"School should be a place where everyone feels comfortable and accepted": An exploration of autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools.

Katie Maria Roberts

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Abstract

Adolescence is a crucial stage for the emergence of mental health needs (Kessler et al., 2005), especially for autistic individuals who are likely to experience mental health challenges (Toseeb & Asbury, 2023). Most autistic pupils attend mainstream schools (National Autistic Society, 2021), placing these settings as key in shaping emotional wellbeing. Despite research recognising the unique needs of autistic girls and their increased likelihood of experiencing mislabelling or delayed diagnosis (Bargiela et al., 2016), existing school support models often neglect them (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010), leading to adverse emotional outcomes (Wild, 2019).

A systematic review of the literature revealed a gap in research exploring autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream schools. Consequently, this research employed a qualitative exploratory research design to explore the lived experiences of emotional wellbeing among four autistic adolescent girls attending mainstream secondary schools. Utilising individual semi-structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis, five group experiential themes were interpreted from the participants' accounts. This revealed the influence of the mainstream environment, classroom dynamics, relationships, coping mechanisms, and social integration on the participants' emotional wellbeing.

This research provides a distinctive contribution to existing knowledge by offering the unique perspectives of autistic girls navigating their mainstream settings. It reveals how relationships profoundly influenced their emotional wellbeing in school. Positive relationships with peers were particularly important, offering essential emotional support and a sense of acceptance. Similarly, positive relationships with teachers were necessary for academic engagement and emotional stability in the classroom, indicating a need for a whole-school relational approach.

The findings emphasise the need for tailored policies and practices to support autistic girls, including creating inclusive environments where they feel accepted and understood. This involves promoting positive learning dynamics, increasing staff understanding of autistic girls' needs, integrating interest-based learning, and fostering positive relationships through a relational approach. Educational psychologists are recognised as having a distinct role in driving these changes to improve the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls.

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To my fiancé Mason, thank you for believing in me. I am looking forward to spending our weekends together again.

1   Introduction

1.1 Overview

This chapter outlines the contextual factors shaping the research, positioning it within a national context that emphasises supporting children's mental health and wellbeing in education. It discusses language and terminology, highlights the researcher's positionality and interest in understanding the needs of autistic girls, and details the focus on exploring their emotional wellbeing in mainstream schools. An overview of the thesis structure is provided, outlining the content of subsequent chapters.

1.2 Context for the current research

This research is situated within a national context that recognises the promotion of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing in education, guided by government policies and initiatives (e.g., Department for Education [DfE] 2014; 2022). The UK Government regularly assesses indices of children's wellbeing to ensure their welfare (Office for National Statistics, 2020), and plans to expand mental health services over the next decade (National Health Service, 2019). The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the DfE (2018) advocate for high-quality mental health and wellbeing support in schools, including teaching pupils about mental health. Educational settings play a crucial role in providing support, with collaborative, multi-agency working encouraged for early intervention and prevention (DHSC, 2017; DHSC & DfE, 2018). Guidance from National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, 2022) on social and emotional wellbeing in education further highlights the active involvement of educational professionals in supporting mental health and wellbeing. This increased focus on promoting wellbeing in education has raised awareness of professionals' roles, the importance of early intervention, and the need for continuous support in schools.

1.3 Language and terminology

1.3.1 Autism spectrum disorder

The language surrounding autistic individuals subject to debate (see Botha et al., 2021). The researcher acknowledges the absence of universally accepted terminology for describing autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and the differing terminology between contexts (Kenny et al., 2016). The potential influence of language

on perceptions and attitudes has been considered in this research. Person-first language places the noun referring to a person before mentioning their disability, such as 'child with autism' (Gernsbacher, 2017). This approach prioritises the individual first followed by their disability (Kenny et al., 2016). In contrast, identity-first language positions the disability as an adjective before the noun denoting an individual, such as 'autistic child' (Gernsbacher, 2017). Identity-first language emphasises positive descriptors preceding nouns, potentially avoiding the implication of inherent negativity associated with disabilities (Halmari, 2011). Autistic adults in the UK support this perspective (Kenny et al., 2016) and guidance from the National Autistic Society (NAS) (2023) and peer-reviewed research (e.g., Bury et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2021) reinforces the use of identity-first language. Consequently, this research will use identity-first language.

1.3.2 Mental health and wellbeing

In this research, 'emotional wellbeing' and 'wellbeing' are used interchangeably to reflect a holistic perspective encompassing hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of wellbeing. This integrated approach considers overall wellness, including emotional and psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction, fulfilment, and purpose (McLellan & Steward, 2015). While the term 'mental health' is not explicitly examined, it is referenced within the broader concept of emotional wellbeing. The deliberate choice to focus on emotional wellbeing over mental health reflects a strengths-based perspective, prioritising overall wellness rather than solely addressing deficits or disorders associated with mental health (Vaillant, 2012).

1.4 Statement of positionality

My interest in the emotional wellbeing of autistic adolescent girls attending mainstream schools is rooted in my professional and personal experiences. I am currently a trainee educational psychologist at the University of Nottingham, and I am undertaking my professional practice placement in a local authority in North West England. This placement, along with my previous roles as a teaching assistant and assistant educational psychologist, has provided me with a direct understanding into the experiences of autistic girls.

In my previous professional role working as a teaching assistant in a special school, I worked closely with an autistic adolescent girl, developing a supportive

relationship that gave me insight into her unique strengths and needs. The smaller school setting and tailored support, guided by each pupil's education, health, and care plan outcomes, were well-suited to her needs. Through conversations with her and her family, I learned how they felt that her previous mainstream school had not adequately met her needs. This experience inspired me to gain a deeper understanding of the specific needs of autistic girls in mainstream schools.

In my previous professional role working as an assistant educational psychologist, I worked closely with autistic pupils, their families, and school staff to develop and implement support strategies. This role highlighted the gaps in current school support models, particularly regarding the needs of autistic girls. Further, my professional practice placement in a local authority has provided additional perspectives on the systemic changes needed to support autistic girls effectively. These experiences have broadened my understanding of the educational landscape and highlighted the role that policies and guidance (e.g., DfE, 2015) play in shaping supportive school environments.

Now working as a trainee educational psychologist, I am driven to conduct research that directly informs Educational Psychology practice. Recognising that autistic girls are often underrepresented in research (Hebron & Bond, 2019), this study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis to highlight their experiences and amplify their voices. Using this methodology, I aim to enhance our understanding of how to better support autistic girls in mainstream settings.

I recognise that my prior experiences shape my perspective on the educational needs and emotional wellbeing of autistic girls. While this perspective enhances my empathy and understanding of the participants' experiences, it also requires me to remain objective and receptive to diverse experiences, even those differing from my own observations. To address this, I engage in reflexive practices throughout the research process, including maintaining a reflexive diary and participating in supervision. These efforts are aimed at critically examining my assumptions and ensuring the research remains unbiased and authentic. The hermeneutic circle, which posits that understanding is achieved through a process of interpreting parts in the context of the whole and vice versa (Smith et al., 2022), underpins my approach. I continually move between my interpretations and the participants' narratives, allowing for a deeper, more nuanced understanding to emerge, while remaining reflexive to the

participants' accounts. Further information about reflexivity in this research can be found in section 3.5.

1.5 Focus and unique contribution of the current research

The evidence base on support for autistic girls in mainstream schools is growing (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2023; Morewood et al., 2019) and has explored various aspects, including situations leading to crisis points such as school exclusion (Sproston et al., 2017) and emotionally based non-attendance (O'Hagan et al., 2022), as well as the need for masking (Pickup, 2021). While there is increased acknowledgement of autistic girls thriving in school (Gould, 2017), their school experiences often adversely affect their mental health and wellbeing (Eaton, 2017; Wild, 2019). Previous literature suggests ways educational psychologists and professionals can support autistic girls' wellbeing in mainstream settings (Critchley, 2019). This study aims to enhance the discussion and provide implications for practice and research by exploring autistic girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools.

This focus aligns with the growing recognition of mental health and wellbeing support in educational settings (DHSC & DfE, 2018). Schools are crucial in promoting emotional wellbeing and positive mental health outcomes for all pupils (Atkinson et al., 2019). Understanding autistic girls' experiences in mainstream schools can identify strengths and areas for improvement in existing support systems, fostering more inclusive and effective interventions for their emotional wellbeing.

1.6 Overview of thesis

This thesis comprises five chapters. Following the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents the literature review, establishing the theoretical basis for understanding mental health and wellbeing, focusing on adolescents' wellbeing, and the role of schools in promoting wellbeing. Next, ASD is discussed including theories and sex differences before focusing on autistic girls. Chapter 2 also includes a systematic literature review synthesising existing knowledge about the impact of mainstream schooling on the mental health and wellbeing of autistic girls. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, discussing philosophical underpinnings, qualitative methodologies, and the rationale for using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Chapter 3 also addresses researcher reflexivity, ethical considerations, data collection methods, and strategies for ensuring quality of qualitative research.

Chapter 4 presents the findings, introducing each participant's context and exploring their experiences interpreted from the data using IPA. The participants' common and differing experiences are discussed to provide an understanding into autistic adolescent girls' emotional wellbeing. In Chapter 5, findings are discussed with consideration to existing literature and theories. Methodological strengths and limitations are evaluated, and the research's unique contributions are provided. The chapter closes with practical implications and recommendations for future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (CYP), particularly focusing on autistic CYP, with an emphasis on autistic girls. This chapter begins by exploring the evolving terminology relating to mental health and wellbeing, before providing a conceptualisation of wellbeing for this research. The prevalence of mental health needs of CYP in the UK will be reviewed and the role of schools in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing will be discussed.

The focus then shifts to autism spectrum disorder (ASD), identified as a vulnerable population for poor mental health (Toseeb & Asbury, 2023). The prevalence and theories of ASD are discussed, and the mental health and wellbeing of autistic CYP is examined before focusing on the challenges faced by autistic adolescent girls and the supportive factors in mainstream schools. This chapter conducts a systematic review of literature on the mental health and wellbeing of autistic girls in mainstream schools, guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria. Limitations of this review and implications for educational psychologists (EPs) and schools are provided before outlining the rationale, research questions, and hypotheses for this research.

2.2 Theoretical underpinnings of mental health and wellbeing

'Mental health' and 'wellbeing' are intricate concepts resisting simplistic definitions and are often used interchangeably (Weare, 1999). Extensive exploration of this topic highlights their complexity, emphasising the need for a comprehensive understanding (Vaillant, 2012). Research identifies two traditions for defining wellbeing: hedonism and eudaimonism.

Psychologists embracing hedonism consider preferences and pleasures of both the mind and body (Kubovy, 1999). From this perspective, wellbeing focuses on subjective happiness and judgements about overall positive or negative life aspects, and the avoidance of pain (Kahneman et al., 1999). Hedonism is linked to subjective wellbeing, covering life satisfaction, positive mood presence, and negative mood absence, often summarised as happiness (Diener, 2009). Hedonic wellbeing involves self-reported assessments of overall life satisfaction and the balance between positive and negative emotions (Diener et al., 1999). However, critics argue that hedonic approaches are reductionist, overlooking the inherent complexity of wellbeing (Kern et
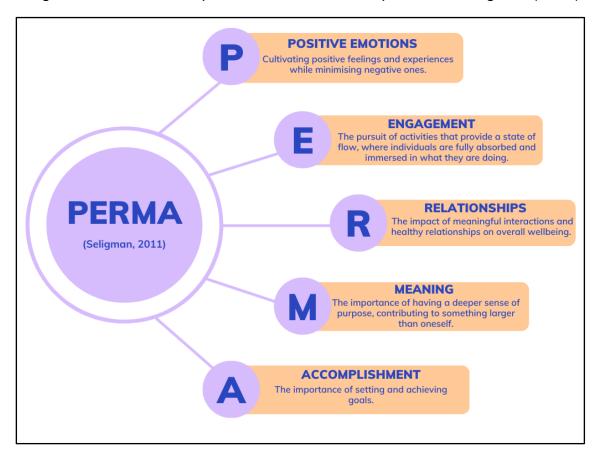
al., 2015), and focusing on these factors does not guarantee inherent 'happiness' (Ryan et al., 2008). Assessing wellbeing from a hedonic lens typically relies on one-dimensional self-report measures such as subjective wellbeing questionnaires. This assessment is limited because findings are susceptible to the influence of an individual's current emotional state which could introduce variability that may not accurately reflect aspects of their overall sense of wellbeing (Huppert & So, 2013).

Conversely, eudaimonic wellbeing emphasises deeper purpose and self-realisation (Waterman, 1993). It offers a broader perspective on wellbeing, going beyond transient emotions and subjective evaluations (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2018). Ryff et al.'s (1995) psychological wellbeing model adopts this approach, encompassing dimensions including autonomy, personal growth, and positive relationships. This surpasses hedonic measures by addressing aspects contributing to a profound life experience. Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2000) propose in their self-determination theory that meeting basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, fosters intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation involves pursuing meaningful activities for their inherent value, contributing to a purposeful life, and aligning with eudiamonic wellbeing.

However, solely adopting a hedonic or eudaimonic perspective may overlook the intricate nature of wellbeing (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2018). This could lead to the omission of crucial domains, such as social wellbeing (Keyes, 1998), which is absent from Ryff et al.'s (1995) model, despite arguments that social interactions and relationships contribute to wellbeing (Keyes, 1998). To address this, researchers advocate for an integrative approach (Hossain et al., 2022; Keyes, 2002), aligning with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of mental health: "*a state of wellbeing in which an individual realises their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to their community*" (WHO, 2022, p. 1). Similarly, positive psychologists adopt an integrated perspective in the PERMA model of flourishing (see Figure 2.1) to provide a more inclusive framework that goes beyond the dichotomy of hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives of wellbeing (Seligman, 2011).

Figure 2.1

A figure to show the components of PERMA, adapted from Seligman (2011).

P POSITIVE EMOTIONS
Cultivating positive feelings and experiences while minimising negative ones.

E ENGAGEMENT
The pursuit of activities that provide a state of flow, where individuals are fully absorbed and immersed in what they are doing.

R RELATIONSHIPS
The impact of meaningful interactions and healthy relationships on overall wellbeing.

M MEANING
The importance of having a deeper sense of purpose, contributing to something larger than oneself.

A ACCOMPLISHMENT
The importance of setting and achieving goals.

PERMA
(Seligman, 2011)

Flourishing is a state of life where an individual experiences a high level of psychological wellbeing, fulfilment, and overall satisfaction with life (Keyes, 2007). This state is reached when all components of the PERMA model are fulfilled (Seligman, 2011). The 'Positive Emotions' component acknowledges hedonic experiences, emphasising the promotion of positive feelings and the avoidance of negative ones. 'Engagement' involves being fully absorbed in tasks, resulting in a state of flow that extends beyond mere pleasure to encompass profound involvement and fulfilment. 'Relationships' highlights the impact of positive social connections and meaningful interactions on overall wellbeing. 'Meaning' refers to the pursuit of a purposeful life, aligning with the eudaimonic perspective, recognising the need for a deeper sense of purpose and contribution. Finally, 'Accomplishment' highlights the importance of setting and achieving goals, combining both hedonic and eudaimonic elements as a source of satisfaction and self-realisation.

Factor analyses conducted by Kern et al. (2015) found the PERMA components to align with wellbeing for adolescents. This finding was reiterated in a comprehensive

scoping review spanning 36 countries that found positive relationships between PERMA components and children's mental health, resilience, and wellbeing (Turner, 2023). However, 'Engagement' and 'Meaning' received less research attention compared to 'Positive Emotions' and 'Relationships', indicating a need for further exploration of these components. Additionally, variability in how PERMA constructs were measured across studies makes it challenging to determine the best measures for both components and outcomes. Nevertheless, PERMA demonstrates significant links with children's mental health and wellbeing, supporting its role as a framework for promoting wellbeing (Turner, 2023).

While research has explored PERMA as a framework for wellbeing in autistic adults (Grosvenor et al., 2023), direct research on its application to autistic CYP is limited. However, studies have examined factors related to their flourishing and wellbeing. For instance, Hilton et al. (2019) compared flourishing between typically developing children and autistic children to identify intervention targets based on parental perceptions. Considering that fulfilment of PERMA components is necessary to flourish (Seligman, 2011), it could be argued that PERMA provides a valuable framework for understanding and promoting the wellbeing of autistic CYP. This perspective aligns with guidance from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and local authority autism services (e.g., Chandler, 2022; Oxford Health, 2023) on supporting the wellbeing of autistic children.

2.2.1 Conceptualising wellbeing in the present study

An integrated view of wellbeing is adopted in this research, considering both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects to capture the multifaceted nature of wellbeing (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2018). This research is situated in the educational context and focuses on the emotional wellbeing of autistic adolescent girls. Consequently, the conceptualisation of 'wellbeing' in this research is informed by a literature review conducted by Danker et al. (2016), who explored the school experiences of autistic pupils in relation to student wellbeing. Their research involved two stages. The first stage involved a comprehensive literature review on the domains of student wellbeing. The researchers conducted electronic searches across various databases to identify peer-reviewed articles published in English. From this review, they established eight domains of student wellbeing derived from twelve studies: positive emotions, lack of negative emotions, engagement, relationships, accomplishment, mental health,

interpersonal skills, and access to resources. The second stage focused on analysing the school experiences of autistic pupils to understand how these experiences relate to the identified domains of wellbeing. Through a systematic review and qualitative analysis of four articles, the researchers explored themes related to autistic pupils' school experiences, including the application of diagnostic labels, relationships, positive/negative emotions, professional support, teacher qualities, curriculum-related issues, environment, and masquerade. Danker et al. (2016) then mapped these themes to the previously established domains of student wellbeing, illustrating how various aspects of autistic pupils' school experiences impact their overall wellbeing.

By integrating findings from both stages through thematic analysis, Danker et al. (2016) developed a framework for understanding the wellbeing of autistic pupils, which was then used to inform the conceptualisation of wellbeing in this research. Figure 2.2 illustrates how each domain of wellbeing relates to themes from autistic pupils' school experiences. For example, Danker et al. (2016) linked the domain of 'positive emotions' to the theme of 'relationships', and emphasised that supportive peer interactions, such as defending against teasing, enhanced positive emotions. (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Poon et al., 2014; Saggers, 2015). Conversely, 'negative emotions' are also associated with 'relationships,' where negative peer interactions, such as bullying, contributed to increased stress and sadness (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Saggers et al., 2011). This analysis highlights the dual role that relationships play in influencing emotional wellbeing for autistic pupils.

Support for Danker et al.'s (2016) domains of wellbeing is reinforced by Hossain et al. (2022), who replicated the original framework and introduced an additional domain: a sense of purpose in school. This addition highlights the reliability and adaptability of Danker et al.'s (2016) framework for examining student wellbeing. However, since Hossain et al. (2022) did not focus on the autistic population, Danker et al.'s (2016) original framework remains an appropriate foundation for conceptualising wellbeing in this research.

While Danker et al. (2016) employed a rigorous approach to categorising domains of student wellbeing and provided a thorough analysis of the school experiences of autistic pupils, offering a valuable framework for understanding their emotional needs, several limitations warrant consideration. Both male and female samples were included in selected articles, which may not fully capture the unique

experiences and challenges faced by autistic girls. Additionally, only four studies on autistic pupils' school experiences were included, with one conducted in the UK, one in Singapore, and two in Australia. This geographical disparity and the small sample size, especially the few female participants, may limit the findings' generalisability. Furthermore, since the review was conducted in Australia, cultural bias may affect the results and limit their applicability to other contexts.

Despite its limitations, Danker et al.'s (2016) framework remains relevant for understanding wellbeing in this research for several reasons. Danker et al.'s (2016) framework aligns with an integrated perspective of wellbeing adopted in this research by addressing multiple domains that are necessary for understanding the emotional wellbeing of pupils. Furthermore, the framework is specifically tailored to the autistic population, making it directly relevant to the participants in this research. Danker et al. (2016) provide insights into aspects unique to autistic pupils such as the influence of diagnostic labels and the importance of professional support, which provide a necessary lens to understand their emotional wellbeing. Consequently, Danker et al.'s (2016) framework complements the PERMA model by incorporating elements specific to the autistic experience, offering a more comprehensive understanding of their wellbeing. Additionally, Danker et al. (2016) highlight the need for more focused research on autistic pupils' wellbeing. By applying their framework to autistic adolescent girls in England, this research builds on their work and fills an identified gap, providing a unique contribution to knowledge

Figure 2.2

A figure to show Danker et al.'s (2016) domains of wellbeing in relation to themes on school experiences of autistic pupils.

THEMES	DOMAINS OF WELLBEING							
	Positive emotions	(Lack of) Negative emotions	Engagement	Relationships	Accomplishment	Mental health	Intrapersonal	(Having) Access to resources
Diagnostic label		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Relationships	✓	✓		✓		✓		
Positive/negative emotions	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
Professional support	✓	✓	✓					✓
Teacher qualities	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Curriculum-related issues		✓						✓
Environment		✓						✓
Masquerade		✓						

Note. This figure illustrates the connection between Danker et al.'s (2016) identified domains of wellbeing and the themes of autistic pupils' school experiences, demonstrating how various aspects of their school experiences influence their overall wellbeing. For example, the domain of 'positive emotions' is linked to the theme of 'relationships', indicating that autistic pupils' emotions are positively influenced by their interpersonal interactions.

2.3 Rationale for adolescent mental health and wellbeing as a topic of interest

2.3.1 Mental health and wellbeing of adolescents

Over half of all mental health difficulties emerge by age 14, with 75% developing by age 24 (Kessler et al., 2005), highlighting adolescence to be a critical stage for the emergence of mental health needs. Developmental and biological changes during adolescence are reported to influence emotions and behaviour (Spenrath et al., 2011). Further, the transition from primary to secondary school is a crucial period of change for adolescents and may contribute to escalating mental health concerns within this age range (Stapley et al., 2020). The move from a familiar primary school environment to a more complex secondary school introduces new challenges (Zeedyk et al., 2003). The increased academic demands and diverse social dynamics can contribute to heightened stress levels during this transitional phase (West et al., 2010). Moreover, peer relationships become increasingly complex to navigate, with challenges arising around preserving existing friendships, establishing new connections, and avoiding bullying (Pratt & George, 2006).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have worsened mental health challenges among adolescents (Clarke et al., 2020). Disruption to daily routines, social isolation, academic stress, and uncertainty about the future have all contributed to declining mental wellbeing. Additionally, economic changes, increased academic pressures, and the influence of social media have further heightened the risk of mental health challenges in adolescence (Fink et al., 2015). These challenges can have long-term effects on key aspects of adult life, such as employment, relationships, and overall wellbeing (Clarke & Lovewell, 2021), reiterating the importance of addressing mental health needs during this critical period.

2.3.2 The current context of young people's mental health and wellbeing

The rise in mental health issues among CYP is a growing public health concern (Humphrey & Wiglesworth, 2016). National data from Newlove-Delgado et al. (2023) indicates that approximately one in five CYP aged eight to 25 likely have a mental disorder, with the highest prevalence observed among 11 to 16-year-olds (22.6%). Among 11 to 16-year-olds, 23.3% sought support for mental health at school, however only 60.4% of them felt they could access support when needed, compared to 80.1% among the overall population. This suggests potential gaps in school-based mental health support systems. However, potential sampling bias and reliance on self-

reporting may affect the accuracy of these findings (Mertens, 2019). For instance, many CYP face difficulties without reporting or seeking assistance for them which could distort the overall picture of mental health prevalence (Rainer & Abdinasir, 2023). Additionally, the data does not explore specific educational factors that might contribute to the discrepancy in CYP's perception of the accessibility of support. Despite potential limitations, the data highlights a need for improved understanding and support for mental health issues among CYP including access to school-based support.

Recent years have witnessed a heightened focus on the mental wellbeing of CYP in the political realm (Cowie, et al., 2004). Recognised as a fundamental human right (Weare, 2015), positive mental health has spurred various government initiatives to meet the mental health needs of CYP including, Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2007); Targeted Mental Health in Schools (DCSF, 2008), and more recently Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: A Green Paper (DHSC & DfE, 2017). The green paper highlights the need for early intervention and prevention, collaborative support in school through Mental Health Support Teams, and increased access to mental health services. In 2018, the Government committed to taking forward these proposals (DHSC & DfE, 2018). This places the present research in a broader context of increasing awareness and efforts to address the mental wellbeing of CYP at school.

2.3.3 The role of schools

In England, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) mandates schools to identify, assess, and cater to pupils' needs. Likewise, the Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools initiative (DfE, 2018) focuses on engaging teaching staff in universal and preventative efforts for early identification of mental health needs. The explicit expectation is that schools actively participate in addressing students' mental health.

Schools have a statutory duty to promote the welfare of their pupils, as outlined in 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' (DfE, 2023) and 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (DfE, 2018a). This duty includes providing support for the mental health of pupils, especially in response to safeguarding concerns and addressing mental health difficulties that qualify as special educational needs. After a child's family, schools are the primary developmental context (Vostanis, et al., 2013), making

them well placed to provide support to pupils and effectively promote positive mental health (Atkinson et al., 2019). Recent government guidance for schools highlights their ability to proactively prevent mental health problems by promoting resilience (e.g., DfE, 2017; 2018). This can be achieved through an integrated, whole-school approach that is customised to meet the specific needs of their students (Weare, 2015).

Recent government initiatives such as the Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: A Green Paper (DHSC & DfE, 2017), outline schools' crucial role in fostering pupil mental health and wellbeing by establishing a supportive whole-school environment. However, individual schools have discretion in interpreting and implementing this guidance, with no statutory requirement for a standalone mental health policy (DfE, 2018). Moreover, the wide disparity in the quality of support provided by schools due to insufficient funding and limited knowledge (Thorley, 2016) highlights the importance of EPs as central figures in addressing schools' challenges in promoting mental health and wellbeing systemically.

2.3.4 *The contribution of school contexts on pupil wellbeing*

The preceding sections highlighted the vital role of schools in fostering the mental health and wellbeing of CYP. However, it is essential to acknowledge the dual nature of the school context and systems, encompassing both supportive factors that promote pupil wellbeing and factors that may undermine it.

A school's social culture, including norms, values, and overall atmosphere, significantly influences interventions for pupil wellbeing (Keshavarz et al., 2010). For example, Hailwood (2020) found that pupils felt uncomfortable with certain mindfulness interventions, particularly when it involved closing their eyes or participating in front of peers due to fear of mockery. Conversely, McKeague et al. (2018) discovered that young people viewed the classroom as a safe space for emotional wellbeing interventions. These varied experiences may stem from pupil perceptions of how teachers deliver interventions, with some perceiving staff as offering early support for wellbeing while others find them lacking in availability, knowledge, and responsiveness (Stapley et al., 2020). Additionally, some pupils view teachers as authority figures, which can negatively impact wellbeing (Demkowicz et al., 2023).

At the school level, ethos and policy significantly influence pupil wellbeing. For instance, school perspectives on 'challenging' behaviour vary, shaping behaviour policies based on whether it is viewed as a conscious choice, a lack of boundaries, or communication of unmet needs (Timpson, 2019). However, enquiries into behaviour and mental health support in schools revealed that policies may take a one-size-fits-all approach, overlooking individual circumstances and needs (Rainer et al., 2023). This can disproportionately affect certain groups, such as those with SEN and existing mental health needs, where relational-based and trauma-informed policies may be more suitable (Rainer et al., 2023).

The school curriculum and emphasis on exam performance impose significant academic expectations on pupils, especially in secondary school (Jerrim, 2022). Consequently, adolescents often experience notable stress, leading to mental health challenges as they strive to meet these academic demands (Roome & Soan, 2019). This pressure intensifies during GCSE exams, where academic stress is the primary source of anxiety for Year 11 students (Roome & Soan, 2019). Compared to the Key Stage 2 SATs, which typically have less impact on pupils' wellbeing, the challenges of adolescence tend to pose a greater vulnerability to mental health needs (Jerrim, 2021). This could be influenced by less pressure placed upon primary school pupils due to the lack of lifelong consequences for performance (Jerrim, 2021). Moreover, the smaller primary environment with fewer teachers differs from the demands of secondary education (Spernes, 2019) that features a more rigorous curriculum and emphasises students' responsibility for their own learning (Howe, 2011).

2.3.5 The role of educational psychologists in supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing

Survey data highlights EPs as key providers of specialised mental health support within school settings (Sharpe et al., 2016). EPs promote wellbeing in schools through various approaches (Atkinson et al., 2014; Fallon, 2017), including consultation, assessment, intervention, research, and training at systemic, group, and individual levels (Cameron, 2006; Fallon et al., 2010). They engage in systemic working to train school staff in effective interventions (Greig et al., 2019), provide group supervision to teachers for supporting students' mental health needs (Law and Woods, 2018), and offer direct support to address individual cases (Zafririou & Guilford, 2020).

The role of EPs in supporting mental health needs is often overlooked in reviews (Carroll & Hurry, 2018) and government developments (Association of Educational Psychologists, 2017; Fallon, 2017), likely due to a lack of understanding about their role among school staff and other professionals (Atkinson et al., 2011). Further, barriers such as statutory assessment duties, time constraints, and staffing levels within educational psychology services hinder their engagement in mental health work (Farrell et al., 2006; Greig et al., 2019).

2.3.6 Conclusion

This section has emphasised the complex nature of mental health and wellbeing as concepts and discussed their significance in the national context on CYP in education. Concerns regarding the increasing prevalence of mental health issues among children are highlighted by recent national survey data (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023), indicating the need for comprehensive support. Adolescence is identified as a critical stage for mental health needs, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health challenges among this age group (Clarke et al., 2020). This section has recognised schools and educational psychology services as crucial in promoting the mental health and wellbeing of pupils, with a statutory duty to support pupil welfare (e.g., DfE, 2023).

