, has indicated that the morning routine is an important transition for autistic girls, but despite strong research into the experience of transitions for autistic children between schools (Makin et al., 2017; Mesa and Hamilton, 2023) there is far less research on the daily transitions (Hughes et al., 2009). Therefore, this thesis, underpinned by an interpretivist emancipatory paradigm uses creative approaches to explore the experiences and embodied responses of autistic girls as they transition between home and school. Informed by Freire’s (2021) pedagogy of hope, the aims of this research are to raise critical consciousness, inform practice and enable emancipation. In this first chapter, I will define autism, explain my choice of language and the structure of this thesis.

2.1 Defining Autism

Autism is defined by the National Autistic Society as, "...a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world" (NAS, 2025). It is a behaviourally defined condition in that there are no agreed genetic biomarkers for identification of autism and therefore, assessment of autism in children can only be made through observation of behaviours (Lai et al., 2017). This includes direct observations of children's behaviours and information provided on the child's development, medical history and current presentation (NHS, 2025). The current diagnostic manual (DSM-5) identifies that to meet the criteria for Autism, there will be:

- A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, and
- B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (APA, 2013: 50-51)

However, the condition of autism is a heterogenous one, which is, "...brilliantly and impossibly diverse in terms of experiences, characteristics, 'symptoms' possible biological markers, and social contexts" (Ryan and Milton, 2023: 1). Initially considered as two separate diagnoses of 'autism' and 'Aspergers', following the work of Wing and Gould (1979), it was recognised that both these diagnoses were similar conditions on the same autism spectrum (Sedgewick and Douglas, 2023).

The definition of autism as a disability with persistent deficits and restricted and repetitive behaviours is contentious, where disability is typically presented as a personal deficit with an innate biological inferiority (Hahn, 1996) rather than a neurological difference (Tremain, 2017) or neurodivergence (Silberman, 2015). Considered from the perspective of a medical model, a disability can be understood as, "... a defect lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated" (Siebers, 2008: 3). As Garland-Thomson (1997) writes:

"The autonomous individual is imagined as having inviolate boundaries that enable unfettered self-determination creating a myth of wholeness ... Conversely, the disabled body represents the incomplete, unbounded, compromised and subjected body susceptible to external forces: property badly managed, a fortress inadequately defended, a self helplessly violated" (Davy, 2019: 101)

Here, the negativity traditionally associated with disability and autism representations in popular culture is identified, which frequently reflects a more medical model and the language of 'deficit' or disorder (Moore, 2023). In this way, autistic persons are negatively compared to an identified 'norm' and considered to 'fall short' of neoliberal standards and expectations (Murray, 2023).

An alternative social model of disability, promoted by Oliver (1987) calls for a refocus on how the physical and cultural environments 'dis-able' (Barnes, 2013). For autistic children in mainstream education therefore, use of the social model moves away from a 'treatment' of autistic children's 'needs' and encourages instead a consideration of the barriers that exist in schools through environments that are built for non-autistic individuals (Ward and Powell, 2025).

My own understanding of autism aligns with that of critical autism theory, which is identified by Davidson and Orsini (2013) as having three key features: enabling autistic narratives to challenge deficit-focused discourses; focusing within the autism field on relationships of power and developing new theoretical approaches to understand the lived realities of autism (Ryan and Milton, 2023). Like Braidotti (2013), I consider that, being autistic is a neurological *difference*; and it does not follow that autistic children are inferior to those children who are perceived to be neuro-typical or a human norm that represents normality (Liddiard et al., 2019). Instead, autism is likened to the definition of disability as "...a social construct, not the inevitable result of impairment," where "...disability is a complex inter-relationship between impairment, an individual's response to that impairment and the physical, institutional, and attitudinal (together, the 'social' environment)" (Hosking, 2008: 7).

2.2 Use of Language

Over the last twenty years since the last changes were made to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2013) the language around autism has changed. Asperger's syndrome has been removed from the diagnostic manual and there is a noted preference for 'autism' and 'autistic spectrum condition' to be used in preference to 'autistic spectrum disorder' with a movement away from a linear understanding of the autism spectrum to a constellation (Dwyer, 2023). In this thesis, I use the terminology of 'autism' rather than 'autistic spectrum disorder' reflecting the preference of the autism community that autism is a difference, not a disorder (Baron-Cohen, 2017).

Since the end of the last century, this recognition of difference rather than disorder has been reflected in the language around neurodiversity, described by the National Autistic Society (2026) as, “a way of saying that human brains are different from each other.” Largely attributed to the work of Judy Singer, the first printed references to neurodiversity was attributed an online community of autistic people (Botha et al., 2024) and has come to be associated with a movement to promote social justice for those who may identify as autistic, ADHD, dyslexic and other conditions. Where neurodiversity has been recognised as an inclusive term, that of neurodivergent has been identified as more exclusionary, dividing the population between those who are neuro-normative and those who have cognitive profiles that diverge from the ‘norm’ (Legault et al., 2021). For this and reasons of consistency, therefore, the terminology of autistic and non-autistic rather than neurodivergent and neurotypical has been used.

Person-centred language, although the preference for some professionals, who feel that the person should always come first, is no longer identified as a firm preference for autistic people (Kenny et al., 2016). Most autistic adults identify a preference for identity-first language in line with Sinclair’s (2013) argument that autistic people cannot or should not be ‘separated from their autism’ and that person-first language can have a dehumanising effect (Sedgewick and Douglas, 2023). However, as argued by Flowers et al (2023) it is most important to pay heed to the individual preferences of participants who also shared their preference for identity-first language.

As all who work with young children should, I am deeply mindful of the impact of this research on the individual children and families involved in the study. Language, for example is constantly evolving and its use can impact both positively and negatively on our sense of self and identity. Changing language is a critical part of changing the world (Freire, 2021: 72) Therefore, it is important that the global and cultural preferences are considered and respected (Stevenson, 2010: 36) but also anticipated. Where ‘disability’ and ‘disabled’ are currently used to define autistic persons, many of those with a diagnosis of autism do not or may not in the future, view themselves as disabled (Watson, 2002).

In summary, therefore, there is an intentional focus on using language specific to autism and difference, rather than that of disability, divergence and disorders within this thesis, being particularly mindful of generalisations that may potentially over-generalise and dehumanise the individual stories of autistic girls.

2.3 Structure of this Thesis

In Chapter 3, I provide a review of the literature of autistic girls and their experiences of school and transition, and the paucity in research that this study addresses.

In Chapter 4, I explain the theory that underpins this research and how this has influenced my approach to the study, where Chapter 5 provides my research aims and questions, and in Chapter 6, I share my methodological approach.

In Chapter 7, individual case study stories are presented, together with an analysis of influential moments and key themes.

In Chapter 8, I discuss the overarching themes of “Alienation and Belonging,” “Conforming and Resistance”, “Clock Time”, “Places and Spaces” and “Care” across the collective case studies.

Finally, in my conclusion, I will respond to the research questions posed, examine my contribution to knowledge, and share the wider implications of this study for research and practice.

2.4 Research Aims and Objectives

Research aims:

- To raise the critical consciousness of the individual lived experiences of daily home-to-school transitions for autistic girls.
- To explore, interpret and share the embodied experiences of autistic girls of their daily home-school experiences.
- To analyse critical moments of the transition to better understand contributing factors and identify supportive approaches.

Research Questions:

- What are the embodied experiences of autistic girls of the daily home-school transition?
- What can the daily home to school transition tell educators about the experiences of autistic girls in school?
- What are the coping mechanisms and strategies employed by children, parents and class teachers to support autistic girls attending mainstream school, particularly in navigating the home to school journey?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Literature Review Approach

The focus of this study was to capture the perceptions of autistic girls, their parents and teachers of the daily transition between home and school. In order to better understand what is already known about autistic girls' presentation and experiences in school, a review of the literature was conducted. This was completed through searches of online and Faculty-Based Library sources alongside the use of databases including Education Research Complete, British Education Index and Web of Science. Search criteria included 'autism' or 'autistic' and 'girls' or 'females', together with 'school' and 'transition.' Further sources were identified by examining those cited in articles from the initial search as well as more focused searches such as 'autis*' and 'mask*' or 'camouflag*'. Where it was important, at the outset, to examine the breadth of research, key authors and gaps in the literature to inform the design and focus of the research (Lichtman, 2014), it was also necessary to revisit literature at regular intervals to ensure a "detailed, cutting-edge knowledge" of the research field (Hyatt and Roberts, 2024).

Autistic girls and women are, "... under-recognised, under-researched and underserved" (Chester, 2019: 1) and therefore it was unsurprising that specific research on autism and girls was of limited availability with the majority of research published after 2010. However, more than forty studies were included in this literature review with the majority completed in the United Kingdom, with some research from overseas where educational systems were comparable. Research with primary-aged children was prioritised; however with a noticeable paucity of research with younger children, research with adolescents was also included, particularly where participants reflected on their experiences at primary school. To be included within the literature review, a source was required to be peer-reviewed, with a preference for sources within the last decade. Excluded studies included those that were over a decade old, but also those where participants did not have an autism diagnosis, or where there was limited discussion of girls' educational experiences.

To minimise researcher bias in the selection and interpretation of literature for this review, reflexivity was employed, defined as, "...a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes" (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Engaging with research from different disciplines, use of a reflective journal and discussion with supervisors all contributed to an increased awareness of the influence of positionality and subjectivity on literature choices and interpretation.

3.2 Autism and Girls

3.21 Identification

Despite a recent surge in research on the school experiences of autistic girls (Tierney et al, 2016; Ratto, 2021), there is a noticeable paucity of this research compared with autistic boys. With concerns that approximately 75% of autistic girls are undiagnosed, there is a strong indication that autism in girls is widely misunderstood (Ward and Powell, 2025). One possible explanation being that it is only recently that the recognition of the differences in the female phenotype has been brought to the fore (Carpenter et al., 2019; Chester, 2019; Eaton, 2024; Wassall and Burke, 2022). This lack of recognition of the differences in presentation is considered to be a significant factor of the delays in identification and diagnosis (Ward et al., 2022) of autistic girls, particularly those without a learning disability (Hull et al., 2020: 138).

Autism is a heterogenous condition and therefore has different aetiologies, where no two people will present the same (Fletcher-Watson and Happe, 2019: 41), including within the subgroup of autistic girls (Hamilton and Roberts, 2024). However, historically, there has been a conception that autism is primarily a 'male' condition (Auyeung, 2009) where the number of autistic girls to autistic boys has been identified as 1 in 4. However, this ratio has been frequently disputed, as research suggests that autistic girls can have a different phenotype and presentation than males (Cammuso and Knapp-Ines, 2024), and therefore gender biases in diagnosis and assessment processes can result in mis- or nil diagnosis (Ratto, 2021).

Consequently the late diagnosis of autistic women is widely recognised. This is explained by a 'female protective effect' in that there is less probability of a female being diagnosed, even when they demonstrate similar levels of difficulty as autistic males (Hull et al., 2020). Others attribute this to an under-recognition of the female phenotype in the diagnosis criteria employed in autism assessments (Duvekot et al., 2017). The diagnostic process itself is considered biased (Gould, 2017) where autistic girls appear to require, "... additional or more severe indicators of autism, intellectual disability or mental health concerns to receive a diagnosis" (Ward et al., 2022: 1364).

Recent research also suggests that trajectories of autism symptom severity can vary between boys and girls, where autistic girls' symptom severity in areas such as eye contact, communication, and mannerism decrease over time (Waizbard et al., 2025). Nevertheless, lack of recognition of the female presentation of autism is associated with negative outcomes including loss of education (Halsall et al., 2021), loss of identity and self-esteem (Hull et al.,

2017) and an increased risk of anxiety and other mental health difficulties, due to lack of timely support (Cammuso and Knapp-Ines, 2024). In contrast, diagnosis has been found to provide a sense of relief and a better understanding of the self (Malone et al., 2025).

These challenges around identification can be understood through the lens of patriarchy, which feminist scholars promote as a means of understanding how women's lives are shaped by the patriarchal framework prevalent within Western cultures (Lerner, 1986). Research into this condition has been largely dominated by male clinicians and researchers, most notably Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger, where the majority of research studies have featured that of male participants. This has resulted in the writing of a script which has defined autism as a primarily a male condition, resulting in the overlooking and exclusion of autistic women from research (Rippon, 2025) and ultimately indicating that the gender disparity can be better attributed to under or misdiagnosis than a genuine lower incidence of the condition (Minutoli et al., 2026).

3.22 Restricted Interests and Patterns of Attention

As part of the autism diagnostic criteria, autistic children will demonstrate "... restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities", which may present as highly restricted, fixated interests with a difference in intensity or focus, repetitive movement or speech, a preference and insistence on sameness with difficulties deviating from routines (APA, 2013: B2-4). This includes atypical patterns of attention, or monotropism, which can result in difficulties moving to and from a preferred activity (Murray, 2018)

Repetitive behaviours observed in autistic boys and girls have included what are understood to be stereotypical presentations of autism including rocking, flapping behaviours, preference for routines, repetitive questions and obsessive behaviours (Sutherland et al., 2017). Historically these restricted interests and patterns of attention have been considered from a negative and deficit perspective. However, recent research shifts the narrative in restricted or an intensity in interests as a flaw, to a provider of autistic joy (Wassell, 2025) and the ability to be more deeply drawn into specific activities (Murray, 2023; Murray et al., 2005).

When considering the criteria of 'strong or restrictive interests' in determining a diagnosis of autism, research has found marked differences in the special interests between boys and girls with an autism diagnosis, with indications that autistic males were more likely to have more restrictive interests (Rubenstein et al, 2015) and behaviours that others consider unusual (Dean et al., 2017: 679). In contrast, autistic females preferred restrictive interests are more

likely to relate to social stimuli such as people, animals or music, which may appear more neurotypical (Cammuso and Knapp-Ines, 2024) and may include more repetitive behaviour in play (Hiller et al., 2016).

3.23 Friendships and Fitting in

Inclusion within a mainstream school can be problematic for autistic pupils, where integration within mainstream schools does not always equate to inclusion (Goodall, 2018). Autistic children report the same desire for inclusion and friendship as those without a diagnosis (Hebron, 2018). However, “Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts” as identified in the autism assessment criteria can result in difficulties in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships such as friendships (APA, 2013: A1-3).

Where this research specifically focuses on autistic girls, literature indicates that difficulties with social interaction can have a negative impact on all autistic pupils’ ability to initiate and maintain friendships (Arnardottir et al., 2023), leading to autistic children feeling socially isolated (Goodall, 2018) and expressing feelings of loneliness in school environments (Peters and Brooks, 2016). This is attributed to difficulties with social communication difficulties (O’Hare et al., 2023), inflexibility of thought or empathy (Auyeung, 2009), or attunement (Bolis et al., 2021).

Friendships are defined by Sedgewick and Douglas (2023: 32) as “reciprocal relationships between two people, where those two people spend time together voluntarily and stay in contact to some degree when not together. The relationship is usually characterised by emotional warmth and closeness, security, trust helpfulness and a lack of conflict.” Where both autistic girls and boys share a motivation for friendship, autistic girls are more likely to have “an unusually strong desire to fit in with peers” (Hiller et al., 2016: 81) more than autistic boys or non-autistic peers (Jones, 2025). Autistic adolescent girls in particular have reported feigning more stereotypical interests and behaviours to their own in order to align with potential friends (Hamilton and Roberts, 2024). Unfortunately, research indicates that self-reported quality of friendships is poorer for autistic girls than those who do not have a diagnosis of autism (Calder et al., 2013), where autistic girls demonstrate similar or greater difficulties with social communication to autistic boys (Duvekot et al., 2017; Ratto et al., 2018; Rubenstein et al., 2015). This includes initiating and contributing to conversations and understanding social rules (Sturrock et al., 2022; Tierney et al., 2016), despite demonstrating superior semantic, pragmatic and social use of language skills (Sturrock et al., 2022). Autistic teenage girls share

challenges around difficulties contributing to conversation, where an inability to talk would take hold, knowing what and what not to share and being laughed at without knowing why (Malone et al., 2025).

Friendships for autistic girls becomes more challenging around the ages of 8-10 years old where social behaviours are more complex (Eaton, 2019) and there is less involvement with parents, who can play a strong role in facilitating play dates and initiating friendships for their autistic daughters (Tierney et al., 2016). Specifically, relationships for autistic girls can be more intense, with greater potential for conflict (Sedgewick et al., 2019), and reported feelings of isolation and alienation (Hamilton and Roberts, 2024). This is supported by findings that autistic girls experienced positive social interactions and potential friendships with children they perceived as similar to themselves (Sturrock et al., 2022), but also that differences in the interpretation of behaviours could result in conflict between autistic girls and their non-autistic peers and/or teachers (Hamilton and Roberts, 2024).

Despite findings that autistic girls can seek and enjoy social interaction, many experience social exhaustion at school (Calder et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2021; Grove et al., 2025; Sturrock et al., 2022) and autistic teenagers have reported feeling “socially drained of battery really quickly” (Malone et al., 2025: 7). This can be attributed to feeling overwhelmed with expectations of engaging with other children (Calder et al., 2013) to the extent that the social environment can provoke distress with a feeling of a lack of safety and potential for rejection (Tierney et al., 2016). Lack of representation and role models for autistic women and girls can also lead to feelings of isolation and confusion (Grove et al., 2025) as exemplified in this quote from an autistic girl attending secondary school:

“It feels like in my classroom that I’m surrounded by lions.... I feel like a mouse and everyone else is like a giant cat or something” (Tierney et al, 2016: p77).

The feeling of insecurity is not unfounded when considering that autistic children are three times more likely to be bullied than their non-autistic children (Hoover and Kaufmann, 2018), where mainstream classrooms and unstructured times are the places and spaces where physical, verbal and relational school bullying are more likely to occur. Although limited research has focused specifically on the bullying of autistic girls, studies indicate that bullying for autistic girls can be more intentional and targeted (Malone et al., 2025) with camouflaging often preventing the addressing of these behaviours (Cook et al., 2018).

3.24 Camouflaging

Camouflaging strategies are understood within the field of autism research to be “... the employment of specific behavioural and cognitive strategies by autistic people to adapt to or cope within the predominately non-autistic social world,”(Cook et al., 2018: 4), and can be implicitly or explicitly learned and conscious or unconscious (Hull et al., 2020: 309). Camouflaging is different from non-autistic imitation in that, rather than being a single process, it is a complex set of cognitive and behavioural mechanisms (Cammuso and Knapp-Ines, 2024) often observed in autistic girls (Cook et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2020; Tubío-Fungueiriño et al., 2021). Although camouflaging can be observed in autistic boys (McLinden and Sedgewick, 2023), research indicates that girls are more likely to self-report camouflaging (Cook et al., 2021) and use this to try and blend in with their peers (Halsall et al., 2021).

The presentation of self in different ways for different environments or for different audiences is not a new concept or one which is limited to those with an autism diagnosis. When considering the general population, Goffman reflects (2022: 24):

“It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role. It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.”

Goffman (2022) goes further to explain that information shared consciously or unconsciously plays a strong role in how others treat or expect to be treated within their communities. Therefore, the presentation and impressions given inadvertently will determine how others respond. In research with children, participants identified “a true self, that existed at home, compared with the “front employed” to fit in at school” (Rice-Adams, 2023: 141). Although, there is a moral right for individuals to be valued for their true selves (Goffman, 2022), defensive or preventative practices such as camouflaging or masking are frequently used to avoid embarrassment or to create specific impressions.

The function of camouflaging is defined as “... complex copying behaviours and/or masking some personality traits with an adaptive function that promotes adjustments into specific environmental demands” (Tubío-Fungueiriño et al., 2021: 2191). Unfortunately with the majority of research into camouflaging related to adolescents and adults (Cook et al., 2021; Sedgewick et al., 2019), there is limited research into camouflaging with younger autistic children (Howe et al., 2023). Particular camouflaging strategies observed and self-reported in

adolescent autistic girls have included the preparation of scripts and rehearsal of social situations, imitation, censoring behaviours and high levels of monitoring of behaviours (Drapalik et al., 2025: 2540) and seeking to mirror the behaviours of non-autistic peers including eye contact or limiting facial expressions (Lai et al., 2017). Examples of this are shared in Halsall et al's (2021) research, where two autistic teenagers share how they camouflage their behaviours to fit in with peers:

"I smile and nod, like I know what they're talking about, but I really don't... I worry they might laugh at me' (Liana)

Sometimes I change how I react. I change my entire personality (Holly) "

The association of camouflaging behaviours with autistic girls has been widely speculated upon with some suggesting that the female cognitive profile provides a greater ability for camouflage (Lehnhardt et al., 2016). Others argue that the societal pressures together with gender stereotypes impact on autistic girls' sense of identity (Grove et al., 2025), thereby necessitating the requirement for camouflage (Pearson and Rose, 2021). Indeed, for some autistic girls, the employment of a mask is not only to present a specific version of themselves but to match peers' social behaviour and gendered expectations, avoiding peer rejection and bullying (Cammuso and Knapp-Ines, 2024; Howe et al., 2023).

Although the internalisation of anxieties is not one of the core features of a typical clinical presentation of autism, it is an identified feature of the female presentation of autism (Hull et al., 2017; Ratto, 2021) and is associated with mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, self-harming and eating disorders (Happé, 2019). With autistic girls more likely to internalise anxieties (Duvekot et al., 2017) research has found that use of camouflaging strategies can have a significant effect on wellbeing and autistic girls' sense of self (Drapalik et al., 2025).

The impact of camouflaging or masking behaviours is significant and results in physical and emotional exhaustion (Grove et al., 2025), which can impact on autistic girls' sense of identity and authenticity (Hull et al., 2017). Despite the increased attention to the practice of camouflaging or 'masking' of autistic girls in research (Anderson, 2020; Halsall et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2016), there is a limited understanding about how conscious girls are of this embodied response to the environment (McCann, 2023). For example, are the girls choosing to camouflage to 'fit in' with specific groups or are these perceived behaviours purely an unconscious 'reaction' to factors in their environment, or a combination of the two?

3.3 Autistic Girls and their School Environment

Views of the nature and purpose of schools vary, but for most, schools are identified as places of transformation or ‘intellectualisation’, where populations are transformed through “... an array of spaces, techniques and occasions” (Peim, 2001: 179). In this transformation, schools are said to teach facts and methods which can be demonstrated or measured through examinations, whilst preparing children for work (Brinkmann, 2021). In this way, schools apply a practice of ‘normalisation’ through uniform behaviour management techniques, standardised testing and assessment alongside imposed rituals and routines. Those who do not comply or are perceived to be ‘abnormal’ thus require additional deterrents to correct behaviours or specialist provision (McNair, 2022).

Researchers in the field of children’s geographies posit that school buildings embody physical capital that shape individuals’ experiences, where Finn and Holton (2019), contend that, “... education spaces are key sites at which power and identity are negotiated,” (Kraftl, 2022: 44). As children cross between the two communities, therefore, they cross a boundary, defined by Akkerman (2011: 133) as “... a sociocultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction,” and must then navigate the change in their environment. This includes adapting to social interactions and responding to processes of surveillance and normalisation. As children comply with the daily school requirements, they are ‘bent’ to its ways; where interactions or rhythms between the biological, the physiological and social (cultural), produces an embodied response either ‘in tune’ with the rhythms of the environment (eurhythmia) or ‘at odds’ (arrhythmia) (Lefebvre, 2021).

For autistic children the ableist discourses of what is ‘normal’ or a generalised assumption of how children learn and behave, can result in, “... an environment of everyday discrimination that marginalises autistic CYP [children and young people]” (Oliver et al., 2021: 7). Despite a push for inclusive practice by government, “... the way that schools are organised and how classrooms are composed therefore creates a form of ‘structural exclusion’, which preserves mainstream education for typically developing pupils” (Webster, 2022: 18). The majority of autistic children in mainstream schools are identified as having special educational needs (McNair, 2022) which is defined as, “...a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools” (DfE, 2015: 15). Thus, in contrast with the dominant group the autistic child requires additional support or adaptation to be able to access the same services and demonstrating a level of epistemic injustice within society (Legault et al., 2021).

Inclusion for autistic children specifically in schools has been problematic, where autistic children can feel an arrhythmia to the dominant rhythms of an environment designed for non-autistic persons (Pang, 2020) and are at greater risk of being excluded, bullied, socially isolated and having low academic outcomes (Humphrey and Symes, 2010; Roberts and Webster, 2022). Further damage can result in autistic pupils' self-esteem, as there is a perception of a deficit within themselves rather than an understanding of environmental influences (Freire, 2021).

3.31 Attendance and Emotion Based School Avoidance

With increased demands for social interaction, imposed embedded routines and environments that autistic children might find particularly challenging, emotion-based school avoidance appears to be on the rise. In a study by Ambitious about Autism (2025), 31% of autistic pupils were identified as being persistently absent (missing 10% or more time in school) compared to 20.9% of non-autistic pupils. With limited access to gender specific data, it is unclear what proportion are autistic girls, however, in a survey of children with autism's attendance in Sweden, higher rates of absence in girls (54.6% compared to boys 43.9%) were identified, where parents attributed this to a lack of knowledge of autism, limited consideration of the learning environment and lack of support for learning and social interaction (Anderson, 2020).

In more qualitative research, autistic girls report difficulties with sensory distress and peer rejection that resulted in school absenteeism or multiple placements particularly for those in mainstream settings (Cook et al., 2018; Totsika et al., 2020). School spaces are reported to be "... hard for participants to tolerate" (Tierney et al., 2016: 77), where attending mainstream rather than specialist schools, increases the chances of missing school by almost 100% (Totsika et al., 2020). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, autistic pupils have demonstrated increased challenges in attending school with over 11,000 classed as severely absent, missing 50% of the school year (DfE, 2024a).

3.32 Rules and Routines

In order for schools to run smoothly and ensure the safety of all, rules and regulations are an intrinsic part of school life. As identified by the Department for Education (DfE) (2022: 55) "Good behaviour in schools is central to a good education. Schools need to manage behaviour well so that they can provide calm, orderly, safe and supportive environments in which children want to attend and can learn and thrive." However, children can perceive the rules and routines as less supportive of their needs. For many children, school has more rules and restrictions

than home environments, where children can feel freer and less constrained (Hughes et al., 2009: 21).

In the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-5), which is used to identify medical conditions, “an excessive adherence to routines, ritualised patterns of verbal or nonverbal behaviour or excessive resistance to change” are potential indicators of autism (APA, 2013: 50). This indicates that rules and routines within the school environment could be supportive for autistic children, although findings across the literature reviewed were mixed. Research indicates that although autistic girls have been found to experience difficulties with interpreting unspoken rules (Halsall et al., 2021) and complying with societal expectations (Wassall and Burke, 2022), autistic secondary school pupils, “...tended to be highly aware of school rules and keen to follow them, becoming anxious if they observed peers breaking rules” (Mesa and Hamilton, 2023: 20). This suggests potential tensions between seeking to conform to rules yet not always understanding or being motivated to comply with institutional expectations.

3.33 Sensory Processing Difficulties

More than 166,000 children in education have a diagnosis of autism (DfE, 2024a) and therefore are more likely to experience associated sensory processing difficulties (SPDs), described by Passarello et al (2022: 1) as “...difficulty detecting, modulating, interpreting, and/or responding to sensory experiences.” For the brain to work effectively, it needs to be able to be in a self-perpetuating state of equilibrium, receiving and integrating a constant stream of sensory stimuli (Ayres and Robbins, 1979: 21). Yet, for autistic pupils, SPDs are not just incidental challenges, they are embodied experiences that shape how they interact with the world, which affect children’s physiological and psychological wellbeing (Passarello et al., 2022). Therefore, in schools, to optimise learning, strategies to support sensory regulation in the eight senses needs to be considered. This includes auditory (hearing), visual, olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), tactile (touch) proprioceptive (sense of ourselves within our environment), vestibular (balance) and interoceptive (internal feelings such as feeling hot or cold or experiencing pain).

Although no two autistic children will have the same sensory processing preferences, autistic people will have hyper- (over-) and hypo- (under-) sensitivity to a variety of different sensory input and difficulties processing sensory stimuli, where too much or too little sensory information can result in dysregulation and discomfort. Sensory challenges for autistic girls identified in research include changing clothes for school and physical activities (Oliver et al., 2021) and hair and teeth brushing at the start of the day (Moyse and Porter, 2015), but in

general focus more on the physical school environments within secondary settings such as navigating busy corridors and assemblies (Jones et al., 2020; Mesa and Hamilton, 2023; Tierney et al., 2016). Loud, unpredictable noise, highly stimulating displays and fluorescent lights as well as incidental smells are all features of mainstream schools identified as unsupportive for autistic pupils (APPGA, 2017) with the impersonal school environments, at times, being likened to a “psychological enclosure in which you are surrounded by all these people, all this different noise.” (Sproston et al., 2017: 4).

Sensory dysregulation in autistic learners has been associated with academic underachievement (Ashburner et al., 2010) reduced participation and increased anxiety (Vincent et al., 2023), particularly when engaging in unfamiliar activities (Jones et al., 2020), or experiencing increased anxiety around academic demands (Cunningham, 2022). The ability to interpret bodily sensations (interoception) has also become a more recent focus of research where autistic persons are likely to be less aware of some bodily signals but hypervigilant to others, impacting on levels of emotional regulation (Palser et al., 2026). Supportive strategies identified in the literature for adolescent girls included being able to voice their concerns and having agency within their environment (Vincent et al., 2023), and access calmer, quieter and safe areas in school when they felt overwhelmed or anxious, particularly at unstructured times (O'Hagan et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2020).

3.34 Transitions between Home and School

Moving between home and school is a daily ritual undertaken by many children, just as many adults move between the communities of home and work and is the focus of this research. Wenger (1998: 160) describes transitions as moving between two communities of practice which requires a level of reconciliation where, “...learners must often deal with conflicting forms of individuality and competence as defined in different communities”. The way to school therefore is a place where individuals’ move between places but also between identities (Berchtold-Sedooka et al., 2023). In Van Gennep’s (2019) rites of passage, transitions are defined as having three distinct elements: separation from what is known, transition or a no-man’s land and incorporation into the new environment or community.

When considering the daily transition, parents and carers generally have a specific time frame to get their child to school, and for working parents, to get to their place of work. For autistic children and adults, moving between places and spaces or between tasks are more challenging (Ross et al., 2020) with contributing factors including a resistance to change and intolerance of uncertainty (Nuske et al., 2019). Monotropic attention differences associated

with autism, results in a tendency for interests to “... pull us in more strongly than most people” (Murray et al., 2005: 139) and can lead to a debilitating autistic inertia; a resistance to starting, stopping or changing direction (Phung et al., 2021). For transitions, therefore additional time is required to accommodate the shift between events or activities (Murray et al., 2005).

The number of transitions within the school day for children who prefer repetition or struggle with moving between tasks or settings, has also been identified as problematic. Moving between structured lessons to unstructured play and breaktimes for autistic girls, can be particularly challenging (Tomlinson et al., 2020). Current research on autistic children’s experiences of transition focuses primarily on transitions between schools (Hebron, 2018; Mesa and Hamilton, 2023; Peters and Brooks, 2016) yet there is limited research around the daily home to school transition (Hughes et al., 2009) and more specifically on the daily transition for autistic girls. Although there have been some qualitative studies, largely within the field of children’s geographies, there has been a call for more “...child-centred approaches to studying journeys to/from school which can offer a means to voice children’s experience and recognise their agency in constructing a sense of place” (Morris et al., 2022: 2).

3.4 Support for Autistic Girls

Across the literature, autistic girls shared a need to be understood, supported and included (Goodall, 2018) in other words, cared for, yet there is a paucity in the discussion of care in education (Vázquez et al., 2024). A range of strategies for autistic girls in school have been identified as supportive including the availability of quiet safe spaces (Cunningham, 2022; Goodall, 2018; Jones et al., 2020; Mesa and Hamilton, 2023) access to timetables and warnings of changes (Cunningham, 2022; Mesa and Hamilton, 2023) where the majority of these studies were with those in secondary schools. With heightened anxiety, social communication differences and friendship difficulties were identified as key concerns for autistic girls in schools, the role of adults in providing a level of care are particularly important.

Educational philosopher, Nel Noddings, defines care as having three meanings: to protect, to be inclined towards and as a burden, identifying that, “To care for another person in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself” (2013: 9). Thus, although the nature of caring for someone, particularly an autistic child, can be often in a protective sense, and, at times may feel burdensome, the act of caring should be ‘enabling’. As advocated by Davy (2019: 7) “Care can and should protect and facilitate autonomy, rather than stifle it, by providing opportunities for others to function as autonomous persons.” Therefore, for an

autistic child, in line with the emancipatory paradigm, the intention is enabling agency rather than limiting this.

3.41 The Role of Parents

Parenting practices have been identified for many years as significant in children's development (Gottman *et al.*, 1996), particularly in the way in which parents support children's emotional regulation, provide positive role models and advocate for their child's wellbeing and education. Across this literature review, parents were identified as sources of knowledge, advocates and carers for their autistic daughters, as well as facilitators of friendships (Tierney *et al.*, 2016), supporting social skills development (Anderson, 2020; Fowler and O'Connor, 2021), and enhancing independence (Mademtzi *et al.*, 2018). Parents report additional responsibilities when caring for an autistic daughter (Hopkins *et al.*, 2023) and spending significantly more time in care-related activities (Clark and Adams, 2020). Providing this level of intensive care can negatively affect parents' wellbeing and consequently their children's (Shochet, 2019), and impacted on all aspects of family life including sleep times, diet and the home environment (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, parents of autistic children expressed relief at not having to get their children to school (Vincent *et al.*, 2023). A parent reflects: "In many ways there was huge sense of relief when the pandemic came because we didn't have to keep jollyng him along on a Sunday night anymore [...] Milo became a free spirit" (Vincent *et al.*, 2023: 9), exemplifying the impact of the daily transition and routines placed on family life.

As an often-unheard group, parents of autistic girls are more likely to advocate for their daughters in education (O'Hare *et al.*, 2023) and in research (Anderson, 2020; Clark and Adams, 2020; O'Hare *et al.*, 2023). Where autistic girls camouflage in schools, behaviours are more observable in the home (McCormick and Thomas, 2025) and therefore insights from parents can illuminate (Karaminis *et al.*, 2023). Valued insights from research with parents have included observations of how autistic girls hold in their emotions (Mesa and Hamilton, 2023; Sutherland *et al.*, 2017) and the potential for increased behavioural differences and meltdowns at home (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Myles *et al.*, 2007). Parents also report the necessity of advocating for their daughters for identification and assessment, particularly where there are reported differences in home and school presentation (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2020)

3.42 The Role of Teachers

Within the primary school context, children will spend the majority of their time with one class teacher, who “...is responsible and accountable for the progress and development of the pupils in their class (DfE, 2015: 6:36). As promoted by Noddings (2012: 772), “...from the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as carer is interested in the *expressed* needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study.” However, charged with making the education of their pupils their first concern with accountability for achieving the highest possible standards (DfE, 2011), a tension between caring for the academic and expressed needs of their pupils can exist necessitating a strong understanding of the individual pupils and their relative needs.

Across the literature explored, teachers’ understanding of autism could significantly impact on where an autistic girl’s experience of school was positive or negative (Cunningham, 2022), yet lack of sufficient training and resources, specifically time are cited to be key challenges in developing this understanding (Hamilton and Cook, 2026). Autistic girls reported that feeling understood by a key adult who could advocate for them was a significant supportive factor in improving their access to school and education (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; O’Hagan et al., 2022) and there was a desire from autistic adolescent girls for teachers to see them as individuals (Hamilton and Roberts, 2024). However, teachers’ knowledge, specifically their ability to recognise autism in girls is influenced by autistic girls’ tendency to mask or camouflage their behaviours (Whitlock et al., 2020) and, in 2017, fewer than 5 in 10 teachers expressed confidence in supporting autistic children (APPGA, 2017) and even those in the role of SENCO rated their confidence as low or quite low in recognising autism and girls (Gray et al., 2021: 85). Limited understanding of the female phenotype and the employment of camouflaging can impact on teachers’ ability to identify and meet individual needs and build effective relationships (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2020), where the most skilled educators need to have time, persistence and dedication to do so.

Autistic children can feel misunderstood and isolated in mainstream schools by their peers and teachers (Goodall, 2021) and require ‘care’ that seeks to repair and support, in a way that is ‘attuned’ to an individual’s needs (Green and Clark, 2024: 8). An example of this is where a teacher, through a concern about pupils spending unstructured times alone, may make unsuccessful attempts to intervene to ensure they were included in others’ activities or games, thus neglecting to respond to the communicated preference for solitude (Calder et al., 2013: 309). Increasing pastoral demands on teachers, and lack of time, resources and staffing are cited as barriers to the implementation of supportive provision and teachers who are the most

passionate about inclusive provision can be more vulnerable to burnout (Ward and Powell, 2025).

3.43 The Impact of Home-School Relationships

A child's development is influenced by the microsystems of home and school, the exosystem of extended family, local authorities and the macrosystems of political, social, and economic systems, but also the interactions between those systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). As children move between home and school, they are not part of one community but are "...simultaneously members of multiple communities of practice" (Hughes et al., 2009: 29) and thus the interactions between a child's teacher and parent are significant (Zaatari and Maalouf, 2022). Although there is limited research about parent and teacher collaboration in the research around autism and girls, there is a widespread acknowledgement that strong relationships between home and school can positively impact on outcomes. This includes feelings of belonging, self-esteem and wellbeing (Critchley, 2019; O'Hagan et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2020) and the prevention of exclusion (Guldborg et al., 2022).

Parents of autistic girls reported significant differences in the presentation of their daughters between home and school (Sutherland et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). Particular challenges in home school communication existed where parents reported school staff demonstrating disbelief at the reported difficulties of their daughters (Tierney et al., 2016) or those communications that had a heavy emphasis on negative feedback (Sproston et al., 2017). Positive feedback, demonstrated understanding and open communication were welcomed, reflecting the argument by the Lamb Inquiry that "Good, honest and open communication is the key to the development of positive working relationships and requires practitioners who listen to parents and are trusted by them." (DCSF, 2009)

3.5 The Voices of Autistic Girls in Research

With the ratification in the United Kingdom of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992 as published by the Select Committee (2015), the government committed to ensuring that children have the right to express their views in all matters that affect them in accordance with their age and maturity (UNCRC, 1989). However, there has been a considerable lack of opportunity for children with identified special educational needs and disabilities to contribute to recent proposed changes to educational reform (Pluquail et al., 2025).

Children's right to express opinions and to be heard is dependent on adults who may have concerns about children's capacity to contribute, the level of authority that should be given to children and the time spent on gaining learners opinions that could be better spent elsewhere (Lundy, 2007: 929). Although there has been a significant increase of research into the lives of autistic children within the last decade, much of the research draws from parents, teachers and teaching assistants (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019); thereby limiting what is learned to what others observe. Autistic girls' voices are thus frequently underrepresented in research with their experiences and perspectives unheard (Grove et al., 2025), particularly those under ten years of age (Zanuttini, 2023). A bias towards male perspectives can be attributed to the under-identification of autistic girls (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019), and the research communities' understanding of autism which limits research around more female-specific characteristics (Zanuttini, 2023).

The majority of research examined in this review replicated the gap in research with autistic children and focused specifically on the perspectives of parents (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2017; Whitlock et al., 2020) or professionals (Ward et al., 2022). Older autistic adolescents were represented in a number of studies (Cook et al., 2018; Hamilton and Roberts, 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021; Malone et al., 2025; Tierney et al., 2016) with a few notable exceptions including younger autistic girls (Calder et al., 2013; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Sturrock et al., 2022). Of the research carried out with autistic girls, qualitative ethnographic methods (Moyse and Porter, 2015) with adapted materials (Sturrock et al., 2022) and arts-based approaches (Cunningham, 2022; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019) reflected research that autistic children require additional consideration and adaptations to traditional methods (Carroll and Twomey, 2021).

3.6 Conclusion

In line with the diagnostic criteria, autistic children demonstrate differences with social communication and interaction and restricted or repetitive behaviours, interests and activities (APA, 2013: 50-51) including differences in attention (Murray et al., 2005) and SPDs (Jones et al., 2020). Literature indicates that autistic girls have been shown to present differently to autistic boys, specifically with more neurotypical interests (Sutherland et al., 2017), a greater motivation for friendships (Cook et al., 2018; Sedgewick et al., 2016) and a propensity to mask or camouflage autistic traits (Dean et al., 2017; Duvekot et al., 2017; Eaton, 2024; Hull et al., 2020; McQuaid et al., 2022; Sedgewick et al., 2016; Ward et al., 2022). They are often underdiagnosed or late diagnosed (Wassall and Burke, 2022) and underrepresented in research, which has been attributed to patriarchal structures and female-protective effect

(Happe, 2019), such as bias in the diagnostic process, the prevalence of camouflaging behaviours in autistic females and a historical emphasis on the male presentation of autism (Rippon, 2025).

Mainstream school experiences of autistic girls are generally presented as challenging with negative experiences outweighing the positive (Jones, 2025) as autistic girls navigate environment and processes designed for the majority. Cited difficulties include managing the sensory demands of the school environment (O'Hagan et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2020), struggling to make and maintain friendships, and responding to social demands (Calder et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2018; Sedgewick et al., 2016); but also a lack of understanding of the female phenotype can impact negatively on teachers' abilities to support autistic girls (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2020). In a desire to conform or fit in, many autistic girls seek to camouflage their authentic self, imitating the behaviours of non-autistic children in comparison to the more authentic behaviours exhibited in their home environment (McCormick and Thomas, 2025), resulting in a loss of identity and a negative impact on wellbeing (Hull et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2020).

Where autistic girls have been supported effectively, adaptations, such as quiet spaces, have been made to the school environment (Jones et al., 2020); changes to timetables have been made explicit (Cunningham, 2022; Mesa and Hamilton, 2023), but overall it is the relationships that have been found to be most supportive. Autistic girls share a desire to be understood and cared for (Goodall, 2018), where greater teacher understanding is impactful (Cunningham, 2022). Parents also have a key role as advocates (O'Hare et al., 2023), facilitators of friendships (Tierney et al., 2016), supporting social skills and independence (Mademtzi et al., 2018) and brokering the transition between home and school environments.

Although existing research has examined the transition between schools for pupils with autism, there has been limited focus on the daily home to school transition for autistic girls; an aspect of the school day that requires a separation from the home, transition between the school spaces and incorporation into the school environment (van Gennep, 2019), negotiating the transition between home and school identities (Wenger, 1998).

Recognising the heterogenous nature of autism, it is acknowledged that every autistic girl will experience the school journey differently. Therefore, this study seeks to humanise this oppressed group through the sharing of individual stories and thus, inform educators of diverse lived experiences, through the perspectives of autistic girls, their teachers and parents.

In the next chapter, I will explore the theoretical framework that underpins this study and the methodological approach.

4. Theoretical Approach – Emancipatory Theoretical Framework

When conducting educational research, theory is used to help the researcher to better understand, explain and offering new insights into phenomena (Wellington, 2015) and therefore must strengthen the research. In this chapter, I will provide a rationale for the choice of an emancipatory theoretical framework and how this applies to this research.

Initial considerations for the underpinning theory to this study included that of Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis. This was identified as a powerful way of understanding the patterns and repetitions that exist in daily life (Lefebvre, 2021) and thus provided opportunities to reflect and interpret the changes on the natural rhythms of the body as the girls moved between home and school. In addition, LeFebvre's concepts of eurhythmia and arrhythmia were particularly pertinent as a means of understanding the embodied responses to moving across the boundaries between home and school. However, although Lefebvre's theory provides a method of examining how the daily rhythms are experienced (Nash, 2020), a greater emphasis on emancipation and transformation was required.

Emancipatory disability research is born out of Oliver's (1992) call for a new approach to researching the lives of those with disabilities, recognising the impact of environmental and societal forces rather than person-specific barriers (Barnes, 2013). Drawing upon Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2017) and *Pedagogy of Hope* (2021). Freire was strongly influenced by traditional Marxist and Gutierrez's liberation theology (Braye and Gibbons, 2021) and his work has since informed emancipatory movements for minoritised groups including racialised communities, women, students (Misoczky, 2024: 125) and more recently to address disability discrimination, through Oliver's (1992) emancipatory disability paradigm (Braye and Gibbons, 2021: 81). Freire argued that education is inherently political, in that it can be used as a tool for liberation or oppression (Darder, 2024). When situated within a capitalist society, oppressors can "... oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power." (Freire, 2017: 18) and thus Freire calls for 'conscientização,' a process of learning to "...perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive element of reality" (Freire, 2017: 9).

Autistic girls, as identified in the literature review are 'oppressed' and 'disabled' by a mainstream environment, driven by neuro-normative expectations, but also the patriarchal structures that have dominated autism research and diagnosis processes. They can experience alienation, exclusion and bullying, and a necessity to mask their true selves to

conform to gender stereotypes (Hull et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016; Tubío-Funqueiriño et al., 2021). As Freire (2017: 30) promotes, living in this state of oppression, seeking to camouflage and imitate perceived norms (Misoczky, 2024: 125) prevents autistic girls from being their authentic selves. This results in a fractured sense of self, where their voices are unheard within educational discourses (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Grove et al., 2025).

Recognising such injustice in society, Freire's pedagogy of hope is defined therefore as an "ontological need", a necessity to initiate change (2021: 16). This requires analysis of the existing power dynamics, the challenging of dominant assumptions and the development of communities of resistance (Giroux, 2021: 12). Thus, to achieve liberation from oppression, Freire suggests that "... this can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (2017: 25). Research therefore, particularly through the sharing of life stories can be transformative, enabling purposeful knowledge acquisition to inform practice (O'Neill and Roberts, 2019). As researchers engage in critical dialogue with oppressed groups, listening to and learning from the language used by the group themselves is important (Freire, 2021) so as to emancipate and transform realities *with* the oppressed:

"...we can legitimately say that in the process of oppression, someone oppresses someone else; we cannot say that in the process of revolution someone liberates someone else, nor yet that someone liberates himself, but rather that men in communion liberate each other" (Freire, 2017: 106).

Within the context of emancipatory autism studies, Freire's belief in collective dialogue and empowerment is reflected in the NAS (2025) motto, "Nothing for us, without us," where the centring of research needs to be on the voices of autistic girls, who are too often excluded from shaping the narratives that define them (Ryan and Milton, 2023), where the autistic voice must be central in the research design, implementation and review.

Autistic girls, like many who live on the margins of society enjoy an epistemological privilege that allows them to theorise society differently from those in dominant social locations (Haraway, 2013). Their unique contribution, borne out of their lived experience is therefore valuable and should not be underestimated by educators (Freire, 2021). Although I am an autistic woman, this study seeks to shift the focus from the researchers' perspective to enable others to share their knowledge and understanding, fostering critical dialogue (Freire, 2017) and a "genuine quest for something undetermined," (Noddings, 2005: 23). To truly humanise and provide the individual stories, there is a necessity therefore, for this study to demonstrate

“...sensitivity to the kaleidoscopic complexity of this highly individualised, relational (dis)order” (Davidson and Orsini, 2013: 12).

Viewed through this emancipatory lens, the purpose of this research was to empower autistic girls to articulate and co-construct their own stories and to challenge dominant assumptions and power structures embedded in educational systems. It raised the critical consciousness ‘*conscientização*’ (conscientisation) of the participants (Freire, 2017) and empowered and explored collective possibilities for change within both education and the broader community.

5. Methodology

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explain the methodology behind this emancipatory research which enables autistic girls to reclaim the narrative in sharing their stories of transition from home to school (Ryan and Milton, 2023: 4) drawing upon Freire's pedagogies of oppression and hope (2017,2021). The focus of this thesis is to explore the transition between home and school and therefore to better understand autistic girls' experiences. Using a case study approach, this research draws from the perspectives of four autistic girls, their parents, and teachers. Situated within the emancipatory approach, side-by-side methods are used to enable critical dialogue rather than traditional face-to-face interviews (Lepp, 2023).

5.2 Case Study Research

Case studies as supported by Stenhouse (1979) are used as a means of capturing complexity through focusing on specific cases (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013). Recognising the heterogenous nature of autism, a case study approach is deemed to be more appropriate than those approaches used to present more generalised findings. Despite pressure for positivist approaches to educational research such as randomised controlled trials (Goldacre, 2008; Thomas, 2021), qualitative research continues to provide important contributions to knowledge within the sector. Value lies in the subjective and emotional responses despite objections that herein lie its weaknesses (Wellington, 2015). Listening to others personal stories and experience, enables a humanising of the individual experience (Freire, 2017; 2021). Thus, in line with the emancipatory paradigm and Freire's pedagogy of hope (2021), qualitative data co-constructed with participants, raises the critical consciousness of the oppressed group and others through engaging with emotions, and with the intention of making a difference (Liamputtong, 2011: 182).

There are several different interpretations of case studies including whether this is a methodology (Yin and Campbell, 2018), an approach (Thomas, 2021) or, "...a particular design of research where the focus is on an in-depth study" (Tight, 2017: 6), and this research draws from each definition. A deeper understanding is prioritised over a breadth of perspectives (Tight, 2017), and a detailed analysis is used to illuminate the authentic holistic experience of autistic girls aligning with Thomas' (2021) definition:

“(case studies) ... are analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions or other systems, which are studied holistically by one or more methods to illuminate and explicate some analytical theme”. (Thomas, 2021: 12)

This study therefore explores the phenomenon of transition and provides a means of presenting a perception of reality through detailed interpretation and analysis in line with more *exploratory* case studies, rather than testing a specific hypothesis (Yin and Campbell, 2018). Instead of participants responding to what the researcher wants to hear, the focus instead is on listening to what participants want to say.

As advocated in the literature review, there is a complexity of individual autistic girls’ reality of the home-school transition. There is also a difference in perceptions between teachers and parents (Cook et al., 2018; Sproston et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2020) and parents and children (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019). By considering the perspectives of child, parent and teacher, a three-dimensional picture, defined by Foucault (1981: 4) as, “... a polyhedron of intelligibility” is created from which multiple perspectives can be viewed (Ferreira et al., 2018). This approach is also sometimes referred to as an *idiographic* approach in that the idiom or little figure is considered from different perspectives so as to better understand their experience, where individuality or ‘details’ might otherwise be lost (Thomas, 2021). Although this avoids the danger of presenting reality from one direction (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013), care has also been taken to preserve the child’s voice in line with this emancipatory approach.

5.3 Participants

5.31 Participant Selection

Each case study focuses on an individual autistic girl’s home to school transition. The autistic girls recruited were all assigned as female at birth and were between the ages of 8 and 10 years old at the time of data collection in order to address a paucity of research with younger autistic girls (Cook et al., 2021). For each child, their teacher(s) and parent(s) were identified and recruited to the project.

The intention was to recruit between 4 to 6 case studies where the rationale for choosing this number of participants was to provide a richness to the individual experiences shared, whilst also being mindful of the capacity of the researcher within the time available. Due to the nature of this research, no schools were approached where I had a personal relationship to pupils,

staff and or parents. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling initially approaching schools known to the researcher in the West Midlands, before advertising the project on social media. Through this process, sixteen primary and junior schools were approached within the West Midlands region of the United Kingdom, selected primarily for convenience so that schools and homes would be within approximately 1.5 hours' drive from the researcher's home.

As identified in the literature review, the number of diagnosed autistic girls is significantly less than autistic boys (Jones, 2025; McLinden and Sedgewick, 2023; Ward and Powell, 2025). When seeking to illuminate the experiences of autistic girls, it was perceived to be beneficial to have assurance, through the diagnosis process, that each of the participants had met the criteria for autism, similar to Tierney et al.'s (2016) study, where each of the participants required a formal diagnosis. However, this did exclude four schools who reported that they did not have any girls who had a diagnosis either through delays in identification or through parental choice not to pursue an assessment. This may be in part explained by delays in diagnosis during the Covid-19 pandemic, where NHS England (2023) reported an acute and prolonged impact on some autism assessment services being suspended or operating at reduced capacity (Cahill et al., 2023). Co-existence of autism with other conditions such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and anxiety disorders are common (Tierney et al., 2016), and therefore those with co-existing diagnoses would not have been excluded from the sample. In the event no additional formal diagnoses had been given to the participants.

Research into autism, and particularly that of camouflaging has been primarily situated within "societal norms of Whiteness and ability" (Nelson and Lichwa, 2025: 417). Repeated calls for the inclusion of underrepresented voices note the importance of proactive recruitment (Pellicano, 2014) to better understand differences within the autistic community (Botha and Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). Although purposive sampling was intended to be used to provide diverse representation including factors such as race and culture, limitations in recruitment resulted in a less diverse representation with each of the four participants identifying as White British. This reflects previous research that people with autism from Global Majority communities are less likely to be diagnosed and 2.6 times more likely to be misdiagnosed (Eaton, 2024: 123). However, there was a breadth of social and cultural experiences representing multiple childhoods and the study was able "... to provide rich detailed data consistent with a qualitative approach and supportive of the children as individuals with different experiences" (Moysse and Porter, 2015: 190). The following boundaries were set for the selection of participants.

Child participants must:

- 1) be a girl with an autism diagnosis; for this purpose, the child will have been assigned female at birth.
- 2) must attend a mainstream primary setting.
- 3) be aged between 7 and 11 years old.
- 4) must be able to understand and respond to verbal interaction to ensure full understanding and consent.

There was a necessity with the focus of the research for the parents recruited to have regular involvement or oversight of the home-to-school transition and were required to have parental responsibility (PR) for their daughter, where PR is defined in the Children's Act 1989 as having "all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property." For each of the participants, only mothers volunteered to participate in the study, reflective of existing research (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021; O'Hare et al., 2023; Sproston et al., 2017). Teachers were primarily female with only one male teacher included in the study. To be included they had to have teaching responsibility either on a part-time or full-time basis. In one of the case studies, the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), together with the teacher, contributed to the study.

5.32 Participant Recruitment

During the recruitment stage, participant information sheets and requests for access were sent to each of the settings where an interest had been expressed ([Appendix. 3, 4 and 5](#)). In order to ensure consent was informed and compliant with legal and ethical standards, information needed to be presented that was accessible and clear (Horowicz and Stalford, 2023). A PowerPoint presentation in an autism-friendly layout was provided for each child participant to explain the process, where visual symbols supported text, reducing anxiety about the unknown (Figure 1).

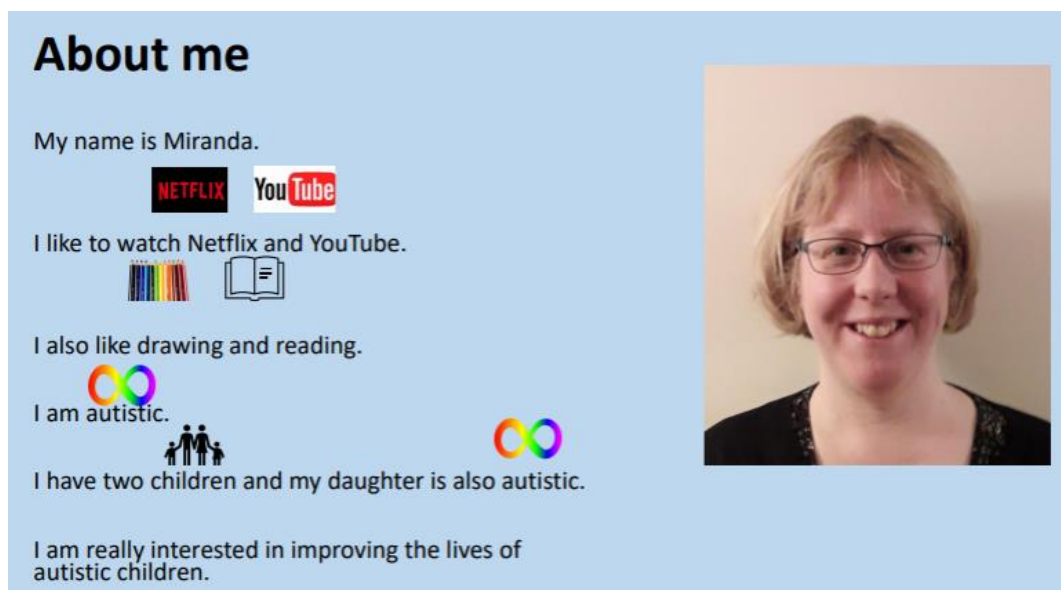


Figure 1 Information Page

Potential participants were given the researcher's university email address if they were interested in taking part in the research, and for each of the participants, gatekeepers such as Headteachers and SENCos communicated with the researcher initially. Each family were asked to communicate with their child to identify a preferred place and time to meet, with 3 out of the 4 pupils choosing to meet at school. At each stage of the recruitment process, families and schools were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any time and, for three participants, parents chose not to proceed with the study due to changes in their circumstances.

An important aspect of researching with children is to ensure that the children feel safe and comfortable working with the researcher through the development of strong professional relationships. This, in turn "... raises issues of obligation, reciprocity, trust and the formation of friendships," which translates to a serious responsibility on the part of the researcher (Madden, 2017: 16). From the outset, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to the children involved and sought to minimise power inequalities (Atkinson, 2015) yet also establish professional boundaries. Similar to Goodall (2021) who conducted research with autistic young people around attitudes to inclusion, emphasis was on the participants as experts. Participants were encouraged to use my first name, and clothing was selected that minimised a perception of 'authority' with the intention of reducing power imbalances (Martin, 2019: 73).

Each participant had their own individual needs and preferences, requiring a slightly different approach to support participation. For the majority of the participants, a readiness to complete the interview was expressed after only one familiarisation visit, whereas others benefitted from

additional acclimatisation visits agreed with participants and gate keepers. Table 1 identifies the 4 participants chosen pseudonyms, together with key family members and teachers and the number of familiarisation visits, chosen locations of the interviews and follow up visits.

Participants	Parent and family members	Teacher(s)	Number of familiarisation visits	Chosen location	Number/time of interview sessions	Nature of recording	Location of interview	Number of follow-up visits
Tiana	Alice (mum), Lee (stepfather), and 5 siblings.	Michaela (Teacher)	1	School	1 x 30 minutes	Video	School	2 visits to check themes and feedback
Autumn	Arwen (mum) Leo (Stepfather) 2 siblings	Kath and Kim (Teachers)	3	Home and school	1 x 40 minutes with a self-selected break	Audio	Home	2 visits to check themes and feedback
Salish	Kerry (mum) 1 brother and 1 sister (living away)	Rachael (Teacher) Pippa (SENCO)	1	School	1 x 30 minutes	Audio	School	2 visits to check themes and feedback (1 virtual)
Moon	Laura (mum) Jason (dad) + 1 sister	Simon (Teacher)	1	Home	2 x 1 hours	Video	School	2 visits to check themes and feedback

Table 1 Participant Information

5.4 Methods

5.41 Participatory Research

Within the emancipatory research paradigm, power is shifted away from researchers to participants (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020). Knowledge is co-constructed *with* participants through critical dialogue using participatory methods (Barnes, 2013). Participatory research can encompass a wide range of levels of participation and a breadth of methodology, but ultimately values “genuine and meaningful participation” (Abma et al., 2019: 127). In Figure 2 (below), Vaughn and Jacquez (2020: 7) identify the key stages of the research process: design, collect, analyse, disseminate, act and partner; alongside the different levels of participation possible: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower. In this study, each of the girls, together with their parents and teachers were **informed** of the nature and purpose of the study, data collection was **collaborative**, where participants co-constructed the data, were **consulted** on the data analysis and interpretation, and **informed** and asked to contribute to the dissemination process.

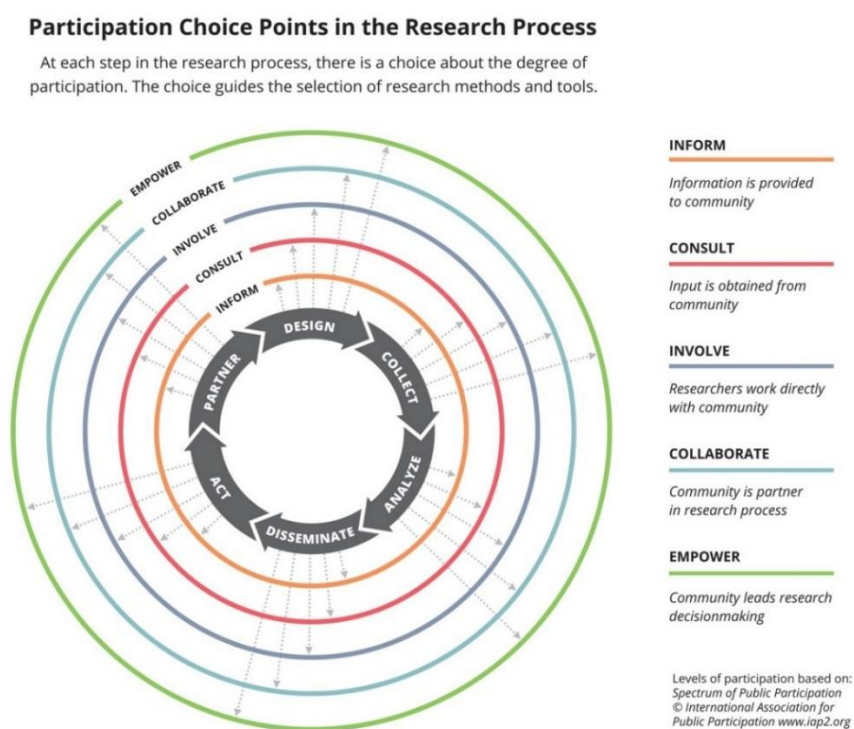


Figure 2 Participation Choice Points in the Research Process (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020:7)

For autism research, the ideal involves incorporating the perspectives of the autistic community about the focus of research, the methodology and application (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Grove et al., 2025), however there were limited opportunities for participants to

engage with this part of the process due to this being a doctoral study (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2017: 224). However, the research was designed by a member of the autistic community and participants contributed significantly to the research process, empowered to lead the walking or drawing interview, whilst being involved in the co-construction of meaning (Twomey, 2018), through critical dialogue (Freire, 2017). Following data collection, a conscious effort was made through post visits to reflect back to the participants the interpretations of the data in line with an ethics of care, "... to hear, feel, understand and value the stories of others and convey that felt empathy and understanding back to the participant." (Gair, 2012: 134). In these meetings with the autistic girls, their parents and teachers, I shared samples of the key phrases that I wanted to include as well as the potential themes for consideration and discussion, which was met with delight particularly from the girls themselves as they saw their words in print.

5.42 The Role of the Researcher

It is important to recognise that although this research would not align with those who might attest that, "...the only genuinely emancipatory research project is one which the participants take full control, and thus the role of the researcher is negated" (Aldridge, 2015: 86), the role and positionality of the researcher as a facilitator of the co-construction of meaning in this study was important (see [Chapter 1](#)).

Objectivity is impossible (Kuhn, 1977) and my positionality, strongly influences my interpretation of the experiences of autistic girls. As beautifully expressed by Nagel (1986), there is "...no view from nowhere, but always a view from somewhere" (Taylor and White, 2000: 20). Far from being a disadvantage, autistic persons are recognised to be better able to empathise with other autistic persons as promoted by the concept of 'double empathy' (Milton, 2012) and addresses the challenges that research historically is 'on' rather than 'with' the autistic community (Pellicano, 2014).

Whilst I recognise the value of my experience and recognise that was inseparable from the data (Madison, 2022), it was also important within the study to make the familiar strange, (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021). To prevent the research being overly 'distorted' and retaining the focus on the participants, it was necessary to be mindful of how identity, experience, self-perception and feelings influence data collection and analysis (Pillow, 2003) and represent others' experiences as truthfully and respectfully as possible. As advocated by Madison (2022: 9), "... we take ethical responsibility for our own subjectivity and political perspective,

resisting the trap of gratuitous self-centredness or of presenting an interpretation as though it has no 'self'."

Talking about positionality is not self-indulgent as suggested by Patai (1994), but instead, being reflexive enables the research to be critically conscious and research with greater accuracy (Pillow, 2003). Regular opportunities for critical reflection were therefore embedded in this project, including use of a reflective journal as promoted by Horton (2021) (Appendix 11). This enabled and encouraged the pausing to reflect throughout the research process, leading to greater insights on the data collection experience, interpretations and analysis (England, 1994: 82)

5.43 Enabling Children's Voices through Creative Approaches

Sharing stories is a long-standing tradition that enables the interpreting and understanding of the world through different viewpoints and perspectives (Hayes, 2019); a powerful methodology within emancipatory research as it allows the presentation of alternative perspectives to the dominant discourse (Lapadat, 2017) in a way that evokes emotion through description and explanation (Skoggard and Waterston, 2015).

As identified in article 12 of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), every child has the right to express their opinions on issues that concern them, and be represented in research (UNCRC, 1989). However, relying on conventional methods has resulted in specific groups being overlooked or considered too difficult to include in research studies (Aldridge, 2007: 4) and could in part, be attributed to the paucity of research with autistic girls (Grove et al., 2025). A key consideration for this study, therefore, was to find more creative and accessible methods that could capture, "...the voices and experiences of interlocutors whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach" (Madison, 2022: 6), recognising that these are more likely to require more imagination, patience and skill (Clark et al., 2011: 6). Importantly, within the emancipatory paradigm, research needs to enable the narratives of participants to be heard (Freire, 2017) and like Freire (2021: 72) to "sharpen my sensitivity to the lovely way they spoke about themselves" using their own language and cultural references.

In this research, more structured interview approaches were rejected in favour of more creative methods that have greater emancipatory potential (Pain and Francis, 2003), and positioned the girls as "experts in their own lives, rights holders and meaning makers" (Clark et al., 2011: 5). The more open-ended methods were "...sufficiently open-ended to leave

space for surprises to emerge from the gap between the implicit or explicit framing of the research and the reality of the participants” (Shaw, 2021: 33) and minimised the potential for the interview to be dominated by the researcher’s own perspectives (Hayes, 2021). These also avoided the evocation of pity (Mitchell and Snyder, 1997) or the embedding of stereotypes (Stevenson, 2010: 43).

5.44 Using Geographical Approaches – Capturing Transitions

Moving between home and school each day, children’s embodied experience is determined by the relationship between mind, body and their environment (Goodfellow, 2012) including the social expectations of that environment (Stephens et al., 2015). It is in the liminal spaces that identities are negotiated and renegotiated (Wenger, 1998) therefore, examining the intersections between places and spaces can enable researchers to better understand structural and everyday injustices and how they are (re)produced in, and through education (Hammond et al., 2023: 1).

In understanding the home to school transition for autistic girls specifically, the research sought to capture the three stages of transition of separation, transition and incorporation (van Gennep, 2019), or in this situation, home, moving between home and school and arrival at school.

5.45 Learning from Autistic Girls through Drawing Interviews

Arts-based approaches were used as they can offer relevant and flexible ways to research everyday life experiences and challenge societal norms (Hayes, 2021). Drawing and talking particularly provides a bottom-up alternative to more traditional top-down research methodologies (Mulvenna and Perkins, 2021; O’Neill and Roberts, 2019), giving greater agency to ‘oppressed’ groups through emancipatory approaches (Freire, 2017). For the drawing interviews, each child participant was asked to draw their journey from home to school; thus ‘mapping’ out what happens each morning, where mapping is “a social process drawing together bodies, things, affects, aesthetics, politics and ethics relating to different places” (Mulvenna and Perkins, 2021: 101).

Arts-based approaches are not unknown to the world of autism and autism research. As a specialist teacher, working with autistic pupils, I found that the opportunity to draw during consultations with children was conducive in developing relationships, breaking the ice, elucidating meaning and encouraging reflection which aligns with the observations of Theron (2011) in Mitchell et al (Mitchell et al., 2011). Therefore it was hoped that the same approach

would enable participants to feel safe and comfortable, compared to more intimidating traditional methods (Kearns et al., 2021).

For many, the practice of drawing is deeply personal and thus, "...it is an embodied physical act influenced by the artist's emotions, perceptions and experiences," and a means of representing who and where through gesture (Kearns et al., 2021: 116). For the purposes of this study, I define drawing as "... intentional mark-making on a receptive surface," (Lyon, 2020: 3), a method of conveying and also constructing meaning. Whether as a means of dialogue with the self (Bakhtin, 1981) or as a form of communication with others (Lyon, 2020: 4), the very act of drawing enables the raising of consciousness (conscientização) of the lived experience both for the self and the audience (Freire, 2017), offering the researcher a 'contingent window' into the construction and interpretation of the issue in focus" (Martin, 2019: 74). As identified by Weber (2008), "...artistic images can help us access those elusive hard-to-put-into-words aspects of knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden or ignored." (Lyon, 2020: 14), but there is also a risk of misinterpretation particularly when influenced by images in media and popular culture (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Drawing *and* talking therefore, is a method that provides agency to autistic girls in articulating their stories with a reduced potential for misinterpretation.

As with other methodologies, drawing is not without its' critics; one being that some children may demonstrate an unwillingness to engage with drawing methods due to a conception that their drawing is 'good' or 'bad', or 'childlike' or 'childish' (Lyon, 2020: 6). This is an important consideration for autistic girls who have a recognised tendency for perfectionism (Wassall and Burke, 2022). It also cannot be assumed that all children can communicate their ideas through this method (Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999) and a potential challenge for those who may feel too self-conscious to share emotive feelings in this medium (Kearns et al., 2021). Alternative methods were therefore offered as alternatives such as use of the researcher to draw dictated images or the use of photography to elicit a narrative of the home-to-school journey ensuring choice for participants (Rice-Adams, 2023). However, each of the participants expressed a preference for drawing and were offered the opportunity to talk through their transition both during the process and also at the end, using their drawing as a prompt.

Recognising the girls as holders of expert knowledge, with the right to contribute to discussions about areas that affect them, it was important to allow them to lead these process (Little et al., 2024). As identified previously, in line with the emancipatory paradigm, the research was

conducted in a way that would promote genuine dialogue (Freire, 2021) and therefore there was a resistance against a pre-determined structure, as advocated by Noddings (2005: 23):

“Dialogue is a common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation. It can be playful or serious, logical or imaginative, goal or process oriented, but it is always a genuine quest for something undetermined at the beginning.”

To provide the ‘space’ in which to contribute, each child was given the option of completing the interview in their home or school environment depending on their preference. A range of new drawing materials were provided by the researcher, to demonstrate how their input was valued and the children often self-sourced erasers, and additional drawing aids from around the classrooms or home environment. To minimise performativity, I drew my own picture alongside and my comments during the interview were intentionally positive and focused on meaning-making, rather than the aesthetic presentation. This was in recognition that drawing is an important form of communication to convey thoughts, emotions and understanding (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2025).

Each of the interviews were scheduled with the participants to ensure that participants had the necessary time and space to reflect and formulate responses without time pressures and could take breaks whenever they needed to. This was important, as using the hands and body as well as the brain to reflect and construct meaning, is a process that should be given time (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006: 82). The children had control over the interview in that they determined the location and could leave at any time. For Moon, Salish and Tiana, school was selected primarily by the children and their parents to prevent disruption from siblings, whereas Autumn expressed a preference for her drawing interview to take place at home during school hours.

For each of the drawing interviews, audio or video recordings, depending on preference, were used to capture the narrative whilst drawing and retelling stories, recognising that children processed their thoughts through talk enabling a “quality of interpretation” (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2025). This is illustrated in Figure 3, where Autumn naturally starts to recount the classroom incident as they draw:



“That's Ronald and Leon... I'm just going to draw what happened with the rubber incident. That's the rubber block. It's a block brick rubber and it's thrown. It goes all the way across the table. M-i-ch— that's sort of like what I said. M-i-ch... So M-i-ch then I re-enact it and I'm going to draw people laughing.”

Figure 3 Autumn enters the classroom

Face-to-face formats have resulted in autistic children withdrawing either physically from the research or providing answers that are reduced or may not represent their true feelings (Rice-Adams, 2023). Therefore, consideration was that an acknowledged challenge for autistic children can be the maintaining of eye contact (Waizbard et al., 2025), whilst not making assumptions that this would be the preference. The organisation of rooms for Moon, Salish and Tiana provided the opportunity for side-by-side interviews if preferred with each participant choosing where we should both sit. A side-by-side option was chosen by Moon and Salish, where Tiana and Autumn chose to seat themselves facing the researcher.

Children were also given the option of being video recorded using Teams on a laptop (which was positioned behind or to the side of us, depending on the pupils' preference) or an audio-only Dictaphone recording, where the device was positioned near the child so that they could also pause it at any time.

5.56 Learning from Parents and Teachers through Walking and Travelling Interviews

The presentation of autistic girls at home and at school are reported to be different by parents and teachers (Gray et al., 2021; Halsall et al., 2021) and to understand the embodied impact of transition, capturing the perspectives of both sides of the school gate was important. Mobile methods enable a better understanding of often hidden aspects of daily lives, particularly situated embodiment (Masso et al., 2025), and in this study participants and researcher co-construct knowledge whilst moving through spaces to make sense of their experiences aided by environmental cues (O'Neill and Roberts, 2019). The walking or travelling interviews described as ride-alongs by Kusenbach (2003), sought to enable the sharing of the ethnographic journeys, with myself as the researcher as a 'companion for the journey' (O'Neill et al., 2010: 3). Interviews were deliberately scheduled away from the transition into school

and were carried out where children were unable to observe or overhear, minimising any potential harm to relationships.

Where I had anticipated that narratives around the home-to-school transition might have begun at the start of the day, for Kerry, Laura and Arwen, they chose to begin their transition narrative from the previous evening or, for Arwen as soon as Autumn arrived home the previous day:

“Well, pretty much as soon as you get home from school the day before..., with Autumn, she's like everything is shed everywhere. You can't do so much as mention school – (she) doesn't want to talk about it, won't pack anything for the next day. Homework is.... a battle. (pauses emphasising the challenge)”

For Kerry, Arwen and Alice, the handover into school was the last scene of their interview, whereas, in contrast, Laura ended her interview at the point where Moon would leave the house as this was the time that she felt was most impactful.

Travelling side-by-side, each of the participants led me along their walking route or drove me from home to school, reducing potential power imbalances as we moved together (Kara and Lemon, 2021; Riley et al., 2021) where conversation along the journey provided a means of developing knowledge and connection (Chen, 2013). Walking or travelling in step brought a closeness (Pink, 2015) and consequently it enabled a greater understanding of participants' lives (Riley et al., 2021: 142), where parents and teachers led the direction and pace of the interview.

Within the interviews there were several points where participants, when either driving through a particular street or walking found that the location evoked a specific memory through the environmental cues. (O'Neill and Roberts, 2019). Both Kerry and Alice identified specific points on their journey when their daughters might become distressed or change their behaviours, whilst a visit to the bathroom triggered a recollection for Laura of trying to leave when Moon was retelling a long story. Pauses were built into the interviews by parents as they dwelt at particular sites of interest, stopping to reflect and remember (O'Neill and Roberts, 2019), an example being when Arwen stopped suddenly on our walk, to re-enact how Autumn would slow down and make tiny steps at this point on the journey. Equally teachers, whilst sharing their daily journey to collect pupils would pause at key locations such as the coat hooks (Kath and Kim) or take me to the site of a critical incident (Michaela). The richness of these encounters were captured through audio recordings to record dialogue, sounds and

movement. A small Dictaphone was held by the researcher or participant depending on preference and held close to the speakers. Where others were encountered, the device was paused so as not to capture others' conversations and to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Additionally, notes were taken by the researcher of non-verbal communication in a reflective journal following the interview ([Appendix 11](#)). At times a careful balance needed to be found in recognising the importance of silence for reflection, even if they may feel awkward (Little et al., 2024: 971) but also the value of dialogue to co-construct meaning.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

This research follows the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2024) and was approved by the Faculty of Health Education and Life Sciences Ethics Committee at Birmingham City University ([see Appendix 1](#)). Ethical considerations of this research including my responsibilities to participants, stakeholders, and to myself were reflected upon at every stage of the research. This included from the design to dissemination and included the researchers' own wellbeing and development as well as that of the participants (BERA, 2024: 1).

The principles that underpin this research include the requirement of the BERA guidance to ensure that individuals are "... treated fairly, sensitively and with dignity and freedom from prejudice" (2024: 11). This includes not only the child, but the parents and professionals engaged in the research. In the 1989 convention on the rights of the child, "... the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth" (UNCRC, 1989). When collecting data with the child and adult participants, a careful balance needed to be maintained, so that the right to participate in research was upheld whilst safeguarding their welfare and privacy (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2025). At each stage of the research, the best interests of the autistic girls were considered, in consultation with the participants themselves and those who care for them to negate any risk of harm. Gatekeepers, such as those with parental responsibility and relevant school staff were consulted prior and during data collection, theme generation and the presentation of data in line with BERA Guidance (2024).

5.51 Informed Consent

Informed consent encompasses four elements: understanding of the research, voluntary participation, explicit written consent, and renegotiable participation (Goodall, 2021: 65). It is an interpersonal process to enable participants to understand the focus and purpose of

research project and their involvement to inform consent. For children and young people, researchers need to acquire *assent* from child participant and informed *consent* from their parents (BERA, 2024) where assent is defined as a willingness to participate in an activity where they might be deemed unable to give legal consent due to age or perceived competence (Horowicz and Stalford, 2023). However, for this study, informed consent from the children was deemed important and therefore I sought to ensure that the information provided to participants was readily accessible and not overwhelming (Guillemin et al., 2015). This therefore ensured accessibility both in terms of reading ability, and attention span (BERA, 2024: 23) in written form ([Appendices 3,4 and 5](#)) and through in-person appointments.

Throughout the process, children, parents and teachers were asked if they continued to consent to being part of the research right up until final submission. This is in response to a concern that some participants may fear that once they have initially agreed to participate, that to withdraw consent would be recalcitrant (Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999). No such request was made and all participants continued to consent for the duration of the study.

5.52 Maintaining Anonymity and Confidentiality through the Research Process

Although it can be argued that withdrawing names from research can fail to recognise unique contributions to research (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2025: 38), it was important to protect the identities of all those who engaged in the research in case they did not wish to be associated with the project at a later date. Therefore anonymity has been maintained through ensuring that all contextual data is unidentifiable including school names, places, and geographical features and the addition of a choice of pseudonym for all participants, recognising participants' rights to privacy (BERA, 2024). Each adult and child participant was able to choose their own pseudonym, where all data was anonymised and recorded with these identities. Providing this level of agency in the process, reinforced to the participants that the research was '*with*' rather than '*on*' them.

When recording interviews, consideration must be made of the ethical implications. Each child participant chose where they would like to complete the drawing interview (home or school) and for Tiana, Moon and Salish, interviews were carried out in a quiet room on the school site. Safeguarding protocols in line with schools' safeguarding policy and government guidance (DfE, 2017) were adhered to, where glass internal windows (Tiana and Moon) or doors being kept ajar (Salish) ensured that they were visible, whilst identifying quieter spaces where they would not be overhead. For Moon and Tiana who were happy to be video recorded, the laptop was positioned and the recording made on Microsoft Teams. The positioning ensured that only

what was inside the room would be captured, to prevent those who had not provided assent being recorded (BERA, 2024). For those who preferred only an audio recording, a small Dictaphone was positioned on the table or floor nearest the participant so that this could be paused where necessary. In Autumn's home interview, siblings were also present in the room and verbal assent was provided to the recording device being used. However, only Autumn's voice was transcribed and recorded within the findings.

For parent and teacher interviews, safety and confidentiality was ensured through the careful consideration of external factors when carrying out the interviews. Parents and teachers were offered the opportunity to hold the Dictaphone during walking interviews and thereby control its' use; however each elected for the researcher to do so, as we walked together. For each journey, the participants led the direction of travel pausing where necessary to comment or pause. When walking with the parents and teachers, consideration was made of the surroundings and the potential of those walking nearby to over-hear the narratives. For this reason, the teachers and researcher negotiated the interview to a time where there were fewer children and adults moving around school.

Audio and visual recordings were transcribed using Microsoft transcription software and checked for accuracy against recordings by the researcher and relevant participants, before being removed. Following this, anonymised data was stored on the encrypted university OneDrive in line with official protocols, where access is only available to the researcher. In accordance with Birmingham City University (BCU) Research Data Retention Schedule V2, all data related to participants under the age of 18 years old will be kept until September 2040. In line with governments policy, 'Keeping Children Safe in Education', all contributions were confidential unless there was a disclosure that could have indicated a safeguarding issue (DfE, 2017). However, in this research no disclosures were made.

Informal conversations outside of this time were not included within the data and full transcripts were supplied to each adult participant, requesting that they be reviewed with any suggested alterations provided to the researcher. Simplified versions were provided to child participants and shared in person ([Appendix 10](#)). This demonstrated full transparency over what had been recorded and could be used in the data collection process. None of the participants requested any changes or removal from these transcripts. Both audio and video recording were uploaded to the secure OneDrive, together with scanned images of the drawings and removed from the respective devices. Physical drawings by the child participants were also scanned upon completion and the original document returned ensuring that each child consented to the drawing being published as part of the study before uploading.

5.53 Potential Risks to Participants

Balancing the importance of protecting autistic girls' right to remain silent with addressing the underrepresentation of autistic females' voices in educational research requires sensitivity and consideration (Hamilton and Roberts, 2024). Potential risks to the child participants included that of managing anxiety, and the associated challenges in social interaction required for such a study. Research indicates that anxiety-related mental health difficulties are more prevalent in autistic girls (Halsall et al., 2021) and in line with the diagnosis criteria, social interaction is frequently identified as more challenging (APA, 2013). Therefore, care was sought to minimise the amount of unknowns before meeting each of the girls, through the use of a visual prompt ([Appendix 2](#)) and addressing potential questions. Opportunities were organised to meet with the children, parents and teachers in relaxed familiar environments prior to the interview, where trusted adults were fully briefed, so they were could also inform and reassure.

Research indicates that the autistic girls and their families frequently feel unheard (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021; Hopkins et al., 2023; McCormick and Thomas, 2025; O'Hare et al., 2023; Sproston et al., 2017), so a crucial element of this study was ensuring that child and adult participants were heard and valued. Part of this was addressed through resisting interruptions to enable a meaningful dialogue, whilst being sensitive to the explicit and less explicit communication through gesture that may indicate a pause was required. In addition, regular opportunities were embedded in the research design for follow up discussion and clarification of what had been shared and expressed (Table 1).

For the walking and travelling interviews, there was also a minor risk of physical harm due to slips, trips or falls, but this was minimised by the teachers and parents leading the way along the familiar routes and paths that they undertook every day. If weather or traffic conditions were considered too dangerous e.g., adverse weather conditions, then the interview would have been rescheduled; however, this was not required.

A key issue in research with autistic girls can be a tension in school and home relationships (Sproston et al., 2017) and a potential risk of this research, is that, through sharing perspectives, home-school relationships could be negatively impacted. Risks were mitigated through supportive conversations, and the anonymisation of data and careful consideration of how and what findings were shared. Throughout the project, use of a reflective journal also allowed me to step back from the research process to critically consider my observations and actions, and the impact on the participants and the relationships between them.

5.54 Potential Risks to the Researcher

The impact of these encounters and reflections on the researcher has also been considered as outlined in the ethical approval request and approval ([Appendix. 1](#)) as recommended by (BERA, 2024) where it is identified that researchers should practice 'self-care' and safeguard their physical and psychological wellbeing alongside sponsors or supervising authorities. It was important to acknowledge that through the study of others' experiences, negative memories of my own childhood experiences could be evoked as a form of vicarious trauma and therefore careful monitoring and reflection of my physiological and mental health and wellbeing. An additional challenge whilst working in academia is that of managing workload whilst studying (Harvey and Howard-Hunt, 2021) and therefore care was required to maintain positive mental health through regular reflection and supervision.

When working with children, there is a risk to the researcher of an accusation being made of inappropriate behaviour. In line with school safeguarding protocols, the interviews took place in a room where we could be observed and followed the recommendations of the government guidance for Keeping Children Safe in Education (DfE, 2017). I also hold an enhanced Disclosing and Barring Safety Certificate which demonstrated enhanced safety checks have been completed around my suitability to work with children.

5.55 Benefits of Participation for Participants

According to Reason and Torbert (2001: p6), there is a strong benefit to co-constructed meaning-making with participants in research, where participant research, "... contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the ecosystems of which they are part." (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020: 1). As posited by Freire (2017), liberating oppressed groups cannot be done *for* but must be done *with*. Participation in the study played a part in validating children, parents' and teachers' perspectives and provided additional benefits including opportunities to process their thoughts, feelings and experiences; specifically raising their consciousness of the transition and factors influencing experiences.

The research has the potential to be transformative, where the participants can gain new insights into aspects of their lives through the retelling and engagement in critical dialogue (O'Neill et al., 2010). This combination of reflection and action can result in 'praxis', purposeful knowledge that can then improve the quality of lives (Freire, 2021).

Initial feedback from participants indicated that, since being involved in the project, they had developed a better understanding of their diagnosis, barriers and supportive factors. Of the two autistic girls attending schools after the project, both reported improved transitions. For the remaining pupils, a better understanding of and more positive perception of their diagnosis was shared. This included Tiana who initially demonstrated anxiety and confusion about her diagnosis. Her mother, Alice shared her hopes that being part of the project would help her in understanding herself and her diagnosis:

“I think she’ll probably look at you as a role model and that will mean a lot to her in terms of understanding because she’s seeking answers within herself like what is autism? What type have I got?”

On my final visit to Tiana in school, she was more confident in her diagnosis requesting that I share that, *“Autistic girls are the same as other girls; they just have superpowers,”* demonstrating a more positive perspective on her diagnosis. Additional training and support for staff was also offered to each school and accepted by 2 of the 4 schools following data collection to enable a better understanding of autistic girls, thus informing the wider teaching community of potential barriers and effective support mechanisms.

5.6 Data Analysis

Once the data had been collected and transcribed to ensure anonymity and stored in line with the BCU recommendations for confidentiality on a secure server, I drew upon Braun and Clarke’s (2022) reflexive thematic analysis as a fully qualitative approach, recognising my active role in knowledge production (Byrne, 2022) and the need for a transparent process (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 592). This approach has been frequently misunderstood, with studies failing to employ the reflexivity advocated by Braun and Clarke (2022), or failing to acknowledge the researcher’s own subjectivity and positionality (Morriss, 2024). A key part of the data analysis, therefore, was that of reflexivity in engaging with the data and my own thoughts and reflections of the process as a whole (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594) as demonstrated in Appendix 6. A reflective journal was recorded through the analysis process to provide opportunities for critical reflection on the process and emerging themes.

A significant concern was to ensure that the participants were frequently consulted and did not feel, as identified by autistic participants in the past, that they had been mined for information (Pellicano, 2014). Equally as emancipatory research it was important that the girls’ authentic stories were heard and valued in the analysis and presentation of this project (Tisdall, 2018)

through the inclusion of both drawing and narratives, alongside consultation with the participants post-interview using visual representations of their stories ([Appendix 10](#)). Maintaining the boundaries of the case studies was essential in preventing the dehumanising effect of presenting the girls stories as homogenised experiences. Therefore, the 6 stages below were completed for each individual case study, analysing the three pieces of interview data individually and then together (walking interviews from the parent(s) and teacher(s) and drawing interviews for the child), protecting the boundaries of each case study (Thomas, 2021). Subsequently, the 6 stages of reflexive analysis were repeated with all of the interview data in order to identify key themes that ran across the case studies. This six-phase analytical process incorporated dataset familiarisation, data coding and theme generation, development and defining, before writing up (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

5.61 Phase 1: Familiarisation

Once data had been collected, I immersed myself in the visual representations, audio and video recordings and observations made, to develop a deep understanding of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). When analysing the drawings themselves, the intention, tone and structure of the drawings were all considered, whether this was Moon's choice of a box simply for "Shooooos" (Figure 4) or the use of a pig to denote Autumn's sister, Bridget.

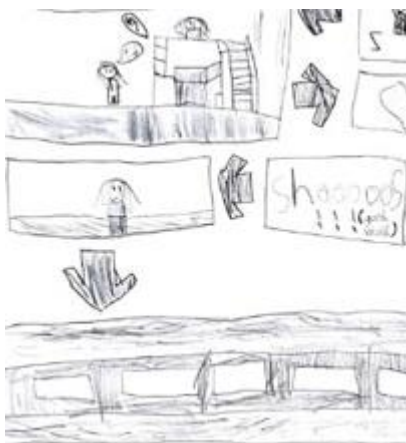


Figure 4 Shooooos

In addition, consideration needed to be made to culturally situated drawing and imagery, recognising children's ability to use visual information and models in the media when constructing meaning for themselves (Anning and Ring, 2004: 2-3). In this study, Moon included popular characters, Ladybug and Cat Noir (Astruc and Zag, 2023) to represent herself and her friend in their adventures, whilst Autumn used the death-eater mask from the Harry Potter world to depict her angry presentation (Rowling, 2000). Similarly, the inclusion of

sound and movement was important, where Autumn frequently used sounds to express her emotions, as demonstrated below:

Autumn: OK. So, I get out of bed, and I walk over here. Muh. I don't want to go to school. And then I go downstairs... And I open the door into Bridget's room where Bridget is making piggy noises. I'm just going to draw a pig. Pig legs. Curly tail. Piggy nose. And Bridget's there going (snorting noises) or sometimes she goes 'ah ah ah ah' ... So, I go and get my clothes.

MB: And how are you feeling at this point?

Autumn: Still muh!!! (Loud angry noise)

Pauses and silences were also identified as important in the transcribing of the interviews to indicate where children and adults might have required additional time. Movement was recorded in line with Kress' (1997) argument that there is no separation of the body and mind when children are drawing, and the engagement of bodies and the objects they make should be considered together (Anning and Ring, 2004). In the example below, Tiana sought sensory feedback by lifting herself above the chair using her arms whilst thinking:

Tiana: Erm... what did I do now? (pulls up on chair arms so that she is suspended above the chair) Oh time to get changed... Erm... (draws again – some narration but not clear) We go in the van.

MB: Wow, that's HUGE!

Tiana: When you look on the drive, you'll see it... That's it. (Long pause while drawing) Then... get to school



Figure 5 Tiana's car

Together, visual, narratives and details captured within the transcriptions were checked with each of the participants to ensure they were happy with the accuracy of the narrative. Each transcription of the walking interviews was also shared with the relevant participants.



Figure 6 Immersion in the data: drawing together the reflections of child, parent and teacher at key transition points

Additional to watching and listening to the recordings and reading of transcripts, familiarising activities or doodles were embedded into the process as a recognised supportive strategy for this stage of the process (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The voices of the child, parent and teacher perspectives were recorded alongside the visual representations in mapping activities to identify influential moments (Figure 6).

5.62 Phase 2: Generating Codes

Each interview was coded through the identification of preliminary codes, which were selected to be as close as possible to the text, these codes could apply to individual words, sentences or aspects of a conversation (Byrne, 2022). This included both visual and audio transcripts ([Appendix 6](#)). Pictorial aspects of the data were added later. Recognising that coding is highly subjective, I endeavoured to ensure that not only what the participants communicated was shared but also how.

Using the formula set out in Braun and Clarke's handbook, the headings, data, code and reflections were included in the analysis process (Table 2). However, the process of coding

needed to be repeated several times as the analysis became deeper over time (Braun and Clarke, 2022). There was a requirement for continually reflecting back, questioning the assumptions originally made when interpreting and coding data (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594) and returning to the original data set to avoid mistranslation in the interpretation of pictorial representations and narratives. Additional considerations in analysing drawings were required particularly for Moon and Salish, where the playful nature of their drawings combined real and imaginary worlds (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2025).

Data	Code	Reflections
Transcript M: Why do you hate PE? R: Well, to be honest, I've always hated PE. ... M: So, if it's a PE Day, would that make you sort of like more nervous or about same nervous. R: It would make me pretty much - meh - I'm even more death eater today. M: That's a good way of describing it. So Death eater is like where all the joys gone, is it? R: In fact, I'll draw the death eater face mask. M: Yes please. R: Ah - wrong side of the pencil. M: Do you have a Death Eater face mask? R: RN has a death eater sleep mask from her death eater set. RN: It was a Christmas gift from someone. M: And what do you do with it? Put it on your head. RN: Well you're supposed to. Rowan like some lights being on when it's dark and I need it dark. R: That's the death eater mask which is argh (aggressive noise and face) R: It looks a bit grumpy. R: Yeah, it's supposed to look grumpy, though, cause death eaters are just like Voldemort's little gang... Draco joins them. That might not be true, but it might be. He joins them at one point.	When it is PE, I am even more of a death eater. I feel grumpy and angry.	Rowan uses the imagery of a death eater when describing her presentation when it is a PE day. She uses an aggressive/angry face and noises to make it clear that she finds this so difficult. This is an example of using popular culture which is a means to understanding/describing emotions for Rowan.

Table 2 Code Generation – Autumn was initially using Rowan at the time of coding.