2.4 Autism spectrum disorder

This review aims to explore the influence of mainstream school experiences on autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing. This section will provide an overview of the prevalence of ASD among CYP, discuss the sex differences in the diagnosis and presentation of ASD, and explore the mental health and overall wellbeing of autistic CYP. This review will then narrow down to show autistic girls as being a vulnerable group for the emergence of mental health needs before examining the influence of mainstream school on their mental health and wellbeing.

2.4.1 Definitions and terminology

ASD is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in social interaction and communication, reactions to sensory stimuli, and the presence of restrictive, repetitive, and stereotypical behaviours (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). The terminology for ASD has evolved over decades and may continue to change as understanding increases (NAS, 2023).

Literature discusses various terms for autistic individuals, including 'autism,' 'ASD,' and 'autistic spectrum condition' (Waterhouse et al., 2017). While labels aid understanding (Hens et al., 2019), medicalised terms including 'disorder' and 'condition' evoke controversy due to their negative connotations (Kenny et al., 2016). The researcher acknowledges the influence of language on perceptions and respects autistic individuals' preferences, particularly in the identity-first versus person-first language debate (Botha et al., 2021). This research uses 'ASD' to reflect UK diagnostic terminology and maintains identity-first language in line with the NAS's (2023) guidance.

2.4.2 Prevalence and theories of ASD

Approximately one in 100 people worldwide are autistic (Happé & Frith, 2020), with an estimated 160,000 autistic CYP in the UK (NAS, 2021). Data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study reveals that 3.1% of children born in 2000 received an ASD diagnosis by age 11 (Dillenburger et al., 2016). Various theories aim to understand the factors contributing to an ASD diagnosis and the challenges faced by autistic individuals. While it is beyond the scope of this literature review to discuss all theories, relevant hypotheses regarding autistic needs will be discussed.

Theory of mind hypothesis. The hypothesis that autistic individuals struggle with understanding others' mental states, known as 'theory of mind', is well-supported (e.g., Brunsdon & Happé, 2014). This difficulty is linked to challenges in social interaction, communication, and empathy among autistic individuals (Happé, 2015). However, research demonstrates variability in theory of mind abilities among autistic children (Rosello et al., 2020). Some can pass theory of mind tests such as, the Sally-Anne false belief test, which challenges the notion of a universal deficit (Tager-Flusberg, 2007). While it is common for autistic individuals to experience theory of mind difficulties, these alone cannot explain the repetitive behaviours, or the unique strengths observed in this population (Tager-Flusberg, 2007).

Executive dysfunction. The 'executive dysfunction' theory suggests that cognitive challenges related to executive functions contribute to the repetitive behaviours and restricted interests seen in ASD (Hill, 2004). Executive functions involve planning, organising, initiating, and controlling goal-directed behaviours (Lai et al., 2015). Recent research supports the executive dysfunction theory to explain autistic children's working memory and flexibility challenges flexibility (Lai et al., 2015).

However, determining if executive function deficits are central to autism is complex due to their presence in various disorders (Hill, 2004). This complexity is especially notable in ASD, where language impairments and difficulties understanding verbal instructions are common. Notably, individuals with specific language impairment but not ASD exhibit executive dysfunctions (Spaulding, 2010), suggesting the need for further research comparing these populations and considering individuals' language abilities (Joseph et al., 2005).

Weak central coherence. The 'weak central coherence' theory, unlike theory of mind and executive dysfunction theories, explains the strengths often demonstrated by many autistic individuals, such as visual-attentive skills (Frith & Hill, 2003). Weak central coherence refers to difficulties in integrating and perceiving information holistically and globally, favouring attention to local details (Frith, 1989). While these strengths are not universal among all autistic individuals, this emphasises the importance of adopting a holistic perspective when understanding ASD and the diverse needs of autistic children, shifting away from a deficit-based medical model.

2.4.3 Mental health and wellbeing of autistic children and young people

ASD is the most prevalent type of special educational need in England (SEN) (DfE, 2023a). Research reveals that in England, children with SEN report lower subjective wellbeing in school, learning, and friendships compared to their peers without SEN. Nearly one in five of these children express dissatisfaction with school (Barnes & Harrison, 2017). Additionally, national statistics indicate that being identified as having SEN in childhood doubles the likelihood of experiencing mental health disorders in adulthood (Green et al., 2005). Researchers attribute this heightened risk to the complexities of transitioning to adulthood (Allcock, 2018). Leaving behind the structured environment of school during this transition may potentially trigger mental health difficulties, such as anxiety and depression (Crane et al., 2018), especially for individuals lacking daytime activities, which is more common among those with learning needs (Young-Southward et al., 2017). These findings highlight the vital role of schools in addressing the mental health needs of their pupils (Atkinson et al., 2019) and imply that schools may be falling short in adequately supporting pupils with SEN, particularly during transitions (Friedman et al., 2013). Possible explanations for this shortfall could include teachers' limited knowledge, understanding, or training (Carroll

et al., 2017), as well as difficulties in accessing professionals including EPs for staff training, partly due to service timing and staffing constraints (Atfield et al., 2023).

Autistic young people have higher rates of mental health needs compared to those with other types of SEND (Toseeb & Asbury, 2023). By age 11, 63% experience notable anxiety, showing lower happiness levels compared to neurotypical peers (Dillenburger et al., 2016). Additionally, 25% of parents report instances of self-harm or suicide attempts among their autistic children (Green et al., 2005). The vulnerability of autistic individuals to mental health challenges could stem from ASD traits. Challenges in understanding others' thoughts and emotions may lead to social isolation and mental health issues, including anxiety and depression (Nichols et al., 2009; Sedgewick et al., 2016). Executive functioning difficulties may result in heightened emotional reactivity, increased stress, and difficulties managing emotions (Fernandes et al., 2023), contributing to anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (Young et al., 2019).

School environmental factors often worsen mental health challenges for autistic young people. Despite wanting to fit in, they often face social exclusion and experience bullying (Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Transitioning to secondary school exacerbates these challenges due to its larger size and increased social complexities (Makin et al., 2017), which can overwhelm those sensitive to sensory stimuli (APA, 2013). Additionally, unexpected changes to daily routines, such as teacher absences, can result in feelings of anxiety due to their reliance on repetition (Gillott et al., 2001). Furthermore, transition points between lessons disrupt consistency and order, adding to their anxiety and overwhelm (Makin et al., 2017; Keen et al., 2016). This highlights the need for tailored support for autistic pupils in educational settings.

2.4.4 Sex differences

Historically, ASD was viewed through a male-centric lens, with a misconception that it primarily affected males (Ratto et al., 2018). This bias influenced theories, research, and assessment methods (Rivet & Matson, 2011). However, it is now widely recognised that autistic females present differently, with fewer repetitive behaviours than males (Frazier et al., 2014). Despite increased awareness, robust empirical studies on gender differences in ASD are lacking, with girls often underrepresented in research (Bloss & Courchesne, 2007; Hebron & Bond, 2019; Tierney et al., 2016).

Existing literature highlights the gender disparity in ASD diagnosis, indicating that females are more likely to face mislabelling, delayed diagnosis, or remain undiagnosed (Bargiela et al., 2016; Duvekot et al., 2017). The NAS (2023a) reports a diagnosed ASD ratio of 3:1 in males versus females, potentially influenced by biases in diagnostic tools and autistic females 'masking' their difficulties (Jordan, 2021; Lai et al., 2015; Loomes et al., 2017; Mandy et al., 2012).

No definitive report of a female autism phenotype is published. However, research suggests the existence of a distinct female autism phenotype, differing from the conventional ASD conceptualisation (e.g., Bargiela et al., 2016; Hiller et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2015; Mandy et al., 2012). Hull and colleagues (2020) found autistic females to be more socially motivated, seeking peer relationships more than males, and to be more likely to internalise emotions when faced with problems. Further, mental health challenges including anxiety and distress are common among autistic females (Howlin & Moss, 2012; Mandy et al., 2012), particularly adolescents (Lai et al., 2015; Solomon et al., 2012). The use of 'masking' or 'camouflaging' strategies to conceal emotions and difficulties are common among autistic girls, particularly in school (Jordan, 2021). By masking challenges in school, autistic girls often go unnoticed by staff, limiting support and intervention, thereby increasing their susceptibility to mental health difficulties (Dean et al., 2017; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). This highlights the importance of tailored support for this population (Bargiela et al., 2016).

2.4.5 The vulnerability of autistic girls in mainstream schools

Most autistic pupils are enrolled in mainstream settings (NAS, 2021). A systematic literature review focusing on autistic pupils' experiences in mainstream secondary schools revealed heightened levels of anxiety, depression, anger, and reduced self-concept compared to peers without SEN (Horgan et al., 2022). The review emphasised the need for further research, particularly regarding autistic girls' experiences caused by the complex and demanding social environment of mainstream settings. Further, Horgan et al.'s (2022) review noted that some studies often prioritised the voices of adult stakeholders, rather than autistic girls, indicating a further need to directly engage with and amplify the voices of autistic girls themselves to ensure their unique perspectives and experiences are adequately represented and understood. Moreover, the reliance on traditional methods, such as semi-structured

interviews, in most studies might have limited the findings' representativeness due to their reliance on verbal communication.

Existing school support models often overlook the specific needs of autistic girls, contributing to the significant challenges they face in mainstream school settings, including anxiety, poor mental health, and reduced wellbeing (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010). Systematic reviews by Tomlinson et al. (2020) and Ayirebi and Thomas (2023) reiterate this issue and highlight the importance of tailored interventions beyond generic autism approaches for supporting autistic girls. Tomlinson et al. (2020) emphasised the need for high-quality research focusing on autistic girls' perspectives on their school experiences and how schools can address their mental health needs. Similarly, Ayirebi and Thomas (2023) outlined the necessity of customised approaches tailored to the female phenotype to ensure access to education, promotion of mental health, and enhanced life opportunities for autistic girls. Neglecting these needs can lead to long-term consequences, including elevated rates of mental health disorders persisting into adulthood (Baldwin and Costley, 2016).

2.4.6 Supportive factors in mainstream schools

While published research into the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream schools is relatively new (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2023; Tomlinson et al., 2020), this topic is explored in doctoral theses. Myles (2017) and Pickup (2021) highlighted the significant impact of relational aspects of education on autistic girls' mental health. This aligns with the published research findings from Sproston et al. (2017) who highlight the importance of school staff to foster positive relationships with autistic girls inside and outside the classroom. Further, by promoting inclusive environments that accept coping strategies, instead of fixating on punishing lateness and uniform discrepancies, schools can decrease the likelihood of autistic girls being excluded from school (Sproston et al., 2017). Group interventions tailored for girls have also been found to enhance a sense of belonging for autistic girls and protect them from peer rejection (Hyde, 2017). Additionally, fostering collaboration between schools and parents is considered essential in offering comprehensive and personalised support for autistic girls (Critchley, 2019; Sproston et al., 2017). As is placing special emphasis on ensuring a smooth transition to high school and ensuring access to continuous support beyond transition (Peters & Brooks, 2016).

Research indicates that supporting autistic girls with school-related anxiety is important, as they tend to experience internalised anxiety more than their male counterparts (Howlin & Moss, 2012). To address these challenges, schools are advised to proactively manage anxiety triggers using strategies including buddy systems, printed timetables, extended transitions, and advance notice of routine changes (Costley et al., 2021). Additionally, external professionals, such as school psychologists, play a crucial role in supporting the mental health of autistic females in mainstream high schools. This involves increasing awareness through conferences, face-to-face training, online modules, and resource distribution (Critchley, 2019). However, many autistic adolescent girls mask their anxiety and social difficulties (Jordan, 2021), making it challenging for staff to identify when support is needed, potentially leading to no referrals to external services (Costley et al., 2021). This indicates the need for training and development opportunities for school staff to understand the distinct needs and the challenges faced by autistic girls in school.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined the prevalence of ASD among CYP and outlined differences in diagnosis and presentation based on sex, before highlighting autistic girls as highlighted as a vulnerable group for the development of mental health needs. Recognising the important role of schools in fostering positive mental health for all pupils, the chapter discussed supportive factors specifically relevant to autistic girls in mainstream schools. The next section will present a systematic review of literature examining the experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream schools and their implications for mental health and wellbeing.

2.6 Systematic Literature Review

2.6.1 Introduction

A systematic literature review rigorously examines existing research in a specific area, involving a structured approach to identify, select, and critically analyse relevant studies for a comprehensive evidence synthesis (Boland et al., 2013). Systematic reviews are used to understand the existing knowledge base of a particular topic (Gough, 2007), revealing areas of uncertainty and the need for further investigation (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). This process ensures a comprehensive and replicable search across various sources (Lefebvre et al., 2013), and can encompass both quantitative and qualitative studies (Siddaway et al., 2019).

2.6.2 Rationale and aims of the current review

Considering the underrepresentation of autistic girls in educational research (Horgan et al., 2022) and the need for more targeted guidance for schools to effectively meet autistic girls' needs (Morewood et al., 2019), this systematic review aims to synthesise findings from studies exploring the influence of mainstream school experiences on their mental health and wellbeing. By synthesising the available literature, this review seeks to highlight the factors in mainstream school that influence autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing. Recognising autistic individuals as experts on ASD, the principle of 'nothing about us without us' (Charlton, 2000) is upheld through a synthesis of qualitative data. This approach ensures the perspectives, experiences, and views of autistic girls are kept central to this review.

This review was informed by the following review question:

What is currently known about the impact of mainstream schooling on the mental health and wellbeing of autistic girls?

2.6.3 Methodology

Review Criteria. Table 2.1 outlines the inclusion/exclusion criteria for this review, providing a rationale for each criterion. Initial scoping searches revealed limited peer-reviewed research on emotions and mental health outcomes of autistic girls in school. Consequently, outcome inclusion criteria were broadened to encompass overall mainstream school experiences. This expands the scope to comprehensively understand autistic girls' experiences in mainstream schools, identifying common themes related to their emotions and mental health.

Table 2.1

A table to show the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Study Feature	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Language	Studies published in English.	Studies published in any other language.	The reviewer speaks English.
Population	Females under the age of 18 with a diagnosis of ASD or Asperger's Syndrome.	Autistic males, females without an ASD diagnosis, adults.	Focuses on understanding the specific experiences of autistic girls and minimises heterogeneity. This criterion addresses the underrepresentation of girls and recognises potential gender distinctions by excluding males.
Study context	Participants in mainstream schools.	Participants attending only specialist settings, pupil referral units, or residential settings.	Focusing solely on mainstream schools ensures that the findings are tailored to the experiences of autistic girls, accounting for the unique challenges they may encounter in this environment.
Study design	Qualitative and mixed methods that include primarily qualitative data with supporting quantitative measures (e.g., interviews and a	Quantitative designs, books, book reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analyses.	Incorporating primary qualitative data provides a thorough exploration of autistic girls' experiences, capturing nuanced aspects beyond quantitative methods alone.

	quantitative measure of wellbeing).		
Publication type	Peer-reviewed articles/journals.	Any publication that has not been peer reviewed (e.g., grey literature including dissertations and theses).	Ensures methodological integrity and high research standards through peer-reviewed scrutiny.
Outcomes	Studies examining emotional wellbeing experiences and overall experiences of autistic girls in mainstream schools.	Studies not exploring school experiences, emotions, or mental health/wellbeing.	Provides understanding about the influence of school experiences on emotional wellbeing, maintaining coherence with the review question.
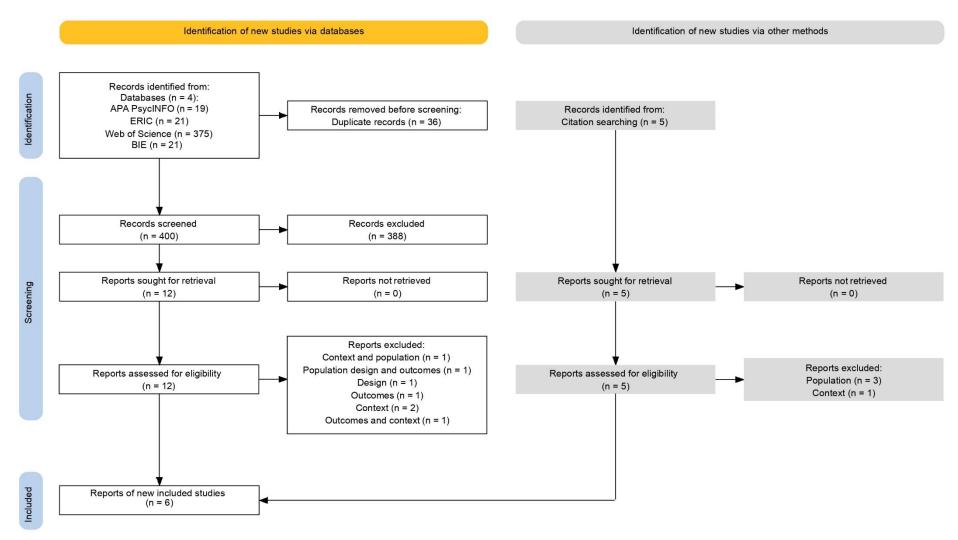
Search strategy. A systematic search strategy, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), was used to identify the included studies. Between June 2023 and July 2023 systematic searches of the following databases were completed: APA PsycINFO, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Web of Science, and the British Index of Education (BIE). APA PsycINFO was selected for its comprehensive coverage of psychological research, including mental health and wellbeing. ERIC was chosen for its focus on education and inclusive practices, offering insights into how the educational context influences emotions and mental health. Web of Science was included to access diverse disciplines and identify influential research in ASD and education. BIE was specifically chosen to gather UK-based research, providing valuable insights into autistic girls' experiences in mainstream schools within the UK educational context.

The search terms employed with Boolean OR/AND connectors were: (Autism OR autis*) AND (girls OR females) AND (education OR school) AND (mental health OR wellbeing OR emotions OR feelings OR anxiety) AND (experiences OR perception). The searches were limited to peer-reviewed journals and articles written in English. Figure 2.3 provides a detailed overview of the selection and screening process.

The initial search produced 436 articles, of which 36 duplicates were removed, leaving 400 unique articles for screening. Titles and abstracts were simultaneously assessed, following the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 2.1. This approach allowed for the consideration of studies that did not explicitly mention 'autistic girls' or 'autistic females' in the title. This resulted in the exclusion of 388 articles. The remaining 12 articles were read in their entirety to determine eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The eligibility process resulted in 7 exclusions with reason (Appendix 1). Five articles were identified through hand-searching citations, which were also fully read to determine eligibility. This process yielded one additional record. The final review comprises six studies. Search terms were revisited in January and April 2024 to check for new research, revealing no additional studies.

Figure 2.3

A figure to show the selection process, created using Haddaway et al.'s (2022) online tool.

Quality appraisal of included studies. Appraising the quality of studies in a systematic review is crucial for assessing evidence strength and potential biases that could impact findings and conclusions (Boland et al., 2013). Studies were appraised using Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence (WoE) framework, selected for its systematic assessment that considers quality, relevance, and contribution to the research question or synthesis objective.

'Weight of Evidence A' (WoE A) evaluates the methodological soundness of each study against specific criteria (Horner et al., 2005). Scoping searches revealed limited peer-reviewed research on autistic girls' emotions, mental health, and wellbeing. Consequently, WoE A was utilised to focus on determining quality rather than excluding studies from the review. The assessment of qualitative designs was guided by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) Qualitative Checklist, with scores assigned for each CASP criterion (1 for met, 0.5 for unclear, 0 for not met). Overall CASP scores categorised research quality as Low (<0-5), Medium (5.5-7.5), or High (8<). Appendix 2 illustrates CASP criteria and WoE A scores for each study.

'Weight of Evidence B' (WoE B) evaluates the methodological relevance of each study to the review question. Tyrrell and Woods' (2018) systematic review regarding data collection methods and research designs used to capture the perspectives of autistic CYP informed the coding protocols used to evaluate methodological relevance, displayed in Appendix 3.

For 'Weight of Evidence C' (WoE C), a coding protocol was developed by the researcher to assess the relevance of each study to the review question, as detailed in Appendix 4. The scores from each dimension were averaged to derive 'Weight of Evidence D' (WoE D), providing an overall score for each study, as presented in Table 2.2

Table 2.2

A table to show the overall WoE D score for each study

Studies	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Cook et al. (2018)	3.0	3.0	2.7	2.9
Cridland et al. (2014)	2.0	3.0	2.3	2.4
Goodall and MacKenzie (2019)	2.0	3.0	2.7	2.6
Jacobs et al. (2021)	2.0	3.0	2.3	2.4
Myles et al. (2019)	3.0	3.0	2.7	2.9
Tomlinson et al. (2022)	3.0	3.0	2.7	2.9

Note. Overall WoE scores provide a judgement rating: Low (≤1.99); Medium (2-2.99); High (≥3).

Data extraction and synthesis. Key information such as participant characteristics, study context, research design, and findings were extracted from the selected studies. While considering various approaches for qualitative synthesis, narrative synthesis was dismissed due to its descriptive nature (Popay et al., 2006), in favour of a more rigorous analytical method due to the complexity of the research question. Framework synthesis, involving the application of a pre-existing theoretical framework (Dixon-Woods, 2011), was also rejected due to a lack of directly relevant peer-reviewed research exploring autistic girls' wellbeing in mainstream school. Consequently, using a pre-existing framework could introduce bias and limit the exploration of new themes. Instead, Danker et al.'s (2016) domains of wellbeing will be used to discuss the findings. Meta synthesis, aggregating findings from multiple studies to identify overarching themes (Lachal et al., 2017), was also rejected in favour of an inductive theme development approach.

A qualitative thematic synthesis was conducted to address the review question, aiming to capture diverse participant perspectives and recognise the significance of their experiences. This inductive approach enabled an open and flexible exploration of data to capture the complexity of participants' experiences without imposing preconceived notions (Thomas, 2006). Further, thematic synthesis was selected to

identify underlying patterns and relationships (Thomas & Harden, 2008) to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing in mainstream schools.

Following Thomas and Harden's (2008) stages, the findings and discussion sections of each study were analysed line by line to create initial codes. This involved examining primary data from participants and the authors' analyses. To ensure all data received appropriate codes, a 'not relevant' code was applied to data not directly related to the aims of the review or to data provided by researchers other than the authors. This code was used to categorise findings related to Cook et al.'s (2018) participants in specialist settings. Initial codes were synthesised into descriptive themes and then further developed into analytical themes based on the researcher's interpretation of findings, facilitated by NVivo 14 software (Lumivero, 2020).

To mitigate potential researcher bias during the qualitative synthesis, an iterative process was used. This included revisiting the data multiple times, cross-referencing findings with the original studies, and maintaining a reflexive diary to document personal thoughts or assumptions that could influence analyses.

2.6.4 Findings

Key characteristics of included studies. All six studies were peer-reviewed journal articles and included autistic girls in their research, with sample sizes ranging from two to 11, including participants aged between 11 and 17 years. Four studies also included the autistic girls' parents (Cook et al., 2018; Cridland et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022), and one study additionally involved the autistic girls' school psychotherapist (Tomlinson et al., 2022). One study considered the experiences of autistic girls in both mainstream and special school settings (Cook et al., 2018). Four studies were conducted in the UK, and two were conducted in Australia. While all explored school experiences, one article focused on autistic girls' social experiences (Myles et al., 2019), and another explored friendships and masking behaviours (Cook et al., 2018).

Table 2.3 provides an overview of the key characteristics of each study. All studies received a 'medium' or 'high' WoE A rating and achieved an overall WoE rating of 'medium'. The lack of an overall high rating does not necessarily indicate poorer quality in this area; it is likely due to the WoE C criteria, as no study scored above

medium for outcomes due to limited research directly exploring the mental health needs of autistic girls attending mainstream schools

Table 2.3

A table to detail the key characteristics of each study

Author(s)	Location	Research Aims	Sample	Methodology	Key Findings
Cook et al. (2018)	UK	Explored autistic girls' experiences of learning, friendships and bullying in mainstream and specialist secondary schools.	Purposive sampling strategy to recruit 11 autistic girls (aged 11-17 years) attending both mainstream and specialist settings and their parents.	Qualitative design; semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis.	Three themes: 'motivation to have friends', 'challenges', 'masking'.
Cridland et al. (2014)	Australia	Explored the experiences of adolescent autistic girls with three mother–daughter dyads	Recruitment of three mother-daughter dyads and two additional mothers through local schools and community groups. Autistic participants aged 12-17 years.	Multiple case study approach, semi-structured interviews analysed using IPA.	Seven themes: 'diagnostic issues', 'being surrounded by boys', 'experiences of high school', 'complexity of relationships', 'puberty', 'sexual relationships and

					concerns' and 'impact of having an adolescent daughter with ASD'.
Goodall and MacKenzie (2019).	UK	Explored the mainstream school experiences of two adolescent girls.	Two participants diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome aged 17 and 16.	Participatory methods chosen by participants and semi-structured interviews.	Participants reported feelings of exclusion, isolation, and anxiety in mainstream school.
Jacobs et al. (2021)	Australia	Investigated factors that 'help' and 'hinder' the learning and academic success of autistic girls	Five autistic girls (12-14 years) and their mothers.	Mixed methods design. Qualitative online survey findings influenced semi-structured interview questions. IPA.	Findings related to: academic progress at school; feelings about school; facilitators and barriers to learning.
Myles et al. (2019)	UK	Explored the social experiences and sense of belonging in adolescent autistic girls in mainstream school	Eight autistic girls (aged 12-17 years)	Semi-structured interviews	Key friendships, understanding, and perceived social competence are vital for autistic girls to feel a sense of

					belonging in mainstream school.
Tomlinson et al. (2022)	UK	Explored how autistic adolescent girls experience mainstream high school	Three autistic girls (aged 14-16 years), their mothers and school psychotherapist	Multiple case study design, using semi-structured interviews	Case-by-case themes presented along with a cross-case analysis: 'school environment'; 'social relationships' and 'specialised interventions to develop social skills'.

2.6.5 Themes

To explore how mainstream school experiences influence autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing, four analytical themes were formulated (Appendix 5) and are reported below.

The need for relationships and social connection. Three studies revealed the pervasive issue of autistic girls lacking a sense of belonging in school, reporting constant judgement and unwanted attention due to their unique needs (Cridland et al., 2014; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Notably, participants in one study were reluctant to share their diagnosis due to fear of rejection and lower expectations of their capabilities (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

The need for reciprocal social connection with peers was found consistently across studies, highlighting the crucial role of friendship in fostering positive experiences in mainstream schools (Jacobs et al., 2021). In some cases, friendships were identified as decisive factors and positive influences, even essential for attending school (Jacobs et al., 2021), while other participants noted difficulties in understanding the concept of friendship and navigating the 'hidden curriculum' of social situations (Cook et al., 2018) (i.e., social rules and customs that are not explicitly taught but are understood using social intuition, Myles et al., 2013). Friendship preferences varied, with some preferring a single 'true friend' to avoid conflicts associated with group dynamics (Myles et al., 2019), while others chose solitude, possibly as a coping mechanism due to past friendship losses (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). Interestingly, friendships also contributed to negative emotions such as sadness and anxiety, particularly when participants relied on one key friend (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Collective findings across all studies indicated that autistic girls experience bullying throughout mainstream school, ranging from subtle social exclusion to severe incidents such as intentional physical attacks and even sexual assault by peers (Cook et al., 2018; Myles et al., 2019). These experiences influenced participants' mental health and wellbeing, contributing to feelings of social isolation, loneliness, and anxiety in school (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).

In five out of six studies, participants described experiencing social exclusion and isolation due to perceived differences from peers (Tomlinson et al., 2022). For

instance, peers questioned their participation in conversations (Myles et al., 2019) and participants reported feeling invisible in the classroom (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Navigating the demands of the school environment and curriculum. Across all studies, autistic girls encountered various challenges in navigating the physical school environment and meeting the demands of the mainstream school curriculum. Findings indicated that these challenges had a considerable impact on their mental health and wellbeing. In five of six studies, participants described school as 'busy,' 'chaotic,' and 'noisy,' contributing to feelings of overwhelm, stress, and anxiety (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Sensory challenges, such as crowded and noisy corridors and unwanted physical contact, further exacerbated their discomfort during lessons and transitions (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). One study emphasised the crucial role of the school's internal culture, indicating that the atmosphere within the physical building influenced school experiences, including perceived judgement or lack of understanding from peers and teachers (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).

The findings reported that participants experienced anxiety in the classroom, especially related to specific curriculum aspects and the lack of personalised teaching strategies. In two studies, autistic girls faced challenges seeking help from teachers which resulted in hesitancy and reduced confidence, exacerbating feelings of isolation and frustration (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Transitioning between classes and managing the demands of a typical school day was challenging and increased participants' anxiety (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Some participants required extra time to adjust to new environments and lessons due to increased sensory stimulation (Tomlinson et al., 2022). The use of a starter activity was found to help alleviate anxiety associated with completing learning tasks in the classroom (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Examinations and academic pressures were identified as stressors for autistic girls in three studies (Cridland et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Stress heightened with increased workloads, especially in subjects where confidence was lacking (Jacobs et al., 2021). Balancing classwork and homework posed challenges for participants and increased stress (Cridland et al., 2014). One participant

even described exams as 'evil,' indicating potentially detrimental perceptions leading to heightened anxiety levels (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

The power of feeling understood, heard, and valued. Feeling understood, heard, and valued was crucial for participants' emotions and wellbeing in all studies. Understanding peers played a pivotal role in promoting positive emotional experiences in four studies (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Moreover, true friendships, characterised by understanding and acceptance, made participants in one study feel valued and supported and created a positive emotional atmosphere that reduced the risk of social exclusion and loneliness (Myles et al., 2019). Some participants experienced peers who had limited understanding of their specific needs, often lacking awareness of ASD altogether. In two studies, peers unfairly blamed participants during arguments and used ASD as an excuse for misunderstandings or conflicts (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Teacher understanding also influenced participants' emotional wellbeing and enjoyment in mainstream placements. One study highlighted the positive impact of implementing a 'pupil passport' to enhance teacher understanding and meet specific needs (Tomlinson et al., 2022), while another emphasised the importance of having proactive teachers who are aware of individual needs (Jacobs et al., 2021). Insufficient teacher understanding led to feelings of invisibility, exclusion, and misunderstanding, resulting in negative consequences such as perceptions of rudeness or ignorance (Myles et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Autistic girls faced detrimental and inappropriate consequences in the classroom, for instance participants reported feeling hated by teaching staff or expected the teacher to scold her when anxious during conversations (Jacobs et al., 2021; Myles et al., 2019). Feelings of frustration and low self-esteem stemmed from perceived underestimation of participants' abilities and contributions in the classroom (Myles et al., 2019), while differential treatment negatively impacted their wellbeing (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019).