5.63 Phases 3, 4 and 5: Generating, Revising and Naming Individual Case Study Themes

Once all data was coded, provisional themes were generated for each individual case study using post-it notes of codes before collated into themes (Figure 7). Using post-it-notes, themes could be moved and evolve naturally in line with the sculpting analogy often used to describe this stage of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 78)

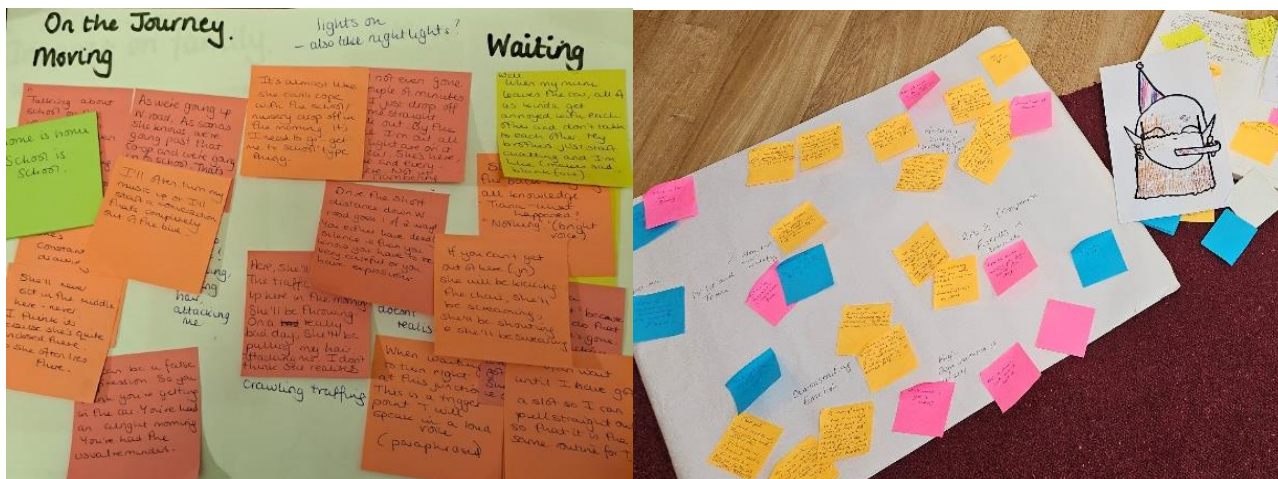


Figure 7 Constructing Themes

For this study, my understanding of themes aligns with that of Braun and Clarke (2022: 228) as “patterns of meaning (e.g. concepts, ideas, experience, sense-making) that are underpinned and unified by a central idea.” Initial themes were identified as I explored overarching concepts or ideas from the voices of the participants, expressed verbally, visually and through their non-verbal behaviours as recorded in Table 3 below:

1. What are the perceptions of children, parents and class teachers of the embodied experiences of autistic girls in Key Stage 2, as they transition between home and their school setting?			
Theme 1: Hiding in plain sight	Masking – explicit reference to the embodied response of ‘masking’	So, at that point. I said she had the paper. I said, ‘Do you want to talk about it?’ No. She asked, ‘What book do I need?’ ‘What lesson you doing?’ MB: So ‘Let’s just crack on’ MM: Yeah. So, I was obviously very aware throughout the day. What’s going on? How’s she feeling? So, I was checking in with her and she was fine. You know, again that mask, it was like watching her physically put a mask on So, it’s the moment she... It’s pretty much like she stepped out of that car. I’m on this surface. That’s all I can describe it as. I’ve stepped out. I’m on this surface. If I have to physically get her out, which has happened on various occasions. You’ll get her through with her mask now and you’ll get her into school and you will get her all the way up until she has to speak to that teacher Up the stairs. And she sort of stops crying and she’s going, “OK. OK”, as I’m getting like short responses from her to what I’m saying... Literally got to the top of the stairs. She let go of her hand. Coat on the arm. Bag on her back. She took the bag off me, and she was ready to go MB: So, the mask is on and I’m ready? MM: The mask is on. I’m ready to go? If you manage to get her out of the car ok, she’ll walk in straight in, not speak to anyone, not acknowledge anyone. It’s like a complete and utter tunnel. And she’s straight in and it’s very much tunneled. If you speak to her in the corridor, she won’t acknowledge you. So, I could be in her class teaching her class T Then I see the gates and I go to school and I’ll walk up the stairs and sit down and get a little bit normal and see what we’re doing.	Explicit reference to masking and camouflaging. Tiana’s teacher and parent in these observations demonstrate how they see that Tiana puts on a mask when entering school. Examples are given on Tiana changing her facial expressions, her body language to become tight and behaving towards mum as she would behave towards her teacher on the school site. Different terms include ‘mask’ but also ‘tunnel’ which I interpret to be similar to tunnel vision. Triggers for this masking appears to be related to spaces in the physical environment – touching the road surface of the school, going through the gate and reaching the top of the stairs. Tiana made no explicit reference to masking although she did refer to ‘getting more normal’ when entering the classroom.

Table 3 Initial Themes

The reflexive thematic analysis process was not linear, and codes and themes were frequently revisited as the project evolved which is an important feature of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). These themes were also considered with participants to ensure that they were happy that the themes identified aligned with their own understanding of the transition experience. Critical considerations included how to maintain the child's voice without this being diluted by potential conflicting opinions of adults (Tisdall, 2018); and how to keep the home-to-school transition as the primary focus as frequently children, parents and teachers would raise issues related to other aspects within the school day. An essential part of this process of analysis, therefore, was to regularly re-engage with the original data to ensure accuracy of representation (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

5.64 Phase 6: Generating, Revising and Naming Overarching Themes

Once the individual themes had been generated, they were frequently reviewed and amended with input from the participants until overarching themes were finalised for each case study. In order to ensure this was accessible, simplified versions were produced ([Appendix 6](#)). Key stories from the data were then developed using the collective dataset to inform the discussion ([see Chapter 7](#)) as demonstrated in Table 4 below:

Potential Theme	Samples from the Dataset	Reflections
Resistance to demands – slowing things down	So, if I've had a tricky morning and I'm trying to get them all in the car and then I get to school and then. She will then either come in OK Or it will then trigger her. So, I have to be very select with how we get to school, how I engage with her on the way to school like I have said to her few times, "T hurry up". But if I rush that, if I say we're gonna be late. Yeah, it's like she puts her ankles down, and it's like 'grrr' (facial expression of jaw down). "No. no, I'm not." (Tiana) Well, I can't turn devices off because she flips a little bit. Although I think it might help her to focus a bit, I have said to her. She gets stuck in something and can't get out of it. Laura: We did have that. We had that where she just wouldn't eat breakfast at all. But she is eating breakfast now. So, yeah, I guess we do that. Have to keep reminding her. Then she'll finish. And then I have to give her enough time, so she doesn't feel that she's being rushed from breakfast to getting changed. She kind of needs breaks between things. (Moon) ARWEN: ... On a bad day, she's like, you know. I don't know how to explain but like this and I'm having to almost pull her along. M: So, she's resisting, almost. She's putting her feet down and...?? ARWEN: But not in an unpleasant way A demonstrates how A will say 'Come on' in a gentle lighthearted encouraging voice but needs to pull her along. M: But she sort of slowed herself down, maybe? ARWEN: Right down, tiny, tiny little steps. Hardly moving. (Rowan) R: OK, no, she's a bit resistant if she's doing work that she really wants. She will be the last one to finish. To put it away, to put the laptop back whatever. (Salish)	Each of the girls demonstrate a need to slow things down whether through putting feet down and reducing speed or taking tiny bites to each breakfast. Together Arwen and I explore what is happening – the slowing down, the resisting but not in an unpleasant way. There is also a recognition of finding it difficult

Table 4 Constructing themes across the case studies

This was even more challenging as I sought to identify what might be the salient messages across the dataset, whilst maintaining the integrity of the individual case studies. Tentative interpretation of data began during familiarisation and data collection stages however, the themes were only secured in the refinement stage of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

5.7 Presentation and Dissemination

Working within the emancipatory framework, a key focus is preserving the authentic voices of autistic girls, recognising the heterogeneous nature of their experiences. In this thesis, therefore, the findings are presented initially as individual case studies, prefaced with each child's retelling of their story using their own words and minimal interpretation. This is then followed with the interpretations I have made as the researcher together with the perceptions of parents and teachers of this transition. These perceptions provide a three-dimensional portrayal of the transition for each case study. It provides 'thick description', described by Geertz (1973) as an interpretation that 'goes all the way down' to describe what people are doing but also considers the cultural context in which they are acting (Hammersley, 2008). This way, data is presented in a way that engages the reader and is more accessible to a diverse audience (Wellington, 2015). Care is also taken to avoid personal narratives that evoke pity and sympathy and, in line with the affirmative and social models of disability, also provide information about the individual girls' strengths and agency.

A tension within this research was sharing quite challenging aspects of the participants' lives, in a way that values and promotes their views, whilst maintaining an ethics of care that prevents them from any harm. A particular concern within this study was where children and their parents might present alternative views of the same situation. To avoid a 'suppression' of the child's voice, these stories were separated from the adults' perspectives initially so that their perspectives could be showcased without any potential dilution if combined with adults' potentially more 'authoritative' perspectives. Following this, in each case study, influential moments and themes were explored, drawing upon observations and description to ensure that the research is accessible and reflects the heterogeneous nature of autistic girls' lived experiences. In the final section reflections are made of the collective case studies within the discussion section of this thesis.

Following the conclusion of the data collection and analysis, training based on this research has been offered to each of the schools participating in the project to inform practice ([see Appendix 12](#)), as well as local authority partnerships and in Initial Teacher Education programmes for those on undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

5.8 Concluding Summary

In conclusion, this methodology chapter explores the methodological decisions made which have been identified as compliant with the BERA Research Guidance (BERA, 2024) and have been approved by the BCU Ethics Committee. The research methodology demonstrates the rationale and implementation of this case study research design situated with emancipatory paradigm, where case studies are posited to provide deeper insights into the individual experiences of transitions (Tight, 2017). Accessible research methods were chosen which promote co-construction of data through drawing methods and walking interviews, enabling a holistic understanding of the heterogeneous experiences of autistic girls' daily transition. This research does not claim to be inherently participatory due to the barriers that exist in doctoral research with children, however participatory approaches are embedded to reduce, where possible, researcher-participant power dynamics. My own positionality as an autistic female with experience of the journey from home to school as a child, parent and an educator reflects a form of insider research argued to be a strength of the research design where an autistic female has been involved in the decision-making of this research (Pellicano and Stears, 2011).

As will be seen in the following results and findings chapter, drawing and talking, together with walking and travelling interviews provided strong emancipatory methods of data collection, where opportunities for participants to lead the direction and pace of the interview were embedded. The importance of reflexivity has been recognised as essential within the field of emancipatory research, and therefore this study has utilised tools such as a reflective journal and reflexive thematic analysis for a staged process of data analysis and presentation (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

6. Discussion of Findings

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter of the thesis, the findings of this research will be discussed. As identified in the methodology, this study recognises that the lived experience of everyone with autism is different and distinct (Fletcher-Watson and Happe, 2019) and the sharing of life stories is both emancipatory and transformative (O'Neill and Roberts). The individual experience cannot and should not be oversimplified into broad generalisations as this can dehumanise the experiences of others and negates the authentic voice required for liberation (Freire, 2017). Therefore, care has been taken to preserve the individual and unique experiences of the daily transition between home and school for these four individual autistic girls, rather than generalising their experience in a way that overlooks and therefore oppresses the individual.

In the first section of this chapter, the individual case studies are presented, prefaced with each girl's own story, combining their drawings with their explanations to humanise their experiences, where possible quotations are included to more accurately present their voices (Freire, 2021). Following this, utilising the idiographic approach described in the methodology chapter, the individual themes constructed from the collective interviews of the child, parent(s) and teacher(s) are discussed, preserving the integrity of the case study. Finally, the overarching themes of this study are presented and examined to better understand the important themes and considerations for practice and research that can be learned from these individual case studies.

6.2 Case Study 1 – Tiana

6.2.1 Background Information

Tiana lives in the Midlands and was diagnosed as autistic in 2022, the year proceeding the research. One of seven children in a blended family, Tiana spends most of the school week with her mother, Alice, siblings, and stepfather, Liam. Her weekends and some school nights are spent at her father's. Liam actively serves in the armed forces, and her biological father has also served, which has resulted in changes of schools. Alice reports that Tiana moved to her current school in Year 3 and during this transition she began to demonstrate school related anxiety. At the time of the interview, Tiana was 9 years old and in Year 5.

Tiana is described by her teacher as nurturing and caring, gravitating towards play with younger children or those who are quieter in her class. In the interviews and follow up meetings, Tiana shared stories of going to a coffee shop after school and would talk about different sensory equipment she had been given. Drawing and craft activities were identified as favourite pastimes.

The three interviews with Tiana, Alice and her teacher, Michaela took place between November 2023 and January 2024. The interviews included a familiarisation meeting, drawing and walking interviews and two follow up meetings to discuss identified themes and provide updates on the progress of the project.

Tiana chose to meet me in school, and we used a small room for the familiarisation visit and interview that was primarily used for small group interventions. We drew alongside each other, both drawing our morning transition. Throughout the interview, Tiana narrated what she was drawing and engaged in sensory-needing behaviours such as rocking in her chair, chewing her pencil and pulling herself up on the chair arms. Towards the start of the interview, Tiana copied my first image of the bed and used this as a scaffold. Following this, the pictures in her story (Figure 8) were original.

6.2.2 Tiana's Story

Figure 8 Tiana's journey to school



Figure 9 At home

Tiana starts her drawing with a double bed, adding her weighted blanket (Figure 9). She explains “*I’ve also got a weighted blanket and a nightlight,*” and I ask whether the weighted blanket helps her to sleep. Tiana laughs, replying “*Yeah, but it’s basically to keep me in bed. It helps me fall asleep because I don’t like the dark or anything and it helps me not to worry.*” We talk about worries and Tiana shares that the night light is because she worries a lot at bedtime but also in the daytime.

Dad is drawn beside the bed as, on the morning of the interview, she wakes up at her dad's house. As she draws her dad, she smiles. He has quite a serious face in the picture and Tiana comments that he is very funny but looks serious as, "*He leaves really early in the morning, and he needs to go to work and everything.*"

Tiana talks about how she shares a room with her sister, but her sister does not have a weighted blanket:

"No, she is a deep sleeper. No one else in my family has a weighted blanket except for me..." Tiana pauses before continuing, *"I used to have my own room, but I share with my sister. My mum says she's going to put me in my own room as it is better for me to calm down."*

As Tiana will sometimes stay over at her dad's house and then travel into school with Mum, she often moves between the two houses before setting off for school. When asked about when anxiety about school begins, chewing on her pencil, Tiana shares:

"It's normally after a bit. Sometimes at my dad's house it's fine but then, when I get to my mum's house it gets a bit more chaotic because there's six kids."



Figure 10 Tiana brushes her hair.

Next to the picture of her dad, Tiana draws herself, commenting, *"I look a bit goofy – still tired!"* before adding, *"I've realised I've given myself no neck!"* The drawing shows her in pyjamas and what is interpreted to be a worried expression (Figure 10). Her hair is drawn to give the impression of being very tangled and messy and Tiana explains, *"I need to brush it all down."* A hairbrush is drawn with a toothbrush before a picture of Tiana with long straight hair. As Tiana gestures towards the picture of her hair, she says *"...my mum does it,"* before adding that she will then say, 'Hi' to her brother. A school uniform is drawn and Tiana shares, *"my jumper is really uncomfortable"* (Figure 11).



Figure 11 Tiana's jumper is really uncomfortable

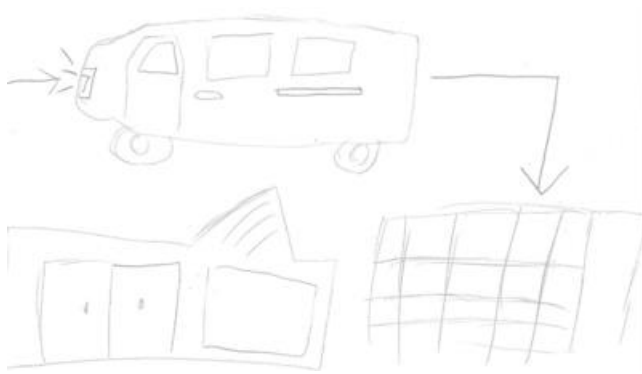


Figure 12 Tiana travels to school

In Figure 12, Tiana draws their car, the large gates, (which she likens to a door for cars) and the school building. I ask whether they go anywhere else before school.

"We normally go to drop my brother but today we didn't... When my mum leaves the car, all of us kind of get annoyed with each other and don't talk to each other. My brothers just start chatting and I'm like (makes sad face). I start thinking "What are we doing? What are we doing? What are we doing?"

She then draws the car travelling through the big gates and arriving at school. Lowering her head, Tiana says quietly, *"Most days Mum gets out at the same time and then Mum says 'So do you want to go to school and everything? And then she will take me in'".* Tiana adds *"If I go to school, good, Mum gets me a treat."* but if it's a bad morning, *"my mum has to go in school and get my teacher."* On what Tiana identifies as a bad day, the scenario can look quite different:

MB: What happens on a really bad day.

Tiana: I don't want to get out of the car in the backseat

MB: And when you are in the back seat, what are you thinking?

Tiana (quiet voice): I'm going to die

MB: You're going to die?

Tiana: No, like not, not actually die.

MB: No.

Tiana: Like... I just get really, really nervous

MB: Really, really nervous and it's too much? So, when I get really nervous, sometimes my tummy hurts, and my head hurts and I find that really hard.

Is it that you can't move or...?

Tiana: It's kind of like my emotions say don't move. Or I stand up and then I have to sit down.

When her teacher has come to help get Tiana out from the car, Tiana shares that Michaela, her teacher, says “Come on. Be happy,” then Tiana will get down from the car.

When Tiana arrives at school and has come out of the car, she shares “I see the gates, and I got to school, and I'll walk up the stairs and sit down and get a little bit normal and see what we're doing.



Figure 13 Tiana goes into the classroom

As Tiana draws herself in the classroom, she is seated on a chair (Figure 13). She comments:

Tiana: I just can't sit still.

MB: No? You find it very difficult to keep still? Is that why you've got your lovely cushion?

Tiana: Yeah. So if I have to sit on the carpet, the teachers let me sit on the chair. There is some maths. I think "Oh my God!"

MB: Is that maths? And why do you say, 'Oh my god' – about maths?

Tiana: (Bouncing up and down on her chair) I can't do it.

MB: And what happens when you when you see that it's maths?

Tiana: Ohh when I see it. I do this (mimes sad face) ... and then I am worrying about what to do. I say "No" under my breath when I don't want to do my work because I can't do it.



Figure 14 Tiana thinks "No"

At the end of the interview, Tiana's chooses to add to her picture and draws the tree at breaktime (Figure 14). I ask her what she does at break time. She responds, "*Mostly I just walk around and think about what's next and how I don't want to do it.*" As we finish the discussion, I ask Tiana what she likes about school:

Tiana: They've got quiet lunch... They've got this room I can show you. I'll show you in a minute. It's like, a 3D room, which you know is quiet and there's a massive screen going on the whole room, and they put like fishes and stuff on the screen.

MB: Oh so that makes that much better. So that's one of the best things about school... Anything else that you like about school?

Tiana: Going home (Laughs)

6.2.3 Influential moments of Tiana's transition between home and the school

The following influential moments have been identified through the drawing and walking interviews of Tiana, Alice (Tiana's mother) and Michaela (Tiana's teacher at the time of data collection). Key influential moments are identified as: 'Brushing Hair', 'In the Car', 'Leaving the Car' and 'Between the Car and the Classroom'.

Brushing Hair

School rules around uniform and general presentation can be contentious between educators and learners with specific rules around the presentation of hair and hairstyles. Children are required to dress and groom in a way that meets the rules of the institution (Shanks et al., 2023b), and as Alice explains, "School have commented a few times, "Have you not brushed her hair?" The taming of hair is therefore a key part of the Tiana's transition, which is raised multiple times in Alice's interview.



Figure 15 Tiana does not want to brush her hair and teeth

For Tiana, she draws her flyaway hair and a sad and confused expression (Figure 15). A hairbrush and toothbrush are drawn alongside with arrows to indicate this aspect of her routine. Tiana's inclusion of this drawing is significant, where hair brushing is identified as something uncomfortable and negative by the facial expression. Tiana's teacher, Michaela also identifies how hair brushing can result in dysregulation when she shares, "*What happened this morning... was something along the lines of her hair, I think which was the problem?*" The sensory processing challenges associated with a hypersensitivity to touch result in additional distress for Tiana (Wassall and Burke, 2022). Although Tiana recognises the need to brush her hair, saying, "*I need to brush it all down,*" the process is identified by Alice as painful:

"It'll be very much a repetitive "Tiana... Bring me brush and I'll brush your hair." She will not allow me to do it. That becomes a real battle. A physical battle, because why should she brush her hair? She'll brush it so there's a knot here. Here at the back.

School have commented a few times. Like, “Have you not brushed her hair?” And I’m like, “This is a battle that you have to pick.”

Alice is torn therefore between responding to a perceived neglect of care and attention to appearance, which can potentially lead to further isolation for autistic girls (Moyse and Porter, 2015) and choosing not to enter into a physical and psychological ‘battle’. The influence of the school rules and regulation on the daily transition is thus identified as having an oppressive impact on Tiana and her family. Despite the dysregulation and distress associated, Tiana acknowledges a need for her hair to be brushed straight; and Alice is mindful of the importance of presentation, and potentially the judgement of others.

In the Car

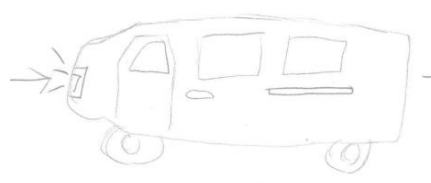


Figure 16 Tiana's car

The physical environment can have a significant impact on the experiences of children and within school journeys, specifically the intersecting rhythms of schools, home and their surrounding areas (Green and Clark, 2024). For autistic children, sensory preferences and a feeling of difference within surroundings can result in arrhythmic responses (Pang, 2020). For Tiana and Alice, the transition between home and school is navigated principally by car along with approximately 45% of children attending primary schools (DfE, 2024b). Moving in urban spaces at transition times, children and their families encounter various rhythms that speed up and slow down their movements (Kullman and Palludan, 2011) and, due to the complexity of multiple drop-offs, and living in a busy city, Tiana waits in the car at several traffic lights, outside her siblings’ nursery and outside the school (Figure 16). Agency for Tiana in this scenario is limited as she is reliant not only on her parent driving her to school, but also the movements of other cars, traffic lights and pedestrians.

Within the car, Tiana has a preferred place, a specific seat described by Alice as, “*quite enclosed*.” It is distinctive in that there was no seat cover on, where Alice explains the seat cover comes off, as “*She’s constantly moving around. Can you see that? It’s all come off.*” Small pieces of paper and art materials are littered around the chair; indicating the art projects that Tiana uses to distract herself on the route to school, as shared by Alice.

In this influential moment of the transition, Alice notes, as we travel along the journey, the changes she notices in Tiana's level of regulation where they are paused at the lights, parked outside the nursery or driving slowly in heavy traffic towards the school. Both Alice's and Tiana's narration of the journey demonstrates how increased traffic and periods of inertia results in increased dysregulated fight, flight or freeze behaviours:

'(Alice) noted how at a particular junction where there is traffic, Tiana will be noticeably distressed waiting for the car to move and will suggest that they turn when it is unsafe to do so. Alice shares how she will try and ensure that the manoeuvres she performs are the same each day e.g. waiting until there is a space to cross both sides so that Tiana has the same routine.' (Research Journal, 2023)

'As the family move towards the school the waiting and slow movement, this results in the presentation of increased sensory needing behaviours on the part of Tiana through increased movement, playing with switches, and aggression (both verbal and physical) towards siblings increase. However, as the car crosses through the gates, Tiana becomes very still.' (Research Journal, December 2023)

The most significant behaviours are reported when Tiana is required to wait in the car, whilst Alice drops off Tiana's sibling. The combination of separation from her key adult and this period of inertia appears to result in significant dysregulation, where Tiana's narrative shares sibling conflict and anxiety:

"... When my mum leaves the car, all of us kind of get annoyed with each other and don't talk to each other. My brothers just start chatting and I'm like (makes sad face). I start thinking "What are we doing? What are we doing? What are we doing?"

In Tiana's reflection the question, *"What are we doing?"* is repeated, reflecting observations by both Alice and Michaela that Tiana will frequently ask questions about what is happening next when anxious, an attributed trait of autism in the DSM-V (APA, 2013). In contrast, Alice's observations represent a more physical dysregulated response:

"So now the lights are on, and the seat belts are off. She's all over the car. I'll walk over the road. By the time I'm coming back, him and her are fighting. She'll be whacking and he'll be crying and screaming. I can hear it from across the road. Or if he's in the back, they're full-on fighting on the floor." (Alice)

Leaving the Car

Gates and fences are a universal feature to denote the boundaries between school and the wider environment, providing safety and security for those within; an example of an “authoritarian strategy for ordering and controlling children in school spaces.” (McNair, 2022: 672). As Tiana draws the car travelling through the gates to arrive at school (see Figure 15) she shares how the gates are drawn tall and wide “...*like doors for the cars.*” Travelling through the gates, Alice notes a significant change in Tiana’s presentation:

“As soon as she (Tiana) sees that we are coming through here (gestures to the gate) she goes very still...That’s it... She’ll be pushed into the back of her seat as soon as we pull in here and seat belts on... she knows you can’t physically get her out.”

As we drive through the school gates, Alice’s narrative slows, punctuated by pauses as she recounts. She describes in her words and non-verbal communication how Tiana’s energy and aggression levels dissipate. Tiana becomes still in the presence of the fenced and gated school building reflecting the argument that school buildings and environments can impact on the embodiment of those who use them (Finn and Holton, 2019).

Between the Car and the Classroom

Leaving the security of the car is associated with different levels of resistance from Tiana, depending on whether it is a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ day (terms used by both Alice and Tiana). On a good day, Tiana shares her level of agency when she says, “*I see the gates, and I got to school, and I’ll walk up the stairs and sit down and get a little bit normal and see what we’re doing.*” Alternatively, in Alice’s narrative, Tiana’s presentation is more passive.

“On a good day, I can drag her out, and once she’s out, you can forcefully, and hand on back, she’ll reluctantly walk, but go in.” Someday she’ll make you push her all the way to the gate that’s there; that closed; the double gate. Other days the resistance will stop as we get just past these bright lights.”

Walking across the playground, Alice demonstrates how she moves Tiana forward whilst she moves slowly, digging her feet against the tarmac, conscious of onlookers. Anxiety about being observed is shared: “*I’m just thinking... get her in because parents are watching. This car park is full in the morning and what example am I setting? I’m having to drag my daughter into*

school.” This level of resistance dissipates as Tiana moves through the gate where her parents cannot enter. At this point, she crosses the ‘no man’s land’ independently identified by van Gennepe (2019) as the second stage of transition, which follows ‘separating from’ and ‘before attaching to’. On days when Tiana’s teacher is on duty, Michaela observes that, as Tiana walks towards the building, she holds her bag tightly by the straps on her shoulders:

Visually, she’s like... she often holds her bag sort of (models holding the straps of her backpack tight). Depending on her mood, she might say “Morning” She might just look at you and look away.”

This demonstrates a form of armouring where muscles are tightened in readiness and can be interpreted as a form of hypervigilance to prevent or minimise fight, flight and freeze responses (Masgutova et al., 2016).. On less ‘good days’ the transition from the car to the gate is too challenging for Tiana and Alice to navigate without assistance and on more difficult mornings, Tiana shares, “...my mum has to go in school and get my teacher.”

MB: So, what happens on a really bad day.

Tiana: I don’t want to get out of the car in the backseat.

MB: And when you are in the back seat, what are you thinking?

Tiana (quiet voice): I’m going to die.

MB: You’re going to die?

Tiana: No, like not, not actually die.

MB: No?

Tiana: Like I just get really, really nervous...it’s kind of like I... my emotions say don’t move.

An example of this, is a critical incident shared by Tiana, Alice and Michaela where the latter was called to support Tiana into school. This event was critical as it was an incident to which those involved attached a particular meaning (Spencer-Oatey, 2013) and shared evocative emotional responses.

On the morning of the incident, Alice recounts that Tiana had shouted, where she had sought to support her out of the car and into school, “No, no, I’m not going. I’m not going to school!” adding, “Don’t do this to me, mum. Don’t send me. Don’t put me in there,” which Alice shared as, “heartbreaking.” Calling the school, Michaela came out to meet Tiana and Alice at the car:

“So, I went to the car and Tiana was...in the corner saying, “I’m not going to school, not going to school!” I’ve not seen this side of Tiana: her displaying these emotions. And then Alice was there going “Come on Tiana, we’ve been through this, we’ve got to go to school.” So, she sort of picked her up and out of the car. So as soon as she saw me, I sort of grabbed her hand and said, “Come on, let’s go. “Let’s do it together” and “I’ve got your bag” and then mum passed her coat, and she put a coat over her head. So, I think that, in my eyes, I think she was trying to hide from me, you know... what was going on...”

Michaela notes the phrases she used as they walked together, coaching Tiana with encouraging phrases such as “We’ve got this,” “We’ll get through the day” and “We’ve got one more day to go,” as the incident had taken place on a Thursday. As they began to walk up the stairs, Michaela acknowledges a specific point where she observed Tiana putting on a mask:

Michaela: Up the stairs. And she sort of stops crying and she’s going, “OK. OK,” as I’m getting like short responses from her to what I’m saying... Literally got to the top of the stairs. She let go of her hand. Coat on the arm. Bag on her back. She took the bag off me, and she was ready to go.

MB: So, the mask is on, and I’m ready?

Michaela: The mask is on. I’m ready to go.

6.2.4 Analysis: Tiana’s Themes

Through analysis of Tiana’s drawing interview, and the walking interviews with Tiana’s teacher, Michaela, and mother, Alice, the following themes have been identified (see Appendix 7).

Home is Home; School is School.

Identities are shaped by the interactions between structural forces such as social categories, individuals’ actions and interactions in the learning environment and the narratives told by the self and of others (Brown and Donnelly, 2023: 17). The line “Home is home; school is school” recurs several times across the data set from Alice and Michaela’s interviews, where there is an acknowledgement of a different presentation across the settings. Alice, as a member of staff at the school, has the unique opportunity to observe Tiana across both settings, and shares her observations when walking around school:

“If you manage to get her out of the car ok, she'll walk in straight in, not speak to anyone, not acknowledge anyone. It's like a complete and utter tunnel. And she's straight in and it's very much tunnelled. If you speak to her in the corridor, she won't acknowledge you.”

Few parents have this opportunity to observe their daughters across settings. and this passive presentation shows how the school space and structure has pacified and rendered Tiana compliant (Freire, 2017); the tunnel imagery implying a containment of emotions (Wassall and Burke, 2022) and 'masking' (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). Tiana also recognises a clear distinction between her school and home identity, demonstrating an intention to keep these separate, as Michaela shares that, *“... when I have conversations with Tiana, she will come into school, and she doesn't want to talk about home,”* whilst Alice also acknowledges that Tiana prefers not to talk about school at home.

A significant challenge, therefore, for Alice and Michaela is a lack of consistency in Tiana's presentation, which impacts on their ability to identify and address difficulties. Mirroring the findings of Tierney et al's (2016) study, this duality of presentation results in additional difficulties in gaining the right level and support.

Hiding in Plain Sight

As Tiana crosses physical boundaries of the school environment, adults report her to hide, whether this is through a preference for contained spaces in the car, the physical concealment of strong emotions either under her coat during a critical incident, or through masking behaviours. Associated physical markers were identified as Tiana crossed boundaries such as stepping out of the car; walking through gates and onto the playground; at the top of the stairs; and entering her classroom.

In Tiana's drawing and narrative, her perceptions of changes to her embodied presentation include an acknowledgement of physical responses to increased anxiety, expressing that *“My emotions say don't move,”* but also an intention to display more 'typical' behaviours as she describes becoming “a little bit normal” when entering the classroom. Several observations of changes in facial expression were also made by Tiana's mother and teacher. Where the wearing of a facial expression that does not reflect one's feelings is nothing unusual (Goffman, 2022), for autistic girls, camouflaging is considered more prevalent with a greater impact on mental health and identity difficulties (Drapalik et al., 2025). Alice's report of how Tiana will 'smirk' when anxious, reflects studies that autistic girls can be observed to adopt an

excessively happy facial expression or a very blank one in social environments (Tierney et al., 2016: 79):

“She'll often... in an unfamiliar setting... do a weird, like I'd say it's a strange... like a smirk and you know, you could have a conversation with her, and she'll smirk. You know, people perceive that as her being quite rude, you know... when she does this and I know family members have her saying, you know, you shouldn't smirk.”

This representation of ‘pasting a smile’ is interpreted as an almost intentional performative action, a response to the perceived demands of the environment. It may be partially explained by Tiana’s perception that, “I get a treat if I... go into school good and happy.” Ultimately however, Tiana’s mask is perceived by both her parent and teacher as a form of protection, and a means of separating the school self from the home self. Michaela posits, *“I get a sense from Tiana that she doesn't want the mask to come off... at all. There's absolutely a kind of sense of self-preservation,”* which mirrors findings in studies with older autistic girls who indicate the necessity to protect themselves with masking (Drapalik et al., 2025). The propensity to ‘hide’ or ‘mask’ is also evident in Tiana’s reticence towards peer friendships where Michaela notes, *“I don't see any formed friendships and actually... I don't think she really wants it,”* sharing how Tiana is more likely to gravitate towards less challenging situations, either playing with boisterous boys, or younger children.

Movement and Stillness

Out of the four case studies, Tiana has the greatest number of transitions moving between two homes and an additional drop-off for her sibling at nursery. Narratives indicate a recognition of the need to move or inertia at key points on the journey. For the majority of her narrative, Tiana uses first person ‘active’ language such as *“I see the gates, and I go to school, and I'll walk up the stairs,”* demonstrating a level of agency. However, at critical moments on the journey such as waiting in the car, or going into school from the car, an impression is given of a more passive presentation, where Tiana is reliant on others, sharing inner thoughts such as *“What are we doing? What are we doing?”* and of Alice, *“... she will take me in,”* when her emotions tell her not to move.



Figure 17 Tiana on her chair

Being still is identified as problematic for Tiana whether this is in the car, or in the classroom. Tiana draws herself on a chair when she first comes into the classroom (Figure 17), sharing, *“That’s me on a chair.... I can’t sit down on the carpet; I just can’t sit still,”* which demonstrates difficulties around sensory processing, especially a need for additional sensory input to regulate (Jones et al, 2020), where a classroom environments can be problematic (Jones, 2025). For Tiana, demonstrations of proprioceptive needing behaviours, such as using her arms to lift her body above the chair during the interview and Alice’s report below recognise the challenges experienced.

“So, and even now, you know, she’ll walk down the corridor and walk straight into a wall... It’s not like the buildings, or the structure of the buildings have moved ... And with her in here, she is dysregulated. You’ll find her lying over the coffee table with her head upside down... she rolls around the lot, doesn’t she?... At school she’s very much on the wall, so you’ll find her touching everything, all the displays.”

Equally, on other occasions, initiating movement is perceived as more challenging particularly when moving between activities, or across boundaries which could be attributed to autistic inertia (Buckle et al., 2021). Examples include where Tiana’s movements are observed to slow down or stop when leaving the house or car and when responding to demands, where Alice shares that, if she says, *“Tiana, hurry up..., we’re gonna be late, she will put her ankles down,”* and Tiana reflects that her emotions tell her not to move when she is unable to get out of the car. There are many pressures for children and those who work with them to be ‘hurried’, whether this is to complete transitions such as the morning school run or keep up in current education systems (Green and Clark, 2024: 6). As a result, engagements between children and adults can feel rushed resulting in difficulties for adults to attune themselves to individuals’ needs.

6.2.5 Conclusion

Tiana's case study indicates the marked distinction between home and school identities that can exist for autistic girls and a recognition of the desire to hide in plain sight; for example, where Tiana was observed by her mother and teacher to keep her home and school identities separate. Conforming to predetermined timings and routines resulted in dysregulation, alongside periods of separation from her mother, where anxiety was evident in the repetitive questioning of herself or others, and fight, flight and freeze responses. SPDs associated with busier environments, and dressing and grooming were also a significant contributor to anxiety and distress. The embodied responses evident in the analysis of drawing and walking interviews indicate the significant impact of crossing boundaries on regulation and identity, where Michaela and Alice observed how she would tense or 'armour' her body, slowing down her movements.

6.3 Case Study 2 – Autumn

6.3.1 Background Information

Autumn lives in the Midlands with her Mum, Arwen, her mum's partner, Leo, older sibling, Fred and younger sister, Bridget. Autumn was diagnosed with Autism in 2020. In the initial interview, Autumn requested a non-binary name, Rowan (they/them), but later requested that her pseudonym be changed to Autumn (she/her). At the time of data collection, Autumn followed the Korean-Pop (K-Pop) band BTS and enjoyed opportunities to share funny videos and recent news about the group. Her interests also included drawing and crafts. Her parents and teachers described Autumn as funny, well-behaved and caring.

Autumn has attended several schools and settings, where Arwen shared that some schools were more supportive than others. In previous schools, Autumn reports having experienced significant bullying, which resulted in school phobia and mental health difficulties. Consequently, Autumn had a period of being home schooled until she was well again. At the time of the research, Autumn was in Year 4, having transferred to the school in Year 3. The interviews were carried out with, Autumn, her mother, and teachers, Kath and Kim in the summer term of 2024. Autumn and Arwen requested three familiarisation visits to support Autumn to feel more comfortable in the interview situation.

Autumn chose to complete the drawing interview on the floor in her bedroom alongside her siblings, who were occupied in other activities. As Autumn drew, she spoke about key events on the transition, making noises and non-verbal gestures to express her feelings towards life events or experiences including the repeated use of 'meh' towards aspects of school and grating noises for the posts in the fence.

As Autumn drew and retold her home-to-school journey, connected events and aspects of her life were also shared and included in Autumn's story as they were entangled in her lived experience of the transition.

6.3.2 Autumn's Story



Figure 18 Autumn walks downstairs and gets her clothes

At the start of Autumn's story (Figure 18), she draws herself in pyjamas walking down the stairs and fetching her clothes from Bridget's bedroom. Autumn shares, *"I often fall straight back asleep the second I lift my head,"* acting this out by sitting up and then miming falling back down. She remarks, *"It's kind of annoying because then I get shouted at to get downstairs."*

At the bottom of the picture, Autumn draws herself collecting clothes. She tries to draw her sister, but comments *"I'm trying to draw Bridget in bed but it's coming out more as somebody who has just had their funeral and died."* As Autumn notices Bridget has got into her bed to watch a film on her tablet, she remarks with a smile in my direction, *"She makes pig noises when she's asleep... she's like a little piglet in bed"* and adds a small little piglet to the drawing.

Whilst Autumn decorating her picture of the chest of drawers with stickers of horses and additional details, Autumn describes a child in the class called Ronald who, *"...got snot in my bubble tea and keeps criticising me and saying that my star sign is not a good star sign, it is vicious."* This triggers a memory of her previous school, and she adds:

"Some of the kids around the area wanted me to watch Bad Guys back then. I was very much meh I'll go with it then I'll sit in the shadows and if you try to get me to do anything, I will... use my karate".



Figure 19 Autumn dresses for school and eats her breakfast

Autumn turns the page and begins to draw Figure 19. Drawing a stick man, Autumn shares that she will either wear her school uniform or PE kit; both options are sketched out, with a straight line for a mouth when wearing the PE kit. Autumn shares *"I've always hated PE"* and *"I'm even more death eater today"* drawing an eye mask with a death-eater from the Harry Potter books and films beside the picture of herself in PE kit. She comments that she looks grumpy. A birthday present is added later to indicate that when it is her birthday, she can wear her own clothes. I ask if she likes non-uniform and she cheers excitedly, adding with a growl, *"Grrr... but I still have to do the work."*

Underneath the picture of getting dressed, Autumn draws toast, cereal, fruit and yoghurt explaining that she makes her own breakfast. *"I don't eat all of this; it's just some options that I could do."*

"I eat... I am eating toast. I am going to make it burnt just to make it sound suss. There – it's burnt" (laughs)."

Autumn continues to explain *"I do have a packed lunch, but I don't always make it. I make it the night before often. Mum does it with me."*

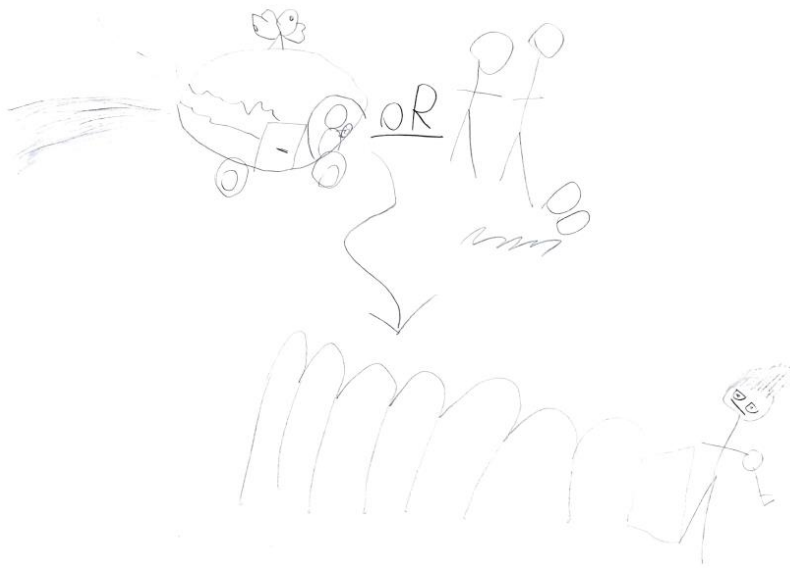


Figure 20 Autumn travels to school

Autumn's next picture is the journey to school (Figure 20). Autumn draws a large car with a bird on the top and shares, *"We often walk but we sometimes take the car... I'm going to draw flames coming out of it."* Leo is drawn holding the steering wheel. Flames come out of the back of the car despite Autumn acknowledging that *"Leo likes to drive it slow because he's still learning, but I'm imagining some crazy car that's alive!"* Autumn is not drawn in the car but explains that she is often in front. Observing my own picture where I had drawn my backpack, Autumn comments:

"... I don't get it, but Mrs Aston doesn't allow backpacks at school, so the first day I make a big mistake by hanging a backpack on my peg with my pencils in".

This provokes a discussion about swimming and swimming bags, where Autumn shares how she hates swimming, identifying *"I don't like getting changed and wet. And it's like the first lesson; we just showed them what we could do. Me... it was cling to the wall."*

Alongside the car, Autumn writes 'or' and draws two figures walking as an alternative to driving with *"zoomy feet."* When asked which of the two options she prefers, Autumn responds:

"I like both, but I prefer car because then we're not likely to bump into Ronald because he goes to the same school as us and he lives on the NEXT STREET!... he walks every day, and he also likes making fun of me. Like one time I asked Oliver, who sits next to him, to pass me a rubber. He threw it at me... because I'm autistic. Not all

people do this who are autistic... but I made this noise, and they started reenacting it and laughing about it."

Drawing the fence and gate, Autumn makes small mechanical noises punctuating each line before drawing the school caretaker with his key. *"I walk to the gate where I see Mr Short, who often looks a bit grumpy, so he often looks a bit like me."*



Figure 21 Autumn walks into her classroom

For Autumn's final picture (Figure 21) she draws herself coming into the classroom, explaining, *"I need eyes. I need angry eyes!"* as, *"I don't want to go to school. School's boring."* As she draws she comments, *"I don't really smile much,"* and when I comment, *"No? – you have been since I've come here. You're smiling a lot. Is home different?"*, Autumn responds, *"Yeah – home is a good place. School is a bad place."* As Autumn draws herself walking through the doors, she recounts, *"I go zip, zip, zip, zip,"*, before drawing Ronald with two empty eyes and a sign above that reads *"annoying Ronald"*. He is compared to a *"walking and talking radio..."* who *"... broadcasts everything he does."*



Figure 22 Autumn with her peers

In the row of pupils, Autumn herself, is drawn with the same angry eyes and a straight line for a mouth as in previous pictures (Figure 22) explaining, *“I’m frowny face.”* Her friends are described as *“... just smiling, reading and talking about the books,”* while a row of faceless boys draw in their spelling books at the right of the page. Autumn recounts the rubber incident again, adding a speech bubble with ‘Mich!’ for the high-pitched noise she makes when the rubber hits her; and a ‘mwah’ for when she cries. Autumn explains:

“That’s Ronald and Leon... I’m just going to draw what happened with the rubber incident. That’s the rubber block. It’s a block brick rubber and it’s thrown. It goes all the way across the table. M-i-ch – that’s sort of like what I said. M-i-ch... So, M-i-ch then I re-enact it and I’m going to draw people laughing.”

Autumn takes her time with this picture, adding additional details and recounting a memory triggered by the discussion:

“And then there was just another thing where I couldn’t sleep at a sleepover cause it smelt funny and their neighbours were making loads of noise, so I had to go home... And then the next day, Ronald whispered it across to the next table to Greg... Greg shouted out in front of the teachers, in front of class, everything that I didn’t want to be spurted out, and I decided to go ‘waaahhh’ (mimes crying) It was really annoying.”

Autumn pauses and we talk about friends, where she adds:

“...there’s also this guy who I think is a friend called Ash, but I can’t really tell if I’m his friend. He says I’m his friend, but I don’t really know. He’s always going off playing with year fives and sixes though, so I don’t really know...”

We finish the interview by discussing what name she would like to use as a pseudonym. Autumn initially finds this difficult as she shares, "*I don't really know what I want to be called. I don't really know what I am... whether I am a dragon, a cat, a 'she', or a 'he'. I don't really know what I am.*"

6.3.3 Influential moments of Autumn's transition between home and the school

The following influential moments were identified through the drawing and walking interviews of Autumn, Arwen (Autumn's mother) and Kath and Kim (Autumn's teachers). Key influential moments are identified as: Getting dressed, The Walk to School, Approaching the School Building, Through the Gate, and Entering the Classroom.