Positive relationships with teaching staff were linked to positive school experiences in two studies (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Participants valued supportive and empathetic teachers who recognised their anxieties and knew how to assist them (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Conversely, the absence of understanding and supportive relationships, such as having a substitute or trainee teacher, led some

participants to feel uncomfortable and compelled to leave the learning environment due to anxiety (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Coping mechanisms and strategies for managing emotional wellbeing. The studies uncovered diverse coping strategies employed by autistic girls to navigate challenges and emotions in mainstream schools. Positive approaches included seeking comfort from a designated space within school where participants felt safe to discuss their emotions with staff (Myles et al., 2019). These spaces also helped during difficulties with learning tasks which triggered anxiety for participants in three studies (Cridland et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Independent coping methods included minimising surprise, using mood signalling tools such as wristbands, and leaving classrooms earlier than peers (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Emotional support animals provided comfort and supported participants to cope with stress and anxiety (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Regular sessions with a school psychotherapist helped participants in one study to address mental health needs and manage their challenges in school (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Additionally, 'girl groups' were used to foster positive mental health by promoting a social support system for participants (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Maladaptive coping strategies were also evident. Two studies reported disordered eating patterns, including skipping meals, to avoid anxiety-inducing situations in school (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Self-injurious behaviours, such as hitting or scratching, were identified as ways to manage intense anger (Tomlinson et al., 2022). School avoidance strategies, driven by dread and anxiety about waking up for school, were reported in two studies (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). School absenteeism, driven by overwhelming anxiety, led to academic difficulties and increased stress at home for one participant (Cook et al., 2018). Participants engaged in 'masking' or 'camouflaging' behaviours during social situations (Cridland et al., 2014; Myles et al., 2019), to conceal feelings of anxiety and isolation (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019), and to avoid standing out from their peers (Cook et al., 2018).

2.6.6 Discussion of findings

The findings from six studies were synthesised into four analytical themes to explore how mainstream school experiences influence autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing.

The findings suggest that reciprocal social connections and friendships are crucial for positive school experiences and emotional wellbeing. However, challenges in fitting into social groups and navigating social dynamics prompted some participants to opt for a single close friend or even choosing solitude to avoid conflicts. This pattern persisted across all studies, reiterating both doctoral research (Pickup, 2021) and published findings on the experiences of autistic girls who have been excluded from school (Sproston et al., 2017). Notably, feelings of rejection were reported by participants in Tomlinson et al. (2022) when sharing their diagnosis with peers, suggesting a barrier to forming meaningful connections. However, Tomlinson et al. (2022) can be critiqued for not exploring in depth the potential interventions that could mitigate these fears. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data and the involvement of the participants' mothers in the interviews could introduce biases, such as social desirability and parental influence, potentially affecting the authenticity of the responses. Nevertheless, the findings align with retrospective accounts from autistic adult females who identified friendships as the most daunting aspect of school, with a noted lack of support for developing social skills in school (Honeybourne, 2015). Notably, the reviewed studies provided no information about the school support in this area, suggesting a lack of available assistance. This raises concerns, particularly as friendships and social networks become increasingly intricate to navigate during adolescence, posing increased challenges for autistic girls to manage (Moyse & Porter, 2015).

All studies highlighted the adverse impact of social exclusion and bullying on the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls, ranging from subtle forms of exclusion to more severe incidents. This aligns with broader research on the mental health needs of autistic CYP and the influence of bullying (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). One study (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019) utilised a range of participatory methods, revealing the adverse effects of social dynamics on the participants' mental health. 'Being bullied' emerged as the participants' top worry about mainstream school, leading to feelings of social isolation and loneliness. However, the study's limited sample of two participants raises questions about the generalisability of their findings. This methodological limitation suggests that their conclusions about the impact of bullying might not fully capture the broader experience of autistic girls in mainstream schools. This might also explain why the remaining primary studies reviewed did not explore

the mental health consequences of bullying or provide information about the available support in schools to help autistic girls cope with such challenges. However, it is important to recognise the tendency for autistic girls to mask their emotions might contribute to these needs being overlooked outside of the research process (Jordan, 2021).

Additionally, the reviewed studies revealed a gap in the literature concerning interventions and support mechanisms that were tailored to meet the specific needs of autistic girls, aligning with previous reviews (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2023; Tomlinson et al., 2020). It is crucial for future research to address this gap by actively integrating the voices and unique experiences of autistic girls, given their tendency to avoid asking for help and masking their feelings (Jordan, 2021). Consequently, schools must be proactive in identifying instances where social support is needed (Costley et al., 2021). Further, they may need to implement targeted interventions or seek support from external professionals, such as EPs, to effectively address issues of social exclusion and bullying while catering to the unique needs of this population (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

The findings revealed the challenges autistic girls faced in navigating the physical school environment. For instance, Goodall and MacKenzie (2019) highlighted how sensory challenges resulting from chaotic environments and transitions between classes contributed to feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, and stress. However, the validity of Goodall and MacKenzie's (2019) study is questionable as the authors did not disclose how they selected their two participants, raising concerns about potential selection bias. This lack of transparency also introduces the risk that the researchers may have chosen these particular participants to support a preconceived narrative. Despite these concerns, the observation of sensory challenges was consistent across all reviewed studies. This consistency indicates a lack of support models in schools designed to address autistic girls' sensory needs and reflects their underrepresentation in research (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Further, anxiety emerged as a prominent issue, particularly in response to specific curriculum aspects, teaching methods, and exam pressures, aligning with existing literature (e.g., Howlin & Moss, 2012). Seeking help from teachers was highlighted as challenging for participants, which could be linked to autistic girls' use of masking (Hull et al., 2020) and their increased likelihood to internalise emotions

(Mandy et al., 2012). Participants also experienced stress related to exams and academic pressures, especially in subjects where they lacked confidence and when they held negative perceptions about exams. This reflects the principles of self-determination theory, indicating a possible need to fulfil autonomy, competence, and relatedness to increase intrinsic motivation and reduce stress in academic settings (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The findings highlighted the positive impact of teacher and peer understanding about ASD and the needs of autistic girls on participants' experiences in school and subsequent wellbeing. Conversely, a lack of understanding resulted in negative perceptions and sometimes unwarranted consequences for participants. This reiterated the notion that school staff should understand the female presentation of ASD and develop supportive strategies tailored towards this population (Tomlinson et al., 2020). Positive relationships with teaching staff also positively influenced autistic girls' school experiences and their mental health in this setting. Tomlinson et al. (2022) reported that supportive, and empathetic teachers who addressed autistic girls' anxieties were highly valued. However, this study did not sufficiently explore how these supportive relationships could be systematically developed and maintained within the school environment. Interestingly, this review did not reveal findings regarding the influence of the home-school relationship on autistic girls' emotional needs, which is reported as important by previous research (Critchley, 2019). Although four studies included parent samples (Cook et al., 2018; Cridland et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022), there was overall minimal emphasis on the home-school relationship in promoting mental health, with a broader focus on school experiences. This suggests a gap in the literature regarding how collaboration between parents and schools can support the mental health and wellbeing of autistic girls.

This review revealed the diverse coping strategies used by autistic girls in mainstream schools. Positive strategies were identified, such as seeking comfort and support from designated safe spaces within the school environment. These safe spaces served as havens where participants could openly discuss their feelings with staff, fostering a sense of security and support (Myles et al., 2019). These findings reflect Sproston et al. (2017), who reported that safe and inclusive environments reduce the likelihood of school exclusion. However, maladaptive coping strategies were also identified, including disordered eating patterns, self-injurious behaviours,

and school avoidance, used to manage anxiety and anger (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Goodall and MacKenzie (2019) particularly underscored the complexities of disordered eating and self-injury using participatory research methods, emphasising the necessity for targeted interventions. However, their cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality between school experiences and the development of these maladaptive strategies. Despite this, the findings highlighted that these strategies not only impacted academic performance but also heightened stress and posed challenges at home. Consequently, the findings reiterate the necessity for robust research, particularly from the perspective of autistic girls, to address their mental health and wellbeing needs in educational settings (Eaton, 2017). Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of accessible mental health and wellbeing support throughout the school day (Cridland et al., 2014).

The findings align with Danker et al.'s (2016) framework of wellbeing, illustrating the complex factors that influence the wellbeing of autistic CYP in school. The review's first theme of 'the need for belonging and social connection' resonates with Danker et al.'s (2016) 'relationships' domain, highlighting the significance of positive connections and the impact of social exclusion on wellbeing in school. Further, the theme of 'navigating the demands of the school environment and curriculum' reiterates the challenges faced by autistic pupils within the physical environment, linking to the 'contextual/external factors', and the subsequent impact of this environment on autistic pupils' 'engagement' and 'accomplishment'. The theme 'the power of feeling understood, heard, and valued' directly corresponds to the 'intrapersonal/internal factors' domain, emphasising the need for understanding teachers and peers in school to promote wellbeing. Lastly, 'coping mechanisms and strategies for managing mental health needs' mirrors Danker et al.'s (2016) 'intrapersonal/internal factors', revealing how autistic girls utilise coping strategies in navigating emotional challenges within the school setting. The findings of this review align with Danker et al.'s (2016) framework for autistic pupil wellbeing. However, considering the methodological limitations of Danker et al.'s (2016) review outlined in section 2.2.1, further research that directly focuses on the wellbeing of autistic girls is essential to fully understand their unique experiences in mainstream schools and extend the applicability of the framework to this specific demographic.

2.6.7 Limitations

While this systematic review provides a comprehensive qualitative synthesis of the available literature on autistic girls' mainstream school experiences and how this influences their mental health and wellbeing, it is necessary to acknowledge limitations that may influence the interpretation and applicability of the findings. Firstly, this review was conducted by a single author, which could influence subjectivity during quality appraisal of studies and result in a subjective interpretation of themes identified from the findings. However, efforts were made to mitigate this bias through the use of a reflexive diary.

Research exploring autistic girls' school experiences and their wellbeing in this context is still emerging (Tomlinson et al., 2020). This resulted in a limited number of peer-reviewed articles and a narrow range of studies available for inclusion. For example, three out of six studies focused on general school experiences, while the remaining two centred on social situations and the use of masking strategies (Cook et al., 2018; Myles et al., 2019). While this lack of comprehensive research coverage could restrict the depth of insights gained and the generalisation of findings, it also presents an opportunity for future research to explore the factors influencing the mental health and wellbeing of autistic girls in mainstream schools.

While this review captured the perspectives of autistic girls who are cited as an underrepresented group in research (Hebron & Bond, 2019), it is necessary to consider the limitations posed by small sample sizes in the included studies. Additionally, all participants in these studies attended mainstream schools and participated in semi-structured interviews, suggesting proficient language and cognitive abilities among participants. These factors limit the generalisability and challenge the ecological validity of findings because they may not fully represent the diverse spectrum of autistic girls, particularly those facing significant challenges in communication and interaction. Thus, future research should include a broader and more varied sample of autistic girls to achieve a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and needs in educational settings.

2.6.8 Implications for practice

This review provides implications for practice for schools and EPs in fostering the mental health and wellbeing of autistic girls attending mainstream schools.

This review emphasised the importance of social connection for autistic girls. For instance, positive friendships in school were found to contribute to autistic girls' happiness and enjoyment (Jacobs et al., 2021). However, the findings highlighted that autistic girls may struggle with understanding friendship dynamics and fitting into social groups (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). This emphasises the crucial role of schools in supporting the wellbeing of autistic girls by creating inclusive environments that foster positive relationships (Sproston et al., 2017). Moreover, schools could implement interventions such as 'girl groups' to foster peer relationships and promote a sense of belonging (Hyde, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

This review highlighted the importance of schools providing easily accessible mental health and wellbeing support for autistic girls throughout the school day. Schools should establish designated safe spaces and incorporate independent coping strategies into the school environment (Cridland et al., 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Moreover, the findings suggest that tailored teaching practices should be implemented by schools to ensure positive school experiences for autistic girls. This includes providing extra time to process and complete tasks and reducing the amount of information to remember in lessons to alleviate anxiety (Jacobs et al., 2021). Schools should also pay attention to the physical environment to prevent it from becoming a source of emotional distress. Planning transition points during the school day can help autistic girls to feel confident and prepared for lessons (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Further, EPs can support schools to create sensory-friendly environments using a range of assessment tools such as, observation, consultation, and sensory-checklists, to devise appropriate interventions (Cook et al., 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Interventions must be devised with the recognition that autistic girls are not a homogeneous group, and their individual needs must be acknowledged (Morewood et al., 2019).

Additionally, the findings highlighted how a lack of awareness among school staff and peers regarding autistic girls' unique needs aversely influenced their wellbeing. Consequently, EPs are positioned to enhance schools' understanding of the female autism phenotype (Gray et al., 2021). This involvement may entail EPs conducting training sessions at the systemic school level to educate staff about the unique social and emotional requirements of autistic girls and to facilitate the

identification of suitable interventions (Cridland et al., 2014; Gray et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

EPs are ideally positioned to assist schools in promoting the wellbeing of autistic girls across various levels: systemic, group, and individual (Atkinson et al., 2014). In alignment with government guidance and initiatives (DfE, 2015; DfE, 2018; DfE, 2022), a collaborative approach between schools and EPs is necessary to promote wellbeing. This collaborative effort ensures the implementation of inclusive practices by integrating the unique needs of autistic girls into school policies and ethos, supported by an EP at the systemic level (Cameron, 2006; Fallon et al., 2010). Further, EPs can collaborate with schools to increase their understanding about the unique challenges faced by autistic girls, leading to greater empathy and support. At the individual level, EPs and schools can collaborate to devise targeted interventions tailored to address the mental health needs of autistic girls within mainstream educational settings (Sharpe et al., 2016).

2.6.9 Conclusion

This review highlighted the influence of mainstream schooling on the mental health and wellbeing of autistic girls. The synthesis of findings from six studies identified four analytical themes, revealing both supportive factors and challenges to mental health and wellbeing within the mainstream school setting. Positive social connections and relationships with both staff and peers were found to be necessary for positive mental health and wellbeing. These relationships contributed to a sense of security in school and fostered a sense of belonging for autistic girls. Additionally, the pervasive presence of anxiety across all themes highlighted the substantial impact of challenges faced in mainstream schools on the mental health and wellbeing of autistic girls. For instance, sensory challenges resulting from the physical environment and academic pressures within the school curriculum were noted as sources of stress and anxiety for autistic girls. Further, the need for increased understanding among teachers and peers concerning the specific needs of autistic girls was highlighted. This enhanced understanding is necessary for creating an inclusive and supportive school atmosphere that promotes positive emotional wellbeing by considering the unique needs of autistic girls. Moreover, the review revealed varied coping strategies among autistic girls, including seeking comfort in designated spaces to more maladaptive strategies such as disordered eating and school avoidance. The four themes indicate

the need for tailored support to meet the individual needs of autistic girls in school to promote positive mental health and ensure an overall positive school experience.

While the applicability of this review is constrained by low ecological validity and limited generalisability due to the small sample sizes and limited research conducted in this area, the review highlighted the factors within mainstream schools that influence autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing. Moreover, this review provides support for Danker et al.'s (2016) domains of autistic pupil wellbeing, however further research exploring the wellbeing of autistic girls is needed to corroborate this framework with this population.

This review provided implications for schools to ensure school staff understand autistic girls' needs and to develop tailored interventions aimed at promoting their mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, the findings highlight the role of EPs in educating school staff about the distinct needs of autistic girls and recommend collaborative relationships between schools and EPs to devise appropriate interventions.

2.7 Rationale and aims of the current research

This review highlighted the importance of school experiences in shaping autistic girls' mental health and emotional wellbeing. The findings indicated that autistic girls have unique emotional experiences and coping strategies compared to their neurotypical peers in school. Emotional wellbeing encompasses a spectrum of affective states such as emotions, stress responses, feelings, and mood (Gross et al., 2019). Positive emotional experiences are crucial for fostering mental health, underpinned by factors including healthy relationships, support networks, and a sense of belonging (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Despite existing studies addressing autistic girls' experiences in mainstream schools, direct research on their emotional wellbeing and specific emotions within this context is lacking. This gap could be attributed to the historical underrepresentation of autistic girls in research, resulting in an inadequate understanding of their gender-specific needs and challenges (Lai et al., 2015).

This review focused on autistic girls in their secondary education phase. While primary aged autistic girls were not excluded, limited research exists likely due to the risk of misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis compared to males (Bargiela et al., 2016; Duvekot et al., 2017). This research aims to contribute to the growing body of evidence

of autistic girls' experiences of mainstream secondary school. The vulnerability of adolescence for developing mental health needs (Fink et al., 2015; Kessler et al., 2005), coupled with the challenges faced by autistic girls in obtaining timely diagnoses, further justifies the importance of focusing on this specific population.

Schools have a statutory responsibility to safeguard pupils and are well-placed to enhance positive mental health and wellbeing (DfE, 2023; Atkinson et al., 2019). Closing this research gap is necessary to gain an understanding about the challenges autistic girls encounter in school and to develop tailored strategies to meet their specific needs (Tomlinson et al., 2020).

2.7.1 Research question

The current study aims to address this gap by considering the following research question:

What are autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools?

3   Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter details the methodology of this research. Recognising my active involvement in the research process (Berger, 2015), I have used a first-person perspective throughout this chapter. The chapter begins with an overview of research aims before discussing ontology, epistemology, and research paradigms. The philosophical underpinnings of this research will be provided, and the use of a qualitative methodology will be justified. The rationale for selecting interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) will be outlined after discussing the other qualitative methodologies considered for this research. The theoretical foundations and limitations of IPA will be discussed and reflexivity as a researcher is addressed. The research design, including stakeholders, final sample, data collection, analysis methods, and ethical considerations will be provided. The chapter concludes by emphasising research quality, particularly focusing on the trustworthiness of qualitative research.

3.2 Research aims

This research aims to enhance understanding for mainstream secondary settings, educational psychology services, and professionals interested in the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls in mainstream schools. It seeks to listen to autistic adolescent girls' perspectives on their emotional experiences in secondary schools and understand how they interpret these experiences. The research question guiding this research is:

What are autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools?

3.3 Philosophical underpinnings of this research

3.3.1 *Ontology*

Ontology concerns the nature of reality, including the researcher's beliefs about whether reality is objective or subjective, its characteristics, and the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Cohen et al., 2017; Robson & McCartan, 2015). Ontological perspectives are typically divided into two main positions: realism and relativism (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Realists believe in an objective reality

independent of individual awareness and aim to uncover truth through research and theory examination (Breakwell et al., 2020), while relativists argue for multiple constructed realities, seeking diverse perspectives and contextual realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Consequently, this research adopts a relativist ontology, recognising that autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing are shaped by their perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts.

3.3.2 Epistemology

Epistemology concerns the nature and acquisition of knowledge (Cohen et al., 2017). It examines the relationship between the researcher, their existing knowledge, the research subject, and knowledge dissemination methods (Cohen et al., 2017; Krauss, 2005). Different perspectives define 'knowledge' or 'truth' and its acquisition (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Objectivity asserts that researchers obtain empirical knowledge while maintaining independence from participants (Scotland, 2012), whereas subjectivity suggests knowledge stems from researchers' experiences and interactions (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

This research adopts a subjective epistemological stance, recognising that knowledge about emotional wellbeing is constructed through individual experiences, perspectives, and interpretations rather than seeking a single, objective truth (Lincoln, et al., 2023). This aligns with phenomenology, which emphasises the importance of gaining deeper insights into human phenomena by exploring the subjective experiences and interpretations of the individuals who have experienced it (Teherani et al., 2015). This research therefore adopts a phenomenological perspective, to uncover the distinct ways in which autistic adolescent girls perceive and experience emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools.

3.3.3 Research Paradigm

A paradigm includes the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological foundations of research (Breakwell et al., 2020; Creswell, 2009). Early educational research followed the positivist paradigm, using deductive reasoning to test hypotheses derived from theory (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Positivism adopts a realist ontology and objective epistemology, advocating for a single reality and separating researchers and participants to minimise researcher influence (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln et al., 2023; Park et al., 2020). Experimental methods are used, including randomised controlled trials to achieve precise measurements of variables

(Varpio & Macleod, 2020), using quantitative methods to establish causal inferences (Cohen et al., 2017). While providing consistent, reliable results with high internal validity, positivist research faces challenges in capturing complex constructs (Lincoln et al., 2023; Robson & McCartan, 2015). Thus, this research rejects the positivist paradigm, because it would be inappropriate for addressing the research question that focuses on individual experiences and the complex construct of emotional wellbeing (Lincoln et al., 2023; Robson & McCartan, 2015).

This research adopts the interpretivist paradigm and emphasises that reality and knowledge are constructed through individual experiences within social and cultural contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 2011; Gergen, 2001). This approach is particularly relevant to this study, which seeks to explore the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls through their own subjective interpretations of their experiences. The interpretivist paradigm was selected instead of the social constructionism paradigm because it aligns more closely with the aims of the research. While both paradigms share similar ontological and epistemological beliefs, they differ in their approach to the construction of knowledge. Interpretivism prioritises individual experiences in building knowledge, whereas social constructionism emphasises the collective influence of society, culture, and language on shaping our understanding of reality (Chen et al., 2011), making interpretivism an appropriate paradigm to research the individual lived experiences of participants.

3.3.4 Qualitative methodology

A qualitative methodology captures detailed descriptions of phenomena and individuals by collecting and analysing data in the form of words (Smith, 2015; Willig & Stainton, 2017). This methodology provides the necessary depth to effectively explore autistic girls' perspectives and experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream school, aligning with the interpretivist paradigm guiding this research (Gray, 2021; Mertens, 2019). Therefore, an exploratory qualitative methodology will be used to address the research question. I initially considered the following four qualitative methodologies based on the philosophical assumptions of this research and their suitability for addressing the research question, before deciding on interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Ethnography. Ethnography involves immersive observation and in-depth interviews to understand cultures and communities from an insider's perspective

(Gray, 2021). While this approach may provide rich contextual insights into how aspects of mainstream schools influence emotional wellbeing, such as social interactions, I rejected this methodology because focusing solely on observation may not fully capture the nuanced inner experiences and emotions of autistic girls. Moreover, autistic girls are known to internalise their emotions (Hull et al., 2020), potentially hindering the ability of ethnography to understand their experiences of emotional wellbeing within the school environment.

Narrative enquiry. I initially considered this methodology to understand autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing through the construction and narration of their stories (Andrews et al., 2013). However, I decided against narrative inquiry because it aligns more with a social constructionist research paradigm, emphasising how individuals construct their realities within a social context (Shacklock & Thorp, 2005). Since this research follows an interpretivist approach and aims to understand the lived experiences and meanings attributed by participants, narrative inquiry could potentially shift the research focus towards understanding how autistic girls construct their emotions and experiences within a social context, which does not align with the research aims or philosophy of this study.

Grounded theory. Grounded theory uses an inductive approach to identify social processes and generate theory from data grounded in observations and experiences (Willig, 2021). The researcher starts without preconceived hypotheses to reduce bias and highlight commonalities and differences. I considered grounded theory due to its suitability for researching previously unexplored areas which could highlight contextually relevant theories concerning emotional wellbeing and the female autism phenotype. Furthermore, grounded theory could focus on how social interactions, educational environments, and individual experiences influence the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls. However, the emphasis on aggregating data and identifying common themes may overlook the individual voices of participants, which does not align with the research aims.

Reflexive thematic analysis. Similarly, reflexive thematic analysis was rejected because it typically focuses on identifying patterns and themes across data without necessarily capturing the depth and richness of individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Although this methodology considers the importance of the researcher's own reflections and interpretations during the analysis process (Braun &

Clarke, 2022), it may not fully capture the unique emotional experiences of individual autistic adolescent girls in mainstream secondary schools desired in this research.

3.3.5 Rationale for interpretative phenomenological analysis

Upon reflection of the different qualitative methodologies and considering the research aim within the interpretivist paradigm, IPA emerged as the most appropriate methodology. IPA focuses on exploring participants' lived experiences and aims to understand these experiences from their unique perspectives. It also acknowledges the potential influence of the researcher's interpretation of participant accounts (Smith, 2015). This methodology prioritises participants' voices and interpretations, aligning well with the research goal to understand autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing from their own perspectives. Moreover, IPA places a strong emphasis on understanding the meanings participants attribute to their experiences, which is crucial when studying wellbeing as emotions involve personal interpretations and complex coping strategies (Haas et al., 2019). The next section will consider the theoretical underpinnings and methodological limitations of IPA.

3.4 Interpretive phenomenological analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is grounded in the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith et al., 2022). This section provides an overview of IPA's theoretical foundations and discussion of its methodological application in the context of the research question.

3.4.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology seeks to understand experience from the perspective of the individuals who have directly experienced them (Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 2022). The perspectives of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre have influenced the field of phenomenology, and shaped the development of a phenomenological framework used in IPA to explore '*how*' a participant understands their experience (Smith et al., 2022).

Edmund Husserl introduced the methods of 'bracketing' or 'epoché,' which involves setting aside preconceptions and biases (Smith et al., 2022). Consequently, during IPA, data is approached with an open mind to better understand participants' experiences and gain a more unbiased interpretation of the data. Further, Martin Heidegger's concept of 'Dasein' highlights the link between individuals and their

surroundings, and 'Mitsein' emphasises the significance of social relationships in shaping human existence (Smith et al., 2022). These concepts are reflected during IPA through consideration of the contextual, social, and existential dimensions of lived experience. Merleau-Ponty proposed that individuals' experiences are embodied, indicating the need to consider how bodily sensations, gestures, and expressions influence participants' experiences and perceptions during IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Further, Jean-Paul Sartre introduced an existential perspective that views individuals' lived experiences within the framework of freedom, choice, and responsibility. He emphasised 'existence precedes essence,' suggesting individuals define themselves through choices and actions which shape experience. (Smith et al., 2022).

These perspectives emphasise that human experience extends beyond a sensation. As a result, IPA acknowledges that an individual's lived experience is shaped by multiple dimensions, including their personal perceptions, bodily sensations, social interactions, and individual decisions (Smith et al., 2022).

3.4.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation and understanding of texts (Boerboom, 2017). The 'Hermeneutic Circle' in IPA outlines how the interpretation of individual parts of text is dependent on the interpretation of the whole, and vice versa (Smith et al., 2022). In this research, the 'whole' means understanding autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream schools, while the 'parts' are their specific responses in interviews. During IPA, I will analyse individual interviews (the parts) to uncover deeper insights into participants' experiences of emotional wellbeing (the whole). At the same time, I will improve my understanding of the overall context, using it to guide how I interpret each individual detail. This method will result in an ongoing and flexible research process, enhancing the depth of my analysis (Smith et al., 2022; Willig, 2021).

The 'Double Hermeneutics' principle also influences IPA. This concept suggests that within the research process, there are two layers of interpretation happening simultaneously (Smith et al., 2022), including:

1.   Participant's meaning-making: This layer represents the participants' perspectives and meanings. In this research, the autistic girls themselves are the primary interpreters of their own experiences. They will provide narratives that reflect

their interpretations and understandings of their emotional wellbeing within mainstream secondary schools.

2.   Researcher's sense-making: This layer represents the researchers' interpretation and analysis. As the researcher, I will engage in my own interpretation of the participants' accounts to understand their narratives. This involves exploring the emotions, and contextual factors that may not be immediately evident.

3.4.3 Ideography

Ideography focuses on the in-depth exploration and understanding of the unique and individual experiences of participants in a study without preconceived theories or hypotheses (Smith et al., 2022). Unlike nomothetic approaches, ideography allows themes and patterns to emerge from participants' narratives, prioritising depth over generalisation (Smith et al., 2022). In IPA, ideography captures the richness of individual experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Consequently, ideography is relevant to the focus of this research on the individual lived experiences of autistic adolescent girls.

3.4.4 Limitations of IPA

To ensure the appropriateness of using IPA in this research, the methodological limitations were considered. IPA relies on detailed first-person accounts from participants to comprehensively explore human experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Verbal language is crucial for conveying these experiences effectively within IPA (Willig, 2021; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012), however given participants' ASD diagnosis, challenges in social interaction and communication are likely (APA, 2013). Participants may face limitations in verbal expression, struggle to articulate emotions, or rely on non-verbal communication cues, which could impact data collection and prevent potential participants from taking part. Despite these obstacles, this research aims to amplify autistic girls' voices, addressing the underrepresentation of autistic girls in research (Hebron & Bond, 2019). During data collection, I will use clear, simple language for instructions and questions, provide participants with the interview schedule in advance to reduce anxiety, and create a supportive environment fostering trust and rapport, as detailed in the ethical considerations section.

Although IPA delves into individuals' lived experiences and their meanings, the descriptive and interpretive nature of this methodology means it cannot establish

causality. Similarly, the small sample sizes in IPA research limits the generalisability of findings. However, this research, does not aim to identify causal relationships between factors in the mainstream school and autistic girls' emotional wellbeing or generalise these findings to other contexts. Instead, this ideographic research aims to give voice to autistic girls in mainstream settings and contribute to the growing body of research with this underrepresented population (Hebron & Bond, 2019). The findings aim to inform stakeholders about potential emotional wellbeing challenges faced by autistic girls in mainstream secondary schools. However, it is important to approach the implications drawn from these findings with caution, considering their specific context.

3.5 Researcher reflexivity

Reflexivity involves the conscious reflection on how a researcher's own experiences, beliefs, and bias can influence the research process and outcomes (Langdridge, 2007). In this research, I have chosen to use a first-person perspective to convey active participation in the research and to reflect the two layers of interpretation occurring simultaneously, as proposed by the double hermeneutic principle (Smith et al., 2022).

I recognise that my values, experiences, and roles as a local authority practitioner and researcher will influence this research. To ensure trustworthiness, I kept a reflexive diary to address bias and enhance transparency (Willig, 2021). Reflexive comments from this diary will be included in Chapter 3 to demonstrate my active participation in the research and to promote the overall credibility of the research process (Berger, 2015).

3.5.1 Reflexivity in the present study

Since my background and experiences significantly influence both the research process and interpretation of findings, it is necessary for me to acknowledge my positionality as the researcher. I am a female who attended a mainstream secondary school and I recognise how these aspects shape my perspective on the education system. My qualifications and experience in education, particularly supporting autistic young people in mainstream schools, further inform my viewpoint. These experiences drive my exploration into the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls in mainstream education.

It is important to note that while I am female and attended a mainstream secondary school, I am not autistic. Consequently, I consider myself an 'outsider' to the group being studied. This outsider perspective raises concerns about confirmation bias, where I might unintentionally seek or interpret data aligning with my preconceived notions of autistic girls' experiences due to my lack of personal experience (Langdridge, 2007). I am aware of this bias, and I am committed to mitigating it through continuous self-reflection in my reflexive research diary in addition to exploring alternative viewpoints and questioning my interpretations during analyses.

3.6 Method

3.6.1 Sample

Recruitment criteria. Aligning with the research question and the phenomenological approach, I used purposive sampling to recruit participants, aiming for a homogenous sample, as advised in IPA research (Smith et al., 2022). Participants were selected based on specific criteria, detailed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

A table to show the recruitment criteria

Criterion	Rationale
Adolescent girls diagnosed with ASD	This criterion focuses this research on the experiences of autistic adolescent girls, addressing gaps in existing literature that often emphasises autistic males' experiences (Lai et al., 2015).
Attend a mainstream secondary school	Most autistic pupils attend mainstream settings (NAS, 2021), making this criterion relevant to the unique social, academic, and emotional challenges autistic girls may face in mainstream education (Horgan et al., 2022).
Not cared for by the local authority	Excluding participants under the care of the local authority allows the research to focus solely on autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing within mainstream school settings. This isolation helps separate these experiences from potential impacts

related to trauma or attachment needs commonly found in children in care (Geddes, 2006).

Are not currently receiving targeted mental health treatment, such as counselling through CAMHS

By excluding participants undergoing counselling or mental health interventions, the research aims to understand the inherent emotional challenges autistic girls face within the school environment more clearly.

Reflections: I considered excluding participants with a history of school exclusion or prolonged absence (e.g., had experienced emotionally based school non-attendance) due to concerns about potential confounding factors. However, I understand that these experiences are likely to be essential to their school journey. Participants with such experiences could offer valuable insights into the factors influencing their behaviours and emotions at school.

While my primary focus was to explore the lived experiences of autistic girls. I understand that participants might have diverse gender identities, including transgender and non-binary. I chose to adopt an approach to recruitment that allowed participants to define their gender identity as female without imposing explicit requirements.

Recruitment procedure. This research explores the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream secondary schools. To do so, I purposely aimed to recruit participants from this population within my professional practice placement local authority in the North West of England. After obtaining ethical approval (Appendix 6), I sought gatekeeper consent and emailed 25 mainstream secondary school head teachers (Appendix 7) to invite their schools to participate. The email detailed the research objectives and requested support from their schools, including providing a safe location for interviews. After headteachers expressed interest via email, I asked for their help in identifying autistic girls in their schools who met the participation criteria. They distributed a recruitment letter (Appendix 8) and an information sheet (Appendix 9) about the study to the parents of these pupils. Parents were asked to provide consent by completing the attached consent form. I provided my contact details for any further questions or information needed. After obtaining parental consent, I sent the participant information sheet (Appendix 10) to the head teacher

and asked for a familiar adult in the school to explain the aims of the research to the potential participant. If they expressed interest, I arranged a meeting to introduce myself and obtain their informed consent using a written consent form (Appendix 11).

> **Reflections:** I chose to have a familiar adult, rather than myself, conduct the initial introduction and explain the aims of the research. This decision aimed to enhance the comfort and autonomy of potential participants in deciding to participate.
> The pre-data collection meetings helped me to build rapport, clarify expectations, and ensure that participants understood nature of their involvement, and their right to freely choose whether to participate. I hoped this process would reduce any pressure or uncertainty associated with interacting with an unfamiliar person.

Final sample. The final sample comprised four participants, aligning with recommended sample sizes for professional doctorate research using IPA (Clarke, 2010; Smith et al., 2022). This sample size is consistent with previous doctoral and peer-reviewed studies investigating the educational experiences of autistic females (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2022). Demographic and participant information was obtained from their schools with parental consent. Table 3.2 presents key details about each participant. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms have been assigned to both the participants and their schools.

Table 3.2

A table detailing key participant information

	Participant			
	Emily	**Sophie**	**Ava**	**Olivia**
Age at interview	13:11	13:11	12:05	14:00
Year Group	9	9	8	9
School Name	School A	School A	School B	School B
Ethnicity	White British	White British	White British	White British
Age at Diagnosis	9	8	11	11
Special Educational Needs Support	Education, Health, and Care Plan	Education, Health, and Care Plan	Education, Health, and Care Plan	Universal support

Sample context. Emily and Sophie both attended School A in the same year 9 group. School A is situated near a large residential housing estate, a church, a business park, and a golf club. An academy serving pupils aged 11 to 18, it holds a 'good' OFSTED rating. While its official capacity is 1214 pupils, School A currently enrols 1373 students. School A also has a sixth form.

Ava and Olivia attended School B, with Ava in Year 8 and Olivia in Year 9. School B is situated in the heart of a market town, close to shops, historical landmarks, and civic institutions. School B operates as an academy within a campus setting, and educates pupils aged 11 to 16, with an OFSTED rating indicating it 'requires improvement'. Unlike School A, School B does not have a sixth form but benefits from its proximity to an independent sixth form college on the same campus. With a designed capacity for 600 pupils, School B currently enrols 582 students. It also hosts a separate resourced provision for autistic pupils requiring an Education, Health, and Care Plan, currently attended by ten pupils.

3.6.2 Stakeholders

This research involves stakeholders with vested interests in the research process and outcomes:

- Researcher: As a trainee EP, I am personally and professionally invested in this research. The findings could directly impact my future practice as a qualified EP.

- The University of Nottingham: As an institutional stakeholder, the university provided ethical approval for this study. Conducting this research contributes to my doctoral qualification awarded by the University of Nottingham. Thus, the university is invested in supporting my academic and professional development to ensure alignment with programme standards and requirements.

- Mainstream secondary schools: These schools provide the research setting and are directly impacted by the findings. Understanding the experiences of emotional wellbeing for autistic girls could inform their practices, policies, and support systems.

- Autistic adolescent girls: Their experiences are the research focus. Understanding their emotions, challenges, and perspectives could be crucial for improving their educational experiences. The research aims to amplify their voices and advocate for their needs within mainstream schools.

- Parent/carers and families of autistic girls: These individuals are directly affected by their child's experiences. The research can provide insights and recommendations to help parents advocate for better support and inclusion for their children.

- The researcher's educational psychology service and local authority: These are professional stakeholders with an interest in the research. They may use the findings to inform policies, resource allocation, and support services for autistic students in mainstream schools, contributing to evidence-based practices and decision-making.

3.6.3 Ethical considerations

I secured ethical approval from the University of Nottingham ethics committee (Appendix 6) and followed the guidance outlined in the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021), BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2021a), BPS Practice Guidelines (BPS, 2017), and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Standards of Conduct, Performance, and Ethics (HCPC, 2016). In this section, I will discuss how I addressed key ethical issues in this research.

Informed consent. Before conducting interviews, I obtained informed consent from both the parents of the participants and the participants themselves via consent forms (Appendix 9;11). I provided detailed information about the research's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations using information sheets designed for parents (Appendix 9) and participants (Appendix 10). Participants and their parents were fully aware of their involvement and willingly agreed to participate. This consent process continued throughout the study, enabling participants to make informed decisions about their ongoing participation.

Confidentiality. At the start of each interview, I emphasised the importance of confidentiality and explained how it would be maintained in the study, including safeguarding constraints. To protect participants' identities, I assigned pseudonyms to them and their schools. All data, including recordings, transcripts, and personal information, were securely stored and accessible only to me via a password-protected OneDrive folder linked to my university account. Potential identifying details, such as school names and references to peers and teachers, were excluded from the final analysis. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription.

Right to withdraw. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without facing consequences or pressure to continue. This information, provided in the information sheet, was reiterated at the start of each interview session to emphasise their ability to discontinue their participation if they felt uncomfortable, or no longer had an interest. Throughout the interview, I monitored participants' emotional responses and non-verbal cues and I offered them the option to pause or leave the room at any time, with no negative impact on their participation.

Protection from harm. I safeguarded participants' wellbeing and minimised harm by having a school staff member introduce the study. The interview questions were sensitively designed to be supportive, avoiding intrusive inquiries, following guidance from Smith et al. (2022). I maintained regular communication with participants, offering breaks and the choice to continue or terminate the interview if needed. Additionally, I provided the option of a trusted adult's presence for comfort and safety, although no participants chose this option.

During data collection, participants remained emotionally unharmed and willingly engaged. Following each interview, I stopped the audio recording and held a

debriefing meeting with each participant, including an emotional check-in. I also provided a debriefing leaflet and explained how to manage post-interview feelings and outlined withdrawal options from the study at a later date.

Due to interview timings, participants missed one lesson. To mitigate potential discomfort from entering a classroom much later than their peers and being subject to unwanted attention, I offered participants the choice to remain in the interview room. One participant chose to stay until the bell rang.

3.6.4 Data collection

Rationale for semi-structured interview method. I initially considered facilitating a focus group however I recognised that potential group dynamics could prevent some participants from expressing their individual experiences (Nyumba et al., 2018). I also considered unstructured individual interviews, however given the unique social and communication needs of this population (APA, 2013), this approach may not have adequately accommodated their diverse needs and experiences. Further, structured interviews were inappropriate as they could restrict exploration of essential information. Consequently, I chose individual semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of autistic girls' emotional wellbeing, aligning with IPA's focus on capturing rich, subjective perspectives while addressing the research question (Smith et al., 2022). These interviews allowed for real-time dialogue and provided flexibility for unexpected topics to emerge, enabling more in-depth investigation through follow-up questions or prompts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Devising the semi-structured interview schedule. I created a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 12) to guide discussions about participants' experience, with the goal of later addressing the research question through analysis (Smith et al., 2022). I followed Smith and colleagues' (2022) recommended sequence for constructing my schedule.

I began by identifying broad areas to explore in my interviews, focusing on participants' emotional wellbeing in mainstream schools. This step ensured comprehensive coverage of their emotional experiences. Next, I considered specific topics by breaking down these broad areas into themes and issues related to mainstream school. Drawing on Danker et al.'s (2016) domains and themes from their autistic student wellbeing framework, and findings from previous research with autistic

girls (Cook et al., 2018; Cridland et al., 2014; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021; Myles et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022), I formulated questions targeting emotional wellbeing in the mainstream environment.

Following Smith et al.'s (2022) process, I arranged these topic areas into a logical sequence, starting with the present and transitioning to the past and future. To offer participants flexibility and to initiate in-depth discussions, I began with a straightforward question: '*Can you tell me about your school?*' This structure enabled participants to start with current experiences and naturally progressed to discussions about the past and future through related questions (Smith et al., 2022). I used the funnelling technique in my questioning sequence, starting with broad questions to gather broad information before gradually narrowing the focus to explore specific aspects relevant to the research aims. This approach facilitated an initial exploration of participants' general emotional experiences in school and allowed for comparisons with emotions in other environments. Then, I directed the discussion toward key themes identified in previous research to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' emotional wellbeing within their school context.

I prepared prompts for each interview question in advance to help participants share the in-depth individual experiences needed for IPA (Smith et al., 2022). I utilised prompts when participants faced challenges in giving detailed responses, showed signs of limited comprehension through non-verbal cues, or expressed uncertainty. Due to the unique communication and interaction needs of autistic individuals, prompts were consistently employed for all questions.

After drafting the initial interview schedule, I sought feedback from trainee and qualified EP peers. This review process identified leading questions that needed revision. For example, I initially framed a question about participants' anxiety as, '*Do you find the school environment overwhelming?*'. This question assumed the school environment is commonly overwhelming for autistic girls, which may not universally apply. To prevent bias, I rephrased the question as: "*How does the school environment make you feel?*" This revised question allowed participants to share their individual experiences in the school environment, expressing their unique perspectives and feelings, promoting a more open and unbiased response.

Reflections: I found the interview schedule helpful in setting expectations and addressing the research question effectively. It helped me to anticipate potential challenges, such as participants' emotional wellbeing during questioning, and allowed me to plan for post-interview debrief support in school. It also led me to carefully devise questions and prompts, recognising that autistic girls may find complex language difficult.

I believe that providing participants with a physical copy of the schedule was beneficial, in addition to allowing them time to review questions beforehand which facilitated their understanding of the interview structure and encouraged responses.

Piloting the questions. I conducted an interview pilot with one autistic girl from a mainstream secondary school to refine my technique, assess question phrasing, and ensure alignment with the research question. I gathered feedback from the participant regarding the clarity of questions and whether they experienced any discomfort. The participant did not identify any significant modifications needed for the interview schedule which led to the inclusion of the pilot data in the final sample.

Reflections: Interviewing for qualitative research was a new experience for me, and I felt a mix of emotions, including anticipation and nervousness. After the pilot interview, I felt relieved that it had gone smoothly. Seeking the participant's feedback was an important step in this research, and I was glad to learn that she did not experience any discomfort during our conversation. The fact that no significant changes were required for the interview schedule was reassuring, indicating that my approach was appropriate.

Before the pilot, I considered the need for visual aids based on previous research involving interviews with autistic young people (e.g., Nind, 2008). However, it became clear that providing a physical copy of the questions for participants to refer to was sufficient due to their age.

Conducting the interviews. After participants were briefed on the study by a trusted adult, I arranged individual meetings to introduce myself and obtain their informed consent using a written form (Appendix 11). In these sessions, I clarified the purpose of this research, their expected involvement, and the recording and confidential storage of interview data, adhering to ethical guidelines. To ensure participants' understanding of potential areas of discussion, I provided a copy of the

schedule and discussed each question, alleviating any interview-related anxieties. Participants were also reminded of the option to have a trusted adult present for support if desired.

Interviews were conducted in quiet rooms. At School A, a small meeting space adjacent to their 'SEND learning hub' was utilised, a familiar location for both participants. Conversely, at School B, interviews occurred in a meeting room commonly used by the school's senior leadership team. Although both rooms were comparable in size, School A's space felt noticeably more comfortable and relaxed, potentially fostering a familiar and less intimidating atmosphere for the participants. In contrast, School B's room, while suitable, may have added a sense of formality to the interviews. Despite these differences, both settings provided a private and conducive environment for the interviews.

At the start of each interview, I outlined the limits of confidentiality related to safeguarding. All participants confirmed their understanding before signing the consent form. Following a brief introductory script from the interview schedule, I directed participants' attention to their copy of the schedule, clarifying the question sequence and expectations of participating. Once participants were prepared, I started the audio recording to initiate the interview. Interview durations varied between 43 minutes and 49 seconds to 1 hour and 8 minutes.

I debriefed each participant after their interview. I asked them to summarise their experience to ensure they understood the research. I asked about their feelings regarding participation and emphasised their right to withdraw until 31st August 2023, before data analyses began. I assured them of the confidentiality of our conversation, stating that only I would have access to it, and explained the transcription process, followed by the deletion of the audio recording. Participants received a debriefing leaflet (see Appendix 13) and were directed to available support services within their school and the local authority for emotional and mental health assistance. All participants reported feeling emotionally well post-interview and expressed satisfaction with participation. One participant thanked me for providing an opportunity for her feelings and views to be heard. I also emailed parents a debriefing letter (see Appendix 14), outlining their daughter's participation and main discussion topics from the interview schedule, along with contact details for pupil emotional wellbeing support services.

Reflections: I used active listening and interactive helping skills to foster a non-judgemental atmosphere, encouraging participants to openly share their experiences. I recorded my immediate reflections post-interview to acknowledge the distinctiveness of each participant. This helped me to recognise that their experiences and viewpoints might diverge significantly from my expectations and prior encounters with other autistic girls.

3.6.5 Data analysis

I listened to the recordings and manually transcribed them to immerse myself in the data. I also included notable non-verbal communication, such as pauses and hesitations to deepen my understanding of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attributed to them, aligning with IPA principles (Smith et al., 2022). Following transcription, I followed the IPA stages outlined by Smith and colleagues (2022).

Step 1: Reading and re-reading. I thoroughly read each interview transcript and then re-read it to immerse myself in the data, ensuring a comprehensive understanding. To maintain an ideographic commitment to data, I approached each interview separately and completed the analysis before progressing to the next one (Spiers & Smith, 2019).

Reflections: Engaging with each participant's narrative allowed me to recall interview details, including subtle cues, which highlighted the importance of starting analysis at the transcription stage (Spiers & Smith, 2019). Initially I found it challenging to ignore themes that came to mind. However, I noted down frequently emerging themes down for later review to ensure that analyses remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than my own assumptions.

Step 2: Exploratory noting. I observed and recorded noteworthy elements of each transcript, focusing on semantic content and language. This helped me understand how participants articulate and understand their emotional wellbeing in school (Smith et al., 2022). I noted under three areas:

1. Descriptive: notes describing the content of what the participant has said and the subject of their discussion.

2. Linguistic: notes exploring the specific use of language and its contribution to my understanding of participants' experiences, including their current perspectives.

3. Conceptual: notes engaging with the data at a more interrogative and conceptual level. This included explicitly asking questions of the data to shift my focus towards participants' overarching understanding.

Appendix 15 provides an example of this process.

> **Reflections:** I found it challenging to avoid noting ideas relating to *why* a participant had shared something or noting down causal explanations. I aimed to focus on key, specific quotes to support the next stage of analysis. I made multiple passes through each transcript to ensure my annotations added depth beyond the original transcript.

Step 3: Constructing experiential statements. I transitioned from the transcripts to the exploratory notes, articulating main claims about the meaning of participants' experiences. These statements directly related to their experiences and their sense-making in school. Once I had consolidated key ideas for each participant, I worked to create case-level summaries and organised the experiential statements in the following steps.

> **Reflections:** Reviewing the transcript multiple times in the previous stage helped in creating experiential statements that captured essential aspects from the exploratory notes. In line with the hermeneutic circle, I ensured these statements reflected participants' original thoughts while incorporating my interpretations for a comprehensive understanding of emotional wellbeing in school.

Step 4: Searching for connections. I began to create case-level summaries by clustering experiential statements and eliminating irrelevant ones. Maintaining an open-minded approach, I structured the summaries to highlight impactful aspects and grouped related statements, potentially forming themes at the case level. I also included additional notes to track my evolving thoughts, examining preconceptions, interpretative observations, and how statements interconnected to derive meaning. Appendix 16 provides an example of the clustering process.

Step 5: Structured consolidation of personal experiential themes. I named each cluster of experiential statements to form a personal experiential theme (PET)

for each participant. These PETs were then organised into a table to generate individual case-level summaries, providing a distinct view of each participant's experiences. Please refer to Appendix 17 for an example PET table.

> **Reflections:** I found it useful to populate each PET table with relevant extracts and quotes from their transcripts linked to each experiential statement. This approach helped me to remain true to the participant's actual words and prompted me to validate interpretations with data references.

Step 6: Continuing the individual analysis of other cases. To work towards the identification of cross-case themes, I repeated steps 1 through 5 for each subsequent participant, maintaining the uniqueness of each transcript and avoiding influence from prior analyses, aligning with the phenomenological approach of this research.

> **Reflections:** I alternated between creating experiential statements and developing PETs multiple times before transitioning to a cross-case summary. This approach enabled me to stay connected to the individual experiences and perspectives of each participant while also advancing toward a broader comprehension of shared themes across cases. I also found it necessary to take breaks between analyses to ensure that I did not let the narratives from one participant influence my interpretation of the next.

Step 7: Developing group experiential themes across cases. I reviewed each participant's case-level summary to identify common themes across cases, aiming to highlight both shared and unique experiences. After thoroughly examining each case summary, I identified broader similarities and differences, then looked for cross-cutting themes in the grouped material to generate Group Experiential Themes (GETs). Finally, I constructed a linear representation of the thematic structure to document my findings, presented in Appendix 18.

> **Reflections:** The iterative nature of IPA demanded patience and persistence. I found that having physical printouts of experiential statements and PETs, that I could manipulate and organise, made the analyses process easier. These printouts served as visual aids, helping me track connections and differences within the data.

Viewing the PETs allowed me to visualise each participant's unique narrative and identify commonalities and variations across cases and at the group level.

3.7 Quality in qualitative research

Systematic evaluation of research involves a thorough assessment of methodology, findings, and analyses to determine research quality against established guidelines (Willig, 2021). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research encounters unique evaluation challenges due to researcher involvement, subjective analyses, and context dependence. Therefore, flexible quality criteria suitable to assess the quality of qualitative research have been developed (Willig, 2021).

I used Yardley's (2000) criteria to assess the quality of this research. Yardley (2000) prioritises depth, richness, and contextual understanding of participants' experiences, aligning well with the core principles of IPA and the aims of this research (Smith et al., 2022). By adhering to Yardley's (2000) criteria, I aim to enhance the rigour and trustworthiness of this research and provide a clear and transparent account of the research process and findings, to contribute to their validity and credibility. This section details how I applied Yardley's (2000) criteria.

3.7.1 Sensitivity to context

Qualitative research involves being attentive to the data, social context, and the researcher-participant relationship (Yardley, 2000). I analysed data while being mindful of each participant's unique context and gathered background and demographic information, with parental consent, to understand their individual experiences. To consider the social context of mainstream secondary schools, I reviewed literature (in Chapter 2) about autistic girls' experiences in this setting to identify research gaps and determine the suitability of IPA. I prioritised reflexivity by acknowledging my own personal perspectives, motivations, and interests that could shape the formulation of research questions and interpretation of data.

I considered potential power-dynamics to maintain sensitivity to the researcher-participant relationship. During interviews, I monitored my emotional responses, maintaining a neutral and empathetic demeanour to avoid influencing participants. A familiar adult explained the research to participants, ensuring they felt at ease and fully understood its purpose. Before interviewing, I built rapport with each participant,

reiterated their right to withdraw, and provided clear information about the interview process including question types and duration to minimise surprises.

3.7.2 Commitment and rigour

Yardley (2000) highlights the importance of commitment and rigour in qualitative research. This is demonstrated by deep engagement with the topic, extensive data collection, methodological expertise, and detailed analysis. I demonstrated this commitment by following Smith et al.'s (2022) structured IPA approach and using a semi-structured interview schedule for comprehensive data collection. Following the idiographic approach of IPA, I conducted immersive individual-level analyses to understand each participant's unique perspectives before exploring convergence and divergence at the group level (Smith et al., 2022).

3.7.3 Transparency and coherence

Transparency in interpretation involves clearly outlining how conclusions were drawn from the data, while coherence ensures alignment between the research question, philosophical stance, and chosen methodology (Yardley, 2000). I ensured transparency by detailing the data collection process, coding procedures, and analysis criteria. Excerpts from the data were included in Chapter 4, enabling direct access to evidence, and promoting trustworthiness for readers to evaluate interpretations. To maintain coherence, I formulated a research question consistent with the philosophical perspectives of this research. Further, IPA was chosen to facilitate the in-depth exploration of autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools, aligning with the research question. I maintained reflexivity staying aware of personal experiences and potential biases to ensure ethical and self-aware research conduct.

3.7.4 Impact and importance

This criterion highlights the need for research to generate practical significance, which may manifest in applications, additional hypotheses, or shifts in perceptions (Yardley, 2000). During adolescence, addressing mental health needs becomes increasingly important, especially among autistic pupils (Kessler et al., 2005). Autistic girls are particularly vulnerable as they often go unnoticed by mainstream school staff, primarily due to internalising emotions and masking their needs, heightening their susceptibility to mental health challenges (Dean et al., 2017). Despite this, there is a research gap concerning how mainstream schools influence the emotional wellbeing

of autistic girls. Therefore, this research can advance understanding of their experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream school and address these gaps. Further implications of this research will be discussed in Chapter 4.

4   Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) conducted to address the research question: *What are autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools?*' Since IPA is an interpretative process, the findings are influenced by my interpretations of participants' understanding of their experiences. This aligns with the interpretivist epistemology of this research. To maintain transparency and adhere to the ideographic nature of IPA (Yardley, 2000), this chapter will begin with a brief description of each participant's context, drawn from demographic data provided by their schools and interview data. Following this, each Group Experiential Theme (GET) will be presented.

4.2 Context

I approached analyses by considering Yardley's (2000) quality criteria and maintained sensitivity to each participant's unique context. Due to the small sample size and the limited number of autistic girls in the local authority, I have opted not to include a comprehensive overview of each participant to safeguard their anonymity.

4.2.1 Sophie

Sophie lived with her mother, father, and younger sister. At the time of the interview, Sophie was 13 years and 11 months old and was in Year 9. At age 8, Sophie received her ASD diagnosis, and her needs were outlined in an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) at age 9. Sophie attended her secondary school since Year 7 and had consistently attended. Sophie participated in all her subjects in the mainstream classroom.

4.2.2 Emily

Emily lived with her mother, father, and older sister. At the time of the interview, she was 13 years and 11 months old, attending Year 9. Emily had been a pupil at the same secondary school since Year 7 and consistently attended. Diagnosed with ASD at 9, she subsequently received an EHCP at the same age. While Emily participates in mainstream lessons for all subjects, she no longer takes drama due to sensory overload from noises, people, and lighting. Instead, during this time, Emily visits a room in the SEN department where she focuses on additional English work.

4.2.3 Ava

Ava was 12 years and 5 months old in Year 8 when she was interviewed. Her parents were separated, and she alternated between living with her mother and younger sister for one week and with her father for the next. Ava received her ASD diagnosis at 11 years old. In Year 7, she was granted an EHCP following a six-month period during which she did not attend school due to anxiety and reported bullying from her school peers. At the time of the interview, Ava consistently attended school and received support from a keyworker.

4.2.4 Olivia

When interviewed, Olivia was aged 14 and in Year 9. She received her ASD diagnosis at the age of 11. Unlike the other three participants, Olivia was not known to her school's SEN department and received universal support in school to meet her needs.

4.3 Group Experiential Themes

Following the data analyses process outlined in Chapter 3, I identified 17 subthemes that grouped into five GETs:

1. Navigating the mainstream environment

2. The influence of classroom learning dynamics on wellbeing

3. The importance of relationships

4. Coping mechanisms for emotional regulation in school

5. Perceptions of inclusion and belonging in the classroom.

The GETs represent the shared and unique features of each participant's experience. Figure 4.1 visually presents each GET and subthemes and Table 4.1 details the distribution of GETs and subthemes among participants.

Figure 4.1

A figure to present GETs and subthemes

Transition and change within the mainstream school environment

The emotional impact of physical surroundings

Establishing safe spaces for emotional wellbeing

Navigating the mainstream environment

Unwanted attention

Social integration challenges

Social inclusion and belonging in the mainstream classroom

Challenges navigating social dynamics

The need for tailored teaching practices

The influence of classroom learning dynamics on wellbeing

Recognition and praise promote wellbeing

Navigating academic pressures

Having a personal interest in lessons

What are autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools?

Masking emotions and hiding one's true self

Coping mechanisms for emotional regulation in school

Social support systems

Avoidance strategies

Personal coping strategies

The importance of relationships

The power of friendships in shaping emotional wellbeing

Perceptions of teachers and their contribution to an emotionally supportive environment

Positive relationships with understanding teachers

Table 4.1

A table to display the distribution of GETs and subthemes among participants

Group Experiential Theme	Subtheme	Participant
Navigating the mainstream environment	The emotional impact of physical surroundings	Emily, Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Establishing safe spaces for emotional wellbeing	Emily, Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Transition and change within the school environment	Emily, Sophie, Ava, Olivia,
The influence of classroom learning dynamics on wellbeing	The need for tailored teaching practices	Emily, Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Recognition and praise promote wellbeing	Emily, Sophie, Olivia
	Navigating academic pressures	Emily, Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Having a personal interest in lessons	Emily, Sophie, Olivia
The importance of relationships	The power of friendships in shaping emotional wellbeing	Emily, Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Positive relationships with understanding teachers	Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Perceptions of teachers and their contribution to an emotionally supportive environment	Emily, Sophie
Coping mechanisms for emotional regulation in school	Social support systems	Emily, Ava
	Personal coping strategies	Emily, Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Avoidance strategies	Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Masking emotions and hiding one's true self	Emily, Sophie, Ava, Olivia

Social inclusion and belonging in the mainstream classroom	Challenges navigating social dynamics	Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Social integration challenges	Emily, Sophie, Ava, Olivia
	Unwanted attention	Emily, Ava, Olivia

4.3.1 Navigating the mainstream environment

The GET 'Navigating the mainstream environment' encompassed participants' interactions in the school environment, emphasising physical surroundings, the significance of perceived safe spaces, and the effects of transitions on emotional wellbeing.