Getting Dressed



Figure 23 Autumn gets dressed

For Autumn, an influential moment illuminated through her own and her mother's interviews, is getting dressed (Figure 23). She resists getting dressed until it can no longer be avoided, with Autumn ensuring that she is in close proximity to her mother, as Arwen shares:

"But right up until 8:00, they are like, 'No, I'm not getting ready'. 'I'll come and talk to you'. 'I'll reorganise the bathroom'. 'I'll do all of these other things I don't need to do'. But getting ready? No. And I'm not going to go downstairs because I'll be lonely if I'm in the kitchen and you're upstairs getting ready. And now I'm going to stay with you."

Where Tiana cites sensory challenges around the wearing of uniform, Autumn's response is perceived as a response to the requirement to wear school uniform and the associated demands. A particular dislike for her PE kit is also indicated in Figure 26 by the addition of a death eater mask. The use of the phrase *"I'm even more death eater today!"* whilst drawing her PE kit illustrates an association with this uniform and the followers of the villain, Voldemort in the Harry Potter series (Rowling, 2014) (Figure 24).



Figure 24 Death-eaters at the Quidditch World Cup (Fandom, 2025)

As Vygotsky (1978) posits, using the language of contemporary popular culture enables the extension of mental abilities as an extension of the mind (Bodrova and Leong, 2022) and it can be argued, gives Autumn additional tools to understand and share the feelings of anger ascribed to wearing school uniform; and the metaphorical mask she wears.

The Walk to School



Figure 25 Walking or driving to school

For Autumn, her journey varies as to whether she is driven or walked to school, and she draws both methods (Figure 25). Changes in weather or time constraints impact on the daily transition and specifically challenge the predictability of routines (Kullman, 2014). When walking, Autumn walks with Arwen, their paces more aligned, where Leo takes responsibility for Bridget. ‘Zoomy feet’ are drawn to demonstrate a sense of speed, whilst Arwen’s perception is that Autumn’s movements are slower.

“Usually, we try and take one each, don’t we? But Bridget will speed up and off and try and bolt, and Autumn is very, very, very slow and if there’s something she doesn’t want to do that day, then she’s even slower and almost walking backwards.”

This slowing down bears strong similarities with the resistance to dressing in her uniform, delaying her arrival. As the two move towards school, Autumn requires physical connection with her significant adult, Arwen, who provides reassurance, support, and connection:

Arwen: I say, "It's OK. I've got you". And she will put her arm in mine and almost pull me downward.

MB: So, anchoring.

Arwen: Yes, definitely. And on a day when she's really struggling, that would be almost all her body weight.

Walking, particularly familiar and habitual routes, aids the engagement with the sense of sight, sound, touch and aromas with the environment and has been found to have a positive impact on mood, perspectives and relationships with others (O'Neill et al., 2010) and increases the ability to be open to communication (Ramsden, 2016). For those with social communication differences, talking whilst walking side-by-side specifically reduces power imbalances in removing the necessity for eye contact (Kinney, 2017) and for Arwen there is a recognition that walking enables the verbalization of worries when she recounts, "*Autumn holds everything in until that walk and will only tell you what the real problem is when she is walking,*" thus enabling co-regulation and a more successful transition between home and school. However, walking is not without its challenges, and Arwen reports the challenge of sudden noises and how she will flinch, reflecting some of the more sensory processing challenges of being in a less predictable environment (Bourke, 2017).

Moving towards the school environs particularly where there are an increased number of children and parents, Autumn is noted to apply more weight to her mother's arm. Being in this space during the walking interview, Arwen reenacts slowing down almost to a stop and shares:

Arwen: On a bad day, she's like, you know. I don't know how to explain but like this and I'm having to almost pull her along.

MB: So, she's resisting almost. She's putting her feet down and...??

Arwen: Yes, but not in an unpleasant way.

MB: So, she's sort of slowed herself down...

Arwen: Right down, tiny, tiny little steps. Hardly moving...

Arwen: Sometimes, as we get to this point, she'll see people we know, but it doesn't speed her up or anything. It has to be at her own pace.

This setting of pace at this point of the transition is interpreted as an important inclusion, providing an alternative and more holistic perspective of the embodied changes taking place, and Autumn's agency in the transition. Moving between home and school, children and young people can use their own agency in managing risks and negotiate their environment (Morris et al., 2022), yet younger autistic children are less likely to complete this journey without support. In this description, Arwen shares how Autumn resists the pressure to walk quickly, slowing herself down and taking a level of control as she navigates the discord between dominant rhythms and her own.

The Gate

Crossing boundaries, results in a change of space and community, and necessitates a change in identity (Akkerman, 2011) and are therefore places of significance on the home to school journey. Drawing the boundary, Autumn uses strong pencil strokes punctuating the drawing with loud mechanical noises. A gatekeeper, Mr Short stands beside the gate, armed with his key (Figure 26). This visual representation focuses specifically on the barrier, and the caretaker who Autumn describes, "... *often looks a bit grumpy, so he often looks a bit like me.*" Here, it is interesting to note a lack of representation of teaching staff, with the sole representation of the caretaker as someone that Autumn feels an affinity with. Both, according to Autumn looking a little grumpy as they meet at the school gate.



Figure 26 Mr Short at the school gate

The school gate is significant in that this is where pupils separate from parents. As parents say goodbye in this liminal space, Arwen shares how she aids Autumn and Bridget in putting on their 'armour' for this transition that they must do alone:

"We go in through this gate, divide up all the bags between them, make sure we've got everything. Do the goodbyes and give them as big a cuddle as they need. And then through the gates into the playground and we're not allowed to go through the gate with them."

The separation of parents and teachers at the point of transition is not uncommon. As Autumn moves across the 'no man's land' away from parents between the outer and inner gate, she must do this alone (Packer et al., 2021), which can result in anxiety for pupils and parents. Arwen shares her anxiety about this aspect of the transition, and the necessity at times of locating key adults to support:

"... some mornings we have to... catch a grown up... This morning, one of them noticed that Autumn was hanging back. So, she came over, even though she's not even a class teacher and helped her to get through and just talking about what's bothering her and helping."

These concerns mirror those raised by Kath and Kim (Autumn's teachers) that, as teachers, they often do not see children transition through the first gate and recognise the importance of being able to check-in with pupils early. Kim shares that if Autumn was anxious, *"...she wouldn't directly say. You can see it in her body language. You know she doesn't like to be late,"* acknowledging how meeting pupils in the inner playground was, *"... quite nice because it gives you time to go down the line and check in on everybody."*

Entering the Classroom



Figure 27 Autumn enters the classroom

One of the most powerful images of Autumn's transition is the final drawing of the interview as she enters the classroom (Figure 27). Autumn's draws her 'frowny face' in contrast to the smiles of her friends, as the critical incident with the eraser is presented visually. Kim reflects on how Autumn spends longer than usual outside the classroom delaying the crossing of this

boundary, mirroring Autumn's delay in putting on uniform and slowing down outside the school premises:

"She'll spend quite a lot of time here (indicates coat peg)... organising herself, putting... things away ... before she'd go in. You'll follow the line until the end, and you'll look and she's still here (gestures to the pegs)."

The necessity for additional support to move across this threshold is acknowledged as teachers share that they always "... make sure we greet her and... I say good morning and always say her name," making use of additional support from an Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA). In contrast to the adults' narratives, it is interesting to note, no mention is made of the teacher's greeting or the presence of an ELSA in Autumn's drawn or spoken narrative. Her focus instead is on her peers, her own "*frowny face*" which she likens to the caretaker's and comparisons with friends who are, "*smiling, reading and talking about books.*"

The classroom space itself has an impact on Autumn's embodied experience, where memories of a critical incident is both simultaneously hidden and visible in her recollections, echoes of the past and present combining (Good, 2019). Autumn's drawing and narrative demonstrate an acute awareness and hypervigilance to how others perceive her, facilitated by the open nature of the classroom (Kraftl, 2022) and shaped by past experiences and her own self-perception of 'being different', reflective of other autistic girls within research (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Jones, 2025; Malone et al., 2025; Tierney et al., 2016).

6.3.4 Analysis: Autumn's Themes

'Frowny Face'

The act of drawing, together with dialogue enables Autumn to explore her unique embodied presentation in school (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2025). Kath reports that Autumn "... *doesn't show that much emotion in their face,*" and presents as "*polite,*" and "*a bit timid.*" However, compared to others' perceptions of her polite compliance, Autumn's own reported presentation story is more assertive with a 'frowny face' and 'angry eyes' (Figure 28), providing a stark contrast to her friends who are smiling and sharing books. Instead, Autumn positions herself as more aligned with the caretaker, Mr Short rather than expressing a desire to 'fit in' with non-autistic peers as presented in other research (Tubío-Fungueiriño et al., 2021).



Figure 28 Autumn's presentation at school

Under the Radar: Keeping Everything In

Despite this self-reported more assertive presentation, Autumn is described across the case study as someone who seeks to remain under the radar, containing strong emotions. As Autumn herself, acknowledges, *"I don't really say much,"* sharing that when there is a potential conflict, *"I'll sit in the shadows,"* thus demonstrating the intention to censor behaviours through increased self-monitoring which is a form of camouflaging (Drapalik et al., 2025). Kim describes Autumn as, *"very self-contained"* and *"... not wanting to fuss or draw attention to herself,"* where Kath observes:

"She is not one of those children that you notice all the time. Some children... they're very visible, aren't they? But she's often quite quiet and her body language is quite (tightens her body bringing her shoulders in)."

Anxiety is expressed in more open or busier places, where Autumn might feel more visible such as in busier spaces and open spaces such as the classroom, where Autumn is more reticent about entering the classroom and demonstrates a level of anxiety on the playground. However, attention is also drawn to swimming lessons, where Autumn reports her anxiety about being in the lower group, and struggles to understand how teachers would not realise this:

Autumn: So, I cling to a wall, they put me in the group for people who can't even swim... They put me in the super shallow pool, so my legs can't even get up.

MB: Oh no, so you're too tall for the shallow pool?

Autumn: Yeah.

MB: Do they know that?

Autumn: Well, I'm assuming they would have seen it because it's kind of obvious if somebody is suitable for the pool.

For Autumn, her preference for hiding in the shadows, can be understood as a form of self-preservation, seeking to prevent making noises that could be embarrassing, and expose potential weaknesses to ridicule. The impact of historical experiences of bullying and embarrassment in front of peers is particularly pertinent and explains in part the frustration expressed about specific children who are more vocal as depicted in Figure 29, which Autumn describes as:

"... Annoying Ronald. I have to sit next to that walking and talking radio (in annoyed voice) ... He broadcasts everything he does, so if he's got 10 out of 10 or 9 out of 10 on his spellings, which he always does. It's like he's cheating and carrying the sheet around or something. He's like, look, I got 10 out of 10. Look, look, look. So annoying!"



Figure 29 Annoying Ronald

In this illuminating description, Ronald is depicted as a radio, broadcasting loud and clear his achievements particularly in spelling, an area that Autumn finds challenging; a stark contrast to the 'muted' presentation, Autumn adopts to reduce social risk by limiting talk, as a form of protective camouflaging (Cook et al., 2021).

Peer Relationships: A Passive Victim or a Karate Kid?

Across this study, frequent references to friends and friendship reflect studies have determined that autistic girls, such as Autumn, can be more socially motivated (Anderson, 2020; Halsall et al., 2021). Throughout her interview, Autumn makes minimal references to adults compared to peers, particularly in the school environment, where the impact of positive and negative social interactions on Autumn's perception of school and her own sense of belonging is

deemed significant. Kath and Kim note the value of Autumn's friendships and the impact of a shared experience on Autumn's confidence:

"At the moment, she's sitting with some nice girls. They're all quite similar and they're into their bands and Taylor Swift and we did an assembly, didn't we? And they did a little group performance and so that seems to be quite nice." (Kim)

"And I feel like that was a little bit of confidence growing for Autumn, performing as part of our class assembly in front of the rest of key stage two parents" (Kath)

When Autumn reflects on the same performance with her friends in assembly, she explains, *"I just stood there like an ice block... to be honest, so did my friends,"* suggesting the security that having friends with similar experiences can provide. In the classroom, Autumn draws her friends, a barrier between herself and others, reflecting findings that friendships for autistic girls can provide a form of protection (Peters and Brooks, 2016). Despite this, navigating friendships are considered to be problematic and confusing for Autumn as she shares:

"And there's also this guy who I think has a friend called Gerry, but I can't really tell if I'm his friend. He says I'm his friend, but I don't really know. He's always going off playing with year fives and sixes though, so I don't really know him."

The difficulties Autumn experiences in interpreting social interactions and relationships are particularly challenging for autistic girls and often result in feelings of anxiety and distress (Tierney et al., 2016). For Autumn, the behaviour of boys in particular appears to be a source of consternation and confusion, as presented in Figure 3.



"Ronald sits on that corner with the other guys. And I'm just going to draw the row of boys there. And they're like 'Muh, I'm going to draw in my spelling book.'"

Figure 30 The faceless boys

Finding social interactions difficult to interpret can result in autistic children like Autumn being vulnerable to relational bullying and victimisation (Humphrey and Symes, 2010), where school environments can place autistic girls at greater risk of emotional or physical harm (Sutherland and Parker, 2020). Similar to the girls in Tierney et al's (2016) study, Autumn's classroom

environment is identified as provoking distress, or as described by Emily, a secondary autistic pupil, “surrounded by lions” (2016: 77).

Despite this vulnerability, the way in which Autumn draws and describes herself, indicates a level of agency and resistance to situations where she might be perceived as a passive victim. Although Autumn is hyper-aware of school rules similar to other autistic children (Mesa and Hamilton, 2023), there is an expressed frustration and desire to resist either through verbal or physical aggression. These include references to sitting ‘in the shadows’ when pressured by peers, wearing an ‘invisible’ death-eater mask and learning karate to defend herself against oppressors. Camouflaging techniques are consciously used as a form of protection. Autumn regularly speaks about her angry eyes, wearing a *death eater mask* and being *angry dragon me* demonstrating a tension between speaking out and being silent, being wholly themselves or divided (Freire, 2017: 22).

6.3.5 Conclusion

Autumn’s case study provides an insight into challenges experienced by autistic girls to conform with mainstream primary education, and the associated demand to understand and navigate social relationships. Significant moments in her transition between home and school, include putting on her uniform, crossing the boundaries of the school gate and the classroom. At these specific transition points, Autumn resists by slowing down her movement, taking action to delay transitions, seeking support from her mother, whilst demonstrating a grumpy face and angry eyes.

Autumn’s story demonstrates the potential division of self as autistic girls navigate school environments, where Autumn presents two personas: the compliant ‘front of stage’ self and the angry-eyed, karate wielding ‘backstage self’ (Goffman, 2022). Self-censorship, and containment are just two of the camouflaging strategies used as a form of protection against bullying and victimisation, where the impact of negative experiences impacts on Autumn’s sense of self.

6.4 Case Study 3 – Salish



Figure 31 Salish's initial drawing

6.4.1 Background Information

Salish was 9 years old and living in the Midlands at the time of data collection with her Mum, Kerry, and her brother, Harry, but they were planning to move north. Her favourite hobbies includes drawing like her mother who is an artist; an example of her drawing is Figure 31. Salish also loves animals and playing on the iPad. At home, Kerry shared the different art projects Salish was involved in and her love of computer games and YouTube. Salish is described as being academically one of the brightest of the class and being emotionally literate.

At the time of the interview, Salish attended a small rural single-form primary school about ten minutes' drive from her home. Her previous school experiences, particularly in Years 2 and 3 at the same school, are reported as challenging, where Salish experienced periods of school avoidance and significant distress when coming into school. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Kerry shared both Salish and her brother still attended school and had a more positive school experience with smaller class sizes.

The interviews took place in the Spring and early Summer of 2024. A pre-visit was arranged as part of the process, and then two follow-up visits at home and via Teams following relocation.

The drawing interview, at Kerry and Salish's request took place in school and we were able to access one of the offices near reception. The interview was recorded on an audio device as Salish indicated a preference for not being videoed. Although Salish had previously drawn alongside me, when it came to drawing the transition, she demonstrated a degree of hesitance, initially choosing to draw a picture of a girl with a hat and party blower rather than engaging with drawing her journey to school (Figure 35) and then opting for me to draw for her. She appeared happy to tell me what to draw, smiling and becoming quite playful in her narration with creatures incorporated into the story. When I started to draw her car, Salish took over the drawing, explaining that my own drawing looked more like a van than her car, replacing it with a giant crocodile for her mother and brother to ride on.

When reflecting on Salish's initial reluctance and her engagement with more fictional representation, I was concerned that this could have been a means of communicating that she did not wish to have her voice included in the research. However, on being asked whether she was happy to continue, Salish replied "I'm ok doing it... it's my morning," demonstrating her agency in the project and a playful imaginative approach. Later, during a follow-up visit, Salish reiterated that she was happy for her work to be included and was delighted in the way that her voice had been represented, calling for her mum to see what she had produced.

6.4.2 Salish's Story



Figure 32 Salish's journey to school

Salish starts her story when she wakes at 5am (Figure 32). We agree to draw a clock and a small picture of Salish. When asked how she is feeling when she wakes up in the morning, Salish replies:

"Good, because mum gets us ready at seven, but me and Harry usually wake for five and sneak downstairs to get a little... like... bit of time playing games. Harry plays on the PlayStation and then I usually go on the iPad ... So I've got like 2 hours on it."

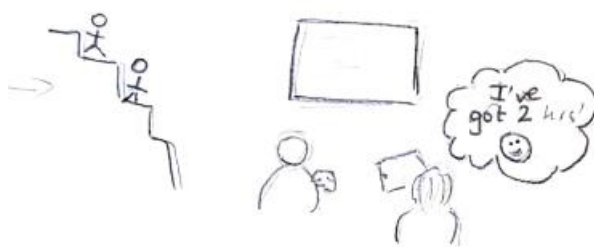


Figure 33 I have 2 hours to play on the iPad

Instructed by Salish, I draw the two children coming down the stairs and then both seated in the lounge with their devices (Figure 33). At 7am, Salish's Mum comes and tells them both to *“Get dressed!”* As I start to draw Mum's face, Salish quickly adds, *“but Mum's in a banana costume.”* I ask Salish whether this was right, and she giggles with an affirmative *“uh-hum.”* so the drawing is adjusted (Figure 34)



Figure 34 Mum is dressed as a banana

Having drawn the speech bubble for Salish's mum, I ask Salish what she is thinking when Mum says get dressed. Salish responds with, *“I don't want to go to school”* and when asked how she might be feeling, she says with a very quick intonation, *“Annoyed”* before adding, *“And then King Kong broke into our house and stole all our cup noodles, which are my favourite, I love cup noodles.”*



Figure 35 King Kong arrives and steal the pot noodle before a Pterodactyl and other creatures take Salish to school

As I start to draw King Kong (Figure 35), we talk about her dog and how she barks at King Kong, before Salish explains:

"A pterodactyl comes in and picks me up and flies me to school... He picks me up and then puts me in his nest... And then it drops me in the nest, diplodocus comes and takes me onto the T-Rex's back (slight laugh), and then the T-Rex gives me to a flying stingray that doesn't breathe underwater, and then they give me to a killer acyloxyl, and then I ride my killer acyloxyl to school."

I attempt the different pictures and ask Salish how her mother and brother might get to school. Salish shares that they travel in the car, but as I start to draw, she takes over (Figure 36):



Figure 36 Mum and Harry arrive at school by crocodile

Salish: It looks like a van... This is what the car looks like (leans over and takes the pencil and paper)

MB: OK. So that's the car?

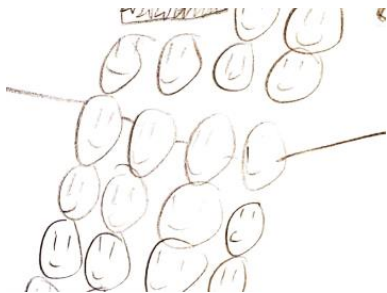
Salish: No - they get to school by crocodile. And then there's mum on the back.

And then Harry and then it's 'Ya!' and it's got spikes on its back. The spikes have a gap for Mum and Harry to sit on.

Salish takes great care with the different spikes on the crocodile and positions little stick people for Mum and Harry riding between the spikes, before starting on the breakfast club drawing (Figure 37). Salish explains *"At breakfast club... we eat sandwiches... we eat mermaid's tail sandwiches... and then for a drink... we have ice!"*



Figure 37 Mermaids' tail sandwiches and friends at Breakfast Club



I ask, "Do you have friends there?" and Salish replies with an affirmative "Uh-hum" drawing ten rows of smiling faces. Each of the twenty-six friends have two eyes and a smile. As I comment on the number of friends, Salish does not respond.

MB: Wow, you've got loads of friends, haven't you?

Salish: No response

MB: So, what else do you do in breakfast club? I've never been to breakfast club here.

Salish: I eat breakfast. (emphasises the 't')

MB: OK, the mermaid tails...

Salish: ... and the ice.

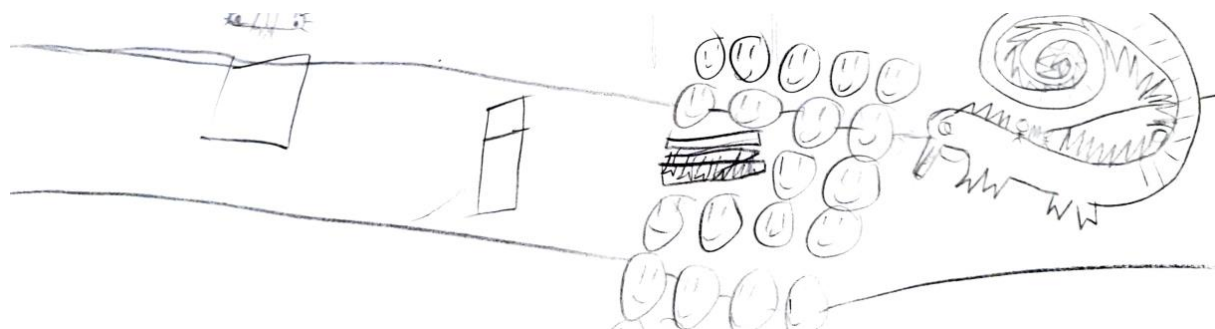


Figure 38 From Breakfast Club to the Classroom

Next, Salish draws two long lines across the page (Figure 38), and onto the other side of the paper:

"We walk to the classroom, which is here. It's longer... And it goes through my friends and through the crocodile... and it goes off the page. That's how big my classroom is... And all the way over there... at the end of my classroom is... This is my seat. And all the way over here is the teacher.

MB: So that's in your seat, which I've seen!

Salish: You saw me in my afternoon seat.

MB: Ah so you have a different seat in the mornings.

Salish: Um-hmm... Then my face and my hair.

After drawing the lines across the pages, Salish draws a large picture of herself on another piece of paper. There are no facial features, but wild hair which swirls around her head (Figure 39). The pressure of the pencil on the paper is heavy, making indents in the paper.



Figure 39 Salish in her morning seat



Together we go back through the pictures and discuss the process of getting ready. When I ask about brushing her hair, Salish replied, *“I don’t really... because I never have time... never have time.”* Salish then draws her hairbrush and toothbrush and crosses through them before adding her dog on the left (Figure 40).

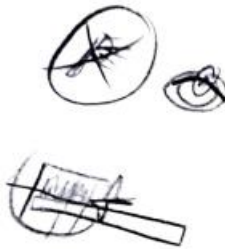


Figure 40 I don't really brush my hair

I also ask whether she takes a packed lunch and Salish becomes more animated, responding:

“No, I wish I could, but mum says you have to pay to get packed lunch, but you can just bring it whenever you want. Because like in Year 2, you did have to pay for packed lunch and school dinners are free when you're in the juniors, you don't have to... In school dinners I don't like it when there is nothing that I like on the menu and I don't have packed lunch, so I am forced to choose one, and I also know what is on the menu every day.”

I ask what how she feels when she gets in the car and Salish responds with *“Bleurgh,”* sticking out her tongue for additional emphasis. As I point to the breakfast club drawing, which is the next part of her visual story, Salish shares:

"I don't like it because Harry always runs behind my back and tries to get to Breakfast Club before me, but then when I'm running, he stops and starts shouting, like "Salish, it doesn't matter!" ... And then I can hear him just running... Then I just run and then he shouts at me, "Salish it is not a competition!" but he is the one that started it."

As we finish the interview, and discuss Salish's pseudonym, she chooses to redraw the picture of herself in the classroom (Figure 41), taking great care to make this neat and accurate. Pencil marks are less heavy, and blending is used to denote her straight hair and the 3-dimensional pencil. She comments, *"I tried to make it look like I'm holding a pencil, but it looks like an ice cream."* I respond, *"I think I'd prefer an ice cream to a pencil sometimes, wouldn't you?"* to which she responds in the affirmative *"Hmm... hmm"* and smiles.



Figure 41 Salish in her classroom

6.4.3 Influential moments of Salish's transition between home and the school

The following influential moments have been identified through the drawing and walking interviews of Salish, Kerry (Salish's mother) and Patricia and Pippa (Salish's teacher and SENCO at the time of the data collection). Key influential moments are identified as: Sneaking Downstairs, Getting Ready, Being Taken to School, Breakfast Club and Into the Classroom.

At Home

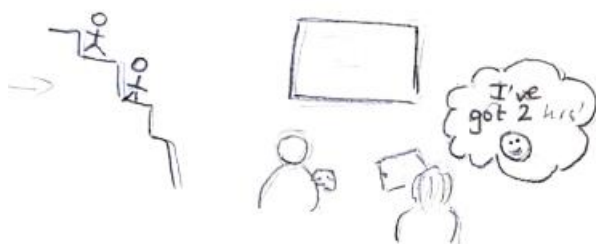


Figure 42 Harry and Salish sneak downstairs

As Salish starts her story, she demonstrates a level of agency in her morning routine as she and her brother “...usually wake for five and sneak downstairs to get a little bit of time playing games.” ensuring time to play (Figure 42). By doing this Salish is able to secure time before the demands of school for preferred activity, her brother an accomplice in her endeavours in accessing alternative virtual environments. Historically, Kerry explains that “*Before the melatonin, she would be up most of the night... and the whole house would be awake at, like, 3am in the morning,*” which Kerry reports had a significant impact on Salish's mental health and access to education. Insomnia, or difficulties with sleep quality or quantity disproportionately affects children with an autism diagnosis (Johnson and Malow, 2008; Schroder et al., 2019), and therefore the use of prolonged-release melatonin has increasingly been used for autistic children like Salish to develop regular sleep routines (Devnani and Hegde, 2015). The impact of the melatonin treatment is identified as having a positive impact, but tiredness is still a concern.

Like Arwen, Kerry resists making demands for getting ready until later in the morning, once Salish has enjoyed time on the iPad or PlayStation. Within the dictated drawings and narratives, it is at the point where Mum appears and says, “Get dressed,” that description and visuals becomes more imaginative, and distanced from reality as Mum becomes a banana and King Kong steals Salish's favourite noodles as detailed below:

“When I ask Salish what she is thinking when Mum says get dressed. Salish responds with “I don't want to go to school” and when asked how she might be feeling, she

says with a very quick intonation “Annoyed” before quickly adding, “And then King Kong broke into our house and stole all our cup noodles, which are my favourite, I love cup noodles... And then King Kong leaves.”

Imaginative play is sometimes considered delayed or absent in the diagnostic criteria for autism (Woods, 2023), yet for Salish, fantastical creatures and imagery are prevalent in this playful narrative. The use of this imagery demonstrates multiple layers of meaning as culturally mediated symbols (in this case, King Kong stealing pot noodle) are used to represent her story (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2025) offering an insightful interpretation into the lived experience. As Kerry makes a demand for Salish to ‘Get Dressed’ in Salish’s story, a fantastical response is created with monsters and caricatures. This masks the resistance presented by Kerry that she experiences as Salish is interrupted from her preferred activity, reflects challenges associated with monotropic attention in autistic children (Murray, 2023):

“Where she will get up, I’ll have to get her clothes for her and give them to her and say you need to get dressed. It can take a lot of persuading for her to get dressed, and there’s usually a lot of screaming and tantruming, because I’ve asked to get dressed... And then she will sometimes scream and shout at me because we’re about to leave the door and I say, have you brushed your teeth? And she’ll get very, very upset and start shouting. “You didn’t tell me, so I didn’t.”

In enabling Salish to tell her own story, agency is awarded. The use of creative narrative gives Salish the freedom to tell her story in the way she wishes allowing for resistance and self-preservation, through the presentation of a ‘front of stage’ self (Goffman, 2022). Reluctance is expressed about going to school whilst monsters stealing her favourite snacks could indicate how her agency feels undermined.

Being Taken to School

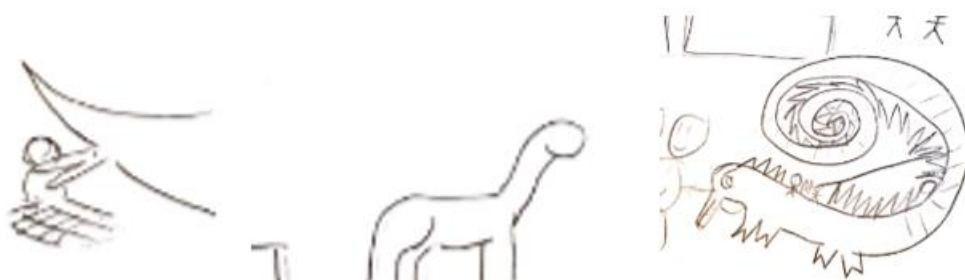


Figure 43 Salish is taken to school by a Pterodactyl, Brontosaurus and a giant crocodile.

The visual representation of Salish's journey to school is the most imaginative of the four stories with references to a pterodactyl, diplodocus, tyrannosaurus-rex, a flying stingray and a killer acyloxyl all forming part of the transition (Figure 43).

"A Pterodactyl comes in and picks me up and flies me to school... He picks me up and then puts me in his nest... And then it drops me in the nest, a diplodocus comes and takes me onto the T-Rex's back (slight laugh), and then the T Rex gives me to a flying stingray that doesn't breathe underwater, and then they give me to a killer acyloxyl, and then I ride my killer acyloxyl to school."

With the exception of the acyloxyl here, what is significant is the use of the passive tense. For each of the transitions, Salish is self-reported to be *'taken'*, *'given'* and *'picked'* reducing all agency until she *'rides'* the killer acyloxyl, reflective of research with autistic children who can feel that they have limited agency in their own lives (Cunningham, 2022). The use of these imaginative creatures distracts from the discomfort and distress experienced, identified in her own admission that when she is in the car, she feels, *"Bleurgh."*

When travelling between home and school, similar to Tiana, she has little agency over this part of the school transition. Unlike Autumn who can slow down her walk, the car moves at the speed determined by Kerry, who observes that as they turn into the road where the school is located, Salish's presentation changes:

"I do notice when we come onto this road here, she'll start getting agitated and sometimes she'll start saying "I'm not going to school. I don't want to go to school."

Despite her protestations that she is "not going to school," the car continues to make progress towards this destination, with Salish a passenger, an unwilling recipient of care (Kullman, 2010). However, as they arrive at the school and the car is parked, Kerry reports how Salish's behaviours become that of fight or flight responses including running up the road and locking herself in the car. The two narratives demonstrating high levels of anxiety and fear surrounding the transition between the car and the school playground.

"Sometimes she wouldn't even look at me. And other times, she'd look at me, and then she'd sometimes laugh. And she's like this "I'm not doing it, not doing it" ... And she's like "No, no, no, I'm not getting out" and she'd be clinging on to the steering wheel, diving into the back. She'd be all over the car."

Breakfast Club

The establishment of breakfast clubs began in the 1990s due to parental demand for supervised childcare and provide breakfast for those who arrived early. Breakfast clubs continue today but with significant variation in cost, provision and timings with limited evidence of their impact (Lambie-Mumford and Sims, 2018). Following periods of significant distress and challenges Salish was given a place at the school's breakfast club to provide access to a calmer and more relaxed environment for the start of the day, reducing anxiety and distress, as explained by Pippa (SENCO).

"Because at that time when she was struggling to get out of the car, ... I mean, sometimes she literally wouldn't get out of the car, and she would be in her pyjamas when she arrived at school at well... then mum would have to take her home to get changed and so then it was another kind of cycle... Her going to the breakfast club just meant that they would go in there and they'd be doing activities actually before she had to come to school, so that seemed to break that kind of pattern".

The intention of this 'third space' is to broker the home and school divide (Akkerman, 2011), thus providing a quieter, more home-based environment and pastoral support. Initially however, Kerry reports the situation felt worsened, with Salish '*running off down the streets*' and '*trying to run off back out of the club.*' Having the additional time to get Salish into school meant that, for Kerry, "*It just felt worse, I suppose, because it lasted longer.*" However, in the months preceding the interview, Kerry shared that security had increased so that, "... *if she does get in, she can't get out,*" which provided reassurance. Whilst this containment of children evokes a prison-like perception of education, where bodies are contained and dehumanised (Freire, 2017), Salish's visual representation of Breakfast Club indicates a positive outcome as she draws a multitude of smiling friends (Figure 44). Where the second stage of transition, moving between home and school is more challenging, integration is more positive (van Gennep, 2019).

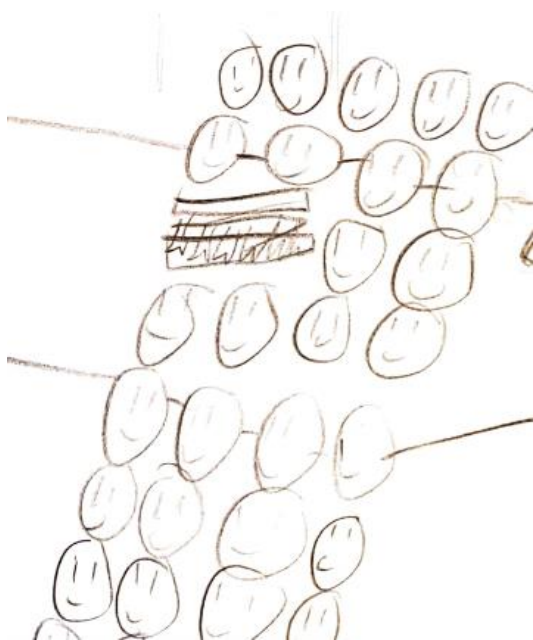


Figure 44 Salish's friends and the mermaid tail sandwiches at Breakfast Club

Moving between the breakfast club and the classroom, the positive connection with peers is observed by Salish's teacher, Rachael who shares that, *"there's always at least two or three from this class, so... they actually come over with linked arms"* in contrast to Kerry's report of Salish's anxiety about waiting to join the line by herself:

"Before breakfast Club when they were going in with everybody else, Salish... She'd refused to go to her classroom. She used to have to wait in line... She'd start getting anxious in the playground and she wouldn't go into the class, and then she'd start running off as well in the playground. And she's like, 'I'm not going. I'm not going.'... The waiting to go in and all the kids and all of the people it was..., it was just too much."

This intervention is thereby identified by her teacher to be effective in providing support and protection for Salish through peer connections; a recognised supportive strategy for transitions (Morris et al., 2022), reducing periods of waiting and uncertainty, and sensory challenges in busier environments associated with autistic girls (Jones et al., 2020).

Adjusting to the Classroom

In Salish's drawing and narrative, she walks straight from Breakfast Club and into her seat, drawing a long continuous line demarcating the route from breakfast club to the classroom. However teacher interviews indicate that navigating the micro-transitions can be more problematic and additional support is necessary. Rachael specifically shares her observations of Salish's embodied presentation as she crosses the classroom threshold. Standing in the doorway in our walking interview, Rachael shares:

"I can often tell how she's feeling by that interaction, because she will... (looks down) And then she can be quite visible in her then like shutting down and putting her head down and then she will take a long time unpacking her bag. So, it's almost like she needs that space, and she wants me to know that she's not ready."

Here Rachael notes Salish's difficulties at times with conforming to the prescribed timings of school day. In response to being bent to the rhythms of the school times and spaces (Lefebvre, 2021), Salish demonstrates a quiet agency in communicating her needs through non-verbal gestures, securing relevant adjustments.



Figure 45 Salish's initial portrait of herself in the classroom alongside the initial drawing and the re-drawn representation

Within the classroom itself, Salish draws herself with quick, swirling strokes and a frenetic energy at first, the emotion expressed interpreted as important as the drawn outcome (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2025); a stark contrast to her drawing style at the start and end of the interview (Figure 45). Frustration and anger is expressed in this drawing, which aligns with Kerry's understanding of Salish's school experience, despite a shared love of learning:

"I know that when she gets into the classroom, she does feel like... a lot of things upset her, like the friendship things and then the talking in the classrooms. She doesn't like it when there's too much loud noise going on. She can't concentrate."

These SPDs often experienced by autistic girls (Jones et al., 2020; Jones, 2025) together with intense friendship concerns (Cook et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2021; Sedgewick et al., 2016) impact on Salish's feelings of safety and belonging in the classroom. In contrast to the gathering of friends in the Breakfast Club, Salish positions herself alone, initially with a more wilder presentation before replacing this with a more tamed or conforming self-portrait (Figure 46). Alert and smiling, Salish presents herself as enjoying her learning, well-groomed and presented for the school day, potentially masking difficulties and insecurities.



Figure 46 Salish's second picture in the classroom

6.4.4 Analysis: Salish's themes

The following themes have been identified through the drawing and walking interviews of Salish, Kerry (Salish's mother) and Rachael and Pippa (Salish's teacher and SENCO at the time of the data collection). Key themes are identified as: 'Everything needs to be just right,' 'The Power of Connection' and 'Resistance and Agency'.

Resistance and Agency

By joining an institution, we are 'bent to its' ways' through the repetition of routines and demands (Lefebvre, 2021), yet in this case study, a theme of resistance and agency is evident. Despite Salish's more limited vocalisations in the interview process, and with teachers, compared with other participants, Salish was reported to regularly seek and to achieve agency through verbal and non-verbal communication. Examples include indicating a need for additional time to unpack her bag, wearing uniform that does not conform to school rules, and in taking additional time to complete a favoured task before moving to the next activity. As Rachael reports, "*She is a bit resistant if she's doing work that she really wants. She will be the last one to finish, to put it away or put the laptop back.*" Small similar microaggressions are also reported by Kerry and Rachael, where Salish will return to bed when asked to get

dressed and will wear converse trainers instead of school shoes. Rachael identifies that, *“She pushes it. She loses things”* including wearing converse instead of school trainers. Although there is a tendency for autistic children to be viewed through a tragedy model as ‘lesser beings’ to their non-autistic peers (Beardon, 2023), Salish’s demonstration of agency in communicating her needs and resisting aspects of school she does not enjoy, indicates that her voice is heard.

Everything needs to be ‘just right’

As reflected in the pictorial representation of Salish in the classroom (Figure 51), there is a recognition across the case study that Salish likes to present a positive ‘front’ and has to be right, reflecting observations that autistic girls are frequently perfectionists (Moyse and Porter, 2015: 189; Wassall and Burke, 2022). Humanity has the propensity to ‘perform’ (Goffman, 2022) and the camouflaging or masking of perceived differences and potential considered weaknesses is a defining characteristic for autistic girls (Cook et al., 2018; Hull et al., 2020; Tierney et al., 2016). Loss of face or a positive representation of herself is reported to result in distress and anxiety for Salish, with examples including the presentation of her hair when going into school:

“She doesn’t like hair brushing very much, but she’ll get very upset if there’s any bumps in her hair, so we could spend ages trying to calm Salish down because she’s got bumps in hair and there’ll be tears and...” (Kerry)

Despite finding hair brushing painful, similar to other autistic girls (Wassall and Burke, 2022; Moyse and Porter, 2015), Salish wants her hair to be brushed smooth, finding any bumps within her hair to be frustrating. The completion of sensory sensitive tasks related to dressing and grooming thus has an impact on the Salish’s daily transition between home and school. Kerry also finds that reminding Salish of the need to brush hair or teeth can result in dysregulation:

“And then she will sometimes scream and shout at me because we’re about to leave the door and I say, have you brushed your teeth? And she’ll get very, very upset and start shouting, ‘You didn’t tell me, so I didn’t.’”

This response could be partially an associated quality found in autistic girls of being highly sensitive to criticism (Gurbuz et al., 2024). As demonstrated in this reflection and throughout

the interviews, Salish presents as having very high standards of herself and others, which Kerry worries results in a perception by others of Salish as, “... *being quite authoritarian.*”

The Power of Connection

Despite shifting responsibility to Kerry for reminding her to brush her teeth, there are indicators across both parent and teacher interviews that Salish responds to being physically and emotionally connected to her mother and her friends. Physical connection between Salish and Kerry, specifically is a positive influence on this daily transition, where Kerry recognises that, “*She has to give me a big cuddle and then she goes in.*” Historically, however, separating from Kerry has been challenging as Pippa, the schools’ SENCO shares, “*She would literally chase her mum and cling on and scream.*” Moving between home and school without parents, can be challenging, and similarly to Autumn, physical objects are used to broker between the two spaces, as recognised by Salish’s teacher, Rachael:

“There are usually little toys and trinkets from home like a fur collar that belongs to one of mum’s coats. It was in there for months... like little bits and pieces. Sometimes Mum’s cardigan will be in there, and she will wear that.”

This use of objects to facilitate emotional security is most often associated with infants and small children (Richins and Chaplin, 2021), but is also a common advised strategy to support more vulnerable children in schools; the transition or attachment object brokering a connection between child and parent (LeedsforLearning, 2025).

Friends also have a complex role in Salish’s experience of school. At the age of 9 years old, social behaviours are more complex and therefore can be more challenging for autistic girls (Eaton, 2019) where they may demonstrate a strong desire to fit in (Cook et al., 2018) but differences in expectations of friendships can make girls an easy target for relational conflict (Sedgewick et al., 2016). Salish, Rachael suggests, is “... *very intense with her friendships and they fall out,*” giving the example that she will sometimes say within a large group, “*You and I are just going to have a conversation, and we are going to walk over here,*” which can prove divisive within the group. Autistic girls experience conflict more frequently and find conflict in their friendships more challenging to manage (Sedgewick et al., 2019). Therefore, for Salish additional support from her teacher, Rachael is frequently requested to mitigate any conflict.

6.4.5 Conclusion

Salish's case study provides a novel insight into the challenges around transition. Fantastical imagery is used to explore her embodied response from a place of agency (home) to a passive traveller at the mercy of a range of creatures, before she enters school. Recognition is made of the importance of connection with peers and adults, the impact of wanting everything to be right on her anxiety, and the impact of busier environments and periods of waiting on Salish's ability to manage transitions at the school gate.

Across the drawing and walking interviews, examples of Salish's resistance towards school demands are evidenced, whether this is pushing boundaries around uniform or communicating a need for additional time and space. Difficulties with sensory challenging environments are mitigated through adult-mediated interventions such as the use of breakfast clubs, but also Salish's own understanding of her needs. Influential moments on the home-to-school transition include Salish's waking early to play on the iPad, response to demands to dress, being taken to school, breakfast club and entering the classroom.

6.5 Case Study 4 – Moon

6.5.1 Background Information

Moon was 9 years old and at the end of Year 4 at the time of the interviews, living in the Midlands with her mother, Laura, her father, Justin and her younger sister, Leah. Moon attends a Junior School in the Midlands and previously attended the local Infant School. Historically, Laura shared that Moon had demonstrated Emotion Based School Avoidance (EBSA) where she would be very anxious about going to school and as a result, Moon would often arrive up to 2 hours after school had started. Laura shared distress at the pressure placed on Moon and herself as a parent at the previous school.

Moon had a recent autism diagnosis and therefore was interested in myself as an autistic adult, as her mum noted, she had not encountered an autistic woman before. She shared a love of animals, and I was able to meet cats and dogs at her home. Moon was also able to show me some of the games that she likes to play on her tablet and the television programmes that she enjoys on Netflix.

Moon's interview and the walking interviews were carried out in the Summer of 2024, where her teacher at the time of the research was Simon. As part of the research, Moon had two familiarisation visits at her home, 3 visits to carry out the interviews in school, and a follow up home visit to discuss the themes identified. Moon shared a preference for an even number of visits.

The drawing interviews took place in intervention rooms that Moon knew well and therefore she was able to self-source different pieces of drawing equipment. Additional sessions were required as Moon was fastidious about the level of detail in her drawings which impacted on the speed in which she completed the task. The initial interview was captured using video and then audio recording for the follow up interview.

During the interviews, Moon engaged in discussion whilst drawing, sharing her own story and asking about my picture and different aspects of my life. There were many cultural references made during her drawing and narration to reference specific television programmes and video games that she enjoyed.

During the drawing part of the interview, Moon shared that she enjoyed drawing competitions and initially would check to see how much of my own story I had finished compared to her own

“Is mine ahead of you? No. You are ahead of me”. However, this did not continue beyond the first drawing session, and Moon was happy to draw at her own pace, sharing some of the strategies she employs when drawing:

“Usually I just draw hands like Roblox. People’s hands are much more simple then... because you just give one cut, another cut... then join them.”

Due to the interview and drawing taking place over two separate occasions, Moon drew a spiral to show the picture going back in time so that she could add the additional details of the journey where there were differences from the original interview day. This can be seen to the left of Moon’s self-portrait in school uniform in Figure 49.