The emotional impact of physical surroundings. The physical surroundings were interpreted as a backdrop that shaped participants' emotional wellbeing throughout the school day. Sophie's description of school was layered:

"*It's a good school [pause] but a big school. It is a good school though.*" (Sophie, 1/3).

Sophie's pause was interpretated as reluctance to talk about the negative aspects of her school. Her repetition of "*it's a good school*" was interpreted as a form of self-reassurance, indicating that she wanted to affirm the school's positive aspects to herself and the researcher, despite recognising challenges posed by its size.

Emily finds a seating plan necessary to maintain a sense of calm in the large classrooms:

"*Well, the classrooms are quite big, and then you have a seating plan, so you know where you're sat, which helps. That makes me feel calmer and organised.*" (Emily, 2/24).

Emily's appreciation for structure and predictability suggests that an organised classroom provider her with a sense of control over the environment.

For Ava, the size of school seemed to present challenges in navigating social dynamics:

"I can't just be myself here; it's too big, larger than my primary school anyway." (Ava, 8/224).

Ava's transition from primary to a larger secondary school appears to impact her ability to be herself and navigate social interactions. Moreover, the secondary environment seems to instil a fear of judgement, physical confrontation, and exposure to unpredictable social situations in the busy corridors:

"It's like, they can look at you funny and like push you into walls and stuff. It's happened to me and my mates before but it's just because like the corridors are like, so busy." (Ava, 1/8).

Ava's use of a simile illustrates how she perceives the social dynamics within the crowded corridors, likening them to situations where individuals may feel exposed to judgement or physical confrontation. Ava's comfort within the physical environment was therefore interpreted as being influenced by the social dynamics within it. This is reiterated in a subsequent quote where Ava recounts a moment of sadness she experienced at school:

"Because like, I didn't have anyone, like to talk to, and the noise level was so overwhelming and people were just like talking, they're talking, they're talking like everywhere, it was like the zoo." (Ava, 4/109).

A sense of loneliness was interpreted from Ava's statement. Her repetition of "*like*" and the casual tone suggest a struggle to articulate her feelings, possibly indicating a lack of close connections or social support. Moreover, it appears that Ava feels overwhelmed by auditory stimuli. The repetition of "*talking*" and the phrase "*like everywhere*" emphasises the pervasive nature of the noise, suggesting that it permeates her environment and contributes to her distress. Ava compares her surroundings to "*the zoo,*" suggesting a chaotic and disorderly atmosphere. This metaphor implies a lack of control or structure, with people talking loudly and without restraint. This comparison also seems to evoke a sense of being observed or trapped, potentially adding to Ava's discomfort and unease.

Emily expressed distress when the physical environment was crowded:

"…there's not enough space in the corridor so I feel crowded and like I can't breathe so I try and go right to the back, or last, but I I can't always do that." (Emily, 6/104).

Emily's linguistic choice of *"I can't breathe"* intensifies her emotions, suggesting that the crowded space triggers a deeper, almost claustrophobic, physical response, affecting her ability to navigate the school environment comfortably. The word "*try*" implies a proactive effort to cope with the emotional discomfort. Seeking solitude or distance as a means of managing overwhelming feelings is reflected in her choice to "*go to the back, or last.*" Sophie seemed to share this experience as she acknowledged the challenges of crowded corridors:

"*The corridors, like I said, can be quite crowded, and I can't breathe.*" (Sophie, 5/136).

Her use of the phrase "*like I said*" suggests that this is a recurring issue for her, indicating a sense of familiarity with the situation.

Olivia shared the experience of crowded corridors negatively influencing her wellbeing however her experience diverges from Emily and Sophie as she perceived her struggles in the school environment through the lens of her neurodivergent identity, possibly attributing her difficulties to her diagnosis:

"*it's hard being autistic in this school. It like, it does get, like a bit crowded and stuff.*" (Olivia, 1/4).

The impact of crowds extends beyond corridors for Emily and Olivia, especially during lunchtime. Emily finds the noisy canteen to be highly stressful, even contemplating skipping lunch altogether:

"*Now I have a packed lunch. Without it I'd be stressed, and it would be so stressful going in the line, with everyone, and I just probably wouldn't even eat lunch then.*" (Emily, 4/69).

Olivia also dislikes crowds during lunchtime, stating:

"*I used to get hot, hot lunches and because I just don't like the crowds and stuff because I just don't like people seeing me.*" (Olivia, 21/447).

This suggests that crowds evoke a heightened sense of self-awareness or social anxiety for Olivia, implying discomfort or feeling scrutinised in crowded settings like the hall.

Establishing safe spaces for emotional wellbeing. Emily highlighted the positive impact of a break room, referred to as the "*hub*", where pupils can retreat to find calm and relieve stress from the school day:

"*You can come here and take a break from everything…*" (Emily, 1/7).

Similarly, Sophie valued an outdoor meeting place which served as a vital space for socialising and creating a sense of security:

"*…me and my friends always hang out there and we just call it our bench.*" (Sophie, 2/32).

These spaces were interpreted as integral to participants' sense of identity and friendship, serving as emotional anchors that contributed to a positive school atmosphere where participants felt valued, connected, and secure.

Ava sought refuge in a quiet space during times of sensory overwhelm, stating:

"*So, I just left the classroom and went to the quiet space…*" (Ava, 4/112).

Similarly, Olivia found tranquillity in designated areas like the "*hub*," expressing:

"*…it's just like, it's just like very, very quiet, and like, I don't have to like, and the teacher doesn't have to tell, doesn't, like have to tell me to write stuff down. I can just like do it.*" (Olivia, 7/162).

These experiences highlight the significance of such spaces in supporting emotional wellbeing, providing participants with a sense of security, calmness, and autonomy in managing their emotional needs at school.

Transition and change within the mainstream school environment. Transition and change were interpreted as stressors for participants, with routines playing a key role in shaping their emotional experiences. Emily and Sophie both described feeling stressed during transitional periods:

"*…at the start of the year, I'm always stressed 'cause I don't know where to go or what I'm doing, 'cause it's like a new school again.*" (Emily, 7/132).

Emily's account suggests that unfamiliar environments and routines foster feelings similar to those experienced in new educational settings. This implies vulnerability and apprehension, as a new school requires adaptation to new routines and social connections.

While initially experiencing stress, Sophie's narrative diverges as she described her progression from fear to calm, adapting over time. This implies differences in the participants' abilities to adapt to new school surroundings:

"*When I was in year seven, it like, it felt scary. But once I knew the school…*"
(Sophie, 1/17).

Sophie further illustrated the intricate relationship between transitions, unexpected changes, and her emotional wellbeing. The stress associated with moving from year six to seven is contrasted with the support of friends, leading to improved confidence and a sense of security:

"G*oing from year six to seven was like, it was a very big change... I kind of thought I wouldn't make any friends and that I'd be like lonely but yeah, I have made friends now. So now I've got friends that are going into town with me, and I know people in my classes next year and I just know a lot more about everything here and I'm a lot more confident, I think.* " (Sophie 6/148).

For Emily, the transition to school in the morning appears to be difficult:

"*I don't feel ready for school. I don't want to think about it in the mornings.*" (Emily, 2/28)

Emily's reluctance to engage with the prospect of school in the mornings suggests an apprehension or fear of the challenges that lie ahead. Her use of "*I don't feel ready*" and "*don't want to think about it*" were interpreted as a tendency to avoid confronting the possibility that school might not go as expected. This reluctance may stem from a fear of the unknown or a lack of competence in her ability to navigate the demands of the school day. However, once at school, where she experiences an expected school day, she finds a sense of calmness and security:

"*It's pretty much a routine for me now. Yeah, 'cause then you know what you're doing and when you've got a timetable, you know how long you got left and the times don't really normally change.*" (Emily, 11/214).

Emily's routine was interpreted as necessary to provide stability and order in the mainstream environment, mitigating challenges associated with unpredictable transitions from home to school. This ongoing need for structure appears to be

consistent in Emily's experiences, as previously highlighted in her need for a seating plan. This suggests that routine can promote positive emotional wellbeing.

Ava's perspective adds another layer to the subtheme, highlighting how teacher changes influence anxiety by disrupting her established routine:

"*Then, when we have those days when another teacher comes, 'cause yours is off sick, and it changes what you're used to and having different teachers can be confusing. When that happens, I'd get anxious because I didn't know what to expect so now I just go up to them and say who I am cause then they'll know but like it's still overwhelming to do.*" (Ava, 6/69).

It appears that consistency in the classroom contributes to Ava's sense of stability and comfort. Additionally, her proactive approach of introducing herself to substitute teachers reflects her coping mechanism to alleviate uncertainty in such situations. This coping strategy will be further explored in the fourth GET.

Olivia reflected on a recent event cancellation in school:

"*Since we were gonna have a sports day yesterday, on Friday, we actually made some banners we can hold up but now we're not gonna have it. I don't know what to do with them because I painted them and I worked really hard on them, so now I'm sad and unsure, I just don't know what to do now.*" (Olivia, 20/462).

Olivia's sadness and uncertainty appear to be linked to the sudden change in plans, particularly when considerable time and effort have been invested. Olivia's description of not knowing what to do with the painted banners further highlights the impact of these changes on her emotional state, possibly providing an explanation for her discomfort with change:

"*I just don't look forward to like when something changes...*"(Olivia, 20/451).

4.3.2 *The influence of classroom learning dynamics on wellbeing*

Participants' narratives highlighted the significant influence of classroom learning dynamics on their emotional wellbeing. 'Learning dynamics' encompass various interactive elements within the classroom, including teaching practices, recognition, academic pressures, and pupil interest in lessons. This shared experience among participants reveals a spectrum of differing emotions influenced by the unique interplay of factors within the classroom setting.

Effective teaching practices. Participants shared how their experiences of various teaching practices impacted their emotional wellbeing in school. Olivia shared her ideal supportive teaching practices:

"I would like it if they had like some maybe some colour cards and maybe if I want to like step outside, I can like turn it to red. Or if I feel happy and that I can do the work, then I can I can turn to green then if I'm not like sure if I need some help, I can turn it to orange and then they'll come over." (Olivia, 17/373).

It appears that implementing such a system could empower Olivia, offering a discreet means to express concerns and receive support using a non-verbal and personalised communication method.

Sophie expressed difficulty understanding the teacher's instructions:

"I find it hard understanding all those big words, and my teacher doesn't always explain things in a way I can understand. It makes me feel frustrated, like I'm not good at it." (Sophie, 5/120).

This reflects a disconnect between the language used in instruction and Sophie's preferred comprehension mode, indicating that complex language acts as a barrier to her learning and her sense of competence.

Ava expressed the need for additional time to complete tasks, citing the stress caused by inflexible teaching practices:

"I wish there was some extra time for me to finish my work when I need it. Sometimes I feel rushed, and that's stressful." (Ava, 3/258).

This highlights the significance of flexible time management in alleviating stress and fostering a positive emotional experience for Ava.

Emily envisioned her ideal school as one centred around enjoyable and interactive activities:

"Schools could do more fun stuff, like, maybe have a day where you can bring your pets or a day for art and crafts or where you can do your own research about something you like." (Emily, 12/232).

Additionally, Emily expressed a preference for teaching practices that reduce the strain on her memory and take place within smaller groups, suggesting:

"Maybe my anxiety would be better if it was smaller amounts of the task to remember and if there were smaller groups." (Emily, 10/184).

It appears that incorporating diverse and engaging activities into the curriculum may enhance Emily's emotional wellbeing. Additionally, smaller group teaching and reducing the amount of learning material provided by teachers could be crucial in supporting her overall learning experience.

Recognition and praise promote wellbeing. Participants' accounts suggest that acknowledging pupils' skills and praising their efforts evokes positive emotions. For Emily, achieving a high score on her exams fosters a sense of empowerment and pride:

"I was happy in school when I found out that I've got, I well I got just over halfway in my maths exam because I think that's the highest I've ever got." (Emily, 3/46).

This reflects not only the numerical accomplishment but also the emotional high that accompanies it. Emily's later description in the interview highlights the connection between her effort, success, and the resulting sense of personal competence:

"When I got my highest in maths it was like, wow, I can do this, [pause] 'cause I worked hard on it." (Emily, 10/90).

For Sophie, the acknowledgment of her proficiency in French, coupled with perceived strengths in computer science, serves as a source of pride, reinforcing her belief in her capabilities and promoting her wellbeing:

"I did really well in the French, French test, yeah, and I'm like that in computer science, so I feel proud because I can do that lesson." (Sophie, 8/211).

Olivia's experience diverges from Emily and Sophie, as she emphasised the impact of tangible and explicit recognition on her sense of accomplishment and self-worth:

"I actually got a certificate recently because I got like over 200 grade ones. Grade one is like the highest mark you can get." (Olivia, 5/100).

When asked how receiving the certificate and grade points made her feel, she explained:

"Getting anything below grade 3 because that's when I just feel like really happy because I know that I'm a good student and stuff and I'm not a bad student and I'm just really happy about that." (Olivia, 16/353).

For Olivia, recognition and praise appears to play an integral role in shaping her identity and sense of self in school, with tangible markers, such as certificates, becoming symbolic representations of her success.

Emily highlighted the role of social interactions and teacher acknowledgment in the classroom, expressing her satisfaction when teachers notice her strengths:

"I like it when teachers notice the things I'm good at. It makes me feel proud and, you know, like they care." (Emily, 10/95).

Recognition and feeling valued seemed necessary for Emily's wellbeing, emphasising the significance of social support in the classroom dynamic. However, the absence of recognition negatively impacts her, leading to frustration when her hard work goes unnoticed:

"It's bad when, I think when teachers don't notice the work, the work that you do in school or homework or exams, or the effort I put in, well, when you do homework and you try really hard, then they normally don't look at it. I feel quite annoyed then… That makes me feel sad." (Emily, 10/99).

This frustration highlights that, for Emily, recognition is not just a desire but a fundamental need that significantly influences her emotional state.

Navigating academic pressures. Participants reflected on the emotional impact of various academic activities. Emily described the emotional response induced by tests, stating:

"I get very stressed about them" (Emily, 7/122).

Similarly, Sophie described feeling unhappy in school when faced with exam pressures:

"I don't like it when we have like, well, we're going to have a maths exam and that stresses me, and I do not like exams. It's not like my favourite. It's the last thing I want to do." (Sophie, 4/93).

Ava vividly described the physical impact of experiencing pressure to have an answer when the teacher asks her a question:

"I feel like that worry and anxiety and my heart like keeps like pounding and like I'm stressed trying to find the answer. Do you ever get that heart pounding? It's like a horrible feeling and then I'm like thinking that I've done something wrong and that gets my heart pumping." (Ava, 7/202).

Ava's question towards the researcher was interpreted as her seeking validation or understanding, perhaps hoping to connect over a shared feeling. Ava further expressed the emotional toll of academic pressures, describing feeling overwhelmed during tests and when confronted with numerous homework tasks or new teachers:

"...it just feels like this huge mountain of tasks…when that happens, I'd get anxious because I didn't know what to expect…" (Ava, 6/168).

Ava's use of the metaphor "*this huge mountain of tasks*" illustrates the weight of the academic pressures she faces. Mountains are steep obstacles, suggesting that Ava perceives her academic responsibilities in a similar way. The metaphor implies that the tasks loom over her, are insurmountable, creating a sense of overwhelm and helplessness. Her narrative further emphasises the uncertainty and unpredictability she associates with these challenges.

For Olivia, the pressure of the teacher's use of random selection techniques resulted in feelings of anxiety:

"When they take out the lolly pop sticks and there's, let's say it has my name on it, well my face just goes blank and stuff like I just don't know the answer and I find it hard. I close down. It's just anxiety all the time for me." (Olivia, 1/15).

Olivia's recurring anxiety indicates that the practice of random selection acts as a constant stressor for her, affecting her emotional state consistently throughout the day. This persistent anxiety seems to not only hinder her ability to actively participate but also generates an ongoing sense of unease and tension, thereby disrupting her overall learning experience.

Olivia described the pressure of keeping up with the class pace, which worsens her anxiety:

"They say if you want me to slow down a bit then they can do it, but like I'm just too anxious to tell them that." (Olivia, 2/34).

By opting for the pronoun "*they*" Olivia seems to distance herself from the teacher, indicating a lack of personal connection or rapport. Additionally, Olivia's hesitation to communicate her anxiety to the teacher reiterates this potential barrier in their relationship. However, her later expression of feeling overwhelmed when the teacher is not nearby indicates a desire for closeness and support:

"…I just feel like overwhelmed when, like, I just don't like, when a teacher's not next to me or something. I just don't get, like, enough help as I expect" (Olivia, 10/215).

The phrase "*next to me*" implies a desire for emotional reassurance and connection from the teacher, suggesting that having a personal relationship with the teacher mitigates Olivia's academic pressures.

Having a personal interest in lessons. Having a personal interest in lessons seemed to influence Emily, Sophie, and Olivia's engagement, emotions, and academic success. Emily's evolving attitude towards lessons was evident in the interview exchange:

R: And what do you look forward to the most about coming into school?

"*I'm starting to like lessons more because it's a bit more interesting, but I usually just feel bored. Boredom.*" (Emily, 5/85).

The admission of boredom suggests a previous lack of alignment between the curriculum and Emily's interests, leading to emotional disengagement. However, her acknowledgment that lessons are becoming more interesting signifies progress.

When Sophie was asked about a happy moment at school, Sophie articulated:

"*Ooh doing well on tests. I got 4 marks on my French test on Tuesday even though I don't want to do French. I want to do German next year. I wish I did it now, because I don't really want to do French because there's no point because I won't be able to speak French, and I'd rather learn German and know it well. But if I could learn any other language, I think I would learn like Spanish or Japanese.*" (Sophie, 3/71).

Sophie's happiness seems closely linked to academic success. However, the contrast between this achievement and her reluctance to study French highlights the complexity of her emotional relationship with certain subjects. Despite her success,

there appears to be a clear dissonance between her academic performance and intrinsic interest in the topic. Sophie's preference for studying German, driven by the desire to learn a language she can use effectively, emphasises the importance of personal interest in fostering her happiness and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, her contemplation of learning other languages reflects a broader interest in diverse cultural and linguistic experiences. This aspiration extends beyond academic achievement to personal fulfilment derived from exploring subjects that genuinely captivate her interest.

For Olivia, certain subjects elicit a feeling of anxiety and stress which implies a negative response to academic content that does not align with her interests:

"When I see like maths or geography on my timetable, I just get like a bit anxious and I just get a bit stressed because I don't wanna go in there, but I'm okay now. Most, and most of the times, but like in my head really, I just don't want to go in there sometimes." (Olivia, 5/95).

This response may indicate a deeper challenge in navigating academic content perhaps linked to classroom dynamics and environmental factors, as discussed previously. Moreover, Olivia's admission that, despite being okay most of the time, there are instances where she simply does not want to go into certain classes highlighting the enduring impact of disliked subjects on her emotional state. Her use of "*in my head*" suggests an internal struggle or resistance, implying a mental burden beyond what is apparent on the surface, implying she masks her emotions which links to GET 'the need for coping mechanisms to regulate emotions in school'.

4.3.3 The importance of relationships

All participants described how relationships contributed to a positive and supportive school environment. Friendships and positive teacher-student relationships were interpreted as crucial factors influencing their school experiences.

The power of friendships in shaping emotional wellbeing. All participants highlighted the significance of their friendships in fostering happiness and positivity at school. Emily, seemed to value the authenticity within her close circle, stating:

"We don't hide who we are with each other…" (Emily, 3/147).

This openness appears to foster a supportive atmosphere where Emily feels free to express herself, enhancing her school experience. However, the quote implies that

outside of this circle, Emily may conceal her true self from others. Furthermore, Emily's enjoyment of school activities seems to be tied to the presence of her friends:

"*I'm starting to like P.E 'cause it's with our almost, our entire friend group is in it.*" (Emily, 3/57).

It seems that sharing lessons with friends creates a positive atmosphere where she feels comfortable and encouraged to participate, contributing to her sense of belonging.

Sophie shares a similar experience, as she described the role of friendships in creating a non-judgemental and accepting space, that contributes to her overall happiness:

"*They don't judge me about things I like or liking horses, like other people at school do. My friends know me really well and what I'm like, I'm stuck with them now [laughs].*" (Sophie, 4/81).

The humorous tone of this phrase suggests that Sophie views being "*stuck*" with her friends as a positive aspect of her life. Her use of "*stuck*" suggests a sense of permanence in her connections with her friends.

For Ava, the connection with her friends serves as a key source of happiness during breaks and lunchtimes:

"*I feel happy because I'm with my friends and they make me feel more happy. If they aren't in, I just find a classroom and sit in there or just walk out. Sometimes if I'm alone I sit in on the floor with my head down.*" (Ava, 5/147).

It appears that being with friends enhances Ava's wellbeing, emphasising the positive influence of social interactions on her emotional state and in creating a supportive and enjoyable school environment. Her proactive efforts to find a space when her friends are absent was interpreted as having a strong desire for social connection and a reluctance to navigate the school environment alone. Ava's mention of sitting on the floor with her head down when alone suggests feelings of isolation and vulnerability during those moments, emphasising the emotional significance of friendships.

Olivia's reflections on her friendships illustrates their positive impact on her happiness at school:

"*Oh, I feel really happy cause I'm with my friends and I can do what I like with them there, and I just feel good at break at lunchtime 'cause they're so funny and stuff, and I just love hanging out with them*" (Olivia, 8/183).

It seems that Olivia's friends create an environment where she can freely pursue activities she enjoys without fear of judgement or restriction. Furthermore, Olivia described the sense of inclusion and happiness she feels when physically close to her friends in particular lessons:

"*I feel included like, mostly when I'm sat next to my friends in lessons because I'm sat next to my really good friend in history, which I'm happy about 'cause I feel OK working then. Yeah. Like, that's when I feel happy.*" (Olivia, 13/300).

Positive relationships with understanding teachers. It was interpreted that positive relationships with teachers who understood participants contributed to feelings of happiness, a sense of security, and overall emotional comfort within the school environment.

Sophie emphasised the importance of "*nice*" teachers who know her well in promoting happiness:

"*My computer teacher makes me happy, so I always like computer science. They're really nice too, they know me 'cause they were my form teacher."* (Sophie, 3/85).

This demonstrates that teachers who develop personal connections with their pupils and take the time to understand them have a positive influence on Sophie's emotional experiences at school. This experience seemed to be shared by Ava, who described the significant role played by a particular teacher in her happiness, creating a space for her to freely express herself and seek help when needed:

"*…he's just like one of those teachers who you can like just go to and like, talk to and like he'll help you with anything…"* (Ava, 9/246).

Olivia's narrative reinforces the role of positive teacher relationships in creating a safe and supportive learning environment, contributing to her emotional wellbeing at school:

"*…the teachers are here to just make sure that like you feel safe…"* (Olivia, 1/11).

She further emphasised the impact of interactions with trusted teachers on her emotional state, highlighting the importance of having a support system within the school where she feels understood and acknowledged:

"*I know that there's someone there who I want to talk to if I need to…*" (Olivia, 14/323).

Perceptions of teachers and their contribution to an emotionally supportive environment. The emotional dynamics within the classroom were interpreted to be influenced by participants' perceptions of their teachers. Emily described the potential consequences of negative feelings towards a teacher:

"*When I don't really like the teacher it's not good. I'd probably just doodle in my book.*" (Emily, 3/53).

This admission highlights the emotional discomfort associated with an unfavourable teacher-student dynamic for Emily. It was interpreted that doodling serves as a visible manifestation of disengagement, highlighting the impact of her perceptions of teachers on her academic participation. Furthermore, Emily's perspective extends beyond her individual experience to encompass a broader vision of what schools should represent. She asserted:

"*School should be a place where everyone feels comfortable and accepted.*" (Emily, 12/223).

Emily's perspective indicates a need for positive teacher-pupil relationships to prioritise emotional wellbeing and foster a sense of belonging for all students.

Sophie's annoyance seemed to be rooted in her perception of her teacher:

"*…he isn't my favourite teacher [pause] I feel quite annoyed when I have English.*" (Sophie, 4/116).

The term "*annoyed*" reflects the emotional strain caused by negative teacher-student dynamics, impacting not only academic engagement but overall wellbeing. She later reiterated this view:

"*Teachers that I don't like who put you sitting next to people that don't like you. The teacher a lot, if they can't control the class and then I can't sit next to my friends. I can't concentrate then. It's overwhelming. The lesson just isn't good. I just feel bored and fed up and just tired. It's overwhelming and tiring*." (Sophie, 8/220).

Sophie's dislike for the teacher seems to trigger a cascade of negative experiences in the classroom. This domino effect includes disruptions in seating arrangements, feelings of isolation, difficulty in focusing, and subsequent overwhelming emotions. This highlights the role of individual teacher-student relationships in shaping Sophie's experiences and fostering an emotionally supportive school environment.

4.3.4 The need for coping mechanisms to regulate emotions in school

All participants described various strategies for managing emotions, seeking support, and coping with challenges in school. These strategies were interpreted to fall into four main categories: social support systems, personal coping strategies, and masking strategies.

Social support systems. In times of hidden emotional distress, having a trusted figure attuned to one's individuality appeared to be crucial for navigating emotional challenges. Being known and understood by teaching assistants was necessary for Emily's emotional wellbeing, highlighting the role of emotional literacy and empathy within the educational support framework:

"*The teaching assistant needs to be one who knows you…*" (Emily, 5/93).

Ava seemed to share this experience, as she described the ability of her 'key worker' to identify emotional distress and offer timely support to regulate her emotions:

"*She noticed I was upset and like went out of her way to check on me. We had a quiet chat in the quiet space, which did help calm my nerves a bit. It was nice to have someone who understood and wanted to hear me.*" (Ava, 4/114).

Additionally, Ava seems to perceive her key worker as a reliable source of emotional comfort, explaining:

"*I can just go find her and talk to her and like they help me with my emotions.*" (Ava, 3/71).

This provides a link to the previous GET, highlighting how perceptions of teachers contributed to an emotionally supportive environment.

Ava also described how parental support influenced her emotional wellbeing, an experience that diverged from other participants. Receiving text messages from her parents seemed to serve as a source of reassurance, as she expressed:

"I had a message from mum and like, it just said are you OK? Have a good day and I just felt so much better cause I knew she was thinking about me in here." (Ava, 6/157).

The use of "*here*" to describe school suggests a feeling of confinement or restriction, contrasting with the relief Ava experiences when someone outside school cares about her. This suggests that while the key worker may be crucial within the school setting, the involvement and support of parents significantly contribute to Ava's emotional resilience and wellbeing.

Personal coping strategies. Participants used various coping strategies to regulate emotions in school. Sophie employed proactive tactics to handle homework stress:

"It's that time pressure. So now probably doing it as soon as it's there…I choose to do homework 'cause I know I'll be stressed." (Sophie, 6/163).

Sophie's proactive stress management was interpreted as a need for autonomy in handling academic responsibilities. Further, engaging in lessons aligned with her personal interests, combined with the company of friends, appears to provide relief:

"The things that you're interested in and lessons with your friends, then I forget what I'm worried about." (Sophie, 7/183).

This highlights the positive influence of both the learning environment and social connections on emotional wellbeing, linking to the second GET.

Ava's experience differed, as her coping strategies focused on managing sensory needs. She described how sensory tools helped to distract her from overwhelming sensory stimuli and allowed her to concentrate, despite the challenges she attributed to her ASD diagnosis:

"…like I've got autism which makes it hard for me to concentrate but I can concentrate with the pin art…" (Ava, 2/37).

Olivia explained how she finds it challenging to communicate verbally and proposes using a card or pass as a tangible way to convey her needs without speaking:

"It's hard, like it is. I think having a card or pass would help because sometimes like, it feels like that I can't tell the teacher, especially if it's like, lots of students." (Olivia, 10/225).

Olivia also described how she already employs a similar tool to visit the bathroom:

"Yeah, I don't have to tell the teacher. I can just show them, and then they just see this, so I can just, like, go and I don't have to ask." (Olivia, 10/231).

The non-verbal pass was interpreted to provide Olivia with a practical solution and alleviate the stress of verbal communication. Olivia expressed satisfaction with the pass, noting its effectiveness in helping others understand her challenges:

"I just feel like a lot more better because I feel like that they know that they know that I do struggle with that, and I'm just happy that I can just show them instead of telling them." (Olivia, 11/233).

Avoidance strategies. Avoidance, whether from specific situations or from school altogether, was interpreted as a coping mechanism aimed at shielding the participants from emotional distress.

Sophie's morning emotions are marked by a reluctance to attend school:

"I don't really want to go. It is long and all day, and I can't see my pets." (Sophie, 2/40).

Sophie's inclination to avoid the school environment is intricately tied to a longing for the comforting presence of her pets, highlighting the role of familiar and nurturing elements in managing emotional challenges.

Ava employed an avoidance strategy by leaving school or seeking pickup, particularly during friendship fallouts:

"I've had someone to come pick me up because I've had a fallout with someone, and it was just too overwhelming…" (Ava, 4/123).

This illustrates how avoidance becomes a response to emotional distress, offering Ava temporary relief from challenging social dynamics.

Olivia seemed to share Ava's experience, as she coped with overwhelming social dynamics by seeking refuge in the toilet:

"So just had to go to the toilet to like, just like, calm myself down…" (Olivia, 12/270).

This illustrates her use of physical spaces to manage emotional overwhelm, highlighting the need for privacy as a coping strategy and possibly links to the need for safe spaces in school, highlighted in the first GET. Additionally, Olivia's avoidance of class presentations by requesting to sit out reflects her efforts to navigate academic pressures at her own pace:

"I do ask the teacher if I can just like sit sit out…" (Olivia, 13/306).

Masking emotions and hiding one's true self. It was interpreted that participants concealed their true needs and feelings to avoid judgement or unwanted attention in school. Emily downplayed her emotions as a protective strategy to avoid drawing attention to herself:

"*I tried to act like it didn't bother me that I didn't really care, and I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. I think that's something I do, I do a lot, you know, try to hide my feelings or pretend everything's okay.*" (Emily, 9/174).

Emily's use of masking was interpreted as a means of self-preservation that allowed her to navigate challenges without exposing vulnerability. Furthermore, Emily articulates her concern about standing out or being perceived as different:

"*I don't want to stand out too much or be different from others. People don't, don't really understand why I get so anxious, and I worry they might think I'm strange or something.*" (Emily, 9/179).

This additional insight provides context to Emily's masking strategy, revealing a fear of potential judgement and a possible desire to fit in with societal norms.

Olivia coped with feelings of sadness by attempting to ignore them:

"*I just like try to ignore it and I just just try to go on with my day really.*" (Olivia, 5/114).

Her reluctance to share these feelings may stem from fear of judgement, societal expectations, or past experiences. Olivia further explained how she uses her strategy, "*Not all the time*" (Olivia, 6/116), suggesting that she selectively chooses when and with whom to share her emotions.

When asked about managing anxious or worried feelings in school, Sophie expressed a preference for dealing with them alone:

*"Well then I don't do anything, not really. I wouldn't tell anyone I'd rather deal with it on my own. No one would understand really." (*Sophie, 7/180).

This was interpreted as a desire for self-reliance and a reluctance to share her feelings. Her perception that "*no one would understand*" hints at a fear of potential misunderstanding or lack of empathy, reinforcing the theme of concealing emotions to avoid judgement or isolation, an experience shared with Emily. This reiterates the need for understanding teachers, previously highlighted in the third GET.

Ava's decision to keep quiet about herself reflects her perception of being different from her peers:

"I'm not just gonna tell them all about me cause I'm different, like I couldn't fit in here anyway. I'd rather keep quiet even if I do feel a bit shy." (Ava, 8/230).

Ava's account was interpreted as conveying a sense of perceived divergence from the norm and a fear of not fitting in. Her choice to *"keep quiet"* and withhold personal information and emotions may stem from this perception, indicating a deliberate effort to avoid potential judgement or exclusion.

4.3.5 *Social inclusion and belonging in the mainstream classroom*

The participants' perceptions of social inclusion and belonging in the classroom were interpreted as playing a pivotal role in shaping their emotional wellbeing in school. This GET focused on participants' challenges in navigating social dynamics, addressing issues related to social integration, and understanding the impact of unwanted attention on their sense of belonging.

Navigating social dynamics in the classroom. Participants' experiences indicated that difficulties navigating social dynamics in the classroom compromised their sense of inclusion, belonging, and emotional wellbeing. Sophie expressed a positive sentiment about her general feelings in school:

"*I think now, in the classrooms, happy and comfortable, yeah. I've got nice friends and good teachers mostly.*" (Sophie, 8/225).

It seems that Sophie feeling "*happy and comfortable*", is related to supportive social dynamics. It was therefore interpreted that positive relationships with peers and

teachers are the main influence on shaping her overall school experience and emotional wellbeing.

Ava's experience of public speaking in an English lesson provides insights into how she navigates social dynamics in the classroom:

"*Standing up at the front of the class in English, just for my teacher though. We were just meant to do something about William Shakespeare, but I asked my English teacher if I could read it in front at break because I thought we were reading out the whole script in front of everyone, and I couldn't do that. But I did it out loud to her, in like words, so I felt proud. I think if I did it like in front of everyone, I would be stumbling, and everyone would laugh.*" (Ava, 8/235).

This quote demonstrates Ava's strategic management of her comfort level and awareness of potential challenges in larger audience settings. By sharing her accomplishment privately with her teacher, it suggests a positive relationship between them. Their relationship was interpreted as a contributing factor to Ava's sense of confidence and empowerment, reinforcing her ability to assert herself and manage her emotional wellbeing effectively.

Olivia described the challenges of navigating social dynamics within the classroom, particularly in the context of group work and interactions with a specific peer:

"The teacher changed the seating plan and said I had to sit next to [peer] and we're doing like this group work and then we plan that she was going to read off the whiteboard, but then on the last minute she said no, you're going to do that, and she started laughing and I did not like that at all. Then, like, I had to ask to go to the toilet because I just felt like, really anxious, and I was just like, shocked up and stuff and I just didn't like how she said that to me." (Olivia, 11/246).

Olivia's emotional experience centres around disruptions in planned group dynamics. A last-minute alteration to her role, along with her peers' laughter, causes distress, as she strongly disapproves, stating, "*I did not like that at all.*" This reflects her struggle with unexpected changes and perceived social insensitivity. Her heightened anxiety seems to become a key moment in her narrative, evident in her request to go to the toilet, interpreted as a coping mechanism. Olivia's description of

feeling "*really anxious*" and "*shocked up*" vividly conveys the adverse impact on her wellbeing.

Social integration challenges. This subtheme represents the intricate social dynamics that contribute to feelings of exclusion, isolation, and discomfort among participants. Participants shared diverse accounts that highlighted the complexities of navigating social interactions, emphasising the impact on their emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging within the mainstream school environment.

Emily's narrative captured the persistent challenges she faces in social integration, possibly indicating the existence of a social hierarchy within the school environment:

"*I didn't fit in more at the start of the, this year. All of them, actually...*" (Emily, 8/138).

Her account emphasises the ongoing struggle to find acceptance among her peers. Additionally, Emily notes a sense of unfairness in the teacher's selection of volunteers in P.E. lessons:

"*She never really asks my friends and me…she asks the other people to volunteer 'cause they're in her class, her form, and that just doesn't seem fair.*" (Emily, 11/208).

This perception of inequitable treatment seems to exacerbate the social integration challenges faced by Emily.

Sophie described the emotional impact of being misunderstood by peers:

"*...she tried to understand me having autism and it just ended up her laughing at it and she ended up not being very nice. Well because she didn't understand that it's different in everyone. Just thought it was one thing that you can get. It was horrible I felt like no one cared.*" (Sophie, 7/194).

The attempt to understand Sophie's perspective seemingly led to a change in the peer's behaviour, transitioning from a potentially positive interaction to an unfavourable one. Sophie's use of "*ended up*" suggests an evolving and possibly disappointing sequence of events. Her experience indicates the emotional impact of the incident, left her feeling alone and uncared for. It appears that the negative social interaction not only influenced her perception of peers but also deepened her sense of isolation, adversely impacting her emotional wellbeing.

Olivia described challenges in social integration, as she highlighted the misconception held by her peers:

"*I just don't think like people know that I do have a hidden disability and stuff like I'm autistic. Just different people, especially children in my class I just don't think they know that. They just think like, I'm, just like a girl who doesn't have any learning disabilities, and they just think that I'm like everyone else. But I actually do struggle with lessons, but some students just don't know that.*" (Olivia, 15/334).

Olivia's perspective highlights a gap in understanding, as her peers fail to recognise the challenges associated with her ASD. Unaware of her hidden disability, they might perceive her difficulties with lessons as a lack of interest. Olivia's narrative indicates a need for educational equity, advocating for fair acknowledgment of her challenges and seeking a favourable educational experience where peers are aware of her difficulties without treating her differently solely based on her neurodivergence.

Ava recounted instances of difficulties with social integration in school that triggered feelings of anxiety and overwhelm:

"*There were times when I couldn't sit with my friends during lunch or in class because of the seating plan or when I got moved from my set to another and no one said why. That made me feel lonely.*" (Ava, 6/175).

Ava's inability to be with friends due to the seating plan or sudden unexplained changes in her seating arrangement seem to contribute to her sense of isolation. This ambiguity in her social environment amplifies her feelings of loneliness, leaving Ava to navigate these situations without a clear understanding. Her articulation of feeling "*lonely*" solidifies the emotional influence of her social integration challenges, indicating a need for inclusion.

Unwanted attention. Participants described facing emotional challenges when placed at the centre of attention. Emily's narrative illustrates the physical and emotional reactions associated with unwanted attention, describing how being asked a question makes her turn "*bright red*" and feel "*hot like, warm*" (Emily, 6/99).

Whereas Ava shared her experiences of anxiety and self-doubt when her name is called in class:

"…they're shouting my name and I'm thinking then I've done something wrong again…" (Ava, 7/207).

This quote highlights the fear of judgement from peers and the associated discomfort of being singled out, providing links to the previous GET. It appears that the mention of her name being shouted prompts feelings of self-doubt and a sense of incompetence, suggesting a pattern of negative self-perception.

Olivia's experiences contribute further to the understanding of this subtheme, expressing discomfort when people stare at her during moments of uncertainty in lessons:

"I just feel like everyone's just like looking at me and stuff…" (Olivia, 17/395).

4.4 Summary of findings

This chapter outlined five GETs that were interpreted from four autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools. The findings revealed the intricate connection of various factors that contributed to the participants' emotional wellbeing in school. The school environment was interpreted to influence emotional experiences, highlighting the need for secure and accessible spaces. Tailored teaching practices were interpreted as necessary for emotional wellbeing, alongside recognition and positive reinforcement from teachers, which countered academic pressures. Positive relationships with peers and teachers were highlighted as essential for emotional support and a fostering a sense of belonging, happiness, and inclusion in mainstream school. The findings demonstrated that participants' coping mechanisms varied, with social support and positive friendships serving as valuable resources and masking behaviours were used to avoid judgement and unwanted attention. The final GET highlighted how the participants' emotional wellbeing was influenced by their perceptions of inclusion and belonging in the classroom.

5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores five Group Experiential Themes (GETs) interpreted from the accounts of four autistic adolescent girls using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as detailed in Chapter 4. Acknowledging the double hermeneutic principle underpinning this research process, the findings and discussion reflect the researcher's interpretation of participants' understanding of their accounts, aligning with the interpretivist paradigm of this research.

The chapter begins with an overview of the research, followed by answering the research question by discussing each GET in relation to literature and psychological theory. Next, the themes found in Chapter 2's systematic literature and the GETs interpreted from participants' experience in this research will be compared. The chapter will then address methodological strengths and limitations of this research, highlight implications for practice, and suggest potential avenues for future research.

5.2 Summary of research

This research aimed to give voice to autistic adolescent girls' views on their emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools through individual semi-structured interviews and an IPA of their experiences. The interpretivist paradigm guided this research with a subjective and phenomenological epistemology and a relativist ontology to understand participants' unique experiences within mainstream secondary schools. IPA was chosen for its depth in exploring lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

The literature review conducted in Chapter 2 focused on the influence of mainstream schooling on autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing. Social connections and positive relationships with staff and peers were identified as important for creating a secure and nurturing school environment (Cridland et al., 2014). Anxiety emerged as a pervasive challenge, with autistic girls using varied coping strategies, reflecting the adverse impact of mainstream school on wellbeing (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). The review emphasised the importance of increased understanding among teachers and peers, particularly in recognising the female

autism phenotype and highlighted the need for further research with this population (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

While existing literature reviews have provided insights into general mainstream school experiences of autistic girls (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2020), and supportive factors in mainstream schools (e.g., Ayirebi & Thomas, 2023) a gap exists in directly exploring autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing in this context. The primary goal of this research was to bridge this gap in the literature by addressing the research question:

What are autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools?

Five GETs were interpretated from an IPA of the experiences of four autistic adolescent girls, shared through individual semi-structured interviews. The GETs and subthemes highlighted shared and unique features of participants' experiences of emotional wellbeing as an autistic girl attending mainstream secondary school. The next section will discuss the findings in relation to relevant psychological theory and research.

5.3 Discussion of findings

5.3.1 Navigating the mainstream school environment

The process of navigating the mainstream school environment was interpreted as a crucial factor influencing participants' emotional wellbeing. Elements such as school size, busy context, and the need for safe areas in school to regulate emotions, along with challenges in transitions and unexpected change, influenced emotional wellbeing. This is consistent with research that reports a link between the busy school environment and autistic girls' increased stress and anxiety (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). The findings support Danker et al.'s (2016) autistic student wellbeing model, highlighting the impact of chaotic and unpredictable school environments (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Saggers, 2015) on negative emotions including stress, anxiety, and frustration.

The emotional impact of physical surrounding. The school's physical surroundings were interpreted to impact participants' emotional wellbeing. Emily and Sophie expressed a sense of discomfort and claustrophobia in crowded school

corridors. This reflects research from Tomlinson et al. (2022) where participants described school corridors as 'evil' and anxiety-inducing, and Jacobs et al.'s (2021) link between busy corridors and participants' experiences of headaches and stress. Further, the physical environment was likened to a '*zoo*' by Ava to portray the noisy, chaotic, and disorderly atmosphere she experienced. The findings resonate with prior research that notes the emotional toll of secondary schools' size and noise (Makin et al., 2017), especially for autistic pupils who are sensitive to sensory stimuli (APA, 2013; Jarman & Rayner, 2015).

Physical space and peer proximity also hindered meeting basic needs. Emily described her desire to skip lunch to avoid queuing for hot food, mirroring Olivia's preference for a packed lunch to avoid crowded cafeterias. These behaviours align with Goodall and MacKenzie's (2019) findings that autistic girls adopt disordered eating to cope with overwhelming cafeteria noise. From a theory of mind perspective, Emily and Olivia's behaviour could be due to their difficulties to anticipate and understand the behaviours and intentions of others in social situations (Happé, 2015), such as navigating cafeteria queues. Further, changes in Emily and Olivia's eating patterns may reflect a need for autonomy in school (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is supported by previous research that reports how the desire for autonomy and predictability is achieved for autistic girls through disordered eating patterns, used to control their ASD diagnosis (Brede et al., 2020). This aligns with broader research, indicating autistic girls often internalise or mask their difficulties, leading them to be misdiagnosis with anxiety or eating disorders and delaying appropriate intervention (Bargiela et al., 2016).

Emily described feeling calm in a structured classroom with a seating plan, emphasising the significance of school organisation. This acknowledgement suggests a connection to executive dysfunction challenges (Hill, 2004). In Emily's case, the structured seating arrangement seems to reduce cognitive load, and promote emotional wellbeing in an unpredictable environment. This corresponds with research indicating that autistic girls often feel calm and regulated with structure, such as a seating plan, in an otherwise unstructured school environment (Honeyborne, 2015). However, for autistic girls with pathological demand avoidance (PDA), structure may be detrimental to mental health (PDA Society, 2018). While not addressed in this

research, it suggests a need for flexible and individualised approaches in school (Fidler, 2019).

Ava's social identity and self-expression were influenced by the school's size, particularly in crowded areas where she encountered conflicts with older peers. This indicates a connection between the 'school environment' and 'relationships' domains, which were not addressed in Danker et al.'s (2016) framework. This difference may be explained by the underrepresentation of autistic girls in Danker et al.'s (2016) review. Autistic girls are reported to be more socially motivated than their male counterparts (Hull et al., 2020), which may explain Ava's account of the environment's impact on her wellbeing.

The need for safe spaces. Safe spaces were interpreted as important to participants, offering respite from crowds while providing feelings of security, calmness, and autonomy. This aligns with Danker et al.'s (2016) link between the 'environment' domain and 'access to resources', emphasising the significance of a positive learning environment for promoting the wellbeing of autistic girls.

For Emily, Ava, and Olivia, a separate room outside the classroom provided sensory breaks and relief from academic pressures, suggesting a bias to focus on local details in the classroom (Frith, 1989). For instance, the overwhelming sensory stimuli and academic responsibilities within the classroom may disrupt their ability to maintain cognitive coherence. Consequently, seeking out separate rooms for sensory breaks may provide a controlled, less stimulating environment, that helped participants to regain cognitive coherence. Further, actively seeking these safe spaces aligns with elements in the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), contributing to overall wellbeing and supporting emotional regulation (Myles et al., 2019). Although having a separate room allows independent work without peer and workload pressures (Cridland et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022) the need for dedicated spaces outside the classroom raises concerns about the inclusivity of mainstream secondary school classrooms.

For Sophie, a feeling of safety and inclusion seemed to be influenced by people rather than the physical environment. Sophie's preference to meet friends at a dedicated bench highlights the role of social interaction in creating an emotionally secure environment, aligning with research emphasising the importance of social

relationships for the wellbeing of autistic girls in school (Guldberg et al., 2019). Supportive peer relationships appear to foster a sense of belonging and mitigate the impact of the mainstream environment on wellbeing (Myles et al., 2019). Therefore, a sense of belonging was interpreted as a protective factor for wellbeing, aligning with research that highlights its role in reducing the likelihood of absconding or school exclusion for autistic girls (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Sproston et al., 2017). Moreover, social connections in these safe spaces appear to fulfil the need for relatedness in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, the outdoor bench becomes a space where Sophie and her friends establish meaningful connections, addressing the need for interpersonal relationships. This reinforces the significant link between the environment and relationships in understanding the wellbeing of autistic girls in school, a connection overlooked in Danker et al.'s (2016) framework.

Transition and change within the mainstream school environment. Transition and unexpected changes impacted upon participants' emotional wellbeing. This is expected given that difficulties with change are intrinsic to an ASD diagnosis (APA, 2013). The literature consistently highlights challenging transition experiences for autistic pupils (Dann, 2011; Hebron, 2019), stemming from difficulties in navigating new social contexts and adapting to new routines, such as having multiple teachers (Cridland et al., 2014). Despite literature consistently noting the difficulty of transition and change for autistic individuals, Danker et al.'s (2016) wellbeing framework excludes transition as a factor contributing to wellbeing or being related to the environment. However, Danker et al. (2016) excluded studies that explicitly focused on transition which potentially explains the lack of reference to this factor in their framework.

Sophie expressed anxiety about the challenging transition from primary to secondary school, particularly fearing difficulty in making new friends. This apprehension is noted in prior research where concerns about forming new friendships and missing primary school friends were common themes for autistic pupils (Foulder-Hughes & Prior, 2014; Makin et al., 2017). Additionally, research emphasises the specific challenges in transitions for autistic girls, particularly linked to their social interaction needs, arising from the unpredictability of the secondary school social environment (Myles et al., 2019).

However, considering Sophie's individual context is necessary as her emotional wellbeing during the transition to secondary school was likely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the pandemic introduced external factors during her transition period that indirectly shaped her immediate environments and likely influenced her emotional wellbeing. For instance, within the exosystem, school policies, governmental regulations, and societal responses to the pandemic likely played a significant role in shaping the overall support available to Sophie during this critical transition. Researchers consistently find that providing autistic children with the opportunity to visit their new school pre-transition facilitates smoother transitions (Stack et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). However, the pandemic likely deprived Sophie of this chance, contributing to her anxiety. Friendships have a protective role during transitions (Fox et al., 2022), explaining why Sophie felt comfortable and secure once she made friends at secondary school. This suggests the anticipation of transition may be more challenging than the actual experience, and increased social opportunities in secondary schools could play a crucial role in mitigating poor emotional wellbeing (Waters et al., 2014).

The start of the school year induced significant stress for all participants, leading to feelings of fear and overwhelm. This could be linked to the perceived lack of school support to prepare pupils for the transition to secondary education. Autistic girls are reported to independently learn hidden social rules in anticipation of Year 7 (Myles et al., 2019). The insufficient support from schools may arise from teacher-related factors, particularly inadequate training, and poor communication between primary and secondary schools (Nuske et al., 2018). While this research did not explore transition support, this perspective highlights the complexity of the transition process for autistic girls and emphasises the need for comprehensive and well-informed strategies to facilitate their transition to mainstream secondary school environments.

Unexpected changes, including teacher absences and cancelled school events, increased feelings of stress, anxiety, and overwhelm among participants, reiterating prior research (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). The findings revealed that participants employed coping strategies to alleviate the effects of these changes. For instance, Ava's proactive approach to substitute teachers indicates

autonomy and engagement, aligning with the positive emotion and engagement components of the PERMA model. This suggests autistic girls can adopt proactive measures for enhanced wellbeing amid unexpected challenges, consistent with previous research (Jacobs et al., 2021). However, it is notable that no other participant demonstrated similar proactive measures, highlighting potential barriers in the mainstream environment or variations in coping strategies among autistic girls.

5.3.2 The influence of classroom learning dynamics on wellbeing

Learning dynamics were interpreted to influence participants' emotional wellbeing in the classroom, encompassing teaching practices, recognition, academic pressures, and participants' interest in lessons. This aligns with Danker et al.'s (2016) themes of 'curriculum-related issues' and 'teacher qualities', linked to the 'wellbeing' domain of a 'lack of negative emotions' in school.

Effective teaching practices. Consistent with previous research, participants described how effective teaching practices contributed to their emotional wellbeing (Tomlinson et al., 2022). This aligns with Danker et al.'s (2016) emphasis on effective teaching as a central component of autistic student wellbeing. Participants expressed a need for flexibility, indicating benefits from approaches that provided independence and choice in their learning. Olivia desired a card system to communicate her emotions and signal when she needed assistance, while Ava sought extra time for learning tasks. This supports the use of individualised strategies, such as visual resources or demonstrations, to reduce cognitive load and promote wellbeing in the classroom (Jacobs et al., 2021; O'Hagan et al., 2022; Pickup, 2021). However, not all participants sought these strategies, highlighting the heterogeneity of autism and the necessity for input from autistic girls in planning supportive interventions (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Participants experienced stress and anxiety when teachers used complex language and provided insufficient time for processing information after verbal instruction. It seems that participants' positive emotions were compromised, and the strained pupil-teacher relationship indicate a deficit in the 'relationships' aspect of the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). This emphasises the need for a positive teacher-student relationship, supporting Danker et al.'s (2016) connections between 'teacher qualities', 'relationships', and 'positive emotions'. Moreover, participants preferred smaller classroom groups and reduced information, citing lower anxiety about classwork. This aligns with advice from autistic girls, recommending breaking down

tasks into smaller units and using multiple sensory means to ease the demand on working memory (Jacobs et al., 2021). These preferences highlight the executive functioning needs of autistic girls (Hill, 2004), emphasising that overlooking these needs in mainstream classrooms adversely affects emotional wellbeing. This aligns with prior research, indicating that teaching practices that neglect executive functioning needs contribute to anxiety among autistic girls in the classroom (Grave, 2016) and strain their relationships with teachers (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Participants preferred schools with interactive teaching practices that incorporate personal interests, fostering acceptance and comfort. Tailoring learning tasks to interests has shown to enhance skills development in autistic secondary-aged pupils, such as improving conversational skills with peers (Davis et al., 2010). It seems that by integrating interests in the classroom, participants' sense of competence is enhanced, contributing positively to their overall wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, creating a learning environment that acknowledges personal interests also helps build connections with autistic pupils and fosters a sense of relatedness and belonging (White et al., 2023), thus fulfilling intrinsic motivation and promoting emotional wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Recognition and praise promote wellbeing. Classroom dynamics that acknowledged participants' achievements and praised their efforts were interpreted as protective factors. This recognition fosters a sense of competence, as seen with Emily and Sophie expressing joy and pride in positive exam results, aligning with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For Olivia, her sense of self was supported by certificates of success which promoted positive emotions. Positive emotions derived from recognition and praise align with the concept of 'savouring' positive experiences in positive psychology (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Savouring involves generating, maintaining, or enhancing positive emotions through mindful appreciation of life experiences (Kilbert et al., 2022). Participants seemed to savour these positive emotions tied to their achievements, contributing to emotional resilience and satisfaction with the learning process. Whilst unexplored in autistic girls in schools, savouring is reported to help individuals recover and extend positive emotions after a stressful event without changing the environment (Quoidbach et al., 2015), offering valuable implications for the stressful mainstream classroom (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Emily takes pride in teachers recognising her strengths, fostering a genuine sense of care. While limited research directly explores the influence of praise on autistic girls' wellbeing, it seems that this recognition fostered a sense of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The acknowledgment of her abilities fostered a positive teacher connection, enhancing a deeper sense of belonging and emotional fulfilment within the educational environment. Literature emphasises that teachers who genuinely care and foster positive relationships with autistic girls are protective factors for inclusion in school and their sense of belonging (Myles et al., 2019). Moreover, inclusive teachers are a common recommendation to support autistic girls' engagement and overall wellbeing (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Jarman & Rayner, 2015), aligning with Danker et al.'s (2016) framework asserting the impact of teacher qualities on autistic students' emotional wellbeing, positive emotions, and classroom engagement.

Navigating academic pressures. Building on prior research findings, participants described heightened anxiety and stress levels during exams (Tomlinson et al., 2022). For instance, Emily's stress during exams, particularly in a crowded room, aligns with the idea that a perceived lack of control over test situations can contribute to exam anxiety (Burić, 2015). To manage this, Emily opted for a less crowded space during exams, potentially enhancing her sense of autonomy and overall wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This resonates with research that reports autistic girls to benefit from accommodations that address sensory needs and social pressures during exams (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Notably, Emily's improvement in stress when in a separate room aligns with research that reports how accommodating individual needs, such as allowing oral recordings instead of written exams, enhances autistic girls' exam performance (Jacobs et al., 2021). Conversely, Sophie's exam anxiety appeared to stem from her lack of interest in specific topics, as she openly stated that exams were not her favourite activity. This disengagement may signify a disconnect from the material, diminishing motivation and overall wellbeing, aligning with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sophie's experience corresponds with Danker et al.'s (2016) model of autistic wellbeing, emphasising that achieving meaningful goals contributes to positive emotions (Sheldon et al., 2010).

Ava experienced anxiety due to an increased workload and changes in teachers, reiterating previous literature (Jacobs et al., 2021; Jarman & Rayner, 2015) and supports a link between pupil wellbeing and curriculum demands (Danker et al.,

2016). Ava shared how answering questions in front of the class triggers physical symptoms of anxiety, consistent with the accounts of autistic girls who experienced an emotional breakdown when faced with challenging questions (Cook et al., 2018). Olivia also struggled with random selection techniques, aligning with Tomlinson et al.'s (2022) findings that autistic girls tend to avoid answering questions due to fear of judgement. It seemed that the teacher-student relationship emerged as a key factor influencing participants' response to questions, reiterating Jacobs et al. (2021), who found that a teacher's lack of understanding contributed to anxiety and difficulties in answering questions for autistic girls. This could explain why Ava sought out a trusted teacher during anxious moments, supporting the protective influence of teacher qualities and relationships on the wellbeing of autistic girls (Danker et al., 2016).

Olivia described her challenges in seeking help within the classroom, aligning with prior research on the educational experiences of autistic girls in mainstream schools (Jacobs et al., 2021). Her difficulties in verbal communication may stem from broader social interaction and communication needs associated with her ASD diagnosis (APA, 2013). Reflecting Heidegger's concept of mitsein (being with), Olivia's preference for a visual card system, discussed in the subtheme 'effective teaching practices,' was interpreted as a non-verbal means to signal when she requires assistance. Employing such strategies is proven to alleviate anxiety in autistic girls (Myles et al., 2019; Pickup, 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022), highlighting the importance of teachers being attuned to pupils' needs. This supports the connection between positive emotions in autistic pupils and resource provision, complemented by positive teacher qualities, aligning with Danker et al.'s (2016) autism wellbeing framework.

Participants experienced anxiety about providing incorrect answers, but they did not describe themselves as perfectionists or explicitly state that they were pursuing perfection in response to academic demands. This finding diverges from what is commonly reported in the literature (Jacobs et al., 2021; Wassell & Burke, 2022). Although participants were not directly questioned about perfectionism by the researcher, this difference suggests potential variability in how autistic girls experience and express academic stress. Additionally, three participants had Education, Health, and Care Plans, indicating their academic needs were acknowledged and understood, potentially reducing the pressure to be 'perfect'. However, even though participants did not overtly claim perfectionist tendencies, they did express challenges in seeking

help, interpreted as a strategy to avoid drawing attention and not wanting to be perceived as unintelligent or prone to making mistakes, potentially highlighting underlying perfectionism (Townson & Povey, 2019).

Having a personal interest in lessons. Attending subjects misaligned with personal interests was interpreted as a potential risk for poor emotional wellbeing, illustrated by Olivia's anxiety in such situations. Olivia's experience suggests that aligning the curriculum with intrinsic preferences could alleviate anxiety and enhance her learning experience, aligning with self-determination theory's emphasis on autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the focus of positive emotions in the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). Although Danker et al.'s (2016) model does not explicitly address subject interest, Olivia's experience implies its pivotal role in influencing the domain 'intrapersonal factors' and the theme of 'masquerade'.

Sophie's shift from boredom to anticipation in response to more interesting lessons suggests active engagement based on intrinsic interests, aligning with autonomy and internal motivation from self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Her higher value placed on subjects such as Japanese reflects a purpose, connecting with the 'Meaning' component of the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) and aligns with the understanding that autistic girls' motivation diminishes when they are not interested in a topic (Lawson, 2019). While Sophie did not explicitly mention having a 'special interest,' a characteristic often associated with ASD (APA, 2013), it is worth noting that autistic girls' special interests may manifest in ways that appear more neurotypical than those of their male peers (Sutherland et al., 2017). Sophie's enthusiasm for different cultures could be interpreted as a unique passion or special interest. Research suggests incorporating such interests into the curriculum as an inclusive strategy to enhance motivation, engagement, and purpose among autistic pupils (Wood, 2018). It appears that having purpose in school could play a role in enhancing Sophie's emotional wellbeing and suggests that incorporating a 'sense of purpose in school' as a distinct domain in Danker et al.'s (2016) framework, as suggested by Hossain et al. (2022), could enhance its applicability to autistic girls.