6.5.2 Moon's story

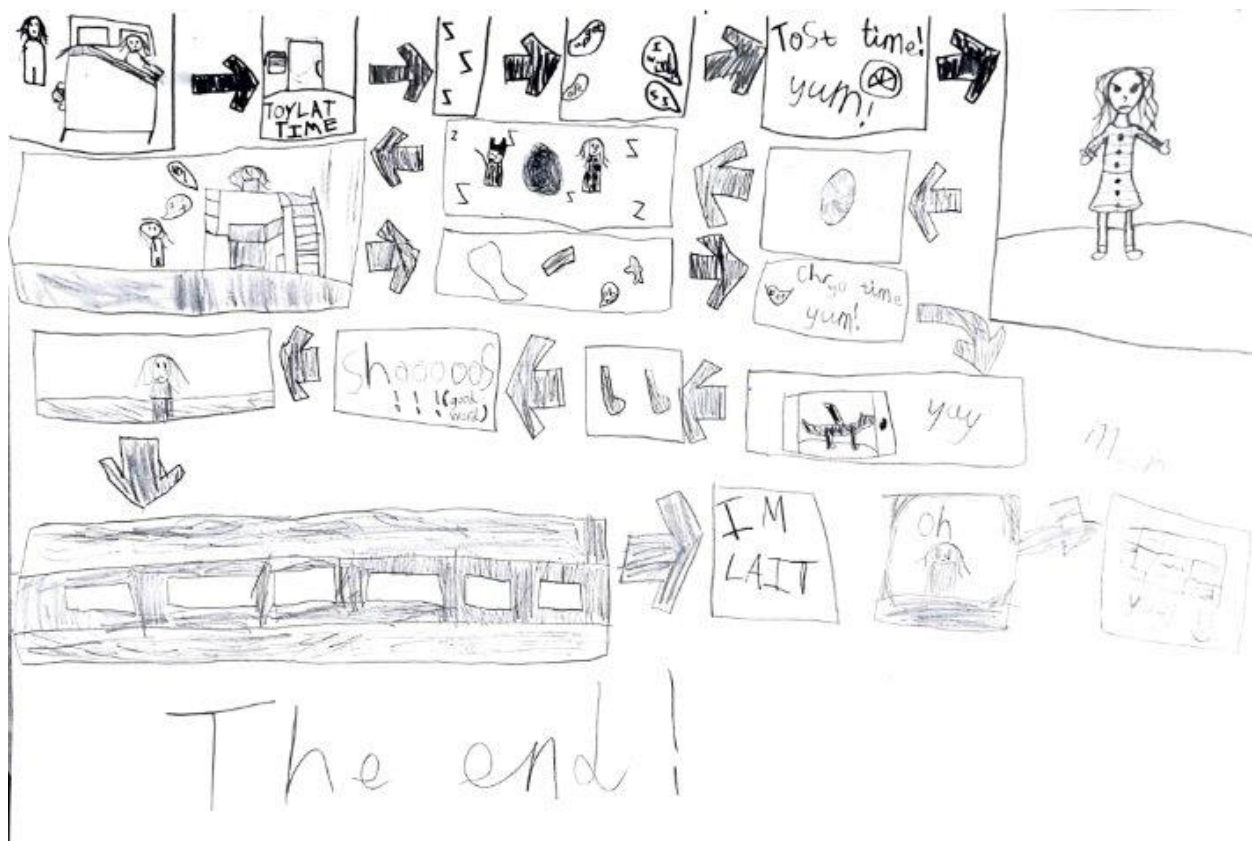


Figure 47 Moon's journey to school

Day One:

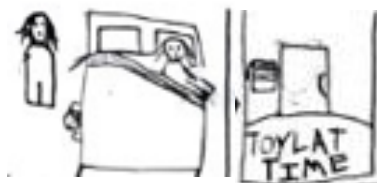


Figure 48 Moon wakes up and goes to her parents' bedroom

"I think I'm just going to draw my parents' bedroom because usually when I wake up, I go into my parents' bedroom because I need to go to the toilet."

Moon begins her drawing with a sketch of her parents' bedroom (Figure 48). She draws herself at the side of the bed waiting to go to the toilet. Mum is in bed and the only visible figure as Dad is wrapped up in the bed clothes with a foot sticking out to show he is there. Moon explains, "My dad usually pulls off all the quilt!" The bathroom door is drawn next to the bed and Moon chatters and giggles about how I will not want to see what is in the toilet. Moon's

drawing of herself beside her parents' bed shows her with long *messy* hair which she checks is sufficiently messy:

Moon: *In the morning, my hair is flying in my face, so I'm just drawing my hair.... Does that look messy now?*

MB: That looks fairly messy... I think so.

Moon: More messy! (*adds some more flyaway hair*)

Once Moon has been to the toilet, she reports that often "*I go back to sleep and then Mum says, "Get up" and I say that I would like to not get up then I go "z z z z z z."*" Moon makes snoring noises and draws speech bubbles for the interaction between herself and her mum with backwards z's to demonstrate that she was asleep (Figure 49). She shares, "*I want to be at school, but I want to be asleep. And then sometimes I ask my mum, "Why can't I bring my bed to school and have that be my desk?"*"

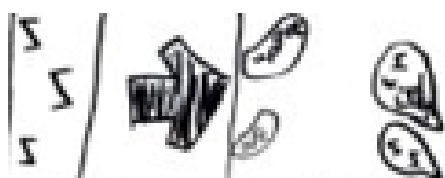


Figure 49 Moon asks for more sleep

I ask why Moon is so tired and she explains:

Moon: *Recently I've been very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very tired.*

Me: *Do you know why...?*

Moon: *It's because I get put to bed later than my sister because I'm older than her.*

Me: *And that's made you more tired?*

Moon: *Yeah, but I like it because that means I have an excuse for lie-in (giggles). I don't get up later if I know that I'm going to be late. If I'm late, I don't get up later... And that's because I love sleeping, so I just make myself tired so I can go back to sleep.*

Me: *How do you make yourself tired?*

Moon: *By playing with Roblox.*

As she draws her own room, Moon takes great care to draw her bed, the ladder, sofa and desk. Mum is drawn standing beside the bed whilst Moon is on the top level (Figure 50).

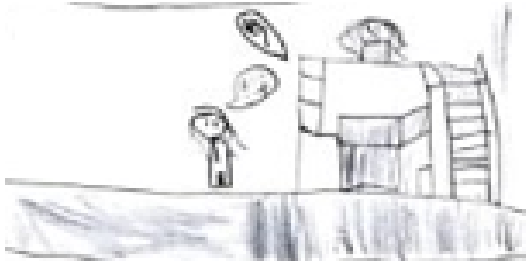


Figure 50 Time to wake up

Moon: *Now, I'm awake. So now, my mum says, come on, it's time to wake up and I'm like, no. And then she says, OK. And she comes back in one minute. And then she adds three toys. And then she's like, "OK, then wake up." And then I'm like, "yeah, I'm waking up"... And then she's like, come on, pass me a blanket and a pillow so you can chillax and watch TV while you eat your breakfast."*

Me: *In your room or downstairs?*

Moon: *In my room. I like being left alone.*

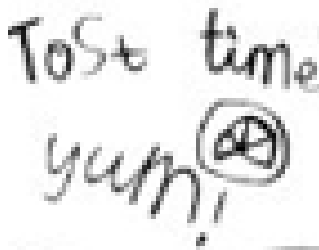


Figure 51 Toast time Yum!

Moon describes how Mum will catch the cushion which is thrown down to her and removes Moon's blanket so that she can sit down on the sofa below the bed with her breakfast. On this day, breakfast is toast and she draws a number of triangle-shape slices explaining "*I don't know how to draw a square*" (Figure 51). Moon laughs as she describes her Mum trying to get her out of bed:

"I've got a blanket, and when I start moving on my blanket, she just starts tugging it again, and she's like, okay, come on, come on. And then a minute later she comes back and starts tugging the blanket off."



Figure 52 Dressing for school

Moon's next drawing is herself in her school clothes (Figure 52). She takes care to get the detail right and draws an unhappy expression, narrating as she goes:

Moon: Next it is... get dressed and I'm going to draw an unhappy face, because I don't like getting dressed

MB: Why don't you like getting dressed?

Moon: I don't like... I like very soft materials, and I wouldn't necessarily call this the softest. I love PE, because then the joggings are so soft with things like... I've got actual fluff.

We discuss what Moon prefers to wear at home, and she replies, "*Blankets and a very, very, very, very, very, very, very soft t-shirt.*" She explains, "Getting changed is pretty much the worst part of the day."

Day Two:

On the second day of the interview, we met in the school in another intervention room. The classrooms are organised differently as there were transition days in progress in preparation for next academic year. Moon is in a different classroom where the children have been reallocated and her new teacher. She demonstrates delight with a big smile, jumping up and down when I fetch her from the classroom. As we arrange the pencils and paper, Moon shares that her morning has been different to the last time we met. After a few moments of considering, Moon announces, "I've got an idea. I can draw a little spiral saying, 'Going into the Future,' which will be today.



Figure 53 The dream

Connecting the time travel spiral to a new box, Moon draws herself as Ladybug and her close friend, James as Cat Noir from a television programme of the same name (Figure 53). This image depicts the dream she awoke from this morning.

Moon: *I didn't go to toilet time today because I was in a dream when I was supposed to go to toilet time. So instead of going to toilet time, I'm going to draw my dream*

MB: What was your dream about?

Moon: *(Pauses). It was about James (turns and smiles) ... It was a very weird dream. Have you watched Cat Noir?*

MB: Yes

Moon: *So, I have a habit of thinking James is Cat Noir. I keep having dreams about him being Cat Noir. So, we came to this lonely old house which looked more like a castle that's been stretched on stilts, and we turned into our secret hero forms and saw a hole, jumped down it and it led to soft play."*

As Moon starts to draw herself getting ready, she reflects on the previous visit, sharing "*I didn't like it much on that day, because my clothes were uncomfortable, so I'm going to do a much happier, more scared version of me.*" Moon explains that she is happier because of the more comfortable clothes, but she is scared because of the mixed-up class with different teacher and friends. This morning, Moon reports "*I just said, 'I want to stay in bed... I say that... to my mum, because today is a scary day, so I'm staying in bed'.*" Breakfast today has been Cheerios' breakfast cereal, which she eats slowly (Figure 54):

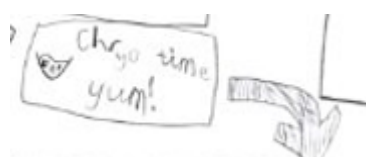


Figure 54 Cheerios' time

Moon shares:

Moon: *Cheerio time! Yum... I just eat rather slow...*

MB: Any reason why you eat slow?

Moon: *Because if its' some food that I really like, I want to keep it for longer.*

MB: Savouring the taste?

Moon: *Taking little nibbles... then I play Roblox.*

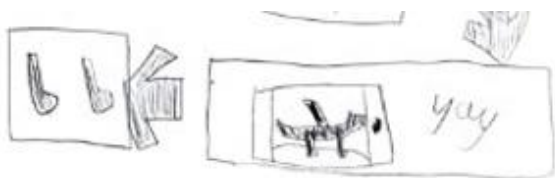


Figure 55 Playing Lost Worlds

Next Moon draws her tablet with a wolf on the screen. The word 'yay' beside the picture (Figure 55) identifies the joy that this game brings for Moon in the mornings and music notes are used to represent relaxing music. Moon explains:

The reason why I played Roblox today is because I knew that I was going with 'them' (mixed class) and there's a very relaxing game on Roblox I like. There are quite a few ones... There's, like, Fire Bobble, which is the least relaxing one, but it's still relaxing. There's also another one I can't remember what it's called. And there's also this one called Lost World and it's about creatures and the music on it is very, very, very, very, very, very, very, calming.



Figure 56 Shooooos!

For Moon's next picture, she writes "Shooooos!!!" in a box with the caption "good word" to reflect how she likes the sound this word makes (Figure 56). She shares that when she puts on her socks and shoes, the seam needs to be in the right place before correcting herself to add, "*I need bamboo socks basically.*"



Figure 57 Crossing the road

Living less than 5 minutes from the school building, Moon shares that she only has a short distance to travel but can still find crossing the road frustrating. She says a desire not to be late. A long road is then drawn with heavier strokes to demarcate the grey tarmac and white stripes (Figure 57)

Moon: *And when I'm ready for school, I cross the road...If there's traffic on that day, I'm going to be like, hmm.*

Me: *Why? Does the traffic make you cross?*

Moon: *No, the traffic didn't make me cross, but... I'd rather not be late. Also, my house is right next to the school and there's only one road to cross. And it would be pretty annoying if the one road that I need to cross is the busiest road. That's pretty annoying.*

The final few pictures are centred around Moon's arrival at school and her transition to doing the drawing interview with me. As she draws Figure 60, she shouts aloud "*I am late!*" adding "*I said 'Ohh' when I realised that I was in the other class and then I said 'Yay' when I was with you.*" When asked how she is usually feeling when she arrives in school, Moon shares "*I'm fine then. But today, I wasn't, because it's mixed classes and my teacher said that I was in the other class. So it was like (demonstrates disappointed face).*"



Figure 58 I'm late!

Finally Moon writes "The end" to indicate that her drawing is complete.

The end!

Figure 59 The end!

6.5.3 Influential moments of Moon's transition between home and school

The following influential moments have been identified through the drawing and walking interviews of Moon, Laura (Moon's mother) and Simon (Moon's teacher). Key influential moments are identified as: Chillaxing, Getting Dressed and Arriving in the Classroom.

Chillaxing

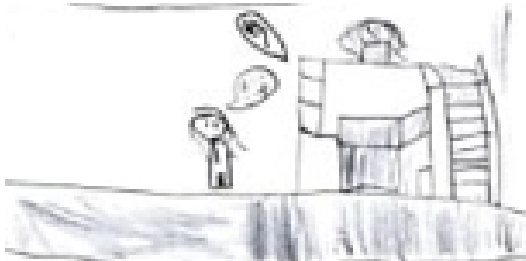


Figure 60 Chillaxing

A distinctive part of Moon's daily transition and thus, an identified influential moment is that of 'chillaxing.' Chillax or chillaxing is a colloquial expression that blends the words, chill and relax together (Dictionary, 2019) and is used by both Moon and Laura to define the part of Moon's daily ritual where she relaxes with her breakfast and tablet (Figure 60). A blanket and scent pillow are passed down from the top bunk bed to the sofa on the lower level of the bed, where Moon is given time and space to ready herself for the day. This period of chillaxing is explained by Laura as a means of acclimatisation:

"She kind of just needs to acclimatise to being awake and sort of more vertical and you can't say a lot or do a lot during that time, so she likes to watch Netflix or YouTube, occasionally a bit of Roblox".

Like many autistic children, Moon finds it difficult to manage transition between activities (Boucher, 2022; Mesa and Hamilton, 2023) and specifically moving from sleeping to waking which can be considered as a form of autistic inertia (Buckle et al., 2021). Unlike Autumn and Salish particularly, Moon shares that she likes school, but it is these initial transitions that are more problematic, *"I want to be at school, but I want to be asleep."* By providing this chillaxing space, Moon demonstrates an awareness of how to regulate her emotions and prepare for the demands of the day using calming games and music:

The reason why I played Roblox today is because I knew that I was going with them and there's a very relaxing game on Roblox I like. There are quite a few ones. There's, like, Firebobble, which is the least relaxing one, but it's still relaxing. There's also

another one I can't remember what it's called. And there's also this one called Lost World and it's about creatures and the music on it is very, very, very, very, very, very, very, calming.

Difficulties with emotional regulation have been associated with autistic children (Connolly et al., 2023) and are of concern within the education sector (Ashburner et al., 2010) and can be attributed to SPDs (Passarello et al., 2022). At this point in the home to school transition, Moon, supported by Laura demonstrates how she has learned that the video and auditory sensory stimulation of her games enable a greater regulation of emotions.

Getting Dressed

SPDs are frequently experienced by autistic children and can lead to discomfort and anxiety, preventing the necessary equilibrium required for optimal learning and wellbeing (Dunn, 1997; Jones et al., 2020; Robertson and Baron-Cohen, 2017). Ultimately SPDs can cause distraction and distress (Jones et al., 2020) and can result in dysregulation for autistic pupils (Wassall and Burke, 2022).

Where chillaxing is identified as an enjoyable part of the transition, getting dressed, Moon identifies that, *"Getting changed is pretty much the worst part of the day... I don't like getting changed at all,"* demonstrates the specific challenges of wearing uncomfortable clothing for autistic girls (Mesa and Hamilton, 2023). For Moon, her hypersensitivity to specific fabrics or textures, translates to a feeling of unhappiness, *"... because my uniform isn't very soft."* As Laura shares:

"She doesn't like clothes. Not really, no. And when we do buy clothes, it's 99.9% of the time, it's never about what's fashionable or what looks good, it's just the comfort."

A preference is shared by Moon for softer textiles where at home she likes to wear *"Blankets and a very, very, very, very, very, very soft t-shirt."* Whereas, in contrast, she gestures to her uniform explaining, *"I wouldn't necessarily call this the softest."* Changing is identified as the worst part of her day and indicates the level of challenge associated with putting on clothes and the associated discomfort. For Moon, a preference for softer or smoother fabrics denotes a probable hypersensitivity to touch and difficulties with responding to this sensory experience (Passarello et al., 2022), potentially exacerbated by increased anxiety (Cunningham, 2022).

An acceptable alternative to school uniform, is her PE kit, which Moon identifies as softer and can be worn on days when she has PE or a club. Laura shares how she tries to find the softest alternative uniform whilst still conforming to the school rules and has previously booked Moon into multiple after-school sports clubs to maximise the number of days that she can wear PE uniform to be more comfortable:

"If she could be in PE kit every day, or if they could just make school uniform a little bit more friendly for those that do have sensory needs, she'd be happy. At one point, we enrolled her in clubs, pretty much so that she could wear PE kit all week it was just so much easier, getting her into those nice comfy clothes."

Equally shoes and socks are identified as problematic. Despite her love for the word 'shooooos,' Moon uses three exclamation marks to emphasise that putting on shoes is uncomfortable. Seamless 'bamboo' socks are also required.

Arriving in the classroom

Out of the four participants, Moon's journey from her home to the school is easily the shortest, a five-minute walk, yet she struggles to be on time for school and draws images of feeling anxious when arriving late (Figure 61). Moon articulates a preference for being on time sharing, *"I'd rather not be late,"* and citing crossing the road as a challenge, however Simon, her teacher shares that, *"she's always about 10-15 minutes late."* Consequently for the walking interview, he focuses on the classroom as he rarely sees Moon arrive with the other children. In the past, Laura explains that Moon could be up to 2 hours late.



Figure 61 I'm late

Once in the classroom, Simon reports that she will *"... slot in and you don't see any kind of behaviours coming out,"* but displays *"... a general feeling of worry but not really pinpointed at anything particular."* Moon's perception varies slightly in that, when asked about how she feels once she has arrived in school, she responds, *"I'm fine then."* However, on the second interview day, Moon draws herself looking scared with "Oh" written above her head. She

shares increased anxiety “...because it's mixed classes and my teacher said that I was in the other class,” before making a disappointed facial expression. Similar to many other autistic children, Moon shares a preference for sameness and routine (Sutherland et al., 2017) finding sudden changes unsettling. Consistent daily routines are recognised by Simon and Laura are enabling greater confidence and positively impacting on learning.

6.5.4 Analysis: Moon's Themes

Imagination



Figure 62 Moon's dream and time-travelling spiral

Despite assumptions that autistic individuals have reduced imagination (Belcher et al., 2022), some autistic children have been found to demonstrate strong imagination and creativity (Howe et al., 2023). For Moon, her response to the research task is a blend of reality and fiction where she intertwines her own life experiences and imagined spaces to create her story (Wood and Hall, 2011). Moon demonstrates a strong awareness and understanding of the task when, after drawing a floating toilet, “We can put a bit of fiction, but not a whole lot though otherwise it wouldn't be what we want,” but also her ability to ‘play’ within her drawing (Lyon, 2020). An example of this is where a portal is incorporated to explain the different morning routines of the split interview (Figure 62). Moon's teacher, Simon also recognises Moon's strong imagination and how opportunities to be imaginative are welcomed:

“She's actually got a wonderful mind, and you see her eyes light up sometimes when it's something really imaginative and she can come up with something that's almost like her little area of... “Right. I can play with this” ... in her own way.”

Other worlds are identified as a place of comfort for Moon where she will play Lost Worlds when chillaxing before school, but also for imaginative adventures with her friend. This reflects existing research that autistic girls can demonstrate an intensified imagination, which is attributed to disassociation or escaping to other worlds (Lai, 2019). Moon shares a “habit of thinking James is Cat Noir” and a specific dream where they visit “...this lonely, odd house

which looked more like a castle that's been stretched on stilts...before turning into "secret hero forms" of Cat Noir and Ladybug.

A challenge for autistic girls with a highly active or intensified imagination is that fears and anxieties can be exacerbated (Hendrickx, 2015), and therefore visual stimulating imagery can appear more realistic and threatening. One of the first pictures that Moon draws in her interview is entitled "Toilet Time" explaining that, when she wakes up, "I go into my parents' bedroom because I need to go to the toilet." At this time, parents support her with toileting as Laura explains:

"We have to go to the toilet with her, you see. She cannot go by herself. We've had a massive toilet fear ever since... they had the school nurse come in reception to talk to them about germs and things like that and they showed them... some sort of animation and the germs were purple."

This teaching episode from the school nurse is identified as significant. From this point, Moon's favourite colour was no longer purple, and she developed a fear of going to the toilet which has later been exacerbated by watching the YouTube video Skibidi Toilet (DaFuq!?Boom!, 2023) Described by Laura as "...this freaky man that pops up through your loo," the video is identified as "Just like something out of your nightmares." (Figure 63).



Figure 63 Skibidi Toilet

Moon's strong imagination, therefore, interacts with her social environment in a way that hinders her transition, as everyday tasks can appear more frightening, but also in a way that supports, where she can dissociate from reality and look at situation in a new and novel way that brings joy.

Getting Stuck

In contrast to Tiana's and Autumn's stories, although Moon shared that some aspects of school were scarier, her drawings and narrative reflect her enjoyment of school and positive friendships. However, there is a recognition of the challenge of the home to school transition itself, as articulated by Simon:

"I think the whole process of the morning is hard. And she's always maintained there is nothing in particular, she doesn't like about school or anything, but it's just she's just worried and I think they have a real struggle with that."

Of the three aspects of transition, Moon appears to have the greatest difficulty in detaching herself from what is known over navigating the 'no-man's land' of the transition or adapting to her new environment (van Gennep, 2019). Autistic people are more likely to experience attention in different ways, where interests can pull us into, 'an attention tunnel' (Murray, 2018). Throughout the transition, Moon regularly demonstrates wanting specific moments to last for longer such as sleeping, savoring breakfast and chillaxing. Therefore, when moving from preferred activities, Moon can require additional time to shift her monotropic focus and attention (Murray et al., 2005), and experiences 'autistic inertia' which includes difficulties in starting, stopping, or changing direction (Murray, 2018: 44). Laura reports these micro-transitions require sensitive and careful management:

"Well, I can't turn devices off because she flips a little bit... Although I think it might help her to focus a bit... she gets stuck in something and can't get her out of it." And then I have to give her enough time, so she doesn't feel that she's being rushed from breakfast to getting changed. She kind of needs breaks between things. So I'll say... 'We'll be getting changed in a minute.' She's got better at putting maybe three items of clothes on, so I have to pop them on the sofa bed thing when she's chilling out."

This theme of getting stuck in the micro-transitions demonstrates some of the challenges for Moon and Laura each morning and the importance for Laura of being able to attend to Moon's preferred pace and rhythm, allowing time for 'slowness' in this morning transition (Green and Clark, 2024).

"At school, Mummy, I'm never me!"

Across both parent and teacher interviews, there is an acknowledgement that Moon finds aspects of school difficult, despite her expressed enjoyment of learning and playing with

friends and therefore she may find it difficult to be her authentic self. Laura reports that Moon wouldn't get out of bed because of her worries and would cry, *"I'm scared about that. That's going to happen. This is going to happen. It's all too much. I can't do that. I can't be me. I can't cope with masking all day."* Moon also acknowledges this difficulty in leaving her bed on scary days where she says of transition day, *"I just said, 'I want to stay in bed'... I say that... to my mum, because today is a scary day so I'm staying in bed"*.

Laura's comment indicates how Moon acknowledges the challenges of school in terms of masking and her sense of identity, feeling that she cannot be herself, which mirrors research that the impact of camouflaging can be exhaustion and distress (Drapalik et al., 2025; Halsall et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2020). There is, however, an acknowledgement that over the course of the academic year there had been a reduction in masking as Moon became more comfortable with her teacher and peers:

"I feel like she's improving confidence because she wouldn't really put her hand up and answer things, but as the year's gone on, she has ... And then the next stage, which I noticed, which was incredible to see, was that she was answering, but with a bit of wit and humour." (Simon, Moon's class teacher)

This observation of Moon's wit and humour is interpreted as being able to be 'more herself' as she develops a sense of safety and belonging within the school setting. Strong relationships with teachers and between home and school reduce the need for camouflage (Halsall et al.'s, 2021) and enable educators to recognise subtle indications that students are feeling overwhelmed or more comfortable.

6.5.5 Conclusion

Moon's story demonstrates her unique perspective of the daily home to school transition. In comparison with other case studies, where school is perceived as more negative, Moon's love of learning, and particularly time with her friend is positive. For Moon, it is the morning transition itself that is considered problematic. At school, as Simon shares, Moon can present, "as a rabbit in headlights", struggling to be her authentic self within the classroom, but with time and consistent care and support from her teacher, her funnier and more playful self emerges.

Laura and Moon share differences with sensory processing where uniforms designed for the majority cause anxiety and distress and the challenges of autistic inertia. However,

Moon's case study also identifies how autistic girls and their parents can identify and implement effective strategies such as brokering of spaces, using of sensory stimulation to regulate emotions or finding alternatives to sensory challenging uniform. Key themes across the interviews for Moon include a recognition of the impact of a strong imagination, the challenges of maintaining a mask, the importance of being comfortable and the demonstration of a preference for slowness in the daily transition between home and school.

6.6. Overarching Themes

The stories of Tiana, Autumn, Salish and Moon provide valuable insights into the individual experiences of autistic girls as they transition between home and school each day, whilst also demonstrating the unique challenges that each experience within their school environments. The 3-dimensional detailed case studies formed by the perspective of child, parent and teacher provide a depth of knowledge of the embodied changes associated with this transition, wider understanding of school experiences for each autistic girl and some of the supportive strategies and approaches utilised.

However, in order for *praxis* (reflection and action) to occur, the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019) across the data set, is of value. Within this chapter, I examine the key themes constructed (see Figure 64), namely: 'Conforming and Resistance', 'Clock Time', 'Places and Spaces' and 'Care'.



6.7 Conforming and Resistance

6.7.1 Feeling Different

Throughout the research a common theme for the girls in this study was a feeling of difference but not understanding why. In school systems designed for the majority, the four girls in this study are frequently less aware of how the environment has 'disabled' them, and when becoming part of the school environment, perceive a fault within themselves. This condition Freire (2017: 19) describes as being "submerged in the reality of oppression". In Laura's interview, she reports Moon's concerns prior to diagnosis, and the response to being told she is autistic:

She felt different and didn't know why. She used to be like "I just need to be like Holly, Mummy. I just need to be like, Holly" I said, "No, you don't. You need to just be you. You're absolutely brilliant. You know. It's like her teacher says, she comes out with some really out-of-the-box, interesting concepts and ideas. And why would you want to just all be the same?"

At the time of the research, Tiana, Autumn, Salish and Moon were all aged between 8 and 10 years old and had received an autism diagnosis. In contrast to many other autistic girls, each of the participants in this study had their diagnosis, which typically is more likely in adolescence (Belcher et al., 2022; Morgan, 2023). For some, more than others, this enabled a greater understanding of their strengths and differences, potentially enabling self-understanding, self-awareness and an opportunity for connection with others (Urbaniak and D'Amico, 2024: 9). For Moon, the diagnosis process was perceived to be a positive outcome. As Laura reflects:

"Literally the first thing she said (when she found out), "There's nothing wrong with me!" "I told you there's nothing wrong with you. You're just you!" and she was just like, "Oh, my God, that's such a relief! I'm so happy!"



Figure 65 From top left, Autumn frowning beside her smiley friends, Salish sitting apart from others with her untamed hair, Tiana isolated at breaktime walking around the tree, Moon arriving at school late saying “Oh” as she forgot it was transition day.

However, despite this, each child's drawings of themselves as they entered the school environment frequently demonstrated a perception of isolation or difference as seen in Figure 64. In this collection of images Autumn is a frowning face beside smiling friends, Salish is seated apart from peers, where Tiana walks alone on the playground and Moon stands in the doorway the only one arriving late.

For Tiana and Autumn particularly, diagnosis had not completely alleviated anxiety or enabled a secure understanding of difference, reflecting research that the understanding of diagnosis is a journey (Malone et al., 2025), where it is necessary to make sense of the diagnostic label to understand the self (Morgan, 2023). Simon, Moon's teacher also raised the additional challenge for autistic girls in the lack of autistic female role models:

Thinking about it as well ... there probably weren't many diagnosed adults at the start either, or I might be wrong in saying that, so actually, like you say role models because that's what the children love, it is when you hear of anyone that's like you.

From seven years onwards, self-evaluation is primarily based on comparisons with others, as children become more self-conscious (Morgan, 2023: 179). Where autistic female adolescents may have varied perspectives on whether or how much they should change their identity to fit in with peers, at the time of the interviews, Moon and Autumn demonstrated a firm desire for similarity and belonging. Autumn shared a sense of disconnect and confusion about identity

explaining, “I don’t really know what I am... whether I am a dragon, a cat, a ‘she’, or a ‘he’. I don’t really know what I am,” which can be a result of camouflaging (Drapalik et al., 2025).

6.7.2 Fitting in

Desire for friendship was shared across the drawing and talking interviews, where Moon’s frequent references to her friend, James, Salish’s drawings of her friends in breakfast club; and Autumn’s friends were identified as a source of protection and support in the home to school transition (Figure 65).



Figure 66 With our friends

The desire to find and maintain friendships however was identified as problematic within school. Laura’s sharing of how Moon wanted to be more like her friend, Holly, reflects a motivation to change in order to belong, to fit within a friendship group (Calder et al., 2013; Hiller et al., 2016; Sedgewick et al., 2016), but also a rejection of herself. Similarly, Autumn reports in a follow-up visit, the relief of being able to develop and follow her own authentic interests after leaving school instead of conforming to others’ preferences to fit in.

Autumn’s experiences of conflict with peers indicates how difficulties with social interaction can lead to alienation and rejection (Tierney et al., 2016: 81), resulting in a preference for ‘hiding in the shadows.’ For Tiana, spending the majority of her breaktimes alone or with her teacher is interpreted by Michaela as a conscious choice. This preference for solitude echoes those of other autistic girls (Peters and Brooks, 2016), but in this instance is understood by Michaela as a form of protection:

“I think the thought of being in a group and putting herself in that position, it would take a lot of trust. And I think the fear of being left and not having that social security of a group is probably something that impacts her friendships.”

When authentic interests are shared, this reflects the sense of commonality seen in both non-autistic and autistic friendships (Ryan et al., 2021) and this was evident in the case studies of Autumn and Moon. Both girls shared a similarity between themselves and others either in interests or behavioural responses, which provided a level of validation (Sturrock et al., 2022). In reflecting on a performance, Autumn demonstrates a kinship to her peers in that they all froze together. Similarly, Moon and James' shared interest in Cat Noir and Ladybug, resulted in regular shared play opportunities. Findings that autistic students are more likely to interact with those of the same-neurotype over time (Chen et al., 2021) were reflected in Alice's observation of Tiana's friendship with a family friend:

"She'll often come back with a family friend, that me and dad both know, and it's a friend in school who is also on the spectrum, but undiagnosed, and they get on really, really well. They kind of rebound off each other."

Friendships with those perceived to be similar to themselves, thus aided a feeling of acceptance, and reduced the requirement for camouflage (Hamilton and Roberts, 2024). Across the data set, the benefit of 'atypical' or 'different' friendships were observed by adults as a motivating factor in going to school. Differences in the intensity of friendships were noted, both as positive and negative. For Moon, her relationship with James is described positively by Simon as *"a very close friend"* and *"a bit more than that possibly."* However, for Salish, conflict is frequently reported by Kerry and Rachael, where Kerry reports that she can be, *"... very intense with her friendships,"* reflecting a relationship between intense autistic friendships and a higher risk of conflict in autistic girls (Sedgewick et al., 2019).

Overall, in the transition from home to school, Autumn, Moon and Salish's stories indicate how the presence of peers can provide support, validation and joy, however, the need to conform to fit in can also impact on feelings of safety and belonging.

6.7.3 Following the Rules

Just as going to school can require a conforming to peer expectations, there is also a requirement to bend to the ways of the institution (Lefebvre, 2021). For autistic pupils, conforming to environments designed for the non-autistic pupils can be more demanding. Similar to the research of Rice-Adams (2023: 141) participants presented home as, *"... a place of freedom, comfort and a lack of judgement,"* where there was no need to change to 'fit in.' For each of the girls, a significant change in presentation was evident in the home and school communities, where each of the girls shared a different relationship to school. Moon indicates

a love of school but also a desire to be asleep where Autumn identifies, school as “...a *bad place*.” For each girl, school requires a ‘front of stage’ and ‘back-stage’ self (Goffman, 2022), where exploring the daily transition identified that each child would “...develop and negotiate a ‘school identity, which may differ in important respects from their home identity” (Hughes et al., 2009: 17).

For Moon, Autumn, Salish and Tiana, home identities were more relaxed, messy and comfortable compared to their self-reported ‘muted’ school presentation, correlated by teacher’s observations of quiet, subdued and obedient girls. Despite conflict with peers, and evidence of resistance to parental demands at home and in the no-man’s land between home and school (van Gennep, 2019), each of the four girls in this study conformed to school rules and expectations when entering the school environment, where teachers reported:

“She just behaves. She just behaves and follows the rules.” Simon (Moon’s Teacher)
“Autumn is extremely polite. Even if she wants to talk to us, she will just sort of stand there. She’d never call out... She’s very much knows the rules.”

For Autumn and Salish, a strong sense of right and wrong resulted in frustration with those who did not comply, echoing findings that autistic pupils are more likely to be aware of school rules and can be distressed if others are not following them (Mesa and Hamilton, 2023).

“She needs everyone to follow the rules as well. If somebody breaks the rules, it’s just so offensive to and she just. She can’t leave it and then she’ll come home, and she’ll tell me about somebody breaking the rules.” (Kerry, Salish’s mum)

Following the rules, thus resulted in a division of self between the observed external persona and the internal persona once in school. Tiana described how she would refuse school demands in her head, “*I say no under my breath when I don’t want to do my work, because I can’t do it,*” and Autumn shared that although she will ‘*sit in the shadows,*’ she really wants to ‘*use my karate*’ or ‘*murder*’ Ronald, wearing a death mask and angry eyes (see Figure 66). Each demonstrated their submergence within a ‘culture of silence,’ not feeling able to be their authentic selves as they conform to societal expectations (Freire, 2021).



Figure 67 Angry eye and a death mask for Autumn; Tiana says 'No' in her head.

6.7.4 Looking the Part

In the girls' stories of transition, getting dressed into uniform, and thus conforming in their appearance was a common cause of tension across the case studies, where their drawings and narratives frequently depicted negative feelings, attributed to discomfort but also in the representation of school and demands (Figure 67).

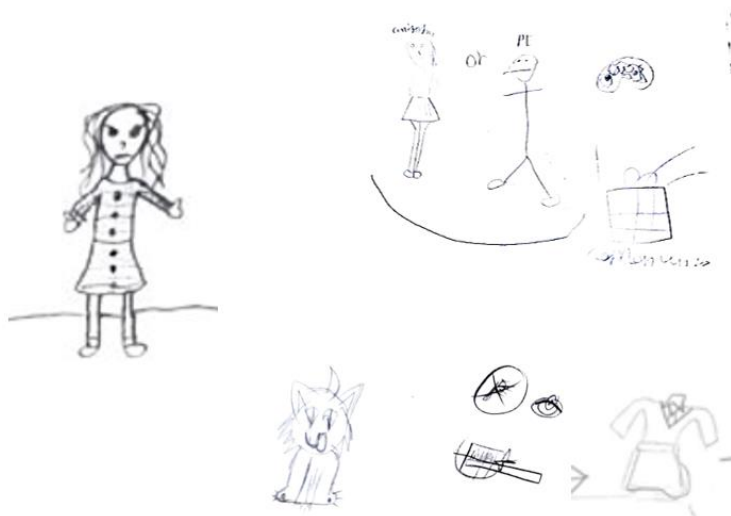


Figure 68 Moon in her uniform; Autumn draws both PE and School Uniform with a Death Eater Mask; Tiana draws herself, hairbrush, toothbrush and uniform

Whilst each of the autistic girls, would dress in their uniforms eventually, evidence of inner tensions and conflicting emotion were evident, with dressing and grooming routines delayed (Autumn and Moon) or refused, as in Figure 68 below:



Where she will get up, I'll have to get her clothes for her and give them to her and say you need to get dressed. It can take a lot of persuading for her to get dressed, and there's usually a lot of screaming and tantruming, because I've asked her to get dressed...
(Kerry, Salish's mum)

Figure 69 Mum dressed as a banana orders "Get Dressed!"

Where the use of clothing can enable persons to construct their own identity, school uniform has its' roots in 'nation building projects' in Germany and is strongly associated with the military, with a focus on developing discipline and conforming society (Shanks et al., 2023a). Despite other Western European countries rejecting school uniforms English schools continue to use uniform to ascribe identity and belonging (Heybach, 2023). Through uniform, the body is bent to the way of the institution and, despite arguments that dress codes can 'level the playing field', is perceived as a form of regulation (Friedrich and Shanks, 2023) and dehumanisation (Freire, 2017).

Sensory Processing Difficulties are commonly associated characteristics of autistic individual, manifesting in atypical responses to sensory stimuli either as a hyper- or hyposensitivity (Patil and Kaple, 2023: 1). Thus, the feeling of seams, more abrasive fabrics and the proximity of garments to the skin, as evidenced in this study can result in dysregulation and distress, impacting on academic outcomes (Moyse and Porter, 2015). Laura, Kerry and Arwen all identify uniform sensitivities as challenging for their daughters, where Arwen shares, "*Textures have got to be just right*" and Alice notes that Tiana's jumper is not comfortable. Laura and Arwen had sought to find acceptable substitutes including seamless socks and uniform in softer fabrics. Similarly, hair and teeth brushing were also perceived as problematic, where brushing hair for Tiana and Alice is considered a "*physical battle*" and Kerry explains that Salish will, "...*get very upset if there's any bumps in her hair.*" Although the majority of concerns about uniform were from this sensory perspective, for Autumn, wearing uniform was associated with a 'death eater' mask indicating a level of anger in addition to discomfort, which is explained in part by Arwen as a response to prior trauma:

"In another awful school she ended up having to be taken out within a couple of weeks and home educated as it was just far too much for her. So, she had a phobia of children in school uniform for a good, few years."

Sensory triggers, such as seeing uniform after an incident of bullying can be associated with an involuntary and intrusive reliving of traumatic experiences (Gus and Wood, 2017); and for Autumn, putting on her uniform, this was associated with death-eaters. Attempts to push back at the uniform dress code were also apparent in Salish's attempts to wear trainers, and in Autumn's wearing of jewellery under her clothes to maintain a connection with her mother through the day:

"We bought matching necklaces or bracelets and things to hide under the uniform even though you're not strictly supposed to, that are like a link between us two and a way of sort of not quite having a cuddle but symbolising a cuddle." (Arwen)

6.7.5 Undercover

Additional references to hiding are evident across the study whether it is concealment of objects, behaviour or physically hiding particularly as the girls travel between home and school and are incorporated into the school environment. A distressed Tiana hides in the car and under her coat to conceal her distress, where Michaela notes, *"I think that, in my eyes, ... she was trying to hide from me, you know... what was going on..."* Likewise, Autumn demonstrates a desire to go unnoticed after sharing her embarrassment at making noises, reflecting a desire within some autistic girls to hide autistic behaviours (Bargiela et al., 2016).

Teachers noted more muted presentations where Kath and Kim describe Autumn as *'quite quiet,' 'self-contained'* sharing that, if she is worried, she will be *'trying to hold it in.'* Similarly, Simon identifies that Moon is, *"... very quiet. She's very calm, very peaceful. You don't hear anything. You don't hear complaints. She just gets on with it."* Indications being that this desire to hide might be understood as a self-protective mechanism (Pearson and Rose, 2021: 55)

Camouflaging is a form of modifying behaviour presented associated with autism, whilst the internal lived experience is unaffected (McQuaid et al., 2022: 552). While each girl presents an external front, another is experienced, enabling a lived duality where they are simultaneously their inauthentic and authentic selves, resulting in dehumanisation and confusion about who they are (Freire, 2017: 24):

"Yet although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalised. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being

divided; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; being spectators or actors... being speaking out or being silent.”

The impact of camouflaging as they entered school was different for each girl, with some citing tiredness and exhaustion (Salish), not having the energy to engage in after-school activities (Moon) and coming out of school like “a bottle of pop” (Tiana). For Moon and Autumn their parents reported the impact on their daughters’ mental health reflecting research that camouflaging can result in anxiety and depression (Belcher et al., 2022; Halsall et al., 2021; McQuaid et al., 2022):

She was vomiting before and after school. She was soiling herself. She was doing anything possible to avoid going. She couldn't sleep. She couldn't eat. It was hell. So she was home educated then. (Arwen, Autumn's mother)

She just said. "I just wish I could throw myself out the window. This life is too hard. I don't want to be here anymore and straight away the next day I was just on the phone to someone private. (Laura, Moon's mother)

Camouflaging has been associated with delays in identification and effective provision (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021) and this was reflected in parents’ interviews. Frustration and disappointment were evident from Alice and Arwen as parents, that teachers did not always recognise the behaviours expressed at home:

I think for me as a parent, it's to be told that and these words will always sit with me... Is... 'We don't see that at school.' But that's not OK just because you don't see that school, it makes us as parents, and I can speak on behalf of Tiana's dad.... that... you're insinuating that we're lying like we're, you know... are we making this up? (Alice)

Arwen also shared frustration with not being believed, where she reports previous settings’ perception that, “I was over nurturing... it was all my fault and it's all made-up and I'm too kind to her and that's why she's doing these things.” Camouflaging was identified a contributing factor to a late diagnosis and difficulties in understanding autistic girls’ needs in the school environment (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021). Where teachers *did* have sight of more overt displays of emotion, there was a recognition that this was unusual, as Michaela shares when collecting Tiana from the car “I'd not seen this side of Tiana: her displaying these emotions.”

6.7.6 Resistance and Agency

In education, autistic children can feel powerless as their lives are “directed and controlled externally” (Cunningham, 2022: 2012). For the four girls in this study, living the duality of an authentic and camouflaged self on the margins, they have a choice between conforming to expected norms through camouflage and resisting and facing alienation, or as suggested by (Freire, 2017: 22) “... being spectators or actors... speaking out or being silent.”

In each of the stories, the girls take back agency despite autistic children being historically presented as passive victims of circumstance (Watson, 2012). Salish was able to set the pace for the morning by waking up two hours early to play games, where Autumn had set boundaries for when she would start getting ready for school. Tiana slowed down movements when approaching the transition and endeavoured to keep her home and school identities separate, where Moon identified and used chillaxing spaces and technology to self-regulate (see Figure 69):



Figure 70 Moon negotiates about getting up with her Mum

Shifting attention from one activity can be more problematic for autistic people, where transition into and out of flow states can be impaired by the complex interactions of monotropism, (Murray, 2018), sensory processing and other environmental factors (Wain et al., 2026) Consequently a particular area where resistance was more apparent was in the setting of pace, either to extend or delay an activity, particularly when moving between spaces. Examples included verbal communication, where Moon requests additional time in bed from her mum or non-verbal communication when Salish puts her head down which is perceived as indicating a need for additional time in the cloakroom. Whether each of the girls are conscious of the agency used in these scenarios is unclear but ultimately each girl was reported, at times, to be able to communicate their needs and have these needs met. An example of this was captured through the cross comparison of participants' voices in Autumn's case study. Where Autumn had shared a dislike of Worship (School Assembly) being, “loud

and obnoxious”, she had been able to find a way to avoid this by requesting additional support as reported by Kim:

“She’ll often, if we’re going to worship, she’ll often come and say, oh, I’ve got something that ...I’ve got a worry, that I need to write down or I’ve got, you know, something. Can I stay? Can I stay? And we, we generally let her, don’t we? Just to have that settling in time in the morning if she needs it. If she’s got something on her mind wants to speak to us, has something that she wants to write down.”

Whether coincidental or not, autistic girls such as those in this study can use strategies to navigate situations they find problematic (Jones et al., 2020). Autumn was able to utilise a school-based system of sharing worries effectively to avoid worship time. Michaela also notices that Tiana avoids swimming by not bringing her kit, when she shares, *“Alice has to bring her swim bag because she’ll, you know, refuse to bring it in because of swimming.”* Equally the ways in which each of the girls engaged with the interview process enabled agency, where each girl determined the content and how they presented their stories. One poignant example is Salish’s seamless blending of the surreal and real at the point of being asked to get dressed. After sharing a feeling of annoyance at this demand, King Kong enters the narrative, demonstrating a playfulness in her retelling, facilitated by the creative method (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2025), but also potentially a form of self-protective agency in censoring what is shared (Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999).

6.7.7 Summary

Across the case studies, feelings of alienation and difference were prevalent, where friendships were often associated with feelings of security and solidarity. Each girl had different friendships which could be intense (Moon and Salish), with others who presented similarly (Autumn and Tiana) but equally could be challenging (Salish) and necessitated masking (Tiana and Autumn). Upon incorporation to the school environment each of the girls conformed to school rules, although frustrations were shared or internally expressed, demonstrated the ways in which they were oppressed by environments designed for the non-autistic. Most notable was a tendency for camouflaging, hiding or masking aspects of their authentic selves. Despite the language around autistic people being that of impairment and disorder with limited agency (Beardon, 2023), the girls in this study demonstrated both a desire to conform and resist across their transition journeys showing autistic girls can seek and demonstrate agency to manage challenges in their daily lives.

6.8 Clock Time

6.8.1 On the Clock

As discussed in the previous chapter, more ‘muted’ presentations were reported by parents and teachers as each girl came into school, where set times influenced their embodied presentation. Conforming to the school environment requires every child and adult to bend to the temporal and spatial constraints of the school day, the school timetable and environmental constrictions. Bodies are influenced by rhythms of the environment, including the linear movements imposed by structural institutions (the school timetable) and the natural cyclical rhythms of day and night, weeks and months (Lefebvre, 2021). When encountering these rhythms in the environment, Lefebvre (2021) promotes, the body can produce a eurhythmic response (where a healthy state is maintained) or an arrhythmic response (where discordant rhythms result in disorder).

In each of the case studies, participants shared how uniform timings of the school day were embedded with associated imposed temporal constraints, rituals and routines (McNair, 2022: 670). Children’s bodies were ‘regulated’ through the enforced repeated rhythms through timetables and timed bells (Brown and Donnelly, 2023). Although predictability and routine within schools can reduce anxiety for autistic students (Cunningham, 2022), the participants in this study indicated that the dominant rhythms, and associated processes of the school, were often at odds with the needs of the four autistic girls (Vincent et al., 2023).