5.3.3 The importance of relationships

The emotional wellbeing of participants was interpreted to be influenced by the quality and nature of their relationships with both peers and teachers. Deficiencies in positive reciprocal relationships with teachers and peers can adversely influence

wellbeing (Jacobs et al., 2021), aligning with Danker et al.'s (2016) 'relationships' domain, indicating the importance of positive connections for autistic students' emotional wellbeing (Norrish et al., 2013).

The power of friendships in shaping emotional wellbeing. In line with existing literature, participants described the key role of friendships in enhancing emotional wellbeing (Tomlinson et al., 2020; 2022). Reciprocal friendships were interpreted as motivators in school and key in fostering participants' sense of belonging and emotional resilience (Sedgewick et al., 2016). Notably, Emily and Sophie highlighted their friends' role in offering a non-judgemental space for authentic self-expression, sharing Cook et al.'s (2018) emphasis on supportive social relationships that create environments of acceptance.

Olivia described her happiness during breaktimes, as these times offered her the opportunity to socialise with friends beyond the classroom. This association could be linked to the chance for unstructured and less busy interactions, contrasting with the potentially restrictive classroom environment. According to weak central coherence theory (Frith, 1989), the less hectic nature of breaktimes enables Olivia to focus on individual social interactions, enhancing her ability to process social cues and engage meaningfully with others, promoting her happiness. This aligns with studies by Myles et al. (2019) and Pickup (2021), emphasising the importance of unstructured periods outside the classroom in fulfilling Olivia's social needs and enhancing her overall happiness.

Ava's happiness in school seemed to closely tie to her friends, acting as a motivator for entering the classroom, suggesting a need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This sentiment converges with Olivia's experience, where feeling comfortable and included is directly connected to sitting next to friends in the classroom, offering a sense of security that aids in managing anxiety during classwork. However, Ava stressed that the absence of friends in the classroom would lead to her non-attendance, highlighting their role in providing a sense of security. This aligns with Cook et al.'s (2018) findings, emphasising that the presence of friends significantly contributes to a sense of security and wellbeing in the school environment (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Existing research shows the friendship challenges faced by autistic girls (Honeybourne, 2015), particularly the increased difficulties in peer interactions during adolescence (Moyse & Porter, 2015). Notably, Ava was the sole participant who recounted instances of falling out with friends, which led to her avoiding school. This divergence among participants could be attributed to factors such as navigating social interactions successfully, supported by understanding peers or effective coping mechanisms, which have previously been highlighted as protective factors for autistic girls' success and positive wellbeing in school (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2023; Tomlinson et al., 2020). Conversely, some participants might have encountered challenges but were either unaware of them or perceived their social dynamics differently, aligning with common occurrences in existing research (Sedgewick et al., 2016) and the reported likelihood of difficulties with theory of mind (Happé, 2015).

Positive relationships with understanding teachers. Positive relationships with understanding teachers were interpreted to significantly contribute to an inclusive learning environment for participants, promoting their emotional wellbeing. This aligns with autistic girls' views from previous research (Cook et al., 2018; Cridland et al., 2014; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022), indicating that teachers who understand the distinct needs of autistic girls are more likely to adopt flexible and personalised teaching approaches (Hebron & Bond, 2019). It was therefore interpreted that for the participants, this personalised approach was crucial for fostering positive emotions in the school environment.

Understanding teachers provided significant comfort and security for Sophie, Ava, and Olivia. Ava highlighted the influential role of a key adult in shaping her emotional wellbeing and providing essential support at school. This resonates with Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), emphasising the significance of positive and secure attachments for emotional support and fostering a conducive learning environment (Friswell & Egerton, 2019). According to Carmona-Halty et al. (2019), the quality of the educator-learner relationship significantly influences motivation and commitment to academic tasks. Participants' accounts therefore support findings from Jacobs et al. (2021), highlighting the important role of trusted staff members for autistic girls' achievement in school.

Perceptions of teachers and their contribution to an emotionally supportive environment. Participants' perceptions of teachers were interpreted as

necessary for creating an emotionally supportive school environment. Emily's engagement seemed to be linked to her preference for a specific teacher, possibly fulfilling her psychological need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sophie's negative perceptions stemmed from a perceived lack of teacher understanding, highlighting the importance of teachers being aware of individual needs. Literature highlights students' perceptions of teacher care and fairness, emphasising the role of their emotional support in shaping these perceptions (Wentzel, 2002). The absence of emotional support, including a teacher's warmth and responsiveness to individual student needs, can lead pupils to develop negative perceptions of teachers (O'Connor et al., 2011). This could explain Emily's desire for an inclusive school environment, which further suggests a potential gap in meeting emotional and relational needs.

Participants' negative perceptions of teachers could result from a lack of understanding about ASD. Given the challenges in identifying ASD in females (Bargiela et al., 2016), there is a possibility that Emily and Sophie's needs are not adequately addressed in the current classroom setting, influencing their negative perceptions and subsequent poor emotional wellbeing. This is reflected by Tomlinson et al. (2022), who reported how negative experiences among autistic girls in mainstream schools often stem from perceptions of teachers as unsupportive (Tomlinson et al., 2020). Furthermore, Goodall and MacKenzie (2019) highlight 'teacher understanding' as the key component that would improve mainstream education for autistic girls.

Both Emily and Sophie highlight the importance of relational approaches in schools. Emily's preference for a specific teacher and Sophie's reliance on friends highlights the need for an environment where students feel cared for, understood, and engaged. This aligns with the notion that when all pupils perceive care and active participation, the school climate becomes positive, supportive, and fosters a sense of belonging (Monteiro et al., 2021).

5.3.4 The need for coping mechanisms to regulate emotions in school

Throughout participants' narratives, coping mechanisms appeared to be essential for maintaining their emotional wellbeing. Consistent with previous research, participants employed various coping strategies, ranging from positive proactive measures to potentially maladaptive ones (Myles et al., 2019; Cridland et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). These

findings highlight the continued necessity to understand autistic girls' distinct needs and reiterate the importance of fostering an inclusive environment in mainstream schools where coping strategies are not required.

Social support systems. Adults within participants' social circles were interpreted as figures who contributed to their emotional resilience in school, consistent with Danker et al. (2016)'s influence of the 'relationships' domain on autistic pupil wellbeing. Emily and Ava emphasised the importance of a key adult at school who not only understands their needs but also actively takes care of their wellbeing. This supports research highlighting the pivotal role of a trusted adult in the school environment, enhancing positive emotions, and improving the overall school experience for autistic girls (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022). This also corresponds with broader autism research, highlighting the crucial role of support staff in improving the school experience for autistic individuals, regardless of gender (Dillon et al., 2016; Woodfield & Ashby, 2016). However, while these trusted adults are recognised as advocates for autistic girls in mainstream schools (O'Hagan et al., 2022), autistic pupils have expressed concerns about the visibility of this support, fearing it might make them appear different (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Saggers et al., 2011).

Ava's experience diverged from other participants as she found maintaining contact with her parents during school hours valuable for her emotional regulation. This perspective could be attributed to Ava's individual context, marked by a significant absence during Year 7, potentially indicating emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA) (O'Hagan et al., 2022). Collaboration with parents is recommended for the reintegration of pupils experiencing EBSNA (Wimmer, 2010), indicating that ongoing parental connection supports Ava's emotional regulation and sense of security. This highlights the importance of a strong home-school relationship for Ava, aligning with literature that confirms this link as a supportive factor for autistic pupils' educational experiences and subsequent social and emotional outcomes (Santiago et al., 2022).

Despite consistently acknowledging the positive impact of friends, participants did not explicitly identify these friendships as primary coping strategies, diverging from the literature (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2021). This suggests that participants may not view friendships as conventional coping mechanisms. Instead, it could be inferred that the

absence of explicit reference to friendships as coping strategies indicates that participants, when in the company of friends, did not feel the need for additional coping mechanisms. Their relationships inherently contributed to positive emotions and overall life satisfaction (Seligman, 2011), suggesting that friendships provided an inclusive and supportive space, eliminating the need for specific coping strategies in those social contexts.

Personal coping strategies. Sophie described her approach to manage homework stressors as completing tasks promptly, reiterating the use of proactive strategies for emotional regulation (Jacobs et al., 2021). This suggests that by having autonomy over her homework schedule, Sophie can effectively manage and reduce the impact of academic stressors on her wellbeing, reiterating self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Linking to the second GET, engaging with friends during interesting lessons served as a coping mechanism, fostering a sense of relatedness, and positively influenced emotional wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, sensory stimuli, consistent with prior research, enhanced Ava's concentration and supports Danker et al.'s (2016) domain of 'resource access', influencing wellbeing.

Olivia expressed a preference for non-verbal communication strategies to convey her emotions and needs to teachers. This choice was interpreted as being driven by a desire to avoid the potential stress associated with verbal communication and the fear of peer judgement. This aligns with prior research advocating visual communication tools for autistic girls (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2023), such as colour-changing wristbands to signal emotional states (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Despite literature emphasis on personal coping strategies, it is crucial for school staff to understand and implement these tools accurately; otherwise, their effectiveness may be compromised, potentially detrimentally impacting their emotional wellbeing. This is reflected in qualitative research where teachers did not read pupil passports (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Avoidance strategies. It was interpreted that participants used avoidance strategies to cope with the discomfort and overwhelm of the mainstream setting. Sophie showed reluctance to attend school mornings, preferring to stay at home with her pets, possibly fulfilling her social needs through their comforting presence. This interpretation is supported by research that suggests autistic individuals may bond with animals to address social engagement needs unmet in school (Livingston &

Happé, 2017). Ava frequently left school premises, while Olivia left certain classrooms, due to challenging social dynamics, which links to GET 5. These responses align with research highlighting autistic girls' struggles in social interactions (Cridland et al., 2014) and their engagement in absenteeism due to social difficulties and bullying (Cook et al., 2018). Cook et al. (2018) noted that this trend is more common in mainstream schools, suggesting environmental factors including larger class sizes and increased academic demands may hinder autistic girls' social adjustment (Horgan et al., 2022).

Masking emotions and hiding one's true self. Participants in the study employed masking strategies to conceal their emotions, aiming to blend in and avoid standing out or being perceived as different by their peers. This aligns with prior research on masking among autistic girls (Cook et al., 2018; Cridland et al., 2014; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019) and the theme of 'masquerade' identified by Danker et al. (2016), linking masking to negative emotions. Participants' use of masking may result from challenges in theory of mind, such as understanding social cues and perspectives of others (Happé, 2015). Consequently, participants may employ masking behaviours to compensate for these difficulties and to fit in with their peers. This aligns with previous findings that suggests autistic pupils may use masking strategies to counteract difficulties navigating social situations (Hull et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2018).

The participants' use of masking behaviours were interpreted as their active engagement in social interactions, which are often challenging for autistic girls (Dean et al., 2017). Masking could have enabled participants to participate in social activities without feeling isolated or stigmatised, enhancing their sense of belonging within the broader social context (Seligman, 2011). Previous research has noted that masking in school prevents autistic girls from being singled out by peers (Cook et al., 2018). However, masking can cause difficulties identifying when autistic girls require support or intervention (Cook et al., 2018). For example, Olivia expressed feeling overlooked by the teacher in certain lessons compared to an autistic peer, likely a consequence of her masking efforts. This highlights the impact of masking on wellbeing (Danker et al., 2016), as it can impede the timely provision of assistance in mainstream settings by obscuring the need for support.

5.3.5 *Social inclusion and belonging in the mainstream classroom*

Participants' experiences highlighted the influence of classroom dynamics on their sense of inclusion and belonging. Consistent with the GET 3, relationships with peers and teachers emerged as pivotal factors shaping these perceptions, further emphasising the importance of relationships for the wellbeing of autistic pupils (Danker et al., 2016). This highlights the potential benefits of adopting a relational approach to supporting autistic girls in mainstream settings, enhancing their wellbeing and educational experiences.

Challenges navigating social dynamics. Sophie's supportive friendships positively impacted her perception of social interactions and overall happiness, aligning with existing research on the importance of friendships for autistic girls' wellbeing (Ryan et al., 2019). Conversely, participants without such friendships faced challenges in social dynamics, leading to heightened anxiety and discomfort. This observation is consistent with research indicating that communication skills, including perspective-taking, can lead to peer disagreements in mainstream settings (Cridland et al., 2014). Further, difficulties in interacting with peers resulted in negative experiences, particularly for Olivia, reflecting common struggles in autistic girls' understanding of social cues and theory of mind challenges (Cook et al., 2018; Happé, 2015). It appears that creating an inclusive school ethos with supportive staff could be crucial for promoting inclusion in mainstream classrooms and mitigating participants' social dynamic challenges (Tomlinson et al., 2022). This approach could significantly enhance participants' emotional wellbeing and their ability to navigate social situations.

Social integration challenges. Social integration challenges were evident among all participants, characterised by feelings of exclusion and isolation in the mainstream classroom, both with teachers and peers. Emily, recounted feeling consistently overlooked by the teacher during PE lessons, exacerbating her sense of isolation. This reiterates Cook et al.'s (2018) findings, who highlighted autistic girls' experiences of social isolation in PE classes, often stemming from being chosen last. Further, Jacobs et al. (2021) documented similar experiences among autistic girls, noting PE teachers' lack of understanding of their social needs and failure to adjust lesson structures or participation accordingly.

Lack of understanding about the participants' ASD diagnosis seemed to contribute to social integration challenges. A lack of understanding fostered feelings

of isolation and perceived neglect. This aligns with research emphasising the pivotal role of peer understanding in fostering positive emotional experiences for autistic girls (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Ava's experience of loneliness and anxiety when separated from her friends in the classroom reiterates the importance of promoting awareness and understanding among peers to improve the social inclusion and emotional wellbeing of autistic girls in mainstream settings.

Unwanted attention. Unwanted attention in the mainstream classroom heightened self-awareness, anxiety, and discomfort for Emily, Ava, and Olivia. This aligns with existing research that reports how autistic girls often use masking strategies to blend in and avoid drawing attention to themselves (Cook et al., 2018). Emily described the physical effects of these emotions, suggesting that the mainstream classroom does not feel safe or inclusive for autistic girls, with social pressures having distressing repercussions. Similar experiences were noted in Jacobs et al.'s (2021) research, where anxiety in mainstream settings led to physical symptoms requiring medical investigation and involvement from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

For Ava, attention in the classroom triggered feelings of self-doubt, potentially indicating a diminished sense of competence, and negatively influenced her emotional wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This corresponds with autistic girls' broader views about school and a poor sense of success characterised by anxiety (Jacobs et al., 2021).

5.4 Comparison of GETs to systematic literature review themes

Chapter 2 included a systematic literature review (SLR) employing qualitative thematic synthesis to explore how mainstream school experiences influence the mental health and wellbeing of autistic girls. The SLR synthesised findings from six studies into four analytical themes. This section will compare the SLR themes with the interpreted GETs from this research, revealing similarities and differences in autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream schools.

5.4.1 The need for relationships and social connection

This theme appears to align with the GET 'the importance of relationships,' as both highlight the crucial role of relationships in the lives of autistic girls within

mainstream school settings and their impact on wellbeing. Both themes emphasise friendships as essential for positive emotional experiences in schools, underscoring the transformative influence of supportive relationships in fostering a sense of belonging and happiness. However, the SLR emphasised that autistic girls often struggle with understanding friendships and tend to have one key friend, a dimension not reflected in the interpreted GET. Additionally, while the pervasive issues of bullying among autistic girls in schools were highlighted, participants did not raise this and are absent from the interpreted GET.

The SLR theme also aligns with the GET 'social inclusion and belonging in the mainstream classroom,' emphasising experiences of social exclusion and invisibility among autistic girls, as reflected in this research. However, in this study, social inclusion and belonging were interpreted as shared experiences with underlying factors among all participants, warranting a separate GET to highlight their significant impact on the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls in mainstream secondary schools.

Additionally, the importance of relationships and social connection appears to be a recurring theme across all GETs, suggesting that supporting positive relationships, especially friendships, play a pivotal role in shaping the emotional landscape of these individuals within the school environment. This consistent pattern emphasises the importance of a relational approach for the wellbeing of autistic girls in mainstream schools and suggests that schools have a role in supporting their social and friendship skills to promote emotional wellbeing.

5.4.2 *Navigating the demands of the school environment and curriculum*

While the SLR theme covered various challenges related to the mainstream environment and curriculum, such as sensory difficulties, classroom dynamics, curriculum-induced stressors, and the emotional impact of physical surroundings, the present research interpreted participants' experiences into two distinct GETs: 'navigating the mainstream environment' and 'the influence of classroom learning dynamics on wellbeing.' This division was prompted by the richness and diversity of firsthand experiences provided by participants, enabling a more detailed exploration of the intricate factors contributing to their wellbeing in mainstream school.

Both the SLR and this research acknowledged the influence of school size on emotional wellbeing. Autistic girls in the SLR theme struggled with feelings of

overwhelm and stress in crowded spaces, while the GET highlighted additional challenges posed by larger school sizes which impacted upon social dynamics. Similarly, both studies found transitions to be difficult for autistic girls, indicating a shared emphasis on these experiences across different research methodologies. Both the present research and the SLR identified academic pressures, such as exams and subject difficulties, as risk factors for poor emotional wellbeing. Conversely, acknowledging individual achievements in school was identified as a protective factor for emotional wellbeing.

Both the SLR and GET indicated that autistic girls require designated safe spaces to navigate the mainstream school environment. Participants emphasised the importance of these areas, such as break rooms and quiet spaces, in providing security in school and regulation for their emotional wellbeing.

5.4.3 *The power of feeling understood, heard, and valued*

While not presented as a standalone GET, this SLR theme aligns with subthemes within the GETs of 'the importance of relationships,' 'social inclusion and belonging in the mainstream classroom,' and 'the influence of classroom learning dynamics on wellbeing.' Shared features include the influence of teacher and peer understanding on fostering positive emotional experiences whereas a lack of understanding led participants to hold negative perceptions of teachers who placed unexpected demands upon participants. Positive teacher-pupil relationships were found to be crucial in creating a secure and supportive school environment. Both the SLR theme and present GETs recognised the broader impact of these relationships on school culture, with participants in this research urging schools to create a culture of acceptance for all.

This research introduced a new interpretation that participants' perceptions of teachers influenced the emotional dynamics in the classroom. Negative perceptions led to discomfort, disengagement, and decreased motivation, often due to a lack of understanding of the participants' diagnosis. This reiterates the importance of teacher understanding on positive emotional experiences and indicates a need for tailored teacher training. Additionally, this research emphasises the significance of emotional literacy and attunement among school staff to foster trusted relationships and supportive social strategies within the school environment.

5.4.4 Coping mechanisms and strategies for managing emotional wellbeing

This SLR theme directly corresponds to the GET 'coping mechanisms for emotional regulation in school,' supporting the literature synthesis. Positive coping strategies, such as seeking comfort in designated safe spaces and using non-verbal communication methods, are consistent with the SLR theme. Similarly, both the GET and SLR theme highlight the significance of social support systems on autistic girls' wellbeing. Additionally, the GET highlights avoidance mechanisms, consistent with the SLR's identification of maladaptive strategies including school avoidance. Both recognised the use of masking by autistic girls to conceal emotions and avoid attention. However, unlike the SLR theme, the GET did not include extreme maladaptive behaviours such as self-injury, and there was no mention of mental health support from professionals such as psychologists. This difference could be due to the exclusion criteria of this research, which prevented individuals receiving mental health treatment from participating.

5.5 Summary of findings

This research aimed to answer the research question: *"What are autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools?"* The findings highlighted five GETs, interpreted from autistic adolescent girls' experiences of their emotional wellbeing. The findings extend the existing literature on autistic girls' mainstream educational experiences by detailing first-hand accounts of their emotional wellbeing in this setting.

The physical environment and peer proximity seemed to affect participants' basic needs, leading some to alter their eating patterns to cope with noise. This aligns with research that found autistic girls to develop disordered eating in response to environmental stressors (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). The chaotic mainstream environment was interpreted as detrimental to emotional wellbeing, consistent with previous research (Danker et al., 2016; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Saggers, 2015). School size also influenced participants' social identity, with one participant feeling constrained in a larger environment, leading to conflicts with older peers. This challenges existing frameworks which overlook the connection between the school environment and relationships for autistic pupils (e.g., Danker et al., 2016), highlighting the need for improved inclusivity in mainstream classrooms to better accommodate diverse needs.

Acknowledging achievements and praising efforts promoted participants' competence and positive emotions. Autistic girls seemed to 'savour' these positive experiences (Kilbert et al., 2022) suggesting lasting impacts on emotional resilience and satisfaction with learning. Academic pressures posed challenges, and individualised accommodations, such as separate exam rooms reduced anxiety and stress, emphasising the importance of considering sensory needs to promote wellbeing. To cope with emotional stressors in school, participants used various strategies. Social support from key adults in school and ongoing parental connection contributed to participants' emotional resilience. However, avoidance strategies, including staying home or leaving specific classrooms, were sometimes employed to manage discomfort and overwhelm and masking strategies were used to blend in with peers which created difficulties in recognising when support was needed.

Relationships were central across all GETs, playing a role in fostering emotionally secure environments. Positive peer relationships acted as protective factors, while teacher-pupil bonds fostered a sense of belonging and emotional fulfilment. Seeking support from trusted teachers during anxious moments highlighted the importance of positive teacher qualities. Interactions with peers and teachers directly impacted emotional wellbeing, reiterating previous research on the significance of interpersonal connections for autistic girls (Cridland et al., 2014). Friendships emerged as potent contributors to emotional resilience, offering a non-judgemental space for acceptance and support, fostering a sense of belonging. Relationships with understanding teachers contributed to a positive and inclusive learning environment where positive emotions were promoted. These findings highlight the importance of a relational approach in mainstream schooling, advocating for an inclusive school ethos and peer awareness to support the social inclusion and emotional wellbeing of autistic girls.

The next section will review the methodology of this research, outline the distinctive contribution of findings, provide implications for practice and future research, and offer overall reflections on future directions.

5.6 Methodological review

5.6.1 Methodological strengths

This research demonstrates methodological strengths by adhering to Yardley's (2000) criteria, prioritising depth, richness, and contextual understanding in exploring participants' experiences. Chapter 3 outlined this process to ensure replicability and confirmability. Further, the use of the pilot study enhanced rigour by addressing potential methodological challenges before data collection began.

This research provided a platform for the voices of autistic adolescent girls to share their experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools. Given the typical underrepresentation of autistic females in studies (Lai et al., 2015) and the documented negative effects of mainstream education on their emotional wellbeing (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), this study fills a research gap by directly gaining the lived experiences of autistic girls in these environments.

The choice of an IPA methodology was suitable for this research due to its capacity to explore individual interpretations in depth, which is particularly important when examining emotional wellbeing given its complex nature (Haas et al., 2019). Using semi-structured interviews further supported the methodological approach, providing participants with flexibility and allowing for an in-depth exploration of their experiences. The expression of gratitude from one participant for being heard highlights the effectiveness of this approach in creating a safe and predictable space for sharing views.

5.6.2 Methodological limitations

This research faced methodological limitations that must be acknowledged. Data collection relied on interviews, with language proficiency being a prerequisite. Participants needed to feel confident in volunteering and in their language skills. While the pilot study suggested that alternative approaches were unnecessary, exclusively using interviews may have deterred potential participants with valuable insights or limited the depth of data obtained. For instance, only one participant used metaphors, known for their ability to provide rich meaning within IPA (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). This was likely influenced by the social and communication challenges associated with ASD (APA, 2013). Nevertheless, this research maintained a commitment to rigor by adhering to Smith et al.'s (2022) structured IPA approach and upheld the idiographic nature of IPA to meet the aims of this research. Future research should explore diverse

methods for capturing a wider range of perspectives on the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls in mainstream schools. For example, using visual imagery could offer participants a means to express their experiences and feelings without the necessity for verbal translation (Boden et al., 2018).

The inductive approach of IPA provided an in-depth interpretation based on the experiences of four participants in one area of the North West of England. While IPA does not aim for generalisation, the small sample size in this research limits the potential transferability of results to a wider context. The localised nature of participants could affect the broader applicability of findings and implications to a more diverse population or different geographic regions. Nevertheless, this research successfully captured autistic girls' views, a demographic often underrepresented in research (Hebron & Bond, 2019).

Participants were not questioned about their conceptualisation of emotional wellbeing during the semi-structured interviews. Additionally, they were not provided with a specific wellbeing framework, such as Danker et al.'s (2016) framework for autistic student wellbeing. This omission may have led to potential misinterpretations of certain expressions or experiences by the researcher. However, this research did not aim to explore how participants conceptualised wellbeing in order to maintain objectivity and capture authentic, unfiltered accounts without imposing external definitions. Explicitly asking participants about their conceptualisations might have introduced response contamination, threatening the naturalistic nature of their reflections and experiences.

5.7 Distinctive contribution

This research makes a distinctive contribution to knowledge by utilising IPA to interpret the lived experiences of emotional wellbeing among autistic girls in mainstream secondary schools. As discussed in the literature review, existing peer-reviewed research has concentrated on the overall experiences of autistic adolescent girls (Cridland et al., 2014), general educational experiences (Cook et al., 2018; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022), factors influencing learning and academic success (Jacobs et al., 2021), and social experiences, including the sense of belonging in mainstream schools (Myles et al., 2019). These studies consistently report that negative experiences within mainstream schools harm the mental health

and emotional wellbeing of autistic girls (Tomlinson et al., 2020). This discovery is particularly concerning due to the tendency for autistic girls to mask and internalise their challenges and emotions (Moyse & Porter, 2015). Unfortunately, this masking often leads to a situation where their needs go unnoticed or unmet in the school environment (Cook et al., 2018). While research highlights effective support for autistic girls in secondary schools (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2023), there is a notable gap in understanding the direct perspectives of autistic girls regarding their emotional wellbeing in mainstream school and the various emotions they experience within this setting. This research addresses this gap by giving voice to autistic adolescent girls and allowing them to articulate their lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools. In doing so, the research provides a unique and valuable perspective directly from this underrepresented group.

The present research makes a unique contribution by applying Danker et al.'s (2016) framework for autistic student wellbeing to participants' experiences. The study supports the domains of wellbeing outlined by Danker et al. (2016) for autistic girls attending mainstream schools. However, the findings also introduce novel insights, identifying areas that merit further research attention, detailed in the 'implications for research' section.

The literature review highlighted that adolescence is as a heightened stage for the emergence of mental health challenges (Kessler et al., 2005), particularly for autistic pupils who are deemed vulnerable within educational contexts (Ghaziuddin et al., 1998). Additionally, the review highlighted that school staff often overlook autistic girls, increasing their vulnerability to mental health difficulties (Dean et al., 2017). Consequently, this research focused on understanding the experiences of autistic adolescent girls, recognising their unique developmental stage. The review also highlighted how existing school support models often failed to address the specific needs of autistic girls (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010). As a result, the research findings offer practical implications, which are detailed in the subsequent section.

5.8 Implications for research and practice

Following Yardley's (2000) criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research, this section evaluates the significance of the current research. Participants' experiences offer insights into the potential emotions of other autistic girls in

mainstream schools and indicate the factors in mainstream settings that could influence their emotional wellbeing. Based on the findings, this section discusses practical implications for the Government, local authorities, schools, and EPs, along with suggestions for future research.

5.8.1 Implications for government and local authorities

The findings suggest that government and local authorities should develop tailored policies and guidance for addressing the needs of autistic girls in mainstream schools. Informed by this research and existing literature on autistic girls' perspectives, these measures should consider environmental factors, sensory sensitivities, relationships, teacher and peer understanding, and available social support in schools. Such policies would aim to foster inclusive educational environments that promote positive emotions and overall wellbeing. These guidelines could be integrated into the local authority's 'Local Offer', which is an information directory where individuals with SEND and their families, can access information about provision available across education, health, and social care (DfE, 2015). This would ensure accessibility for schools, families, and the girls themselves.

The findings are relevant to the upcoming policy paper outlined in the recent SEND and alternative provision improvement plan (DfE, 2023b), particularly regarding the development of guidance for mainstream settings to support children with SEND. Considering that ASD is the most common SEN (DfE, 2023a) and most autistic pupils attend mainstream schools (NAS, 2021), it is essential for this guidance to recognise and address the needs of autistic girls in mainstream settings.

5.8.2 Implications for schools

Adapting the physical environment. The findings suggest that schools should create accessible quiet and safe spaces for autistic girls to regulate their emotions, reducing stress and anxiety (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Myles et al., 2019). However, the need for separate spaces highlights potential inclusivity issues in mainstream school classrooms. Consequently, schools must address factors hindering feelings of safety and security for autistic girls, for instance, by recognising the impact of physical attributes such as school size and noise (Makin et al., 2017), and by implementing strategies to mitigate challenges in crowded spaces and busy corridors (APA, 2013; Jarman & Rayner, 2015).

An inclusive classroom learning dynamic. The findings highlighted effective teaching practices, such as individualised and flexible approaches to foster emotional wellbeing (Danker et al., 2016; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Schools must acknowledge the diverse needs of autistic girls and involve them in planning interventions to reduce anxiety and encourage inclusivity (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Teachers should carefully consider their use of instructional techniques and explore alternative methods including non-verbal or visual approaches when engaging autistic girls in classroom activities.

Executive functioning awareness. Complex language and limited processing time was found to increase stress and anxiety among participants, consistent with previous research (Jacobs et al., 2021). Strategies including breaking down tasks, smaller classroom groups, and multiple sensory approaches were valued by participants and previous research (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Implementing these strategies could alleviate cognitive load and promote emotional wellbeing by meeting executive functioning needs. Schools should also recognise masking among autistic girls, as it may obscure their executive functioning needs.