6.8.2 Waking up

To be ready for the start of the school day, children’s sleeping patterns need to be brought into line with school schedules (Kullman and Palludan, 2011), however, for Moon, Autumn and Tiana waking up and getting out of bed was perceived as particularly challenging. Autumn, Moon and Tiana recounted falling back to sleep with Moon struggling to get out of bed without support; their natural rhythms at odds with the required waking times thus resulting in arrhythmia (Lefebvre, 2021). Laura and Arwen shared difficulties with getting their children out of bed, where, in contrast, Kerry shared how Salish was often awake at night, rising at 5am, which results in high levels of tiredness and dysregulation:

“Sometimes it could be that she doesn’t want to be in the car and she’s already crying and getting upset because of the fights in the house... and getting dressed and before, a lot of the time it was because she wasn’t sleeping, and she’d be tired.”

The tiredness expressed by each of the girls and the reported sleep difficulties by their parents reflects research that autistic children are more likely to experience reduced sleep time, high chances of nocturnal awakening and less time in bed (Devnani and Hegde, 2015). These sleep difficulties are associated with increased anxiety and ruminating thoughts, but also sensory difficulties (Hendrickx, 2015). In Estes et al. study (2023: 164) of 6- to 12-year-old children, almost 85% of the autistic girls experiencing sleep problems compared to 65.8% of the autistic boys, with autistic girls being more likely to resist going to bed.

Parents in this research shared a range of strategies trialled including time to talk and process before bed (Moon and Autumn), sleeping close by for reassurance (Salish and Autumn) and use of sensory resources (Tiana). Melatonin, a drug used to regulate sleep routines in autistic children, had also been prescribed for three out of the four girls, (Schroder et al., 2019) to bend each girls' sleep pattern to align with the school day.

The necessity to conform to specific sleep schedules and school timings was frequently reported to result in dysregulated behaviour and exhaustion for both parents and children. Parents shared a sense of relief at weekends and holidays, aligning with the findings that during lockdown, children and their parents welcomed the loss of the imposition of school routines (Oliver et al., 2021).

6.8.3 Fear of being late



Figure 71 I'm late!

Despite the expression of a preference for sleep and additional time for aspects of transition, Autumn, Tiana, Salish and Moon all demonstrated a fear of being late with an example of this being when Kim, Autumn's teacher shares, *"You can see it in her body language. You know she doesn't like to be late."* Moon also shares concerns about being late, as evidenced in her drawing and narrative (Figure 70) and increased levels of distress were reported when Tiana had to wait at traffic lights or outside of her brother's nursery, delaying the arrival into school.

6.8.4 Don't rush me!

Whilst being late was anxiety inducing, a resistance to being rushed was also noted across the case studies. Each of the participants expressed a need for additional time through setting the pace in their transition (Moon, Salish, Autumn and Tiana), or ring-fencing time for preferred activities (Salish, Moon and Autumn). This time was facilitated by Salish waking early, where Moon and Autumn negotiated additional time to regulate. Slowing down often reflected resistance to the next stage of a transition, where Tiana and Autumn slowed their movements as they approached school building, or a preference for enjoying a specific activity such as Moon eating her breakfast slowly to better enjoy the taste.

Different preferences in terms of pace can result in friction when moving between home and school (Kullman and Palludan, 2011) and this was reflected in the narratives of both child and adult interviews, with changes in pace being considered between siblings and between children and parents. Competing preferences for pace are challenges for children and parents with a poignant example being where Salish shares how Harry's running makes her feel distressed with the sensory challenge of hearing him behind her and the necessity of Arwen and Leo to take one of the children each when going to school.

As posited by Murray et al (2005), this monotropic presentation of struggling to stop activities or switching focus quickly is problematic for autistic children and adults and can be at odds with typical demands. Moving away from an immersive game (Salish and Moon) or preferred activity at home can be challenging, where interruptions can disrupt autistic flow and can be overwhelming and distressing (Wain et al., 2026: 8). The tension between caring for expressed needs and ensuring that they are in school on time was a topic frequently visited in parent interviews. For Arwen, Alice and Laura an inner turmoil is shared of keeping calm whilst still getting their daughters to school, and the care needed to prevent distress or shutting down:

"... you're almost at war with yourself internally, and you've got to, like, bury down all of that. 'Oh, God, I'm really panicking'. How am I going to get into school on time' and, you know, like, make that bit of you shut up... to then be able to be there for them as calmly as you possibly can be." (Arwen)

I have to be very selective with how we get to school, how I engage with her on the way to school. I have said to her a few times, "Tiana, hurry up" but if I rush that, if I say, "We're going to be late" It's like she puts her ankles down and it's like grr (facial expression – jaw clenched) (Alice).

*And if I, if I'm like, (whispers) "Moon, we've got to leave in 10 minutes... we've got to rein it in... can we finish this conversation on the way to school or, you know, after? And she's "No, no, no, no." and I'm like, 'Ooh, she's losing it. She's losing it.' So, I'm like, "OK. Just try and tell me a little bit quickly." So that's really tense **always**, because she feels like she's got to get to the end of what she's got to say." (Laura)*

Both Arwen and Laura supported their daughters through side-by-side approaches to co-regulate and get to school on time, acting as a metronome as described by Kullman and Palludan (2011). Arwen shared how walking "...has to be at her own pace," whilst Laura reports that, "*I have to give her enough time... She kind of needs breaks between things.*" This was also evident in some teachers' approaches where Michaela talked Tiana through the plan for the school day and Rachael demonstrated flexibility in support Salish in moving between activities. Adapting to a child's pace and 'being with' children in the moment (Green and Clark, 2024) and providing flexible timings were therefore identified as effective ways to best meet children's needs (Kraftl, 2013).

6.8.5 Summary

Timetables and routines have been identified as supportive of autistic children, enabling a better understanding of what is to come next and reducing anxiety. However, conforming to the imposed time structures was challenging for the girls in this study, and frequently resulted in an arrhythmic response. Medication such as Melatonin had been prescribed for three of the girls to regulate sleep routines, yet waking up at the required time was still challenging for all except Salish who woke early but was frequently exhausted.

Fear of being late was prevalent across the study, but also an anxiety around being rushed, where girls were reported to slow their movements down or delay aspects of the transition. Monotropic difficulties with switching attention also were demonstrated (Murray et al., 2005).

6.9 Places and Spaces

6.9.1 My Favourite Places

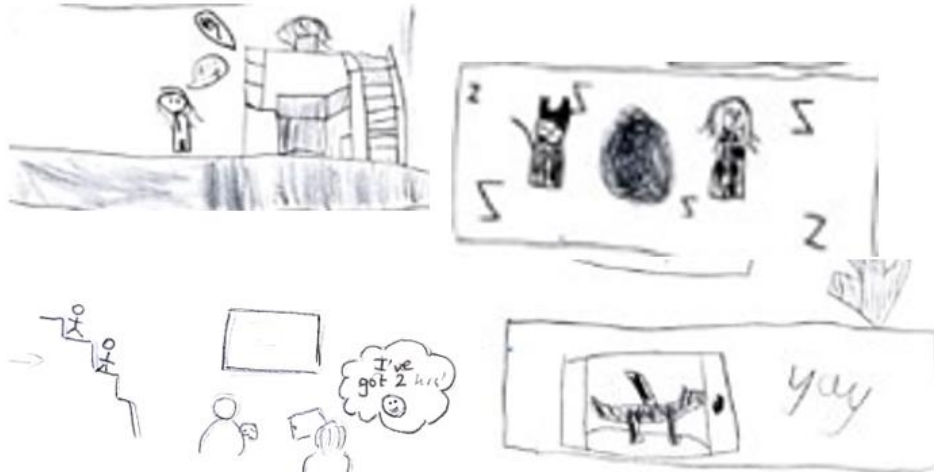


Figure 72 Favourite Spaces

Places are spaces that have had meaning attributed to them (Goodfellow, 2012) and across this study both in terms of the mapped journeys and narrative descriptions, each of the four children demonstrated an emotional or embodied response to specific spaces leading to them becoming places of interest, understood as ‘place attachment’ (Scheller et al., 2024). Examples included beds, playing on computer games and imaginary worlds (Figure 71). Where girls shared feelings of isolation or confusion in school spaces, they demonstrated preferences for specific places at home, on route and within the school environment. Places to hide were popular whether under the covers (Moon, Tiana and Autumn), or a hiding space in a bedroom (Moon), a sheltered part of the car (Tiana) or within the classroom (Salish) as shared by Rachael below:

“She sits here in the morning, and she has a child that has a desk beside her, so she is a kind of a little bit sheltered. She likes that feeling”.

Imaginative worlds and virtual environments were also shared as favoured spaces by Salish and Moon, where playing games or engaging in tablet-based applications provided a form of escape. Despite concerns about a predisposition to gaming addiction in the autistic population due to restrictive and repetitive patterns of behaviour (APA, 2013; Eltahir et al., 2025), gaming has been identified as beneficial in providing social connections (Oliver et al., 2021) and provision of safe and comfortable sensory spaces that can be controlled by the user (Passarello et al., 2022). Where Salish shares a desire “... to get a little bit of time playing games,” Moon speaks of the use of Roblox© as a means of calming feelings of anxiety through

music and connection with virtual forms of her favourite animals, wolves. These virtual environments, therefore, provide Moon and Salish with an element of control and agency before they leave the house for school. Yet the difficulties that both Moon and Salish demonstrate in managing intrusive interruption from the flow state they experience whilst playing these games, can be problematic, reflecting concerns that the use of video games can interfere daily real-life opportunities (Craig et al., 2021; Eltahir et al., 2025).

6.9.2 The School Environment

As discussed previously, as children transition to school, they navigate three transition stages, separation from their home, crossing the liminal spaces between home and school, and incorporation into the school environment (van Gennep, 2019). By doing so, they encounter distinct sociocultural differences, and therefore there is discontinuity between interaction and action across the two places (Akkerman, 2011). Consequently, navigating the boundaries between home and school requires a ‘reconciliation’ of identity and competence across boundaries (Wenger, 1998). This is particularly challenging for autistic girls considering SPDs (Halsall et al., 2021; Mesa and Hamilton, 2023; Sproston et al., 2017) and embedded socially demanding routines (Jones et al., 2020). School buildings and specifically the way in which spaces are used within institutions can thus trigger an internalising of behaviours (Hamilton and Roberts, 2024) and impact on identity, motivation and wellbeing (Kraftl, 2022).



Figure 73 Tiana's drawing of the school building and giant metal gates, together with Autumn's drawing of the school fence and playground.

In Tiana and Autumn's narratives, the drawing of the physical boundaries or barriers of school specifically the gates and fences is significant (Figure 72). Approaching school buildings and navigating the spaces that surround the school results in a slowing of pace, tensing of muscles and increased levels of anxiety. This is observed both by parents such as Arwen, Kerry and Alice as the girls move from home to school and by teachers such as Michaela, Simon, Rachael, Kath and Kim upon arrival in the playground or classroom. Proximity of traffic was challenging for children on their journeys to school, particularly in congested areas, where Tiana demonstrated greater levels of distress when waiting in traffic and Moon demonstrated anxiety in waiting to cross the road. This is in line with other research in this field (Morris et al., 2022) that the additional sights, sounds and smells can be more challenging (Jones et al., 2020).

The four girls were also reported to slow down and withdraw in specific spaces on the journey between home and school, particularly on arrival. Increased sensory stimulation in heavy traffic, on school playgrounds, busy classrooms and halls resulted in a slowing of pace (Autumn and Tiana) and increased resistance to micro-transitions such as leaving the car (Salish and Tiana). Reflecting research that autistic girls can find crowded spaces challenging (Sproston et al., 2017), these busy areas were identified by parents as a contributing factor to increased anxiety.

Within school environments, there are generally limited opportunities to be unobserved (McNair, 2022). In direct contrast for the girls expressed preference for enclosed 'hidden' spaces or camouflaging, Autumn's and Tiana's drawings of their classrooms (Figure 73), demonstrate the open nature of the classroom environment enabling effective monitoring and surveillance to render children compliant (Foucault, 2019). Autumn's drawing and narrative is indicative of a shame memory, a form of traumatic memory where someone sees themselves as inadequate or worthless (Yu et al., 2023); her reflection that, "*Because I'm autistic... I made this noise, and they started re-enacting it and laughing about it,*" contributing towards embodied feelings and subsequent camouflaging behaviours (Vincent et al., 2023).

More positive aspects of the school environment noted by participants included breakfast club, a place which combined the nurturing aspects of home with the school building for Salish, as

well as an adapted 'quiet lunch' space for Tiana which was a smaller, enclosed space for those who experience sensory overwhelm with a 3-dimensional projection of calming scenes.

6.9.3 The Third Space

The space between home and school is a form of transitional space identified as a 'third space' framed by the limited time and locations between the two (Moody et al, 2023). For each of the girls, their mothers accompanied them as they moved through this space, reflecting research that children are more likely to be accompanied by parents on their school transition (Kullman and Palludan, 2011). Salish and Tiana travelled by car, moving within a contained confidential space where emotions could be processed (Ferguson, 2016), but both found it difficult to leave this space. In contrast, Moon and Autumn used the physical act of walking, an embodied sensory experience (Yi'En, 2014) to move through this third space, and a method which Arwen perceived aided Autumn to process thoughts and feelings, thereby reducing anxiety. The physical presence of Arwen supportive as Autumn leant physically and metaphorically, sharing fears and excitement, reflecting the value of sharing school journeys with parents (Bourke, 2017).

Focusing on this third space identified significant changes in embodied presentation at boundaries such as the school gate or moving the entrance to the classroom. As Autumn and Tiana approached the school gate, Autumn and Tiana slowed down, visibly tensing muscles, or going very still, whereas Salish becomes more agitated repeating "... *I'm not going to school; I don't want to go to school.*" Successfully managing the school transition, therefore requires embodying the diverse rhythms without causing arrhythmia (Kullman and Palludan, 2011: 351). However, the girls' behaviours in this study indicates significant anxiety as they approached the school gate, and a need for support from parents and teachers to cross this boundary.

With these challenges, mediating the transition between home and school was of particular interest across the data set. Use of a breakfast club for Salish, provided a liminal space within the wider school environs for more pastoral provision as a stepping stone to the classroom but for Moon, Autumn and Tiana, parents would deliver their daughters directly to school. For each of the parents, there was recognition of needing to 'pass the baton', maintaining continuity across boundaries (Akkerman, 2011), where gates or doors acted as physical barriers, demonstrating the clearly defined power structures embedded in the physical school environment (Kraftl, 2022).

Separation from parents was identified as challenging for Tiana, Autumn and Salish particularly, where the girls would cling to their parents or cry not to be left. Transitional objects from their mothers were used as a form of brokering to reduce the impact of this separation. This included identical bracelets for Arwen and Autumn, providing, “...*a link between us and a way of sort of ... not quite having a cuddle but symbolising it.*” Similarly Rachael reported how Salish brought, “...*little toys and trinkets from home like a fur collar that belongs to one of mum's coats and sometimes Mum's cardigan.*”

These objects are understood to enable a sense of control when negotiating transitional spaces (Kullman, 2010), and blur the lines between home and school (Winnicott, 2008). They were perceived to be supportive by parents and teachers but required monitoring as the objects often collected around the desk or in the lockers, and teachers needed to limit the number of items.

Being able to see a recognisable and trusted adult was identified by all as an important aspect of the daily positive transition. Michaela identified that Tiana was better able to cope with coming through the standard gate on a day where Michaela was on duty, “*I suppose it's that familiar face. And as you say, breaking down that transition,*” whereas on alternative days, Alice was more likely to take Tiana in through the school office, a quieter route. Having a trusted adult on the school gate was appreciated by Arwen and Kerry, so that they could physically handover their child. Both Rachael and Michaela recalled incidents where they were required to fetch Salish and Tiana respectively, where parents were struggling.

“I would go and Salish would be sitting in the back, and I would just open the door and go, ‘Come on, Salish, it's time to go!’ She would get out. There was never any resistance once you did that, but she would never have done that for Mum.” (Rachael)

This communication across boundaries, both at the school gate and at other times was also recognised as important ‘brokering practice’ between home and school. Alice, Kerry, Arwen and Laura all identified that their child frequently would be embarrassed about asking for help, where Alice shared, “*I say, why don't you tell the teachers and ask for help and she's like... Well I don't want people looking at me.*” This therefore necessitated their role as advocates; a common experience for the parents of autistic pupils (O'Hare et al., 2023; Tierney et al., 2016).

6.9.4 Summary

Across the drawing and walking interviews, the impact of place on the children's embodied presentation moving between home and school was identified. Memories of key events were triggered as children drew, or adults walked or drove through specific spaces, with negative experiences recounted. Participants shared a preference for quieter, more sheltered spaces, including virtual worlds where sensory stimuli could be controlled, and examples were shared of where individuals had appropriated spaces that they found beneficial. Busy spaces such as the school playground at the start of the day, traffic within the vicinity of the school and the open design of classrooms contributed towards anxiety in autistic girls, which was demonstrated through the tightening of muscles, slowing down of movements and more 'muted' presentation. An influential boundary between home and school was often the school gate, where different identities needed to be reconciled, yet frequently the adults trusted most were not available until an additional boundary had been crossed.

6.10 Care

Care is identified “... as both a *practice* and an *ethical disposition*,” and can be observed in many ways: “It may be verbal, visual, tactile, intuitive, tacit, unconscious” (Kullman, 2014: 2866), but ultimately enables a person to grow (Noddings, 2013). Across the transitions, each of the girls demonstrated a need for care through ‘meaningful attachments’ (Kullman and Palludan, 2011) reflecting findings that those who are autistic or disabled are more likely to require additional support from adults (Ross et al., 2020), who have a strong understanding of their needs (Cunningham, 2022).

As Freire (2017: 106) posits, “... we cannot say that in the process of revolution someone liberates someone else, nor yet that someone liberates himself, but rather that human beings in communion liberate each other.” Despite a perception that the practice of caring is one-sided, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the relational aspect of caring (Noddings, 2005: xv). In this context, therefore, not only the care provided to each girl, but also ‘cared for’ response should be considered.

Multiple examples of care were shared, whether as a form of protection, an expression of love or affection, or in the form of support (Noddings, 2013), and varied according to where and who the girls were with, reflecting the complexity of care as relational and situational (Hayes, 2017). Children’s drawings and interviews presented parents and teachers as providers of comfort (Moon), supporters for completing tasks (Autumn, Salish, Tiana and Moon), providers of adaptive equipment (Tiana and Moon) and advocates (Moon).

6.10.1 ‘Tuning in’

In order to provide the right balance of support and autonomy, an understanding of autism in girls is required (Moyse and Porter, 2015), but also a disposition to care through love, kindness and attention (Hayes, 2017). Common across the case studies was a shared understanding of the importance of adults to attune themselves so as to recognise the expressed needs of autistic girls during the transition (Gray et al., 2021; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Sproston et al., 2017), where attentiveness and receptiveness to small behaviours, together with empathy facilitated better attunement (Kullman, 2014).

Teachers in this study demonstrated both the intention to attune and attend, although some lacked the opportunity, their first encounter along the transition at the classroom door unless

like Michaela, it was their turn to be on the playground. Instead, Moon and Tiana frequently come through the school office, Salish attends breakfast club and for Autumn, the caretaker is the first staff member she sees with school systems preventing more personalised handovers from parents.

Increased time spent with autistic pupils results in a better understanding and ability to attune to pupils' needs (Hamilton and Cook, 2026). The teachers therefore demonstrated a strong ability to identify signs of distress or discomfort in their pupils and noticed small changes in presentation including the tightening of muscles (Autumn and Tiana), a 'rabbit in headlights' expression (Moon), a turning away (Salish) amongst others. As part of the morning routine, teachers demonstrated an intention to greet their pupil, commenting on the importance of this in determining levels of anxiety, and providing an effective response, whether this was signposting to an Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (Autumn and Tiana), providing additional space and time (Salish and Tiana) or knowing when they feel more comfortable and ready to learn (Moon):

"We always make sure we greet her and I kind of have, like you say good morning, and you like always say her name." (Kim)

"I can often tell how she's feeling by that interaction, because she will... (looks down) And then she can be quite visible in her then like shutting down and putting her head down and then she will take a long time unpacking her bag." (Rachael)

"I got that very early on. I could tell that she was quite quirky. And there was quite a character in there. But she was almost getting to the point where she willing to make a joke... and it was clever. It wasn't obvious. It was quite subtle, but it was still enough to be funny, and I thought she's getting the point where she confident enough. She's testing the water." (Simon)

This ability to notice behaviours and therefore attune to children's needs is recognised as an important part of enabling the regulation of emotions through emotion coaching (Gottman et al., 1996); components of emotion coaching being the establishment of empathy, congruence (relationship) and unconditional positive regard (Rogers and Kelly, 2024). By identifying and empathising with children's emotions, parents and teachers, are better able to support children in acknowledging and managing their emotions and find effective solutions (Gus and Wood, 2017: 85). Both parents and teachers across the study shared examples of tuning into the

girls' emotions across the transition journey and using this understanding to respond effectively.

In each of the case studies, as with similar research, mothers provided care and supported the development of social skills, assertiveness, resilience and independence (O'Hare et al., 2023). Laura gave several examples of how she had helped Moon to develop sensory strategies for regulation, where Alice had taken opportunities to talk with Tiana about her emotions. Michaela also shares how she co-regulates with Tiana during a critical incident by narrating, *"I can see that you are upset today", so I said, "Let's have a look at the morning routine."* Here, Michaela assists Tiana in the recognising, and by implication, validating Tiana's emotions before suggesting a supportive strategy.

Parents also emphasised the importance of strong relational above more didactic approaches; an example being where Arwen shared the importance of using language such, *"Come and I'll help you get ready,"* rather than, *"You will do this' or 'I am your dictator' kind of thing."* This echoes research that those who engage in more respectful communication are likely to provide more effective support (Moyse, 2021). In each of the case studies, parents reported taking a side-by-side approach to getting ready for school whether this was dressing alongside their child (Laura and Moon, Tiana and Alice, Arwen and Autumn) or walking together to school (Arwen and Autumn). Drawings by each child demonstrated how parents supported them on their journeys whether it was Tiana's dad waking her up, Arwen walking with Autumn to school, Kerry riding alongside Salish and Harry on a giant crocodile, or Moon negotiating boundaries with Laura (See Figure 74).



Figure 75 With a little help

Similarly, the teachers in this study were reported or self-reported prioritising relationships with their pupils, striking a careful balance between care and autonomy. Examples include when Simon shared how he had prioritised the building of relationship with Moon over academic demands and Michaela's vigilance and responsiveness were praised by Alice:

"In my personal opinion, I needed to form a relationship with her. And I don't think putting someone in fear was going to help the situation in any way. So for me, it was just let's get her in. Let's get her happy."

"She (Michaela) is very vigilant to Tiana and her needs and will give her the support she needs, but also ultimately, she walks away and says, "I've given you what you need. You need to get on and I'll come back." And I like that about her, because she's not feeding her."

Yet pressures to get children to school on time, resulted in reported challenges with finding the right balance between meeting the *expressed* needs of their child and the *inferred* needs identified by the school to be in school early (Noddings, 2012). Arwen recollected times where she had been called 'over-nurturing' and 'too kind' where Laura was instructed to be firmer to get Moon to school on time, which Laura strongly rejected:

"... I felt very strongly that it was more important that she got there (school) regulated and ready to learn and in the right frame of mind than just dragging her there half naked, giving her consequences and making her cope, through the day ... But they used to say, "It doesn't matter, mum, whether she's half-dressed or not, she'll soon learn once you've her in and she's humiliated and feeling different."

The ebb and flow between care and autonomy is common to all interpersonal relationships, where a careful balance is required so that neither care nor autonomy takes precedence over the other (Davy, 2019). Yet, what is the right balance is highly subjective. Where parents perceived that their daughter's teacher had a similar understanding of care to their own, positive feedback was given.

6.10.2 Care through physical affection and proximity

Across the home to school transitions, both girls and their parents shared how they expressed and received care through physical affection, where different meanings were attributed to their embraces. For some, it was a daily ritual to declare love (Moon) whereas for others, a hug was a means of armouring for the day (Arwen):

"I'm going to draw myself going down the stairs and clinging on to my dad's legs. Oh, do you cling on to your dad's legs? Yeah, I do that every day because that's the sort of how we say that we love each other. We call it koala dad." (Moon)

We do the goodbyes and give them as big a cuddles as they need. And then through the gates into the playground and we're not allowed to go through the gate with them.
(Arwen, Autumn's mother)

Physical gestures of affection for the girls in this study, such as hugs, were reserved primarily for parents rather than teachers, as demonstrated in the interview with Salish's teacher and SENCO, where Pippa notes that Salish *"likes hugging her mum,"* but is not one of the children who will seek affection from school staff *"She's not a hugger or like that. She doesn't like that sort of affection."* In contrast, in Salish's story, it is the creatures who are seen to carry Salish between home and school, as the Pterodactyl, *"...picks me up and flies me to school... he picks me up and puts me in his next."*

Separation from parents on the transition were seen as periods of heightened anxiety, where even the shortest of separations for Tiana was reported in resulting in dysregulation:

"I'm not even gone a couple of minutes as I just drop off and come straight back out. By the time I'm out, all the lights are on in the car. She's here there and everywhere. Not in her seat, clambering."

Walking together particularly has been found to be valuable for children as they move between home and school, integrated within the landscape and providing a space to share with friends and family (Bourke, 2017). For Autumn, the need for physical proximity was apparent throughout her daily transition, reflecting research that children can feel safer when walking with parents and benefit from the giving and receiving of care through movements and touch (Morris et al., 2022: 8).

6.10.3 Care through adaptive practice

Across the data, small adaptations to support the transition were welcomed and considered supportive, reflecting research that personalised adaptations can enable greater inclusion of autistic pupils (EEF, 2020) and are valued by young people (Mesa and Hamilton, 2023). Parents and teachers gave examples of how they would break down the transitions into separate activities or tasks, a self-reported effective strategy for adults who experience autistic inertia (Buckle et al., 2021), provide supportive resources, and give autistic girls additional time for transitions. Laura's use of 'chillaxing' supported Moon's transition from bedtime to

dressing for school, where quiet spaces, coaching and adaptive practice were evident for others.

One of the recognised challenges of this transition was the 'not knowing' of what is to come (Packer et al., 2021), where Tiana, Autumn and Moon shared feelings of worry about what was happening next and would use repetitive questioning to seek to alleviate this. Intolerance of uncertainty, together with resistance to change can lead to significant levels of anxiety around transitions for autistic young people (Nuske et al., 2019). In these case studies, adults sought to support with explanations about what was next, whether this was through talking through plans for the day or the use of visual schedules. These schedules or timetables were responded to particularly positively by Tiana and Salish, where Rachael remarks of Salish, "*If I've forgotten to do it, she will be the first one to say. 'Is that what's happening today?'*" and Tiana is said to enjoy opportunities to take responsibility for the timetable:

We have a visual timetable and a written timetable. There are a couple of girls, but Tiana is one of them who, if the written timetable isn't up, she's like, do you want me to write it down on the board? So, I was like "Yeah - I'll write it on a post-it note and you can go and write it up." (Michaela)

One specific strategy shared by both Laura and Alice was that of reducing information and demands, which Alice called, 'laying the soil:'

I always say. "Come on. You can do this. You can do this and I'm not going out the bathroom. I'll stay. Then you can wash your hands and be fine. But she's like it's just too much. (Laura)

While speaking to her, I'll say, "OK, today Tiana we need to do..." Or she'll say, 'what are we doing today?' So instead of breaking it down to all the time and layman's terms and saying like, OK, we're going to do this, then we're going to do this, and we're going to do this, I'll have a conversation with her, and I'll kind of 'lay the soil' is how I say it. (Alice)

Side-by-side approaches like this, with the language of 'we' and 'us' rather than 'you' were employed regularly as Arwen explains, "*I'm on your team, I'm helping you. We'll go through the difficult bit of getting ready together and I'll sort of try and put your armour on you, to help you get through the day.*" This relational approach positions parents and teachers alongside the girls and recognises the importance of cooperation and reduced power structures to

enable independence (Freire, 2021). For example, Autumn shares that she and her mother make her lunch together the night before, *“I do have a packed lunch, but I don’t always make it. I make it the night before often. Mum does it with me,”* this approach reducing uncertainty of what she might have for lunch and promoting independent life skills.

Over-stimulation of the senses through the sights, sounds, smells and proximity of others in the environment can be challenging (Jones et al., 2020). Each of the girls in this study presented with different sensory profiles, but all demonstrated hyper- or hypo- sensitivities to sensory input. This included a need for grounding demonstrated through Tiana and Autumn’s leaning on their parents and the requirement of Tiana’s weighted blanket but also a hypersensitivity to noisier environments. Interactions between these sensory sensitivities, environmental factors and difficulties with emotional processing contributed towards anxiety levels (Jones et al., 2020)

Attempts to mitigate sensory challenges were made by parents and teachers through walking and physical contact (hugs) where some sensory aids were utilised for auditory input (Tiana), weighted blankets and peanut balls to provide proprioceptive feedback (Tiana and Moon), as well as a wobble cushion or board for vestibular feedback (Tiana and Moon). Across the final stage of transition, although there was limited access to sensory equipment, schools instead provided quieter spaces for the girls in the form of a breakfast club or quiet, sheltered spaces away from the main group in the classroom. Michaela had created a regulation station, providing Tiana with colouring activities and a worry container, where Tiana and Autumn had access to an ELSA staff member who would remove them and provide support for integration and regulation.

In contrast to these specialist resources, Rachael had developed a number of universal strategies that Salish benefitted from, preventing the singling out of Salish for specific support within the classroom and included regular check-ins using a visual resource as well as class toys at the start of the school day:

We have what we refer to as class pets, which are soft toys. And if they need one, they don’t say anything, they don’t have to say, “Can I have one?” or whatever, they just go and collect one. And as soon as I see that there’s one gone or there’s one on a lap or one on..., and then I know just to do a check in and say, “Is everything ok?” And she will always say, “Yes,” but she often doesn’t look yes. And so, I just make sure that I kind of buzz past her quite a few times until she settles.

Use of soft toys can provide comfort and soothing for a dysregulated child. Where stroking a soft toy provides tactile stimulation, hugging can also provide deep pressure sensory feedback (NeuroLaunch, 2025). The intervention, being self-initiated also required a level of self-awareness and promoted independence in that the children were required to collect it from the bookshelf; and thus was an example of how children were encouraged to self-care.

6.10.4 Care through advocacy

Where girls found it difficult to share anxieties in their schools, parents would often advocate for them with class teachers, an example being where Laura told the school that Moon would need more information about the transition day. Those parents who are well informed and connected have been identified to be able to advocate for their autistic children (Nuske et al., 2019), and this is a supportive factor in enabling access for this group of children (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; O'Hagan et al., 2022). However, having a safe person to talk with better enabled this advocacy. Sometimes this was the teacher as was evident in the relationships between Laura and Simon, and Alice and Michaela, and sometimes this was the SENCO, in the case of Autumn and Arwen:

“The SENCO is brilliant. I'm absolutely gutted that she is leaving at the end of the year... She's neurodivergent herself. And she gets it. And she puts in so many adjustments just because she gets it.”

Breakdowns in communication or a feeling of not being heard, however could impact on this relationship and for Arwen there was a sense of frustration but a determination to be heard, as she shares, *“Oh, they'll be fed up of hearing my voice in the end,”* which reflects representations of parents as ‘warriors’ (O'Hare et al., 2023).

6.10.5 Challenges in Caring

In order to be ready to respond to expressed needs, adults need to be able to pay close attention to the individual (Hayes, 2017), yet frequently this attention is difficult to facilitate. Across the transition, challenges such as a lack of time and resources in attending to children's needs were raised by parents and teachers, reflective of other studies (Hamilton and Cook, 2026; Wain et al., 2026), particularly where multiple needs across a family or class of children needed to be met. Where Arwen and Leo were able to take one child each on the way to school, whereas Laura, Alice and Kerry managed the transitions alone. For Alice who is

responsible for getting four children to three settings, she reports, *“I’ve had to really change my whole life just to manage Tiana’s demands,”* sharing the impact of Tiana’s behaviours on her other children:

“We’ve noticed a massive decline in Kieran. He’ll often say I don’t feel safe around Tiana and that breaks my heart because, you know, probably as a mum. You’re just trying to keep them all safe.”

At the time of the interview, Tiana’s Dad had given up his job in order to support with the morning transition. Alice shares, *“he’s given up his job recently in order to support school transitions so he will take Tiana to school and then I can focus on getting the others to school.”* Kerry, also a single parent, found that prioritising care for Salish, meant that her elder daughter was late to school:

“A lot of the time Sarah was late, and I’d have to ring the school and just say to them, “I’ve got a child who really struggles in the morning. So, Sarah’s late.” It’s no fault of her own or anybody. It’s just that’s life. So, they knew. But then Sarah is going to school stressed, because she’s just heard screaming all the time... all morning.”

Meeting the needs of multiple children was thus viewed as significantly challenging and, similar to other studies parents shared feelings of overwhelm (Anderson, 2020; Cook et al., 2018; Fowler and O’Connor, 2021), as they prioritised their autistic daughters’ needs over everyone and everything else (Hopkins et al., 2023). Alice spoke of being *‘reduced to tears’* or *‘mentally drained,’* Kerry would cry most days after the emotional toll of witnessing Salish’s distress upon transition, where Arwen would *“...spend half the day planning in advance for all the things that have got to be right”* on the school transition, as a *“tiny thing can derail everything else and set off a cascade of meltdowns.”*

For teachers, challenges were slightly different. Balancing the needs of the whole class was a particular concern for Simon, Kath, Kim and Rachael, yet each maintained, in line with care ethics, that some children require additional consideration due to their increased vulnerability (Thompson, 2018). There was no evidence in these participants of *‘compassion fatigue’*; a reduction in teachers taking mental health and wellbeing issues seriously after an increased number of reports following the pandemic (Ward and Powell, 2025). Teachers who had known the children for longer shared the positive impact of additional time to better get to know

individual needs, which resulted in more bespoke interventions and approaches (Hamilton and Cook, 2026).

A significant challenge for Michaela was meeting Tiana's needs when she had not seen the behaviours reported, reflecting concerns that autistic female can present surface-level behaviours that do not reflect how they are thinking and feeling (McLinden and Sedgewick, 2023: 75). Michaela explains, *"It can be really difficult for mum to understand that we don't see it in school and then it's difficult for us to understand when it happens at home."* Equally, there were challenges in providing adaptive provision or care where the child did not welcome this, such as where Tiana demonstrates a determination for her teacher not to know about the behaviours or anxieties that she experiences.

Approaches to addressing the challenge of conflicting needs and perceived inequity of provision varied between participants. Where Rachael maintained universal expectations and approaches around homework and uniform, Simon's approach to prioritise relationships before demand, resulted in more relaxed expectations for Moon initially:

I think that something like that was a worry at the start. So, even though I've kind of said to her "Don't worry", it's still the "what if." I imagine that's what's going on because I still have to maintain a certain way to the other kids and say, "Why have you not done this and so on?"

This anxiety, shared by Simon reflects a tension between caring for identified needs and maintaining education control, frequently experienced by teachers (Vázquez et al., 2024), but also the influence of performativity and monitoring, and an anxiety about meeting every child's needs (Ward and Powell, 2025). Simon shared initial concern that specific expectations for the class must be maintained, whilst aware that Moon requires adaptations. However, his act of caring is a conscious choice driven by a desire to enable Moon to flourish (Plust et al., 2021). This is also evident in Kim and Kath's discussion about what to do with Autumn's mother hat, which is not school uniform but has been brought into school:

Kim: Oh, it is a great hat. Is it on her peg? Or whether it should be, whether we should put it somewhere safe?

Kath: Oh, she might get told "That's not school uniform" That's the only thing. But again, we'll just sort of... we'll prepare her for that, I think I'll just say it's a show and tell or something.

Together the teaching team, used a white lie to explain the presence of the hat in school, providing an additional level of protection; demonstrating a perceived disconnect between what Autumn needed and the school's expectations (Plust et al., 2021). For both parents and teachers, thus, the desire to care for their daughters or students respectively often resulted in making decisions or sacrifices around what was best for the autistic girl, over their own health (parents) or professional reputation (teachers) (Vázquez et al., 2024).

6.10.6 Summary

As identified by Noddings, "When we care for others, we attend and respond as nearly as we can to expressed needs. When we have to refuse a request because we lack the necessary resources, find the request unwise or even evaluate it as morally wrong, we still try to support the caring relation" (2005: xxv). In this study, care was strongly reflected across all case studies and through the interviews with all participants. Recognition was made of the increased levels of anxiety and vulnerability of the autistic girls and the necessity of a different approach (Ward and Powell, 2025). Strong relationships between children and both teachers and parents were identified as important, alongside respectful relationships between carers at home and at school. Adults shared the importance of being attuned and responsive to autistic girls' needs through physical affection and proximity and adapting of tasks often through a side-by-side or emotion coaching approach. Challenges in providing this level of care included differences in perspectives of care, conflicting demands for care, lack of time and resources, and where the girls rejected the care provided. Despite the challenges that existed, it was noticeable that the desire to ensure that the girls were happy, safe and supported was a priority.

In the next chapter, my conclusion, I will draw from the results, findings and discussion chapters to the initial research questions posed. Examination of the implications for practice and research will be presented and the overall contribution to knowledge will be shared.

7. Conclusion

School environments are reported to be more challenging for autistic girls than for their non-autistic peers, with more likelihood of experiencing sensory overload (Jones et al., 2020), anxiety and depression (Boucher, 2022), and peer conflict (Ward and Powell, 2025). Research indicates that increasing numbers of autistic children are withdrawing from mainstream education (Connolly et al., 2023) with recent statistics demonstrating high levels of persistent absence in this group (DfE, 2025). Recognising autistic girls' right to education without discrimination under the Equality Act (2010), I took an emancipatory approach to better understand and support autistic girls in the mainstream school using critical reflection with members of the autism community to inform action (praxis) (Freire, 2021).

Where previous studies have considered more the experiences of autistic girls *within* the school environment (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Hamilton and Roberts, 2024; Jones, 2025; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Tomlinson et al., 2020; Ward and Powell, 2025), this research focused instead on the daily transition between home and school. By engaging in critical dialogue facilitated by the participatory methods of drawing and walking interviews, the experiences of four autistic girls were captured as they navigated the three stages of transition to school: separating from their homes, crossing the no-man's land between home and school and incorporation within the school environment (van Gennep, 2019) to respond to the research aims and answer the research questions posed in [Chapter 2](#).

In this conclusion, I will summarise what can be learned from this doctoral research about the embodied experiences of autistic girls in the daily home to school transition, what this tells us about autistic girls' school experiences and what strategies and approaches can be utilised to support this under-researched group in mainstream schools. I will also reflect on the impact of this research on the participants, educators and myself as the researcher.

7.1 What are the embodied experiences of autistic girls of the daily home-school transition?

For each of the four autistic girls, the daily transition varied considerably, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of the autism condition (Fletcher-Watson and Happe, 2019) and the complex variations and interactions of the individual's circumstances (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). However, for each of the girls, experiences of the daily home to school transition frequently impacted on levels of anxiety and distress.

This transition required not only the physical preparations of getting dressed and physically moving between spaces but also reconciling two identities as they moved between the two communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and regulating their bodies through normalised school temporal and spatial rhythms and processes (McNair, 2022). Particular difficulties with SPDs commonly associated with autism (Jones et al., 2020; Patil and Kaple, 2023) were evident in challenges around dressing and grooming, navigating busy high-traffic areas whether walking or in a car, where sleep differences impacted on the girls' ability to wake.

Differences in switching attention and focus, associated with the monotropic presentation of autism meant that each of the girls required additional time for micro-transitions such as moving between tasks (Murray, 2018). High levels of anxiety also contributed towards increased autistic inertia (Buckle et al., 2021). Data indicates that interruptions, specifically when pursuing preferred interests such as computer games or retelling a story were problematic. Although each of the girls demonstrated anxiety about being late for school, such difficulties with transitions inevitably resulted in a late or rushed arrival at school for Moon, Salish, Tiana and Autumn.

As the four girls crossed boundaries, or points at which they negotiated sociocultural differences (Akkerman, 2011: 133) such as stepping out of a car, through a school gate or classroom door, the girls demonstrated arrhythmic responses (Lefebvre, 2021). These included the masking or camouflaging of behaviours to blend in with others (Dean et al., 2017; Tubío-Fungueiriño et al., 2021), and seeking to hide in the shadows, as well as armouring themselves with tightened muscles. When approaching the school gate, Tiana and Autumn were observed by parents and teachers to slow their bodies, seeking greater proximity and sensory feedback from their parents as they leaned heavily on them. Environmental delays such as being stuck in traffic, waiting to cross the road or waiting in the school playground were also reported to be anxiety-inducing and resulted in Tiana and Salish demonstrating fight, flight and freeze responses.

At the final stage of transition, where the girls were incorporated into their classroom environment, each girl generally conformed to the school rules, demonstrating more passive presentations than at their home environment or on the transition. Drawing and talking interviews illustrated shared feelings of difference and sometimes alienation, however for each of the girls, the level of distress reported upon the transition was significantly reduced once in school, where Moon shares of her arrival in school, *“I’m fine then.”*

7.2 What can the daily home to school transition tell educators about the experiences of autistic girls in school?

Through the examination of autistic girls’ transitions between home and school, a greater understanding of the school experience was gained, evidencing the value of research in the boundaries (Reid-Musson, 2018). The stories of Tiana, Autumn, Salish and Moon, together with that of their parents and teachers convey their vulnerability and arrhythmic embodied responses, thus identifying autistic girls as an oppressed group within an education system designed for the majority (Freire, 2021). Each girls’ embodied transformation as they moved between home and school resulted in the adoption of less authentic presentations, where the girls’ shared difficulties in being their true selves.

Narratives indicating feelings of alienation and difference within the mainstream primary school context aligns with other research with autistic girls of this age (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Jones, 2025; Moyse and Porter, 2015; O’Hagan et al., 2022; Ward and Powell, 2025). Camouflaging strategies were evident across the study, where girls would self-censor and hide behaviours as a form of protection and to maintain friendships. This was perceived by parents to result in increased tiredness, a lack of self-esteem and poor mental health. In school systems designed for the majority, large open plan spaces were at odds with a demonstrated preference by the girls for enclosed and sheltered places. However, the four girls were frequently less aware of how the environment had ‘disabled’ them, perceiving a fault or difference within themselves, which is a form of internalised oppression (Freire, 2017).

Evidenced both in the drawing and narratives was the importance of friendships, particularly for Autumn, Moon and Salish in providing protection, affirmation and support. Friendships provided opportunities for imaginative play, solidarity and companionship (Bolis et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2021; Sedgewick et al., 2016), but also the potential for conflict and vulnerability (Sedgewick et al., 2019). Frequently friendships were formed with those seen to be similar to themselves and could be intense in their nature. Through the process of recounting

transitions, whether through movement or mapping, additional memories of past critical events were also evoked for both Autumn and Tiana (Ellis et al., 2012). This demonstrated how strong emotions, associated with fear and anxiety were linked to places within their school buildings (Scheller et al., 2024) and could be triggered through the movement in these spaces.

Where autistic girls might have historically been viewed as having limited agency in line with the tragedy model of disability (Beardon, 2023), each of the girls in this study demonstrated agency in finding ways to disrupt, resist and have their needs met. This included setting their own pace, adopting spaces, using strategies to avoid busier environments or communicating their needs through verbal and non-verbal methods.

7.3 What are the coping mechanisms and strategies employed by children, parents, and class teachers to support autistic girls attending mainstream school, particularly in navigating the home to school journey?

Across the study, participants shared a range of approaches to enable a more positive transition at home, on the way to school and as they arrived in the classroom. A range of strategies and supportive approaches were embedded in classroom practice and also in the home. Sensory processing challenges commonly associated with autism (Jones et al., 2020) were addressed with the allocation of quieter or more sheltered spaces, alternative softer options were provided for uniforms where possible, and the use of soft toys or quiet spaces upon arrival provided emotional comfort and sensory feedback for regulation (NeuroLaunch, 2025). However, universal school systems of prescribed timings, open environments and uniformed clothing contributed to a sense of arrhythmia particularly when autistic girls crossed boundaries such as the school gate (Tori et al., 2024).

Relationships were a core theme throughout the research, where an ethics of care pervaded the relationships between children and parents and the children and their teachers. The use of side-by-side responses and the language of 'we' and 'us', were promoted by parents and teachers as a means of supporting transitions and reducing anxiety. Parents often acted as a metronome to facilitate the aspects of the transition of which they were apart (Kullman and Palludan, 2011), accommodating individual's natural rhythms, where Arwen noted the value of walking side-by-side as a means of processing of worries and enabling sensory regulation. Teachers recognised the importance of being able to attune to the individual needs and 'notice' changes in behaviours through purposeful interactions (Gray et al., 2021), reporting the use of approaches aligned with 'emotion coaching' (Gottman et al., 1996) and providing flexibility around micro-transitions. More positive transitions existed where girls were able to exert some

agency in their transitions. Examples included negotiating their own routines, taking ownership of the class visual timetable to reduce anxiety around daily events and the use of devices to regulate their own emotions with calming visuals and music. This agency and autonomy realised through the support and enablement of others through relationship (Davy, 2019).

However, a gap observed across the data was the transition from the school gate to the classroom, where frequently neither teachers nor parents were available for co-regulation. For the transition itself, maintaining connections was considered important for reducing anxiety and reconciling home and school identities across this boundary, reflecting and understanding that strong communication between parents and school is supportive of autistic girls (Ward and Powell, 2025). Strategies for brokering this gap included the use of transition objects, consistency of language and approach and the availability of support staff such as SENCOs or Emotional Literacy Support Assistants, once in school, to mitigate the handover. The use of a breakfast club was also shared to be a successful 'third space' in brokering the home-school transition for Salish, where the presence of friends into the classroom was a protective factor.

7.4 Implications for practice

This study demonstrates the challenges experienced by four autistic girls when moving between home and school, raising consciousness of the impact of normative school environments and routines. The participants reported camouflaging as a form of armouring in mainstream environments (Rice-Adams, 2023) and there was an observed tension between their authentic self and the presented self in school (Hull et al., 2017). An implication for practice therefore is the necessity of teachers and parents to adopt more relational approaches in order to attune to expressed needs (Gray et al., 2021) and provide personalised responses (Hamilton and Cook, 2026), where side-by-side approaches for these four children were particularly supportive.

School leaders are also recommended to consider the design of both the internal and external school environments and systems to consider individual sensory sensitivities and individual preferences for more sheltered or contained spaces, alongside uniform design. A specific area of focus should be the systems and processes for crossing boundaries into the school environment. Embodied responses at this point of the transition indicated significant levels of arrhythmia, where the presence of trusted adults or peers were identified as supportive. Therefore, further exploration of how to broker this space would be of value.

The contributions of the girls, parents and teachers to this research illustrate autistic girls' ability to exercise agency in their daily lives to find solutions to challenges. Their ability to communicate and reflect on their lived experiences through the drawing and talking methods demonstrates critical consciousness of the impact of embodied experience but also an ability to play with ideas through this medium. A key recommendation, therefore, is that parents and education practitioners continue to listen to girls themselves, stepping outside of traditional methods to listen and respond to previously unheard voices (Aldridge, 2007).

7.5 Implications for future research

This study sought to capture the perspectives of autistic girls and their parents and teachers of the home to school transition and has identified the unique experiences and transition for a small group of autistic girls in Key Stage 2.

Where much of the research around autism and girls has been conducted with parents, carers, teachers and older children, the use of drawing and talking methods has enabled autistic girls' individual interpretations of their daily transition to be shared. This study illuminates the potential of arts-based methods for listening to children's voices (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2025) particularly when researching everyday experiences (Hayes, 2021). The study also demonstrates the ability of young autistic pupils to share valuable insights, addressing the paucity of research with those under ten years old (Zanuttini, 2023). Critical dialogue and more open-ended research methods offered insightful knowledge into lived experiences (Freire, 2017), where the triangulation of these drawing and talking interviews, alongside walking interviews enabled the identification of key moments along the transition journey.

Tiana's, Autumn's, Salish's and Moon's stories raise the importance of continued research around daily transitions for autistic girls but provided limited insights into diverse experiences. Further research therefore should include those within the intersections of underrepresented groups such as autistic girls from Global Majority backgrounds and those on an assessment pathway. Further expansion of the study to encompass autistic girls who use funded shared or individual transport to attend specialist provision would also be valuable, especially considering the value of relationships highlighted in this study.

7.6 Contribution to Knowledge

A fundamental requirement of a doctoral thesis is to provide an original and significant contribution to research (Wellington, 2015), where this originality can be in contributing to

current academic research, in the methodology employed, knowledge synthesis and implications (Vita and Begley, 2024: 1888). In this section, I will provide justification for why this thesis can be classed as doctoral.

As explored in [Chapter 3](#), autistic girls are often under- or late diagnosed (Gould, 2017) which is often attributed to a female protective effect (Happé, 2019) including an increased tendency to camouflage and mask behaviours (Cook et al., 2021; Halsall et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2020; Tubío-Fungueiriño et al., 2021). This research contributes to a growing body of work that captures the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream schools, illuminating for educators the experiences of four autistic girls in a way that demonstrates the heterogenous nature of the autistic experience (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019).

Combining the contributions of the child, their parent and their teachers in distinct case studies, the research examines the morning transition from three different lenses, providing an in-depth 3-dimensional presentation (Thomas, 2021) and results in rich informative and evocative case studies ([Chapter 6](#)). For Tiana, Autumn, Moon and Salish, difficulties with sensory overwhelm (O'Hagan et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2020), understanding and responding to social interaction and friendships, (Cook et al., 2018; Dean et al., 2014; Sedgewick et al., 2019; Tierney et al., 2016) and bullying (Ochi et al., 2020), were all shared through their personal transition stories.

Researching in this boundary between home and school where identities are negotiated and renegotiated (Wenger, 1998) enabled a greater exploration of the structural and everyday challenges experienced by autistic girls and how they are produced and reproduced in education (Hammond et al., 2023: 1). In addition, a significant contribution of this study is how it addresses a paucity of knowledge in the transitional experiences of autistic girls between home and school (Hughes et al., 2009), specifically identifying challenges and supportive approaches that can guide practice.

From a methodological perspective, my positionality as an autistic woman has meant that this research also responds to a call for more research that has been designed, carried out and interpreted from within the autistic community, on an aspect that is meaningful to the autistic population (Pellicano and Stears, 2011). This doctoral study also demonstrates the impact of using drawing and talking interviews with children and walking interviews with adults in capturing the lived experiences. Using open-ended geographical methods enabled the re-experiencing of daily transitions, where sights, sounds and smells evoked valuable memories and contributions, where the construction of knowledge through critical dialogue, resulted in

the raising of critical consciousness in the participants and the researcher (Freire, 2017). Where concerns for research with children might indicate that such methods could trigger emotional or psychological distress or reawaken difficult memories (NSPCC, 2023), the raising of critical consciousness through this research demonstrated positive impact. For each of the girls a positive impact of being included in the study was reported by the girls and their parents, whether this was a more positive perception of their diagnosis and a greater understanding of their daily transitions. In post-visits, the girls and their parents shared how they had, as a result of the research, revisited and adapted their morning transition, reducing the number of micro-transition and finding alternative uniforms to reduce sensory sensitivities. For Laura and Moon, taking part in the study had raised their awareness of the number of micro-transitions and together they had trialled Moon sleeping on her lower bunk to reduce additional anxiety. This had resulted in a more positive transition between home and school, resulting in increased attendance and reduced anxiety.

For myself, shining a spotlight on the voices of the girls in this study was the most impactful. As shared, by engaging in the research, participants gained a stronger understanding of themselves, of being autistic and the realities of their daily lived experience. The inclusion of their stories, captured through drawing and talking, not only humanised younger autistic girls for others, but also positions them as capable, agents of change with valuable knowledge to share which I anticipate will encourage and support other autistic girls, their families and educators to transform their realities.

7.7 Limitations of this research

Although this research provides an important contribution to research into the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream schools, there are limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. As a qualitative study, this research provides rich detail about the lived experiences of four individual autistic girls, but as autism is a heterogenous condition (Ryan and Milton, 2023) generalisations should be avoided. An associated danger of female-specific research such as this, is that of creating stereotypical expectations of autistic girls and failing to acknowledge variation which can result in the under-identification of girls who do not conform to the stereotype presented (Pearson et al., 2025). Therefore, a specific challenge is to embrace intersectionality when carrying out research with underrepresented groups, ensuring that autistic girls who are further minoritised by socio-economic status, race or cultural identity not further minoritised within research (Botha and Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). In this study, which is representative of a single point in time, participant recruitment was adversely influenced by contextual factors including delays in autism diagnosis, and the

underdiagnosis of those from global majority backgrounds. In addition, it is important to note that there was a lack of fathers' contributions to his research, mirroring other studies where mothers' voices are more prevalent (Fowler and O'Connor, 2021; O'Hare et al., 2023).

Further research is therefore required in order to address these gaps.

My position in this research is not the knower of truth, but instead an interpreter and recorder (Beazley et al., 2009) and a witness and advocate, I would like to have provided participants with a greater role in the design and analysis of the research, enabling genuine and meaningful collaboration throughout the multiple stages of the research process (Abma et al., 2019). However, doctoral researchers are responsible for decisions around the design and implementations of the research and therefore limits in the level of participation for participants exist (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2017). As explained in Chapter 5, frequently opportunities for participant involvement were embedded to ensure accuracy, check interpretations and reduce power imbalances.

7.8 Final Thoughts

The contributions of Tiana, Autumn, Salish and Moon together with their parents (Alice, Arwen, Kerry and Laura) and teachers (Michaela, Kath, Kim, Rachael and Sam) have provided a much-needed insight into the individual lived experiences of the daily home-to-school transition for autistic girls addresses a paucity in research in this area. This research specifically prioritising the voices of girls themselves, drawing upon the voices of their carers to provide in-depth narratives of their experiences.

Ultimately, this study seeks to raise the critical consciousness and issue a call for action to all those working with autistic girls by sharing these unique stories from four very special autistic girls. I am incredibly grateful to Tiana, Autumn, Salish, Moon and their wonderful parents and teachers to allow me to draw and walk alongside them in this study. Each moment spent with them opened my eyes a little further about their lived experiences, how much they have to offer and the importance of finding ways to listen and value their stories.

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Appendices

1. Ethical Approval



Faculty of Health, Education & Life Sciences Research Office
Seacole Building, 8 Westbourne Road
Birmingham
B15 3TN

HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

27/Oct/2023

Mrs Miranda Barker
miranda.barker@mail.bcu.ac.uk

Dear Miranda,

Re: Barker /#11607 /sub2 /R(B) /2023 /Oct /HELS FAEC - Exploring the daily transition between home and school for girls with autism

Thank you for your application and documentation regarding the above activity. I am pleased to take Chair's Action and approve this activity.

Provided that you are granted Permission of Access by relevant parties (meeting requirements as laid out by them), you may begin your activity.

I can also confirm that any person participating in the project is covered under the University's insurance arrangements.

Please note that ethics approval only covers your activity as it has been detailed in your ethics application. If you wish to make any changes to the activity, then you must submit an Amendment application for approval of the proposed changes.

Examples of changes include (but are not limited to) adding a new study site, a new method of participant recruitment, adding a new method of data collection and/or change of Project Lead.

Please also note that the Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee should be notified of any serious adverse effects arising as a result of this activity.

If for any reason the Committee feels that the activity is no longer ethically sound, it reserves the right to withdraw its approval. In the unlikely event of issues arising which would lead to this, you will be consulted.

Keep a copy of this letter along with the corresponding application for your records as evidence of approval.

If you have any queries, please contact HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

If you would like to provide feedback on the ethics process, please complete the feedback form using [this link](#).

I wish you every success with your activity.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr. Alex Wade

On behalf of the Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee

2. Information Booklet for Child Participants



Exploring the experiences of autistic girls of their daily transition between home and school:

Information Presentation

Welcome!

This booklet has been designed for young people and their parents in understanding and informing you about my project

“Exploring the experiences of autistic girls of their daily transition between home and school.”

The booklet will set out what the project will look like, how you will be involved and the choices you will have through the process.



About me

My name is Miranda.



I like to watch Netflix and YouTube.



I also like drawing and reading.



I am autistic.



I have two children and my daughter is also autistic.

I am really interested in improving the lives of autistic children.



About me



I am a researcher at Birmingham City University in Birmingham

And I am doing an exciting project which I would like you to be a part of.

I have three experienced researchers who are supervising this project.

They are Dr. Carolyn Blackburn



Dr. Stephen Griffin



and Dr. Zoe Lewis.



1.

The Project

The project is to find out what going to school is like for you.

I want to learn about what your journey is like?



What kind of things do you do to get ready for school?



What happens when you arrive at school?



Images courtesy of Getty Images, 2023

I am interested in finding out what it feels like as well as what happens each day

Why have I asked you to be part of the project?

I am looking for about 3-5 girls to help me with this project who are in Key Stage 2.

I have asked people I know to tell me about girls and families who might want to talk to me about their journey and who like to draw.



Getty Images, 2023

What will happen if you agree to do the project?

If you agree to be part of the project, I will ask you and your parents to sign a form.

This just means you write your name to say you agree.

We will meet **three** times, or more if you like.

You can choose to leave the project at any time before I have written the project.



The first visit – getting to know you...

For my first visit, I would like to meet you and someone from your family together.

We can meet at your **home**, your **school** or somewhere else that you feel safe and **happy**.

It will not be for longer than an hour.

You might want to show me some places that are important to you or plan an activity you like that we can do together.



My second visit

For my second visit, I will meet with you to do some drawing together. We can meet in your school or in your home.

For this activity, I will ask you to tell me or draw me what your journey to school looks like.

You can also bring photos you have taken or drawings you have done before that we can use in the picture, if you prefer.

If you use photos though, I will need you to hide any faces of other people in the photos.



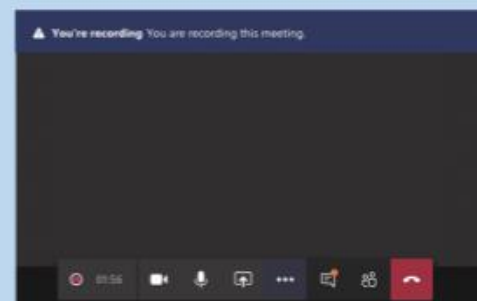
These Photos by Unknown
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My second visit

When we meet, we will find somewhere quiet to work.

I will record a video of our drawing time, but no one will see it except me. This is to help me remember what you say.

We can stop the recording whenever you like.



Walking or travelling with your parent

I will then meet with one of your parents who will tell me about their journey to school.

I will record what your parent says to me using a Dictaphone, but no one else will hear this.



Talking to your teacher

Finally, I will talk to your teacher and ask them to show me around your school.

You may see me in school, or I might meet them before or after school.



After the second meeting..

After my visits, I will go back to my office, and type up what has been said.

I will look for patterns in what has been shared and particularly things that you have all said which I think are important.



Our third meeting...

For our third meeting, I will ask to meet with you and your parent and teacher.

I will share what I have written and check that you agree with what I have said.

I will tell you about my findings and make any changes if you think I have misunderstood anything.



What happens when the project is finished?

When the project is finished, I will write something called a thesis which is like a small book.

I will use this to tell other people about this journey to make things better for girls like you.

If you want to, I could share this with you or put together a smaller book with what I found out.



What happens if I change my mind about being part of the project?

You can change your mind at any point in the project. You just need to let me or your parents or your teacher know.

If you decide to leave the project, I will delete everything that I have written and any recording that we have.



Will this project mean that other people will know about my life?

No.

In this project, I will hide your name and anything that could be used to identify you.

You can choose another name which I will use to describe you in my project.

It means that no one reading my project will know who you really are.



What are the benefits to doing this project?

There are many benefits to doing this project.

You will get to tell others about what it is like to be you.

You will get to talk to me about what is really important and may even learn more about yourself than you knew before.

You will get to change the way that people see the journey to school.



Any Questions?



3. Participant Information Sheet – Parents and Carers

Participant Information Sheet: Parent/Carer

Dear

I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study which is entitled '**Exploring the experiences of autistic girls of their daily transition between home and school**'. The purpose of this information sheet is to provide you with further detail about this project, so that you can decide whether you would like to take part.

Background to the Study

This educational doctorate study is rooted in my own experiences of the morning journey between home and school as an autistic child, as the mother of an autistic daughter and through my experiences as a primary and then specialist teacher, supporting families with improving their experiences of school.

The aims of this study are:

1. To raise awareness in the participants and educationalists of the experiences of autistic girls of this transition.
2. To give autistic girls the opportunity to reflect and share their thoughts of this transition and thus empower them as individuals.
3. To inform future research around home school transitions and developing environments for autistic girls.

This will be done by asking the following research questions:

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3. What are the coping mechanisms employed by children, parents, and class teachers to mitigate any challenges this transition may present for autistic girls?
4. How can we facilitate a greater collaborative understanding of autistic girls' experiences of navigating the home school boundary to inform future practice?

Who has been invited and why?

I am inviting girls who have a diagnosis of autism and who are between the ages of 7 and 11 years old to participate along with their parents and their teachers. This is to provide a 3-dimensional picture of this transition, drawing on parents', pupils' and staff perspectives. There will be between 3 and 5 case studies included in the project.

Is participation voluntary?

Participation is entirely voluntary, and consent can be withdrawn at any time before the writing up of this research. I will provide you with a consent form although if you require this to be in another format, please let me know. There is an information PowerPoint available which you can share with your child to inform them about the study.

Consent for your child will be sought from both yourselves, and from your child. If either you, your child or their teacher withdraw consent, then this case study will not go ahead, and any data already collected will be destroyed.

What to expect if you consent to participate in this study?

If you consent to this study, there will be five key interactions. These will be arranged to best meet yours and your child's needs and schedules.

1. A meeting with yourself/yourselves and your child either at home, at school or a neutral place to be chosen by yourselves. This meeting is only to build relationships and will not be used for data collection. If further meetings are required so that your child or yourselves feel safe to complete the data collection, then this can be facilitated.
2. A meeting with your child to draw their journey to school. We will meet either in your home or at the school depending on your child's preference and the interview will be video recorded – this is only for my own viewing to recall the discussion. In this meeting, I will ask your child to draw or to tell me about their journey to school. If they choose, they can bring photographs so that we can build a collage. I just ask that no other persons can be identified from the photographs.
3. A meeting with yourself to talk about your experience of the transition. This will take the form of a walking or travelling interview where we will walk through the usual morning transition. Ideally this will take place outside of the usual school transition and

will be audio recorded. Again, this audio recording is solely for my research purposes and will only be heard by myself.

4. A meeting with your child's teacher or a member of staff who knows them well. I will meet with them in school to ask them about their understanding of your child's needs, their journey into school and how they present in the classroom. This will be audio recorded.
5. Following these meetings, I will transcribe the interviews and check with yourself, your child and your child's teacher to ensure that my notes reflect what you wanted to say.
6. Initial findings will be shared. This can be online or face to face, individually or together. If you choose to participate, we can determine how this can best be done for your child, yourselves, and teacher.

Potential benefits of participation

There will be no payment to participants who consent to take part in this study, but it is acknowledged that there is a strong benefit in that participants can feel empowered when they are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful participation (Reason and Torbert, 2001).

By taking part in this study, participants will be helping the researcher to inform others through publication of the realities of this daily transition from the perspectives of children, parents, and teachers.

Potential risks of participation

The potential risks of participation have been identified as falling into two categories:

Risk 1: A participant may become distressed during the interview or post interview:

The potential risk to the child participants in this study is that they may become anxious about their responses and working with a new adult. To address this, a visual prompt will be introduced to the children in advance of our initial meeting to explain who I am and the purpose of the research.

I will then organise with you and your child's teachers, an opportunity to meet with you and your child in advance of the interview in a relaxed environment where they feel safe and comfortable, so that we can engage in a low-demand activity. This will be repeated until the child feels comfortable working with me. In the interview, it will be explained that they can pause or stop the interview at any time.

For yourselves, there is a risk that you may become anxious or distressed discussing this situation. Should this happen, then you will have the option to stop the interview and either continue at another time or withdraw from the process. If you withdraw from the process, then your child will also be withdrawn from the research.

Risk 2: An adult participant may become physically injured during the walking interview.

There is a minor risk of physical harm due to slips, trips or falls but this will be minimised through taking safe familiar routes. Should conditions be considered too dangerous e.g., significant adverse weather conditions, then the interview will be rescheduled.

Risk 3: There may be damage to the relationship between home and school through the sharing of opinions.

There is a minor risk of damage to the relationship through the sharing of data. This will be mitigated by a clear focus on the child and their experiences. Opportunities will be provided for participants to reflect on their contributions prior to sharing and identities will be hidden. Where the researcher identifies a comment to be inflammatory, then this will not be shared.

Confidentiality Arrangements and GDPR regulations.

All data collected from interviews will be coded and anonymous. Care will be taken to ensure that all interviews that take place cannot be overheard; however, when working with your child, I will follow the safeguarding protocols of the school or setting in line with current legislation and guidance (Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2017)

A pseudonym will be chosen by your child or selected for her, depending on her preference. Your identity will also be hidden with a pseudonym which you can choose. All identifiable features such as place and school names will also be removed to protect identities. Only I as the researcher will have access to any personal data and recorded information. These will be stored on the University encrypted drive in a password protected folder. Your child's physical drawing will be scanned onto a secure folder within this folder, and the physical drawing will be released to your child once the project is written up. The drawing will remain their intellectual property throughout the project.

The anonymised data and findings will be used in conference presentations and potentially academic journal publications. No participant will be identifiable from the results of this study after analysis. The data will be kept for up to ten years after the completion of this study.

If you wish to raise concerns about how your personal data is used you can contact the Data Protection Officer on or +44 (0)121 331-5288 or Data Protection Officer, Information Management Team, Birmingham City University, University House, 15 Bartholomew Row, Birmingham, B5 5JU.

You may also complain directly to the Information Commissioner at Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF, further information available at www.ico.org.uk

Participant Rights

You have the right to be informed about every aspect of this study before giving consent if you wish to participate. You may withdraw from this study at any stage (without prejudice) until the thesis is completed and published. You have the right to anonymity and data protection. If you have any concerns about the study or require further information, please contact me directly.

Details of Supervisors

This research is supervised by Dr Carolyn Blackburn (Carolyn.Blackburn@bcu.ac.uk), Dr. Stephen Griffin (Stephen.Griffin@bcu.ac.uk) and Dr Zoe Lewis (Zoe.Lewis@bcu.ac.uk).

If you have any questions or concerns that you do not wish to address to me, please contact HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk or a member of my supervision team.

Project Lead Contact Details:

Miranda Barker

Email: Miranda.Barker@mail.bcu.ac.uk

Telephone: 0121 387 4796 (This is my work number and as such will only be available during working hours)

Thank you for your consideration of inclusion in this project. If you have any questions about this, please do not hesitate to contact me on the email or telephone number above.

Yours faithfully,



Mrs Miranda Barker

4. Participant Information Form - Teacher

Participant Information Sheet: Teacher

Dear

I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study which is entitled '**Exploring the experiences of autistic girls of their daily transition between home and school.**' The purpose of this information sheet is to provide you with further detail about this project, so that you can decide whether you would like to take part.

Background to the Study

This educational doctorate study is rooted in my own experiences of the morning journey between home and school as an autistic child, as the mother of an autistic daughter and through my experiences as a primary and then specialist teacher, supporting families with improving their experiences of school.

The aims of this study are:

1. To raise awareness in the participants and educationalists of the experiences of autistic girls of this transition.
2. To give autistic girls the opportunity to reflect and share their thoughts of this transition and thus empower them as individuals.
3. To inform future research around home school transitions and developing environments for autistic girls.

This will be done by asking the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of children, parents, and class teachers of the embodied experiences of autistic primary-aged girls, as they transition between home and their school setting?
2. What moments are identified as those that positively or negatively influence the autistic girls' transition between home and school as identified by the girls, their parents, and the class teachers?

3. What are the coping mechanisms employed by children, parents, and class teachers to mitigate any challenges this transition may present for autistic girls?
4. How can we facilitate a greater collaborative understanding of autistic girls' experiences of navigating the home school boundary to inform future practice?

Who has been invited and why?

I am inviting girls who have a diagnosis of autism and who are between the ages of 7 and 11 years old to participate along with their parents and their teachers. This is to provide a 3-dimensional picture of this transition, drawing on parents', pupils' and staff perspectives. There will be between 3 and 5 case studies included in the project. For this study to be undertaken, the child, parent and teacher must all consent to be part of the study.

Is participation voluntary?

Participation is entirely voluntary, and consent can be withdrawn at any time before the writing up of this research. However, if any of the three withdraw, the study will cease for the other participants in the triad. I will provide you with a consent form although if you require this to be in another format, please let me know.

Consent will be sought from yourself and from your setting as well as the child and parent identified above.

What to expect if you consent to participate in this study?

If you consent to this study, there will be five key interactions, but only 2 with yourself. These will be arranged to best meet your availability.

1. A meeting with the child and their parent either at home, at school or a neutral place. This meeting is to build relationships and will not be used for data collection.
2. A meeting with the child to draw their journey to school. We will meet either in their home or at school depending on your child's preference and the interview will be video recorded – this is only for my own viewing to recall the discussion. In this meeting, I will ask the child to draw or to tell me about their journey to school. If they choose, they can bring photographs so that we can build a collage. All identifiable features or persons will be removed/hidden from these photographs.
3. A meeting with the parent to talk about their experience of the transition. This will take the form of a walking or travelling interview where we will walk through the usual morning transition. Ideally this will take place outside of the usual school transition and

will be audio recorded. Again, this audio recording is solely for my research purposes and will only be heard by myself.

4. A meeting with you, as the child's teacher or a member of staff who knows them well. I will meet with you in school to talk about your understanding of the child's needs, their journey into school and how they present in the classroom. This will be audio recorded and will be around 1 hour in duration.
5. Following these meetings, I will transcribe the interviews and check with you, the child, and parent to ensure that my notes reflect what everyone wanted to say.
6. Initial findings will be shared. This can be online or face to face, individually or together.

Potential benefits of participation

There will be no payment to participants who consent to take part in this study, but it is acknowledged that there is a strong benefit in that participants can feel empowered when they are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful participation (Reason and Torbert, 2001).

By taking part in this study, participants will be helping the researcher to inform others through publication of the realities of this daily transition from the perspectives of children, parents, and teachers.

Potential risks of participation

The potential risks of participation have been identified as falling into two categories:

Risk 1: A participant may become distressed during the interview or post interview:

The potential risk to the child participants in this study is that they may become anxious about their responses and working with a new adult. To address this, a visual prompt will be introduced to the children in advance of our initial meeting to explain who I am and the purpose of the research.

I will then organise with you and the child's parent(s), an opportunity to meet with them in advance of the interview in a relaxed environment where they feel safe and comfortable, so that we can engage in a low-demand activity. This will be repeated until the child feels comfortable working with me. In the interview, it will be explained that they can pause or stop the interview at any time.

For yourselves, there is a risk that you may become anxious or distressed discussing this situation. Should this happen, then you will have the option to stop the interview and either continue at another time or withdraw from the process.

Risk 2: An adult participant may become physically injured during the walking interview.

There is a minor risk of physical harm due to slips, trips or falls but this will be minimised through taking safe familiar routes. For our walk around the school, I anticipate that there are risk assessments in place.

Risk 3: There may be damage to the relationship between home and school through the sharing of opinions.

There is a minor risk of damage to the relationship through the sharing of data. This will be mitigated by a clear focus on the child and their experiences. Opportunities will be provided for participants to reflect on their contributions prior to sharing and identities will be hidden. Where the researcher identifies a comment to be inflammatory, then this will not be shared.

Confidentiality Arrangements and GDPR regulations.

All data collected from interviews will be coded and anonymous. Care will be taken to ensure that all interviews that take place cannot be overheard; however, when working with the child, I will follow the safeguarding protocols of the school or setting in line with current legislation and guidance (Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2017)

A pseudonym will be chosen for each of the participants, ideally by the participants themselves. Your identity will also be hidden with a pseudonym which you can choose. All identifiable features such as place names and school names will also be removed to protect identities. Only I as the researcher will have access to any personal data and recorded information. These will be stored on the University encrypted drive in a password protected folder. The child's physical drawing will be scanned onto a secure folder within this folder, and the physical drawing will be released to the child once the project is written up. The drawing will remain their intellectual property throughout the project.

The anonymised data and findings will be used in conference presentations and potentially academic journal publications. No participant will be identifiable from the results of this study after analysis. The data will be kept for up to ten years after the completion of this study.

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Yours faithfully,



Mrs Miranda Barker

5. Permission of Access Request Form

Permission of Access Request

Dear...

I am writing to ask your permission to complete my study, **‘Exploring the experiences of autistic girls of their daily transition between home and school’** with members of your school community.

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide you with further detail about this project, so that you can decide whether you would be able to grant permission of access for this study to take place.

Background to the Study

This educational doctorate study is rooted in my own experiences of the morning journey between home and school as an autistic child, as the mother of an autistic daughter and through my experiences as a primary and then specialist teacher, supporting families with improving their experiences of school.

The aims of this study are:

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will be audio recorded. Again, this audio recording is solely for my research purposes and will only be heard by myself.

4. A meeting with the child's teacher or a member of staff who knows them well. This will take place in school to talk about their understanding of the child's needs, their journey into school and how they present in the classroom. This will be audio recorded.
5. Following these meetings, I will transcribe the interviews and check with the child, parent and teacher to ensure that my notes reflect what everyone wanted to say.
6. Initial findings will be shared. This can be online or face to face, individually or together.

Potential benefits of participation

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For yourselves, there is a risk that you may become anxious or distressed discussing this situation. Should this happen, then you will have the option to stop the interview and either continue at another time or withdraw from the process.

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Thank you for your consideration of inclusion in this project. If you have any questions about this, please do not hesitate to contact me on the email or telephone number above.

Yours faithfully,



Mrs Miranda Barker

6. Data Analysis – Samples of Familiarisation and Coding

spoken quickly - echoes feeling of panic. Need to keep her calm.

conversation on the way to school or, you know, after? And she's "No, no no no" and I'm like, ah, she's losing it. She's losing it. So I'm like, "OK, just try and tell me a little bit quickly." So that's really tense always because she feels like she's got to get to the end of what she's got to say. And she went through this period of time where if you interrupted her, so if Daddy poked his head round the door and said "Where are the keys?" or something?, she'd be like, "I've got to start again from the very beginning and you're going. Shoot me now." Because she'll tell you every single detail. What the hair looked like, what colour it was. This is a big thing a very big thing. And she'll restart sentences again, again and again, and it gets really annoying.

Need to keep siblings apart. Separation is important. Impact on whole family.

And it's really hard if sister's around. So I have to get them ready, she down stairs and one upstairs generally so they don't interfere with each other, so it just means that I am up and down a lot. Stresses Moon out big time because she's a dynamo and Moon needs time and calm. So yeah, every morning we have these conversations where it has to restart them. She gets quite harassed if you're trying to hurry her along, but she does take a very long time telling you what she wants to say but eventually we move past that, get into the bathroom. Normally before literally we've got through the door, another conversation is starting. I'm putting toothpaste on. She won't put toothpaste on the toothbrush or normally get it out. So I do then normally to save time because she's started another conversation. She doesn't realise. She just doesn't get it. So I'm like, let's finish it afterwards and so it just depends on the frame of mind. Sometimes, depending on how urgently she needs to get it out, yes, she will dig her heels in a little bit more about "I've got to finish this first", and then she'll go to too. She's terrible for wanting me to wipe her bum in the morning. She doesn't want to do anything of that. I think it is the germs thing. She doesn't like wiping her bum full stop. But she's so much better than she was. She tends to be fine during the holidays because she's got nothing to rush for. If we've got a relatively relaxed day, she can cope with all of those extra demands that worry her on a busy day. She's just far too overwhelmed to even contemplate it.

- No day is the same. Overwhelm results in a form of shut down!

I always say "Come on. You can do this. You can do this and I'm not going out the bathroom. I'll stay. Then you can wash your hands and be fine. But she's like it's just too much."

→ Importance of staying. Positive language.

This is her sanctuary, and she does just literally walk through the door and the clothes start flying.

→ home as a place of safety.

00:58:04 Speaker 3

And you're trying to catch something, and saying "Could you at least just give some to me?"

M: Lovely. So you sneak downstairs. So if I drew some stairs. OK, just apologies for the drawing. Right. But you sneak downstairs. And there's two of you, you and Harry, and you've come in the lounge where you've got a whopping great telly, haven't you? Is that where you do your gaming?

S: Yeah, Harry plays on the PlayStation and then I usually go on the iPad.

So Harry's there with his PlayStation controller, which is not great and you're on the iPad like that. So all of your hair there. You can correct me and take over if you think it's going really badly. OK. And you're thinking. I've got till o'clock, is that right?

S: Hmm hmmm. So I'm going to get like 2 hours on it.

M: OK, so you got two hours. What happens next?

S: Mum wakes up but Mum's in a banana costume. Adds the creative.

M: Mum's in a banana costume? Love it. Love it. Human. Yeah, but banana costume. There's her feet. Is that what it looks like? So she comes downstairs. And what does she say?

S: (Very quickly) Get dressed.

M: OK and what do you think when she says get dressed?

S: Errmmmmmm. I don't want to go to school (very quickly) area she is less keen to discuss.

M: I don't want to go to school. Right. Fair play.

And how would you say you were feeling?

S: Annoyed.

M: Pardon?

S: Annoyed.

M: Annoyed? OK.

S: And then King Kong broke into our house and stole all our cup noodles, which are my favourite, I love cup noodles.

M: OK, let's put King Kong in there. I'm just quickly drawing some cup noodles.

Oh yes, OK, so you've got King Kong with the cup noodles, those come through the window. Is that alright? OK, to get the cup noodles. OK. So what happened after that?

S: And then King Kong leaves.

M: OK, so he's left. He comes in, he goes out. OK. And what's next?

S: And then Pterodactyl comes in.

M: But what happens to you?

S: A Pterodactyl comes in and picks me up and flies me to school.

M: A Pterodactyl. I'm not very good at pterodactyls, but I like how you're making this challenging. OK?

S: He picks me up and then puts me in his nest.

M: OK, so take you into his nest, OK?

S: And then...

Character are coming in and out of the house.

→ Presence - this is happening to Sarah.

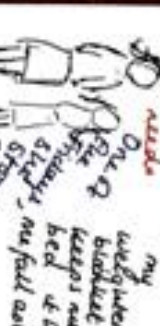
Reading and re-reading, highlighting phrases and recording reflections



a physical barrier

I sure presented with a brick wall. There are towns where from the moment they awaken up, she physically goes for you.

The teacher is very hard to learn and has needs



One of my unglued booklets keeps me in bed it helps! I'm sorry, my fault asleep.

She put the book over her head. I think she was trying to hide from me and get a little bit of peace.

It's funny normal a good friend see what she does feel we're doing nothing.

Usually... she often made a table bag for straps of the base. Another thing is that she might say 'Morning' to you and just look at you and look away.

She'll smile & laugh at us, not smile to anyone, not acknowledge anyone. Mike & I know!



I don't have a terrible dream but like this

But his serious now but he's really funny.

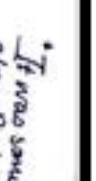
She has a habit of saying 'I'm sorry' to me.

OK! OK! You made to me. I'm sorry!

It's funny she says 'I'm sorry' to me.

So if I have to sit on the carpet, my teacher let's me sit on the chair.

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I want my name

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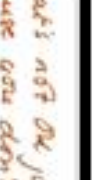
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Hand-drawn sketches of mechanical components. The top sketch shows a cross-section of a shaft with a central hole, a bolt passing through it, and a nut on the other side. The bottom sketch shows a side view of a bolt and nut assembly. The sketches are labeled with '1' and '2'.

I don't exit
all of them, it's
just some options
that I could do.
I sort of just
choose and make it

Annoying Konaldi.
I have to sit next
to that waiting a
talking radio the
broadcasts everything
we do.

1, I usually to the gate
where I see Mr. Skoff
who often looks at
but grumpy. So we often
imagine a bit like me, so girl",

Hand-drawn diagram of a neural network architecture. It shows an input layer with two nodes, a hidden layer with two nodes, and an output layer with one node. The input nodes are labeled 'input' and 'output'. The hidden nodes are labeled 'hidden'. The output node is labeled 'output'. The connections between layers are labeled 'w1', 'w2', 'w3', and 'w4'. The output node is labeled 'output'.

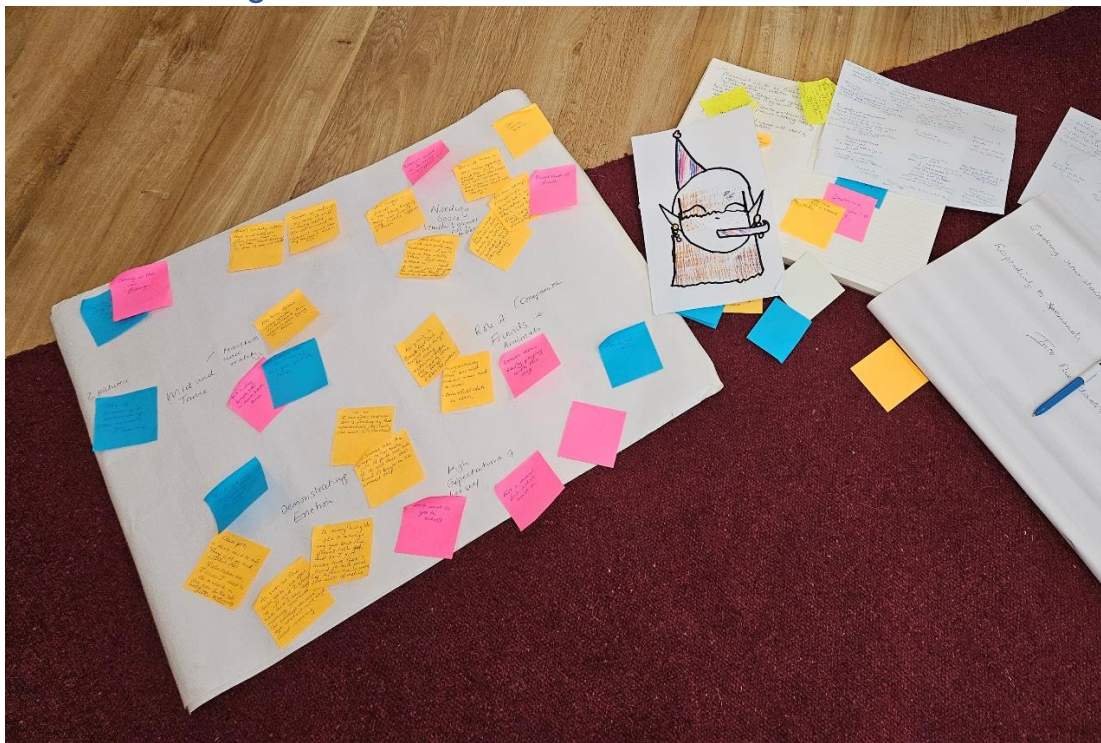
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Autumn:

A: Well, I woke once because of her snores, then went back to bed. Then Martha came up and she started jumping around on my bed. <i>Indistinguishable chatter.</i> RN: She's been a pain lately, so she has to sleep downstairs now.	I am disturbed by the cat which can affect my sleep.	<i>Autumn remarked upon the cat being a pain and disturbing her sleep.</i>
A: I don't know why but I always draw people with their hands in their pockets, it's probably because I cannot draw hands or fingers. <i>Quiet drawing and some noises from younger sibling.</i> A: And I don't know why, but I draw my eyes like they're lemons. M: Hmm. Well, that makes sense because they are oval, aren't they? eyes? A: They don't come out quite right, though.	When I am drawing people, they don't turn out quite how I want them to. I have ways of drawing people which make it easier for me.	<i>Autumn has her own way of drawing which helps her to draw people and places avoiding aspects that she finds difficult. In the interview, initially Autumn demonstrated anxiety about the quality of her drawing but as the interview progress, less reference was made to the art of drawing and more about what she was communicating through drawing.</i>
A: So, I go downstairs... A: OK, I go to L's room. Open the door. But cause I'm often up before Lucy. ... So, I pretty much just go into her room, open the door and rummage for my school clothes and my drawers cause. A: I really can't draw people on beds. M: It's very hard. To draw people in bed. A: I'm trying to draw L in bed but it's coming out more as somebody who has just had their funeral and has died. M: Well, if you give her a smile, would she be smiling. A: She's more... <i>(makes a toothy expression with a sharp intake of breath)</i> She makes pig noises when she's asleep. L is currently in Autumn's bed. M: No A: Yeah, she's like a little piglet in her bed. A: And we go to these drawers. L's drawers are here. M: Is that where you get your uniform from? A: Yeah. But we also have these little boxes where we store our PE stuff. M: Oh, so you know what you need for the day. Do you organise it yourself? A: Mum sometimes helps, but... pretty much. M: Wow, which is impressive. A: Just trying to draw the stuff on the drawers. Oh, my gosh, this is going to be the worst horse on L's drawers yet. It'll be like a big bear. M: That's cool to me.	I can organise my own clothes for school, and I make sure that I have everything ready in the morning. When I am drawing people, they don't turn out quite how I want them to.	<i>In this part of the narrative, Autumn is using the first-person active voice. She demonstrates agency in getting ready for school.</i> <i>Concerns shared about how her drawing does not always meet her expectations.</i> <i>Although she has not really complained about her sister being in her bed, she is using humour about her sister to deflect the conversation, likening her first to a dead body and then a pig. This, I interpret, is demonstrating her creativity</i>

A: The worst part is that now Ronald is obsessed with it, but it has to be the worst song ever. M: So, who's Ronald? Ah yes, the one who... A: Got snot in my mobo tea and keeps criticising me and saying that my star sign is not a good star sign. My star sign is vicious. My star sign is. No, not Pisces. That's his star sign. My star sign is Scorpio.	Other children have upset me.	Autumn shares repeatedly about incidents where other children have hurt her either through words or actions.
M: So did you not want to move that much. A: To be honest, I did. The house that we were in before was boring and was a dump. RM: It was a little place pretty small, not enough space for us. A:... and the area was full of chavs. One of them shouted at us for rubbish being on their lawn and it wasn't even our rubbish. M: But now you're in a nice place. A: Oh, and some of the others tried to make me play Wednesday. Everybody hates Wednesday. M: It's not a good programme is it? A: No, it's pretty much about murder, like in one of them, the girl called Wednesday puts piranhas into a pool. Not that I've watched it. Mum said she saw an advert about piranhas in a pool. M: That's not nice, is it? Yeah. I don't like thinking about death much. A: And other people got eaten.... At least it's not another movie called Bad Guys where a piranha jumps out the toilet to scare some random guy. M: Well, I haven't watched bad guys. A: Meh... it's a Netflix movie that some of the kids around the area wanted me to watch back then. I was very much meh I'll go with it then I'll sit in the shadows, and if you try to get me to do anything, I will... I will... use my karate. M: Marvellous. Do you know karate? A: No, but I want to. I could sort of do a karate kick though	I wanted to move. Other children tried to make me do things that I didn't want to do such as watch Wednesday. I want to sit in the shadows I want to be stronger and be able to fight back (use karate)	Autumn shares two perspectives here. She refers to sitting in the shadows when with kids in the past – demonstrating a tendency to comply. However, there appears to be an inner struggle where she would like to be able to fight back and use karate which is shared in the future tense.

6. Themes generation



Initial stages of theme generation for individual case studies using post-it notes, journals and drawings.

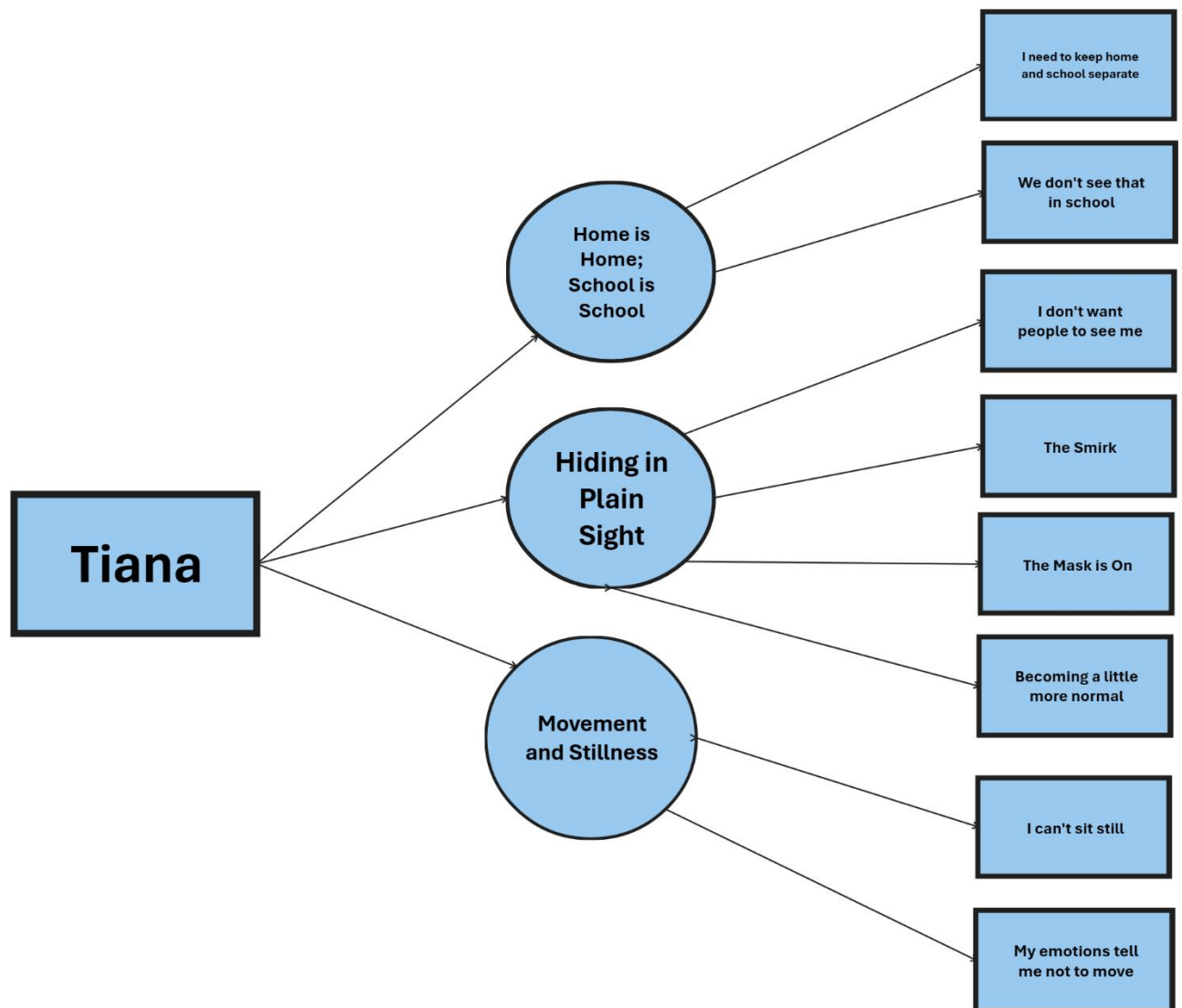
Autumn – Themes and Codes (Autumn, Arwyn, Kath/Kim)

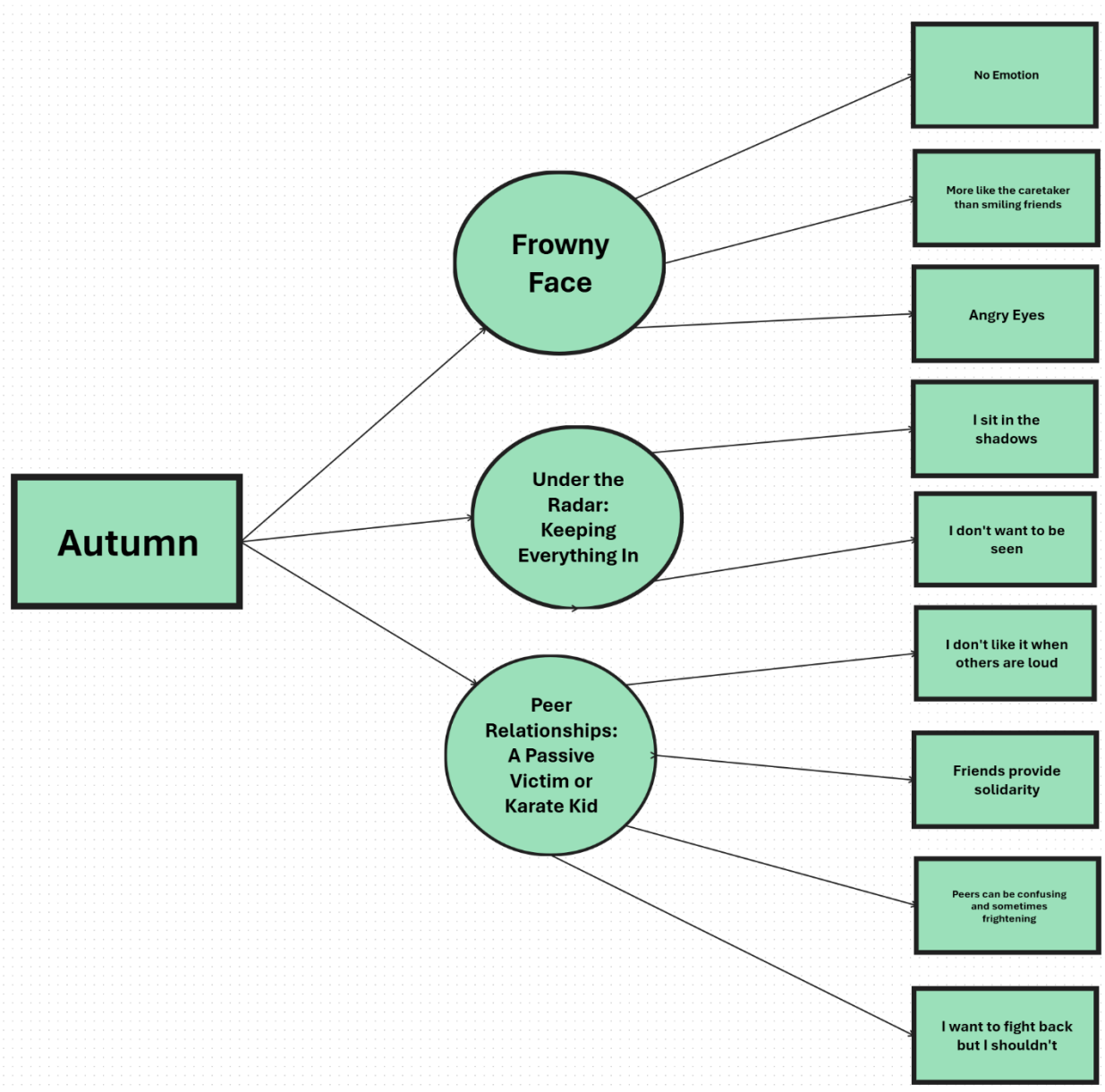
Theme	Codes	Excerpts from the text	Reflections
Theme 1: Frowny Face	No emotion 	A: My face is just most of the time, meh M: Do you do that on purpose or does it just sort of happen. A: It happens at school "... doesn't show that much emotion in their face," and presents as "polite... a bit timid." A: I don't really smile much. M: No – you have been since I've come here. You're smiling a lot. Is home different. A: Yeah – home is good place. School's a bad place.	Imagery in the drawing interview demonstrates a straight line for a mouth. Together with teacher's identification that she does not show much emotion in her face. This is not so much frowny as emotionless. Could this be a hiding of emotions as a form of mask?
	Frowny – compared to friends 	A: Erm... that's me – pointing at the person on the end. I'm frowny face. M: And then you've got the others. There's your friends smiling next to you. Autumn describes her friends as "... just smiling, reading and talking about the books."	Autumn's presentation looks all the more frowny when compared to that of her friends. She has drawn herself and describes herself as very different 'standing out'
	Frowny – similar to Mr Short	Mr Short, "... who often looks a bit grumpy, so he often looks a bit like me."	Instead, the person Autumn appears to relate to most is that of the caretaker.

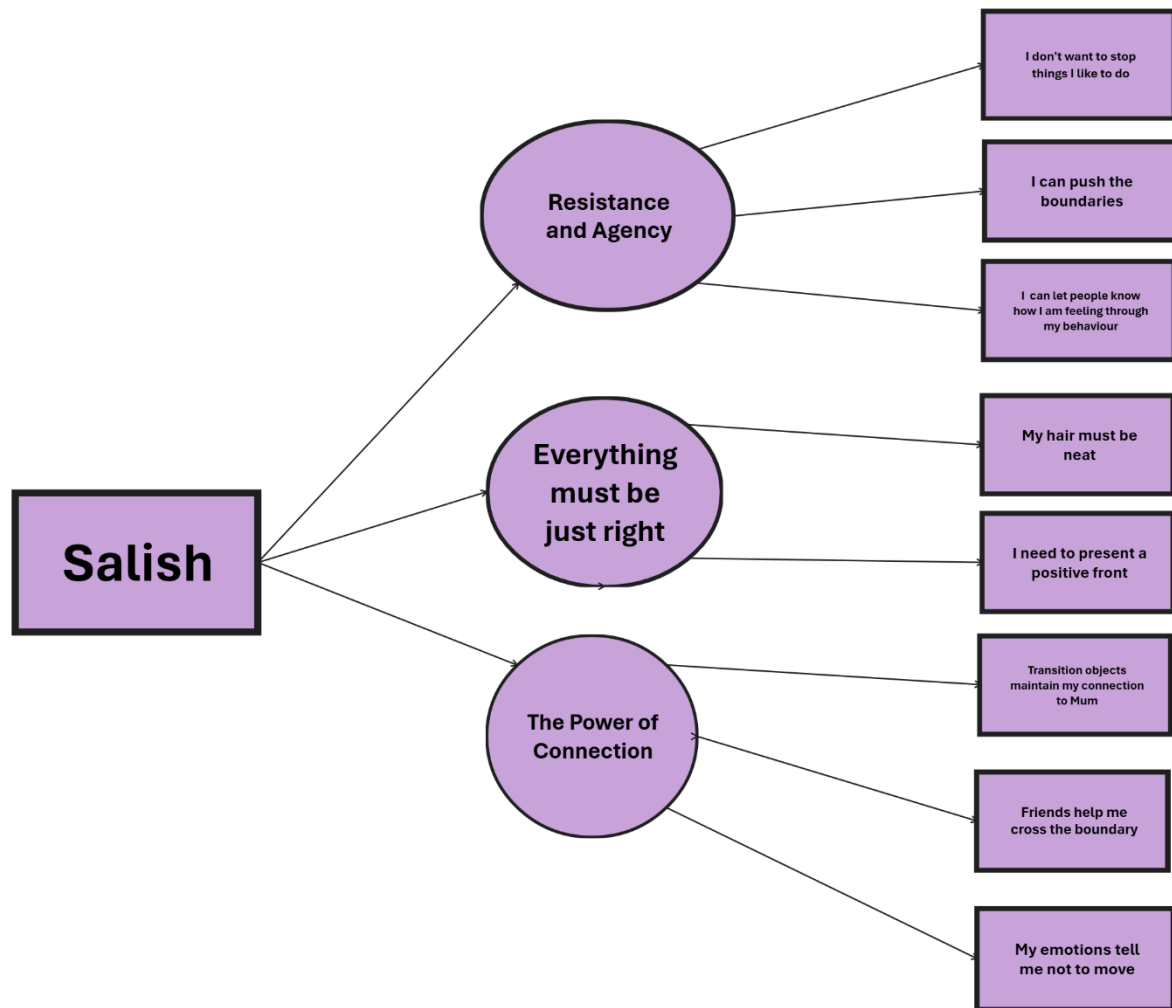
Influential Moments	Coding	Responses	Reflections
Theme 1: Getting ready in the morning	Grooming is a battle 	It can be times where she's quite defiant in terms of. I'm not going to brush my hair. I'm not going to brush my teeth. I'm not even going to get dressed. You know, I'm. I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to do that. And you're presented with that, and you hit a brick wall. So in the morning, she'd often get herself dressed. She'll be rolling. It'll be very much a repetitive "Tiana... Bring me brush and I'll brush your hair." She will not allow me to do it. That becomes a real battle. A physical battle, because why should she brush her hair? She'll brush it so there's a knot here. Here at the back. Yeah. School have commented a few times. Like, "Have you not brushed her hair?" And I'm like, "This is a battle that you have to pick." "What happened this morning... and it was something along the lines of her hair, I think which was the problem?" MB Of course, I think sometimes even the funniest people are serious in the morning. Is that your hair in the morning? T Yes (Smiling) MB Mine looks a bit of a mess too in the morning T Then I need to brush it all down MB Do you like doing that? Oh – my mum does it	Across the parent interviews, there are repeated references to refusal particularly around brushing hair and sometimes teeth. In both Tiana's and her mother interviews, the elements of grooming are mentioned but it is Mum's reflection which demonstrates the challenges of this. There were 18 references to hair across the dataset and 5 references to teeth.
	Clothing 	Her usual routine is to encourage her to get up and get dressed. That can be a faff. She can't do her own top button. She can't. She won't put a jumper on. I was surprised yesterday that she had this jumper on A. She won't wear a jumper. It's the material. It's not the usual cotton material. It's like weird material - the V-neck. So, she's gone backwards, and she can't get herself dressed. She can't get self in and out of clothes, which is really bizarre. It's like she's regressed. T: I need to get ready so I need to draw my school uniform. M: And how are you feeling when you say 'hi' to your brother? T: Yes, fine. It just my jumper is really uncomfortable. She used to chew through the end of her jumpers, but they were different material. So, this year, the last years with cotton. So, there's, like, a normal jumper. Fine. She would wear that religiously. It's like a nice jumper. This year, it's like a completely different material and she won't, she won't wear it. She's like "No, I'm not putting that on"	There is also a reference to the changes in the jumper material and how this can now feel uncomfortable. Despite describing this exchange as feeling uncomfortable, Tiana has drawn a smile on her face

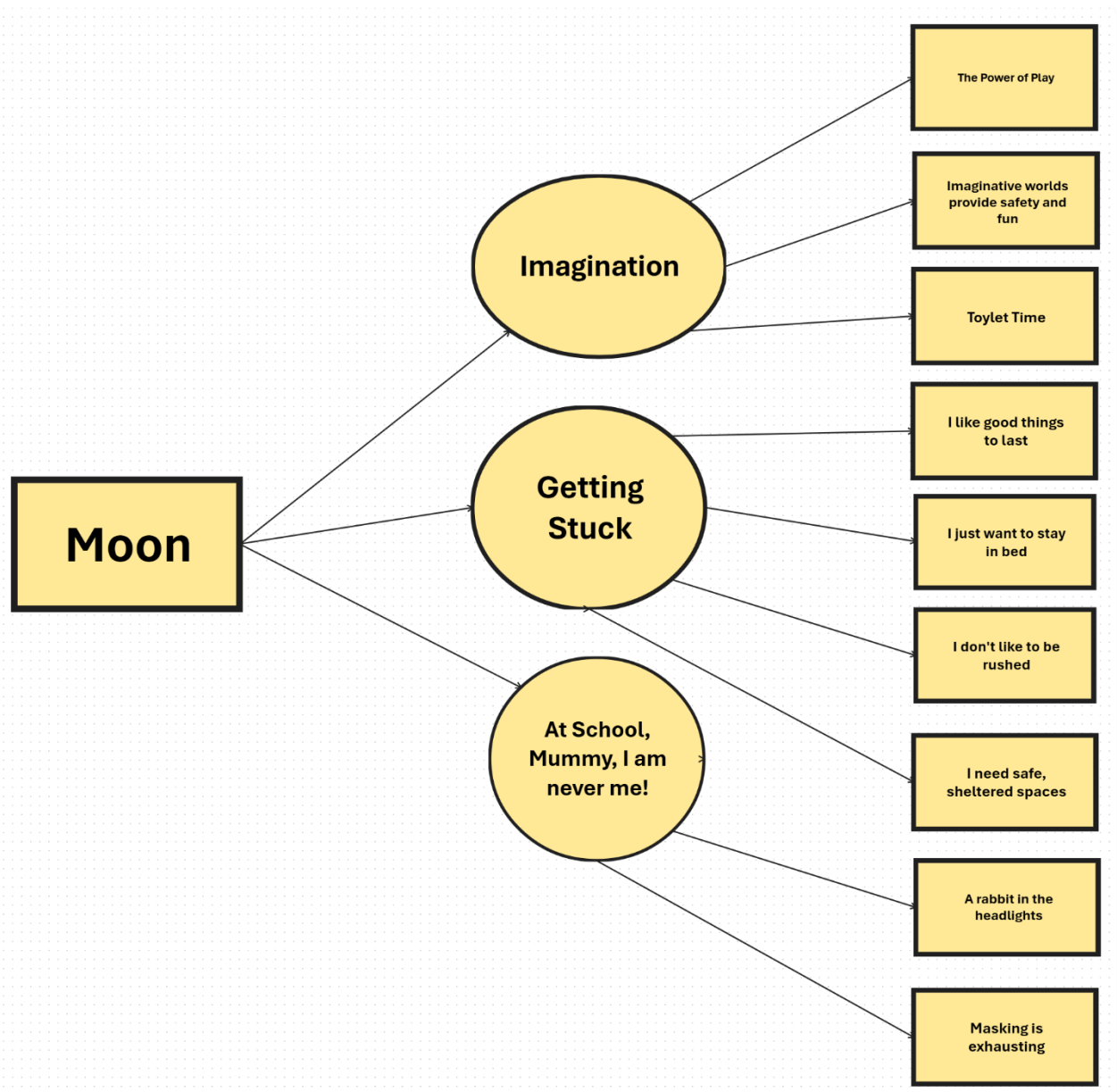
Influential Moments Moon Laura Simon			
Moment	Codes		
Getting Dressed	Clothes need to be comfortable/Soft 	Moon: Next it is... get dressed and I'm going to draw an unhappy face, because I don't like getting dressed MB: Why don't you like getting dressed? Moon: I don't like... I like very soft materials, and I wouldn't necessarily call this the softest. I love PE, because then the joggings are so soft with things like... I've got actual fluff. We discuss what Moon prefers to wear at home, and she replies, "Blankets and a very, very, very, very, very, very soft t-shirt" Getting changed is pretty much the worst part of the day. She doesn't like clothes. Not really, no. And when we do buy clothes, it's 99.9% of the time, it's never about what's fashionable or what looks good, it's just the comfort.	The repeated use of soft indicates the importance of texture for Moon. She draws herself with an unhappy face. Comfort is a <u>really important</u> part of clothing for Moon as identified by Moon and Laura.
	Alternative clothing is used to enable school attendance.	Moon: Socks Me: And you were talking about socks, aren't you? Moon: Yes, and then shoes. Me: Did you say you had to have the seam in the right place... Moon: Yes. I need bamboo socks basically. If she could be in PE kit every day, or if they could just make school uniform a little bit more friendly for those that do have sensory needs, she'd be happy. At one point, we enrolled her in clubs, pretty much so that she could wear PE kit all week it was just so much easier, getting her into those nice comfy clothes.	Adaptive clothing has been helpful for Moon – seamless socks. More expensive/exclusive? Demonstrating agency. Finding ways to negotiate with the rules <u>in pace</u>.

7. Themes and Subthemes for the Individual Case Studies

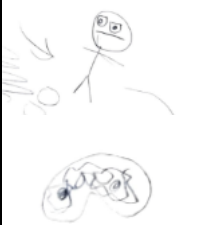








8. Collective Discussion Themes - Samples

Conforming and Resistance			
Theme	Images	Text	Reflections and Connection to Literature
Looking the Part		"It's just my jumper is really uncomfortable." In another awful school they ended up having to be taken out within a couple of weeks and home educated as it was just far too much for her. So, they had a phobia of children in school uniform for a good few years. (Arwen) "I'm even more death eater today!" She doesn't like clothes. Not really, no. And when we do buy clothes, it's 99.9% of the time, it's never about what's fashionable or what looks good, it's just the comfort. If she could be in PE kit every day, or if they could just make school uniform a little bit more friendly for those that do have sensory needs, she'd be happy. At one point, we enrolled her in clubs, pretty much so that she could wear PE kit all week it was just so much easier, getting her into those nice comfy clothes. Where she will get up, I'll have to get her clothes for her and give them to her and say you need to get dressed. It can take a lot of persuading for her to get dressed, and there's usually a lot of screaming and tantruming, because I've asked to get dressed... (Kerry, Salish's mum)	Relation to Literature: Dussel, (2004), "School uniforms are signs and signifying practices that carry along meanings about identity and difference" Goffman's presentation of self (2022) Mesa and Hamilton (2023) Connection to Themes Care; Rhythms – 'get a bit more normal' Theoretical framework: Taking on the image of the oppressor; The use of uniform as a form of dehumanisation – no longer authentic selves. The use of routines and rules to bend the students to the way of the oppressor. The oppressed feeling a conflict inside themselves.
Following the Rules		"She just behaves. She just behaves and follows the rules. It's very interesting. Even you saying that, makes me think, you can imagine how it is for her and getting home and that different world and the way she can behave and interact." (Simon, Moon's teacher) Autumn as "...extremely polite even if she wants to talk to us, she will just sort of stand there. She'd never call out... She's very much knows the rules." "...not one of those children that you notice all the time." (Kath and Kim). Autumn is also observed to be "quite quiet" and "her body language is quite... (tightens her body bringing the shoulders in)". "She needs everyone to follow the rules as well. If somebody breaks the rules, it's just so offensive to and she just. She can't leave it and then she'll come home, and she'll tell me about somebody breaking the rules." (Kerry, Salish's mum)	The use of uniform as a form of dehumanisation – no longer authentic selves. The use of routines and rules to bend the students to the way of the oppressor. The oppressed feeling a conflict inside themselves.
Feeling Conflicted		Moon: I want to be at school, but I want to be asleep. And then sometimes I ask my mum, Why can't I bring my bed to school and have that be my desk? M: But he hasn't teased you about noises or anything? R: To be honest, he has. M: Has he? R: Yeah, it gets annoying. It makes me want to murder him. M: Please don't. MB Really, really nervous and it's too much? So when I get really nervous, sometimes my tummy hurts and my head hurts and I find that really hard. Is it that you can't move or...? T It's kinda like I my emotions say don't move. MB So it's kind of like your emotions in your mind have said don't move.	

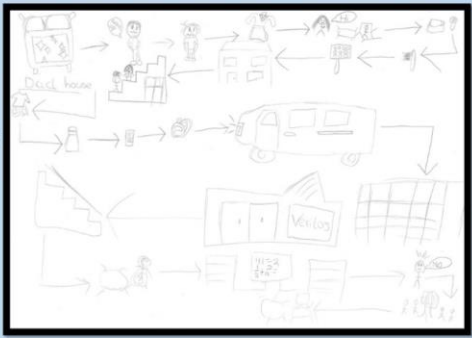
		... and on a good day. T Then I kind of stand up and then I just sit back down. R: Yeah, I won't, because that will be committing crime and then I'd go to prison. Angry dragon me. You do not want to see.	
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"I've Got You" – Caring for Autistic Girls

Theme	Images	Text	Reflections and Connection to Literature
Care – Need for Proximity and Physical Connection		A: It's like that attachment. "My mum's now gone downstairs. I have to go downstairs." If I asked her to say, go downstairs and cause your sister's here like her older sister does a lot. Like if I say, "Go and have your breakfast," she'll say, "I'm still doing this" or "I'm still getting ready." You'll often find that she likes to mirror what I'm doing. M: And would you hold her hand or would you just walk beside her or? R: No, I don't think. She's not a hugger or like that. M: She doesn't like that sort of affection. P: She likes hugging mum and stuff. R: She likes soft things and she likes things to sort of touch, but no, she doesn't seek that. And she's so very, very firmly attached to me, partly because of everything she's been through, but she's just always been that way anyway, so not separating from me is a really big deal for both of them. And a lot of it is just I don't want to leave. I don't want to go to school because I don't want to leave you, I want to be with you. It's amazing, but it's exhausting. Pippa: I think the only thing as I say is the difference between now and when how she was when literally she would, chase her mum as well. So, even if her mum left her, she would chase her mum and cling on and scream. So it was a real.... Rachael: It was distressing for everybody, wasn't it? M: And a lot of it was about mum then? Pippa: It was. It's definitely that kind of attachment thing there as well, yeah. So when I'm on duty, I'll stand in the corner because that corner scares the life out of me because they come bombing round, and they don't slow down and and one of the Fridays she just stood with me the whole time. Yeah, but when the class were walking past. So like people that she knows, she would be like, "So, what you playing?" and would be talking to people and chatting and then she would be like, "What are you playing today?" Then what happened was, she was back to me telling me her stories like she was at her Dad's, "We had a takeaway... would you believe how much it was!" And I think I was quite shocked at that because, you know, she was telling me a lot about home, so I kind of just went with it. I was like, OK, she's... Moon: No, that was from last night and I'm going to do it from today I guess. I'm going to draw myself going down the stairs and clinging on to my dad's legs. Oh, do you cling on to your dad's legs? Yeah, I do that every day because that's the sort of how we say that we love each other. We call it koala dad	Relation to Literature: Bowlby v Freud? Importance of side by side and connection (Children's Geographies – Morris et al, 2022) Davy (2019) – p102 Reading around Transition – van Gennep and Packer et al (All Change) Connection to Themes Rhythms Identity

9. Slides to Check Accuracy of Transcription with Child Participants

Tiana's Journey to School



At Home

"So... my morning. We wake up at my dad's house. I was like a bit goofy, still tired"

"No one else in my family has a weighted blanket except for me. I used to have my own room but I share with my sister. My mum says she's going to put me in my own room as it is better for me to calm down."

"I have to get my breakfast and do my teeth and my hair."

The Journey

Then I go to my mum's house and walk upstairs and see my brother. After he done his hair, I go tidy my room. So I get my bag and I go to my mum's car.

Well, when my mom leaves the car, all of us kinda get annoyed with each other and don't talk to each other. My brothers just start chatting and I'm like *(makes blank, sad face)* I start thinking "What we doing, what we doing what we doing?"

Arriving at School

So basically, most days mum gets out at the same time and then Mum says, "So do you want to go to school and everything? And then she will take me in..." No, so if I've had a bad morning. And I basically won't, my mum has to be in school and get my teacher

MB And... what happens on a really bad day?
T I don't want to get out of the car and the backseat.
MB And when you are in the back seat, what are you thinking?
T (quiet voice) I'm going to die
MB You're going to die?
T No, like not, not actually die.
MB No.
T Like I just get really, really nervous... It's kind of like my emotions say don't move.

Salish's Journey to School



S: And then King Kong broke into our house and stole all our cup noodles, which are my favourite, I love cup noodles...

S: And then Pterodactyl comes in... and picks me up and flies me to school... He picks me up and then puts me in his nest... and then it drops me in the nest. Diptodocus comes and takes me onto the T-Rex's back, and then the T Rex gives me to a flying Stingray that doesn't breathe underwater, and then they give me to a killer Axolotyl, and then I ride my killer Axolotyl to school, then at Breakfast Club.

M: OK. So that's you in your classroom. And what are these bits here?
S: That's my book – my maths book
M: And how does it feel being in the classroom.
S: It's ok.
M: So, is it just going to school because you said you didn't want to go to school back here, didn't you?
S: No
M: So, is there any reason why you don't like going to school?
S: I just don't like it.

M: So Salish, what time do you get up?
S: 5:00.
M: So let's start with a 5:00. There we are, 5:00 AM. And how are you feeling when you wake up in the morning?
S: Good, because Mum gets us ready at seven but me and Harry usually wake for five and sneak downstairs to get a little like bit of time playing games.
Harry plays on the PlayStation and then I usually go on the iPad.

S: Mum wakes up but Mum's in a banana costume.
.... And what does she say?
S: (Very quickly) Get dressed
M: Ok and what do you think when she says get dressed?
S: I don't want to go to school
M: And how would you say you were feeling?
S: Annoyed

Waking up...



"I think I'm just going to draw my parents' bedroom because usually when I wake up, I go into my parents' bedroom because I need to go to the toilet."



"I didn't go to toilet time today because I was in a dream. It was about James. So, I have a habit of thinking James is Cat Noir. I keep having dreams about him being Cat Noir. So, we came to this lonely old house which looked more like a castle that's been stretched on stilts, and we turned into our secret hero forms and saw a hole, jumped down it and it led to soft play."

Getting dressed...



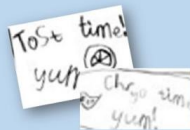
Getting changed is pretty much the worst part of the day. I don't like getting changed at all.

Next it is... get dressed... and I'm going to draw an unhappy face because I don't like getting dressed. Why don't you like getting dressed? I don't like... I like very soft materials, and I wouldn't necessarily call this the softest. I love PE because then the jeggings were so soft with things like... actually fluff.

Chillaxing



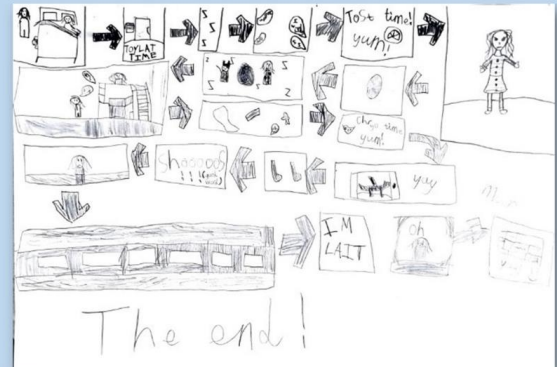
Throwing down the blanket, pillow and teddies



Eating toast or cheerios!

And then I'm like.. Yeah I'm waking up. And she's like 'Come on, pass me a blanket and pillow so you can chillax and watch TV while you eat your breakfast'

I just eat rather slow, because if it's some food that I really like, I want to keep it for longer. Taking little nibbles.



Autumn's Journey to School



And then where do you get to next? So, you drive or you go to the car and then do you get to the...
R: Makes mechanical noises whilst drawing the school fence and gate.
A: Ah - school fence
R: Continues to make mechanical and eek noises and then there's this one gate that's open with Mr. Short!
M: Mr. Short is that his name?
R: Yes. The guy who holds the gate.

R: Ok. What I do now... depends whether it's car or whether it's something else, but. We often walk but she sometimes take the car. This looks even worse than my car looks. L normal drives if we are driving so steering wheel - L. I'm going to draw flames coming out of it.
M: Wow, does the car go very fast?
R: No, L likes to drive it slow because he's still learning when I'm just imagining some crazy car that's alive.

We get in the car, or we walk. I'll do zoomy feet.
M: Ah, and who do you stand next to if you're walking, do you walk with?
R: Mum



So... Walk to school. Zoomy feet. I go through zip, zip, zip.
zip. I open the doors....
R: I don't really say much.
M: No. Do you keep it all inside?
R: Yes.

R: I need eyes. I need angry eyes.
M: Why do you need angry eyes? Who's angry?
R: Me - I don't want to go to school. School's boring.
M: So you feel angry?
R: Well, not really angry. Well, muh muh muh (making grumpy face)
M: Why do you think you feel muh?
R: That's me for some unknown reason I'm balding.
M: You can always add hair on if you want to.
R: I don't really smile much.
M: No - you have been since I've come here. You're smiling a lot. Is home different.
R: Yeah - home is good place. School's a bad place.



. And I'm just going to draw the row of boys there. And they're just like 'Muh, I'm gonna draw in my spelling book.'
M: They draw in their spelling books
R: Yeah - That's Ronald and Oliver and I'm just going to draw what happened with the rubber incident. That's the rubber block. It's a block brick rubber and it throws. It goes all the way across the table.

M: It sounds like it was really traumatic for you, Rowan.
R: So 'Miish' then react... and I'm going to draw people laughing. So they're laughing.
M: So, as you're going to school, do you worry about it?
R: Yeah. And then they're laughing. And then there was just another thing where I couldn't sleep at a sleepover cause it smelt funny and their neighbours were making loads of noise, so I had to go home... and then the next day, Ronald was whispering it across to the next table which is there (points) as he used to sit there.
He whispered it across to Leon and Leon shouted out in front of the teachers in front of class everything that I didn't want to be spurted out and I decided to go 'waaahhh.' It was really annoying.

10. Sample of Journal Reflections – Written Notes

Just met with Autumn's teachers ready for the interview and to gain their permission. Something that I hadn't considered which has come up today is that teachers are not seeing the pupils coming into school and therefore this is something that I really hadn't realised had changed since my own practice. This shows the datedness of my experience and role. The first teacher did, to an extent, in that she saw Tiana coming in on specific days, but the child is always crossing that abyss or limbo with no presence from the teacher or the parent so there is somebody else in that 'in-between' space. This will be a gap in the research in that I am learning from teachers and parents and the only person who can tell me about that gap is the child. The other issue is that people are signing up to research with the help of research; either the parents with the support to understand what is happening and the teachers particularly welcoming an outside view and support. This is why my training has been so helpful, and it has been about providing information and support. Other issues – there was a lot of confusion about what the teachers did or didn't know about the family and therefore I had to be careful not to 'share' in a way that could upset parents and the child whilst leading to a supportive outcome.

Journal Reflection Sample – Transcribed Voice Note.

OK, so I just finished my interview with Autumn. Really different to what I was expecting. I was expecting to be doing this interview at a table, maybe with mum, downstairs but instead it was upstairs with the siblings, which was an interesting dynamic and very much, on the floor, colouring, very much in **her own time and space and control** which actually felt quite genuine. I liked her very forthright approach and I think for this young lady there was a little bit less of an understanding of emotional vocabulary which impacted on how much she could tell me. She tended to use a lot of facial expressions and noises e.g., “**Mwh**” or “**Meep!**”

An interesting comment came as she was coming down the stairs as she was remembering her morning routine, which was actually what I was trying to capture with walking interviews with the parents and maybe I should have been braver and done the walking interviews with the children. As we were walking down the stairs, Rowan said, “Another thing that I hate about the morning and being upstairs is having the litter tray at the bottom of the stairs because the cat would use it in the night and she found the smell difficult. The smells appear to be an issue and a really interesting addition.

In the drawing interview, she struggled to visualise the aspects of the walk. There does need to be a walk in order to capture the journey from home to school. I have a lot of data about how they are feeling and presenting themselves, but the individual spaces and places are more limited. In terms of ethics, I probably need to remove anything where the other siblings were speaking although by virtue of them being in the room that may have impacted on her responses. It was really interesting to see how she chose to conduct the interview up in her room and perhaps felt like a safer space. It felt much more that I was in ‘**her life**’ which has been aided

by the relationship that I have built with mum and building time with the girls not being a threat. It was really good. I was worried when she went to the toilet that she was letting me know that she didn't want to continue, but this was almost a self-imposed bit of space which helped her. She returned very happily with snacks for us all that she had from her Mum!

11. Sample of Training Materials



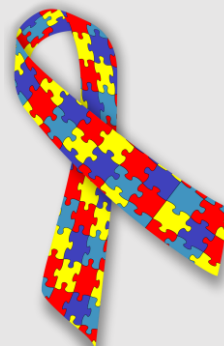
What to expect?

- What might be signs of autism in girls?
- What does research say about the challenges of school for autistic girls
- Emotionally-Based School Avoidance/Distress
- Different approaches and examples of effective practice



What language do you use to describe and understand autism?

- Autistic
- Has autism
- Neurodiverse?
- Neurodivergent?
- Quirky?
- Aspie?
- Aspergers?
- On the spectrum?
- Special?
- Super-powers?



Language – what do you think?

Do say	Avoid saying
Autistic Person	Person with autism
Is autistic Has an autism diagnosis	Has autism Suffers with autism Living with autism Is autistic/aspie
Autism is a spectrum condition	Everyone is on the spectrum somewhere Everyone is a little autistic
Condition	Disorder Dysfunction
Not autistic/non-autistic Neurotypical people	Normal people

NAS, 2015

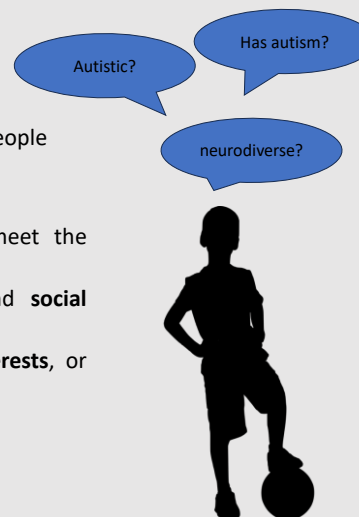
What is autism?

Autism is a developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. (NAS, 2023)

The Diagnostic Manual (DSM-5) identifies that to meet the criteria for Autism, there will be:

- A. **Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts**
- B. **Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities**

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013)



Depictions of Autism in the Media



“Our results showed that the coverage of autism increased slightly over time, especially in broadsheets and left-leaning newspapers. Newspapers emphasised adversities associated with autism, often **used negative language**, and tended to focus on **boys**.” (Karaminis et al, 2022: 1092)

The 'female protective effect'

Potential explanations for the delay in diagnosis include:

- **Biased diagnosis process** towards male presentation (Gould, 2017)
- **Lack of awareness** of how this presents in girls
- **Less 'unusual'** restrictive interests (Ratto, 2019)
- Tendency to **camouflage** (Tierney et al, 2016)

Autism is a behaviourally defined condition



What do we know about autism and girls

- Girls with autism are under-represented (Zwaigenbaum et al, 2012 and Dworzynski et al, 2012) and receive a diagnosis far later than males (Goodall, 202; Duvekot et al, 2017 and Hull et al, 2020) and require more signs of mental health concerns (Ward et al, 2021)
- In school, autistic girls can be overwhelmed with expectations of having to constantly engage with other children (Calder et al, 2012: 311) and find school's sensory environments challenging, leading to reduced participation and anxiety (Jones et al, 2020)
- Autistic girls regularly seek to actively mask their autism (Sutherland et al, 2017) and have an unusually strong desire to fit in with peers (Hiller, 2015; Sturrock et al, 2022)
- Difficulties with transitions are problematic.



Understanding Autism in Girls



Social communication and social interaction challenges



Highly focused interests or hobbies



Repetitive and restrictive behaviour



Extreme anxiety



Over- or under-sensitivity to sensory stimuli



Meltdowns and shutdown

National Autistic Society, 2023

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism>

Communication Differences

- Autistic children **may learn language in a different way**
- Some autistic children learn language through **learning whole phrases and repeating them in different contexts**
- Autistic children may use **echolalia**
- Some autistic children **may start to talk later** than others or a minimally verbal
- Some autistic children **start talking very early** and have a large vocabulary but may have gaps in their understanding.
- Some autistic children will struggle with **making eye contact** or **interpreting non-verbal communication**. (McCann, 2023: p16)



Friendship Differences

- Intensity of friendships may be different
- Number of friendships may be different
- Behaviours within the friendship may be more controlling or passive.

"Some autistic children withdraw from social situations because they are overwhelming, they are too unstructured, or they have had negative experiences before that have destroyed their confidence. Most autistic children do want to have friends, but they want friends who will accept them for who they are, who will allow them to be themselves and who are kind. (McCann, 2023: p19)



Sensory Processing Differences

Children with autism will often demonstrate heightened senses (hyper-sensitivity) or require additional sensory feedback (hypo-sensitivity).

This could include:



Sensory Processing Differences



Why do we 'mask'?

- Why do you think we mask?
- What are the benefits or challenges of masking?



Camouflaging or masking in autistic girls

"Camouflaging consists of complex copying behaviours and/or masking some personality traits with an adaptive function that promotes adjustments into specific environmental demands." (Tubio-Funguerino et al, 2021: p2191)

As identified by Hull et al, (2017: p2530) "Consequences of camouflaging included physical and emotional exhaustion, often requiring time alone to recover to issues around identity and authenticity which led some participants to '... lose track of who I really am.'"



Anxiety – what helps us to feel safe?

I can accurately guess what happens next...

I can ask for help in a socially acceptable way...

I know that if it goes wrong, I can find and use effective solution – and my strategy won't cause me more problems...



Taken from Hendrickx, 2014 Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPD_yzMHJls

For autistic children, this might be...

I struggle to guess what might happen next – either through limited or overdeveloped imagination

I have fewer tools in my toolbox of strategies and might use one strategy or an extreme response.

I find asking for help and accepting help difficult.



Taken from Hendrickx, 2014 Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPD_yzMHJls

How might this present?

Anxiety – repeatedly checking in

Repetitive, obsessive thoughts

Meltdowns or shutdowns

Hair pulling or finger skin picking

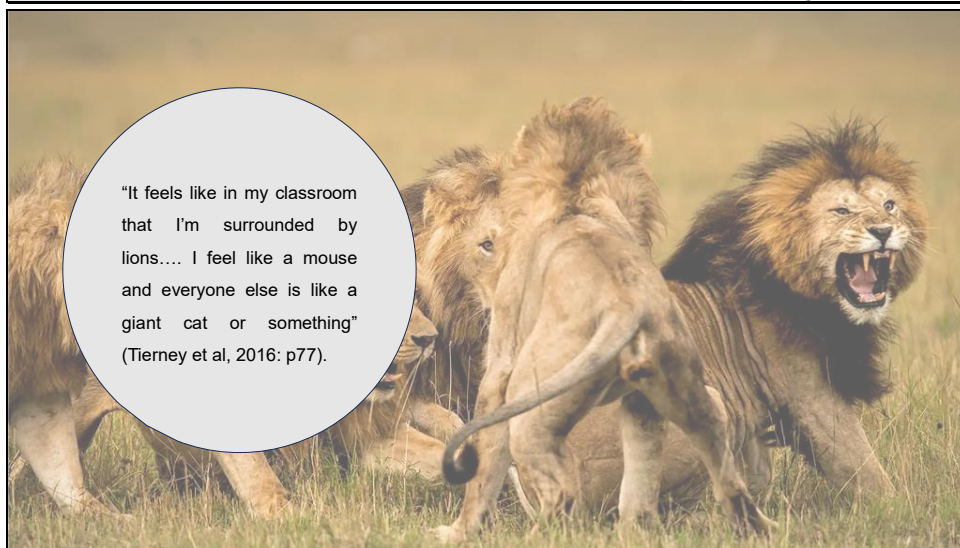


Autistic Girls in School – the Impact

- A place of great trauma and anxiety, (Hendrickx, 2019: 96)
- Social exhaustion (Calder et al, 2012, Sturrock et al, 2021, Cook et al, 2021),
- Experience emotional meltdowns or burnout (Suckle, 2020)
- Internalising of anxiety with associated mental health conditions: anxiety, depression, self-harming and eating disorders (Duvekot, 2017) and Happe, 2019)
- Increased levels of absenteeism and school refusal (Cook et al, 2017; Sproston et al, 2017)
- 43% of participants were persistently absent and being in a mainstream school increased chances of missing school by almost 100% (Totsika et al, 2020)

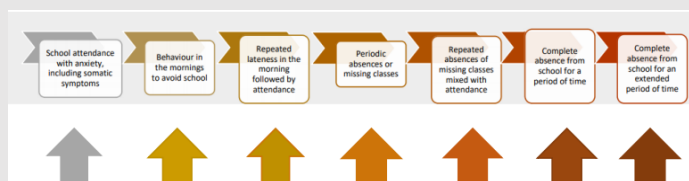


Kendall and Taylor (2016) reported that the challenges faced by autistic students and their subsequent impact on their mental health has led some parents to feel that they have no other choice than to withdraw their autistic children from the school system to be home educated (O'Hagan et al, 2021: 8)



"It feels like in my classroom that I'm surrounded by lions.... I feel like a mouse and everyone else is like a giant cat or something" (Tierney et al, 2016: p77).

Emotion Based School Distress/Avoidance



EBSA is different from absence relating to physical illness and truancy. Most young people experiencing EBSA can be highly anxious and show significant distress associated with attending school and/or engaging in aspects of the school experience. In many instances, CYP want to participate in their education even though they feel unable to do so. Parents are often aware of their child's school related anxiety, even when this is not apparent to school staff. Often, the young person's anxiety will reduce during weekends or school holidays. (South Glos Educational Psychology, 2023)

Functions of EBSA Behaviours:

Function 1

To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school, e.g., anxiety or low mood

Function 2

To avoid situations that might be stressful, e.g., academic demands, social pressures and/or aspects of the school environment

Function 3

To reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention from significant others, e.g., parents or family members

Function 4

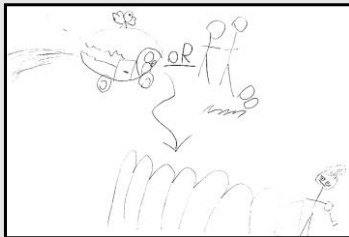
To pursue tangible reinforcers outside of school, e.g., going shopping or playing computer games.

"EBSA occurs when 'stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when 'pull' factors that promote school non-attendance overcome 'push' factors that encourage attendance' (Thrambiraja et al, 2008: p33)

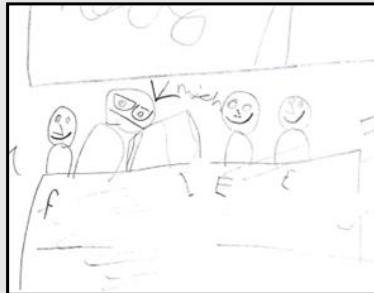
Autumn's Journey to School



"Frowny face"



Autumn is in Year 4 and attends a small school in the Midlands. She lives with her mother, step-father, two sisters and a baby brother. She has had previous experience of domestic violence and bullying at a previous school. She loves K-Pop.



Salish's Journey to School

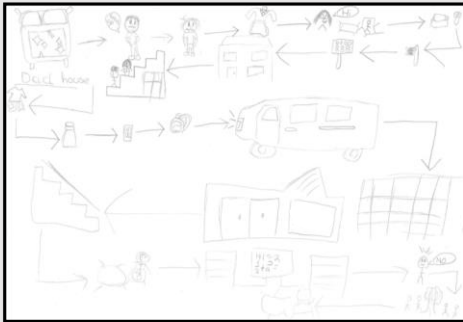
M: And how does it feel when you're walking to breakfast club.

S: I don't like it because Harry always runs behind my back and tries to get to Breakfast Club before me, but then when I'm running, he stops and starts shouting, like "Salish, it doesn't matter!"



S: A Pterodactyl comes in and picks me up and flies me to school... He picks me up and then puts me in his nest.
M: OK, so take you into his nest, OK?
S: And then... it drops me in the nest, Diplodocus comes and takes me onto the T-Rex's back, and then the T Rex gives me to a flying Stingray that doesn't breathe underwater, and then they give me to a killer Acyloxyl, and then I ride my killer Acyloxyl to school, then at Breakfast Club. (Salish, 2024)

Tiana's Journey to school



MB: What happens on a really bad day.
T: I don't want to get out of the car in the backseat
MB: And when you are in the back seat, what are you thinking?
T: (quiet voice) I'm going to die
MB: You're going to die?
T: No, like not, not actually die.
MB: No.
T: Like I just get really, really nervous. It's kinda like I my emotions say don't move.
(Tiana, 2023)



Moon's Journey to School

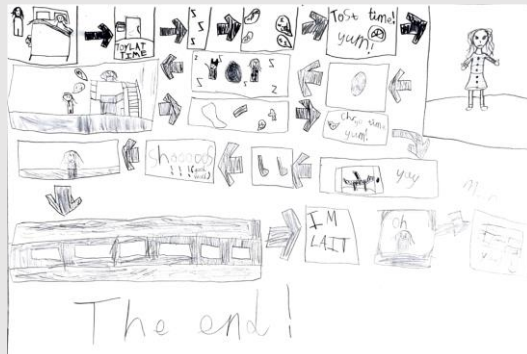
Moon: The reason why I played Roblox today is because I knew that I was going with them and there's a very relaxing game on Roblox. There's quite a few ones. There's, like, Fire Bobble, which is the least relaxing one, but it's still relaxing. There's also another one I can't remember what it's called. And there's also this one called Lost World and it's about creatures and the music on it is very, very, very, very, very, very, calming. (Moon, 2024)

Me: And how are you feeling when you're getting changed?

Moon: Not happy.

Me: No, and why are you not happy when you're getting changed?

Moon: Because my uniform isn't very soft and like this *(gestures to soft T-shirt she is wearing)*



Parental Perspectives

It depends what's coming up that day. On a good day. She's absolutely talking your ear off, and you've got to remind her to walk. On a bad day, she's like... I don't know how to explain but like this *(mimes being dragged downwards)* and I'm having to almost pull her along.

So, it's the moment she... It's pretty much like she stepped out of that car. I'm on this surface. That's all I can describe it as. I've stepped out. I'm on this surface. If I have to physically get her out, which has happened on various occasions. You'll get her through with her mask now and you'll get her into school, and you will get her all the way up until she has to speak to that teacher.

She doesn't like hair brushing very much so she'll get very upset if there's any bumps in her hair so we could spend ages trying to calm her down because she has bumps in her hair and there'll be tears.

The waiting for going in and all the kids and all of the people it was just too much and she wasn't going into the classroom.

If I say no, she gets all dysregulated and upset, and then it just... She doesn't like pressure.

When we were getting school refusal, to some extent we were getting her in but it could be an hour and a half, up to two hours late. That was a case of taking one step and then like a deep breath. It took a long time.

What were the strategies considered effective?

- Side by Side Caring
- Visual/Written Timetables
- Walking to School
- Chillaxing
- Reducing the number of transitions (Moon's bed)
- Supported Transitions (Who's on the gate?/ breakfast club?)
- Thinking pace
- The pets!



Reducing Anxiety

- Breathing Techniques
- Grounding Techniques
- Helpful Apps
- Distraction Techniques
- Understanding what is happening in my brain/body

Anxiety Ladder/ Incredible 5 - point scale

What does a 1-5 look like feel like?

What are:
5 things you can see
4 things you can hear
3 things you can feel
2 things you can smell or taste
Take 1 deep breath
(Rae, 2022)

What music helps you feel calm? Can you make a playlist for the journey to school or if you are anxious in school?



Emotion Coaching as Co-Regulation

Emotion coaching has 5 components:

- Express awareness** of low intensity emotions in themselves
- Viewed the **child's negative emotions as an opportunity for intimacy or teaching**
- Validated** the child's emotion
- Assisted the child in **verbally labelling** the child's emotions
- Problem solved** with the child, setting **behavioural limits** and **discussing goals** and strategies for dealing with the situation.

There are clear boundaries

Gottman, Katz and Hooven: 1996

Signposting

- <https://notfineinschool.co.uk/home>
- <https://www.teamsquarepeg.org/news>
- <https://www.donaldsons.org.uk/walk-in-my-shoes/>
- Tina Rae (2022) 'Understanding and Supporting Children and Young People with Emotionally Based School Avoidance'
- Felicity Sedgewick, Laura Hull and Helen Ellis (2023) 'Autism and Masking: How and why people do it and the impact it can have' Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.



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