Interest based learning. Participants described their positive experiences of emotional wellbeing during lessons of interest. Schools could facilitate interest-based learning by incorporating personal interests into lessons, promoting positive emotions, engagement, and relationships within the classroom (Seligman, 2011). This tailored approach enhances competence, relatedness, and overall wellbeing for autistic girls, fostering connections among pupils and creating a more inclusive and engaging learning environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000; White et al., 2023).

Fostering relationships. Positive relationships were interpreted as crucial for autistic girls' emotional wellbeing and should therefore be fostered in mainstream school. Teachers play a pivotal role in this regard by understanding and supporting the unique needs of autistic girls (Hebron & Bond, 2019). Consequently, developing emotional literacy skills among teachers is essential for creating a positive and inclusive learning environment, as well as mitigating negative perceptions of teachers held by autistic girls. This involves promoting awareness of emotional cues, fostering empathy, and refining communication skills to establish supportive relationships.

A whole-school relational approach. The findings indicate that a holistic relational approach is essential for schools, emphasising positive interactions among pupils and between pupils and teachers. Recognising the profound impact of relationships and understanding the distinct needs of autistic girls, this approach could reduce the need for autistic girls to mask emotions and establish a strong social support system within the school. Implementing a whole-school approach could address any apprehensions autistic girls may have regarding visible support (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Saggers et al., 2011).

5.8.3 *Implications for educational psychologists*

The findings highlight the importance of school staff gaining a greater understanding of autistic girls' needs and how the mainstream environment, curriculum, and social dynamics influence their emotional wellbeing. EPs frequently engage in consultation and deliver training as part of their role (Fallon et al., 2010). Therefore, EPs can assess schools' current understanding and support mechanisms for autistic girls through consultation. They can then design and deliver training to ensure consistent support for autistic girls throughout school, including implementing a relational approach as a key strategy for promoting wellbeing.

EPs have skills in consultation and facilitation and extensive psychological knowledge (Cameron, 2006). Drawing upon these skills, they can facilitate strategic change within schools, improving understanding of autistic girls' needs and promoting inclusivity to enhance their emotional wellbeing. For example, they can use person-centred planning techniques such as, 'Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope' (Pearpoint et al., 1993) to guide staff in supporting autistic girls while sharing pertinent research and theory. This approach has driven whole-school change in staff understanding of SEND, including devising appropriate provision for autistic pupils (Hughes et al., 2018).

The findings highlighted a need for school staff to be emotionally literate, empathetic, and attuned to autistic girls' emotional needs. EPs can promote the emotional literacy of school staff by delivering training sessions on the 'Emotional Literacy Support Assistant' intervention which equips staff with psychological theories and practical skills for emotional literacy and wellbeing (Burton, 2008).

5.8.4 Implications for research

This research aligns with Danker et al.'s (2016) autistic student wellbeing framework. Future studies could enhance this framework by including a broader sample of autistic girls and incorporating additional elements such as a sense of purpose in school, as suggested by Hossain et al. (2022). Moreover, transition and unexpected changes were identified as factors influencing participants' emotional wellbeing, reiterating existing research on autistic girls' experiences (Cridland et al., 2014). However, Danker et al.'s (2016) framework does not address this aspect, indicating the need for further exploration.

This research explored the emotional wellbeing experiences of four autistic adolescent girls attending mainstream secondary schools within one local authority. Conducting further research across diverse educational settings in different local authorities could deepen understanding of autistic girls' varied experiences. Longitudinal studies tracking these girls across different educational stages could also provide valuable insights into the evolution of emotional wellbeing over time, identifying influential factors and guiding potential interventions.

While one participant acknowledged the importance of parental support for their emotional regulation, this research did not explore the influence of the home environment and the home-school relationship on emotional wellbeing. Existing research recognise the home-school link as pivotal for positive educational experiences (Critchley, 2019), suggesting its potential contribution to supporting emotional wellbeing. Future research should explore this aspect, involving parents, caregivers, and families alongside autistic girls in the process. This approach could provide a holistic understanding of the interaction between home, school, and autistic girls' emotional wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), highlighting home-school links as areas for improvement in mainstream schools.

This research used IPA to amplify the voices of an underrepresented group. Considering the interpretative nature of the study, future research must acknowledge potential biases in the researcher's interpretations of participants' experiences. Adhering to the principle of 'nothing about us, without us' (Charlton, 2000), adopting a participatory action research framework could address this limitation. Involving autistic girls throughout the research process, from devising questions to analysing findings,

participants could be empowered, and their perspectives would contribute to improved educational experiences.

5.8.5 Future directions

The findings of this research align with broader studies on the educational experiences of autistic pupils (e.g., Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) and support the autistic pupil wellbeing framework proposed by Danker et al. (2016). This indicates that the implications of this research could benefit all autistic pupils, including both boys and girls. For example, sensory needs, executive functioning challenges, curriculum demands, challenges navigating social dynamics and academic pressures influence the emotional wellbeing of both autistic boys and girls (Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). However, the research highlights that relationships are especially crucial for autistic girls in mainstream secondary schools. Feeling accepted within the classroom appeared to be an unmet need for these girls. While autistic boys and girls share some similar needs in education, it is important to specifically seek out the voices of autistic girls, as their educational experiences uniquely differ from those of boys, vary widely among themselves, and are often overlooked in research (Hebron & Bond, 2019).

The key message in this research is encapsulated by Emily's view that *"School should be a place where everyone feels comfortable and accepted"* (Emily, 12/223). This highlights the need for mainstream secondary schools to prioritise relational and inclusive practices to support the emotional wellbeing of autistic adolescent girls. The study emphasises the importance of creating a physically accommodating environment that addresses sensory needs to reduce stressors affecting emotional wellbeing. Equally important is the need to build strong, supportive relationships between students and teachers, which are essential for fostering a sense of belonging and resilience. Moreover, acknowledging the influential role of friendships for autistic girls in this study is necessary for creating an inclusive and supportive school environment. Friendships provided crucial emotional support and a sense of acceptance for the participants, which contributed significantly to their overall wellbeing in school. Therefore, schools should not only facilitate positive interactions between students and teachers but also encourage and support the development of meaningful peer relationships. Moving forward, it is crucial for EPs, schools, and other professionals to place the female voice at the heart of their approach. This involves

integrating the findings to create inclusive environments that address both sensory and academic needs while also promoting positive interpersonal interactions.

5.9 Conclusion

The literature review revealed adolescence as a critical period for the emergence of mental health needs, especially among autistic pupils. Autistic girls were identified as an underrepresented population in research who often go unnoticed by school staff which increases their likelihood to develop mental health needs (Dean et al., 2017). A research gap exists regarding the impact of mainstream schools on the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls. To address this gap, a systematic qualitative synthesis aimed to consolidate findings from existing research focusing on autistic girls' experiences in mainstream settings and their mental health implications. This review revealed a scarcity of primary studies directly investigating the influence of mainstream schools on autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing.

This research employed a qualitative exploratory design to address the research gap and explore autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants, and their experiences were analysed using IPA. Five GETs were interpreted from their accounts, highlighting how the physical mainstream environment, classroom dynamics, relationships, coping mechanisms, and social integration experiences impacted on their emotional wellbeing. While there were both shared experiences and differences among participants, the findings highlight the need for mainstream schools to be inclusive and accepting of autistic girls' needs and foster a comfortable environment to promote their emotional wellbeing.

The use of IPA offered a distinct contribution to knowledge by providing a unique perspective of autistic girls' experience of emotional wellbeing in mainstream settings. This research adopted an integrated perspective of wellbeing, and the findings were discussed in relation to hedonic and eudiamonic aspects of participants' wellbeing. The findings resonate with Danker et al.'s (2016) domains of autistic pupil wellbeing, while also revealing new insights and highlighting areas requiring additional research attention, such as, the link between transition and wellbeing. However, there is a clear need for more targeted research involving autistic girls to fully align with and support Danker et al.'s (2016) framework.

The methodology addresses the underrepresentation of autistic girls in research by enabling them to share their experiences. IPA was chosen for its in-depth exploration of experiences, and individual semi-structured interviews were used to provide flexibility for unexpected topics to emerge and in-depth investigation using prompts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). While IPA does not aim for generalisation (Smith et al., 2022), the findings offer implications for practice and future research. For example, tailored policies and guidance from government and local authorities can address the unique needs of autistic girls in mainstream schools, potentially integrating them into wider dissemination efforts such as the local authority's Local Offer. Schools can improve the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls by adapting the physical environment, fostering inclusive learning dynamics, raising awareness of executive functioning, incorporating interest-based learning, and emphasising positive relationships through a relational approach. EPs are ideally placed to support school staff understanding, facilitate strategic change, and implement interventions to promote inclusivity. This research recommends that autistic girls are involved in intervention planning and research, following the principle of 'nothing about us, without us' (Charlton, 2000). This ensures their views are recognised, understood, and met in mainstream school to enhance their emotional wellbeing.

Reflections: Conducting this research and hearing the experiences of four autistic adolescent girls has been a privilege. This research has impacted me both professionally and personally. I am grateful to the participants for their honesty and openness, highlighting often overlooked aspects of their school lives and emotional wellbeing.

The participants' experiences have highlighted the need to prioritise the voices of autistic girls in education. Emily's view that "*school should be a place where everyone feels comfortable and accepted*" emphasised to me how crucial it is to focus on relational and inclusive practices in my work. As I begin my career as an EP, I am committed to amplifying the voices of those we support, like Emily, in my practice. I am dedicated to creating environments where autistic girls feel accepted, understood, and valued, prioritising their emotional wellbeing. By raising awareness of their unique needs among schools, families, and professionals, I aim to reinforce the transformative power of truly hearing and responding to those we support.

Throughout this research journey, I have consistently reflected on my role as a researcher and practitioner. By examining my biases and assumptions, I have gained a deeper understanding into how my personal and professional experiences influence my approach to research and practice. As I move forward as an EP, I will continue to engage in self-reflection to identify and address any biases that could affect my work with children, young people, their families, and other professionals.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Studies excluded at full text screening

Study	Rationale for Exclusion
Brede, J., Remington, A., Kenny, L., Warren, K., & Pellicano, E. (2017). Excluded from school: Autistic students' experiences of school exclusion and subsequent re-integration into school. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, *2*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1177/2396941517737511	Context Population
DaWalt, L. S., Taylor, J. L., Bishop, S., Hall, L. J., Steinbrenner, J. D., Kraemer, B., Hume, K. A., & Odom, S. L. (2020). Sex differences in social participation of high school students with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism Research, 13*(12), 2155–2163. https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2348	Population
Halsall, J., Clarke, C., & Crane, L. (2021). 'Camouflaging' by Adolescent Autistic Girls Who Attend Both Mainstream and Specialist Resource Classes: Perspectives of Girls, Their Mothers and Their Educators. Autism: *The International Journal of Research and Practice, 25*(7), 2074–2086. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211012819	Context
Moyse, R., & Porter, J. (2015). The experience of the hidden curriculum for autistic girls at mainstream primary schools. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 30*(2), 187–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.986915	Design
O'Hagan, S., Bond, C., & Hebron, J. (2022). Autistic girls and emotionally based school avoidance: Supportive factors for successful re-engagement in mainstream high school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2049378	Outcomes

Sproston, K., Sedgewick, F., & Crane, L. (2017). Autistic girls and school exclusion: Perspectives of students and their parents. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments, 2,* 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2396941517706172

Sturrock, A., Chilton, H., Foy, K., Freed, J., & Adams, C. (2022). In their own words: The impact of subtle language and communication difficulties as described by autistic girls and boys without intellectual disability. *Autism, 26*(2), 332–345. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211002047

Context

Context
Outcomes

Appendix 2: CASP criteria and weight of evidence A scoring for each study

CASP Criteria	Cook et al. (2018)	Cridland et al. (2014)	Goodall and MacKenzie (2019)	Jacobs et al. (2014)	Myles et al. (2019)	Tomlinson et al. (2022)
Was there a clear statement of aims?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims?	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the aims?	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Has the researcher–participant relationship been considered?	?	✗	✗	✗	?	?
Have all ethical issues been taken into consideration?	✓	?	✗	✗	?	?
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	✓	✗	?	✓	?	?
Is there a clear statement of findings?	✓	✓	?	✓	?	✓
How valuable is the research?	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	✓
CASP Score /10 (WoE A Descriptor and Score)	8.5 (High – 3)	6 (Medium – 2)	6 (Medium – 2)	6 (Medium – 2)	8 (High – 3)	8.5 (High – 3)

Scoring criteria: ✓ = Yes (1 point), ? = Can't tell/unclear (0.5 points), ✗ = No (0 points).

Appendix 3: Weight of evidence B criteria

Categorisation	Criteria
High (Score = 3)	• Uses qualitative methodologies to directly gather the views and voices of autistic girls for example, through interviews or focus groups. • Considers use of a researcher-participant negotiation approach, involving participants in choosing their preferred method for communicating their views.
Medium (Score = 2)	• Employs qualitative methodologies that gather primary data from autistic girls but may not directly obtain their views or voices via verbal means for example, use of online surveys. • Partially involving participant input in data gathering method decisions.
Low (Score = 1)	• Methodology does not gather primary data from autistic girls.

Appendix 4: Weight of evidence C criteria and scoring

Criteria	Descriptor (Score)	Score Criteria	Rationale
Contextual relevance	High (3)	Mainstream schools in the UK.	This criterion evaluates the relevance of the study's context to the review's main focus, which is on autistic girls attending mainstream schools in the UK. Studies conducted outside the UK are less likely to capture the nuances and specificities of the UK's educational system and context.
	Medium (2)	Mainstream schools in comparable Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (e.g., Australia, United States, Canada, New Zealand, where the education systems and societal attitudes might be similar to the UK).	
	Low (1)	Non-comparable OECD counties and all other countries.	
	High (3)	Explores the mental health, wellbeing, or emotional	Studies that investigate these outcomes are of highest relevance, as they directly address the review's focus.

Outcome relevance		experiences of autistic girls in addition to general school experiences.	Studies exploring specific influences of school experiences (e.g., camouflaging, social skills, sensory processing) but not directly exploring mental health and wellbeing are still relevant, as they can offer valuable insights into potential indirect influences on emotions and mental health
	Medium (2)	Explores specific influences of school which may indirectly influence wellbeing (e.g., camouflaging, social skills, sensory processing) in addition to general experiences. However, mental health and wellbeing are not directly explored.	
	Low (1)	Explores the general school experiences.	
Participant relevance	High (3)	All participants are female.	This criterion evaluates the relevance of the study's participants to the review's focus on autistic girls attending mainstream schools. Studies that exclusively include female participants are of highest relevance, as they directly address the experiences of autistic girls in
	Medium (2)	75% of participants are female.	

Low (1)	Less than 50% of participants are female.	the context of mainstream schools. Studies with a majority (75%) of female participants are still relevant but to a slightly lesser extent, as they may also include some male participants. Studies with less than 50% female participants are the least relevant, as they might not offer sufficient insights into the experiences of autistic girls specifically.

Note: Total WoE C score is derived from the mean score of each criterion. Scores: *Low (≤1.99); Medium (2-2.99); High (≥3).*

Appendix 5: Analytical themes and descriptive themes

	Analytical theme: The need for relationships and social connection	
Descriptive Theme	**Number of articles including this theme**	**Example quotations**
Need for friendships	6	"I go to an all girls' school and I feel happy to go to school when I know that my friends will be there" (Jacobs et al., 2021)
Experiences of bullying	6	"Because I have a disability, they ignore me or pick on me and bully me just because of that. It's hard, especially with like the really popular girls, they won't even listen to me- as soon as they hear that I have a disability they just won't even listen to me and what I have to say" (Cridland et al., 2014). "I was bullied when I was younger … verbal physical and there was once … sexual … which is bad. It was a pupil." (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).
Feeling judged	3	"I still felt the centre of attention with others looking at me and judging" (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).
Not fitting in	5	"I'm changing because no one's actually listening to me and I always feel left out." (Cook et al., 2018).

Descriptive Theme	Number of articles including this theme	Example quotations
	4	"My low social skills sometimes makes me feel that I did something wrong in the conversation or said something that came across the wrong way" (Jacobs et al., 2021).
Navigating the 'hidden curriculum'		"I really try and keep the peace. It's quite hard, but if you really, really try and keep the peace . . . they don't exclude you. Because girls can very mean - one thing you do wrong and then you're gone" (Jacobs et al., 2021).
		"I didn't realise it was an argument! Until somebody said, 'can we just stop arguing!' and I was like, 'What? We're arguing?'… I didn't understand that" (Tomlinson et al., 2022).
Social exclusion	5	"I was isolated and separate, in like a bubble of depression and anxiety …" (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).

Analytical theme:

Navigating the demands of the school environment and curriculum

Descriptive Theme	Number of articles including this theme	Example quotations

Anxiety around asking for help	1	"The girls lacked the confidence to ask questions and reported being reluctant to seek help when they were confused" (Jacobs et al., 2021).
Exam stress	3	"The schoolwork is stressful when there's lots of it, and if there's a subject I don't feel good about . . . or if there's a subject that usually triggers anxiety, or if there's a test, I feel more anxiety" (Jacobs et al., 2021). "exams are evil…they [the teachers] just don't shut up about them" (Tomlinson et al., 2022).
Challenges with transition	2	"I need a bit of time to sort my head out before the next lesson…. I can't concentrate for long…. period five might as well not exist for me" (Tomlinson et al., 2022).
Anxiety around time pressures for work	3	"Trying to keep up with the work… both (class work and homework), it's too hard" (Cridland et al., 2014).
Sensory needs	6	"The corridors are evil… there's lots of people…it's very noisy and they touch you and I don't like it" (Tomlinson et al., 2022).
School culture	1	"It's not the building which matters, it's the attitude and atmosphere inside it" (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).

	Analytical theme:	
	The power of feeling understood, heard, and valued	
Descriptive Theme	**Number of articles including this theme**	**Example quotations**
Teacher understanding	6	"They're just sort of there like, 'why is that girl there rocking? What's she doing?'. (Tomlinson et al., 2022).
	2	"Whenever I feel anxious, they [staff] know how to help me" (Tomlinson et al., 2022).
Teacher relationships		
		"If there's a supply teacher or trainee then … that is always a time where I will leave" (Tomlinson et al., 2022).
Peer understanding	4	"True friends… they actually understand and just don't not like me for my autism" (Myles et al., 2019).
	2	"A number of participants expressed the view that others underestimated them and did not value their contribution". (Myles et al., 2019).
Underestimating autistic girls		
		"When I first got diagnosed everyone started treating me differently … I got treated differently, like babyish" (Myles et al., 2019).

"I think other people treat me as being different. When I was at school, I was often called a geek or weirdo" (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).

Analytical theme:

Coping mechanisms and strategies for managing mental health needs

Descriptive Theme	Number of articles including this theme	Example quotations
Disordered patterns of eating	2	"I went through whole days without eating to avoid it" (Tomlinson et al., 2022). "I might eat a bit to show that I was eating, but then I wouldn't eat anything until home. I went through whole days without eating" (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).
School absenteeism	1	"Lily was regularly absent from school and her mother described how this affected them at home: So she just missed huge amounts of school. Her teachers-, I was forever asking them to send work home. Sometimes they did, sometimes they didn't. She used to go in for a little bit, and then not – caused a lot of anxiety in the house." (Cook et al., 2018).
Safe spaces in school	2	"It's just a place to go like away from everybody and people from student support run it. …So we sit there as a place to go and they chat about like

		how's your week's going and that's been a nice thing to do" (Myles et al., 2019).
Self-injurious behaviours	1	"If I'm very angry…I'll do something dangerous … I hit my head…. I scratched myself" (Tomlinson et al., 2022).
Masking	3	"I do whatever they're doing… …Yeah it helps because then it's doing the sort of thing that they like. Then you'll know that they'll like what you're doing" (Myles et al., 2019).
Emotional support animals	1	"We have tortoises which are great … they're very calming" (Tomlinson et al., 2022).
Independent use of strategies	4	"I've got my wristband which is green on one side, red on the other … I can flip it and people know whether to talk to me or not' and 'I leave five minutes early for each lesson'." (Tomlinson et al., 2022)
External support services	1	"…Weekly sessions with the school psychotherapist; 'who basically sorts my life out for me" (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Appendix 6: Ethical approval letter

SJ/tp

Ref: **S1523**

Monday 5th June 2023

Dear Katie Roberts and Mark Izzard-Snape,

Ethics Committee Review
Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'Exploring the emotional experiences of autistic girls attending mainstream secondary schools using interpretive phenomenological analysis.'

That proposal has now been reviewed by the Ethics Committee and I am pleased to tell you that your submission has met with the committee's approval.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely

Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix 7: Email requesting gatekeeper consent

Dear Head Teacher,

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at X Council and currently undertaking my Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology at the University of Nottingham. As part of my training programme, I am conducting a research project about the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls who currently attend a mainstream secondary school. My research aims to explore how these girls perceive, manage, and express their emotional wellbeing within the school environment. I am writing to you to ask whether you would be interested in your school being involved in this project. The decision to participate in the study is at the discretion of the school. However, it is important to note that declining participation will have no bearing on any future collaborations with me or the Educational Psychology Team.

Following the project, I hope to share my findings with school staff. This will be in an anonymised form and no individual young people will be identifiable. I hope this may be helpful to staff's understanding of the experiences of these girls. The results of this study could inform the development of strategies and resources to better support these pupils and promote positive emotional wellbeing in mainstream schools.

I am seeking participants who have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who are not cared for by the local authority, are currently **not** receiving specialist support for a mental health concern or diagnosis, for example, counselling via CAMHS.

I hope to invite autistic girls to attend an individual interview with me. I hope to conduct these interviews in the second half of the summer term (May-July 2023). Interviews will be conducted in your school and all school visitor protocols will be followed. I have an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Services disclosure to support my work as a Trainee Educational Psychologist and I have had full safeguarding training from X Council.

Support needed from school would include:

- Sending consent letters to parents of autistic female pupils.

- Sharing information about the project with pupils whose parents consent for them to take part, and asking if they are interested in taking part.

- Sharing key information already held by school about the pupils taking part, with parent consent such as, gender, ethnicity, if they receive pupil premium, if they are identified as having SEN, and whether they are looked after by the local authority.

- Providing a quiet space in school to conduct the interview (and a member of staff to support this if requested by the pupil).

All data will be kept securely and confidentially in line with data protection protocols at X Council. Young people's data will not be individually identifiable in the final report and individually identifiable data will be destroyed when it is no longer needed. Young people will be free to withdraw from the project at any time if they no longer wish to participate.

I would very much appreciate it if you could contact me by email (X) to let me know whether you would be interested in your school taking part in this project.

Yours sincerely,
Katie Roberts

Appendix 8: Recruitment letter sent to parents/carers

Dear parent/carer,

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at X Council and currently undertaking my Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology at the University of Nottingham.

I am conducting a research project about the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls who currently attend a mainstream secondary school. My research aims to explore how autistic girls perceive, manage, and express their emotions within the school environment. My research aims to explore autistic girls' experiences of emotional wellbeing in school, how they have made sense of these experiences and their views on any support they feel may be helpful in school. I am writing to you to share some information about this research project and ask if you consent for your daughter to take part.

Please read the attached information sheet about the project, and if you are happy for your daughter to take part, please fill in the attached consent form. If you have any questions about the project or would like any further information, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me by email (X) or telephone (X).

Yours sincerely,

Katie Roberts

Appendix 9: Information sheet and consent form for parents/carers

<table>
<tr><td>School of Psychology

Information Sheet</td><td>The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA</td></tr>
</table>

Title of Project: An exploration of autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools.

Ethics approval number: S1523

Researcher: Katie Roberts

Supervisor: Mark Izzard-Snape

Contact Details:

Katie (X)

Mark (X)

This is an invitation for your daughter to take part in a research study about their emotional experiences of attending a mainstream secondary school. The study will explore the different emotions autistic girls feel during school and how these girls manage and express their emotions while they are at school. The goal of the study is to gain a better understanding of the emotional wellbeing experiences of autistic teenage girls in mainstream schools, which may help to improve support and resources for these pupils in the future.

Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

If you consent for your child to participate, they will be invited to take part in an interview about their experiences of emotional wellbeing while attending a mainstream school, and how they make sense of these experiences. The interview will take place individually in school. The interview will ask about times when they have experienced

different emotions, what influenced those emotions in school and how they made sense of their feelings.

Before giving your consent for your daughter to take part, you should think about whether talking about attending secondary school might be upsetting for your daughter. Children who are likely to become distressed by talking about these things should not take part; for example, because they have recently experienced a very stressful life event or they have significant mental health needs for which they are currently receiving specialist support such as, counselling via CAMHS.

The interview will last around an hour and will be audio-recorded. Recordings will be stored securely in line with X Council data security policies and will be deleted when they are no longer needed. Your daughter will also be asked if they are happy for the interview to be recorded before the recording is started.

If you consent for your daughter to take part, some key information held by school about your daughter will be shared with the researcher, including their gender, ethnicity, whether they receive Pupil Premium funding or are Looked After by the local authority and whether they are identified as having Special Educational Needs such as, if they hold an Education, Health and Care Plan. Your daughter's name will not be kept with these details and your daughter will not be individually identifiable when reporting the findings. All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent for your daughter to take part. If you are happy for your daughter to take part, then you are free to withdraw your child at any point before, during or after the interview, up until the point that data analysis commences, which will not be earlier than (**insert date**). Your daughter can also choose to withdraw from the study at any time before this point. If your daughter would like to withdraw or you would like to withdraw your daughter, please contact the researcher using the details above.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact. We can also be contacted after your child's participation at the above email address.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

(Email)

Privacy information for Research Participants

For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit: www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Why we collect your personal data

We collect personal data under the terms of the University's Royal Charter in our capacity as a teaching and research body to advance education and learning. Specific purposes for data collection on this occasion are to fulfil requirements for the researcher's professional doctorate.

Legal basis for processing your personal data under GDPR

The legal basis for processing your personal data on this occasion is Article 6(1a) consent of the data subject.

How long we keep your data

The University may store your data for up to 25 years and for a period of no less than 7 years after the research project finishes. The researchers who gathered or processed the data may also store the data indefinitely and reuse it in future research. Measures to safeguard your stored data include:

- Anonymisation of all personal data collected (e.g., name and school). Data will be saved under a pseudonym and will not contain the names or any identifiable information about participants.

- All collected data will be securely stored on a password protected drive and only accessed by the researcher for data analyses purposes.

- A separate code/key will be created on a password protected word document that matches the file with the participant. This will be stored on a different password protected drive, only accessed by the researcher. Once data is securely saved, audio recordings will be deleted from the digital audio recording device.

- Audio recordings of each interview will be downloaded and saved on a secure password protected folder only accessed by the researcher. Audio recordings will be deleted upon transcription.

School of Psychology
Consent Form

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Title of Project: An exploration of autistic adolescent girls' lived experiences of emotional wellbeing in mainstream secondary schools.

<div align="center">

Ethics approval number: S1523

Researcher: Katie Roberts

Supervisor: Mark Izzard-Snape

Contact Details:

Katie (X)

Mark (X)

</div>

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet?
  YES/NO

- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study?
  YES/NO

- Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? YES/NO

- Do you understand that your child is free to withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason?   YES/NO

- My child has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.   YES/NO

- I give permission for information held by school about my child as described in the Information Sheet to be shared with the researcher for research purposes only. I understand this data will be kept anonymously and securely.
                    YES/NO

- I give permission for my child's data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected.   YES/NO

Appendix 10: Participant information sheet

Hello!

My name is Katie, and I am doing some research to find out about what it is like to attend a mainstream secondary school as an autistic girl.

I would like to find out about how you feel when you go to school. I am interested in the different kinds of emotions you have and how you deal with them when you are in school. I would also like to know how you talk about your feelings, and if you feel comfortable expressing your feelings in school. I would like to know if you would like to take part and tell me about your emotional experiences at secondary school so far.

This information sheet tells you about what would happen if you <u>choose</u> to take part.

You can choose if you want to take part and you do not have to take part if you do not want to.

If you would like to take part, I will ask you to meet with me in school for around an hour. In this meeting I will ask you some questions about what it has been like in school. I will also send you a copy of questions I will ask during the meeting.

You can choose what you would like to say and you do not have to say anything you don't feel comfortable talking about. I will take a recording of what we say in the interview so I can remember exactly what you have said. Only I will listen to this recording, and it will be deleted once I have written down what has been said.

Your name will not be kept with the information I have written down from the recording. You can choose if you would like to take part. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you choose to take part, you can choose to stop at any time and you do not have to say why.

You can also choose to stop taking part after you have done the interview, as long as you do this before I have started to write my report about what I have found out.

If you do this, I will delete any information you have given me. After I have finished speaking to other girls about secondary school, I am going to write a report about what I found out. This is so that other people can understand what it has been like to attend a mainstream secondary school as an autistic girl. This report will not have anyone's name in it and anyone that reads it won't be able to tell who I spoke to. The only time that I would need to tell anyone about what you say to me is if I think that you or someone else might not be safe. If I thought this, I would need to tell a teacher in school so they could help to keep you safe.

If you have any questions, you can ask your teacher or an adult at home and they can pass your question on to me. Please can you fill in the form below to tell me if you want to take part. Please give this to your teacher when you have finished.

If you are interested in taking part, I would love to meet you first to introduce myself and explain what will happen in the interview. You can ask me any questions too! I will contact your teacher to arrange a date for us to meet in school.

Best wishes,

Katie

Appendix 11: Participant consent form

Name:

Year Group:

Please circle **YES** or **NO** to answer these questions:

Have you read the information sheet?	**YES**	**NO**
Did you understand the information sheet?	**YES**	**NO**
Do you understand that it is your choice to take part?	**YES**	**NO**
Would you like to take part?	**YES**	**NO**

Appendix 12: Semi-structured interview schedule

Introduction to interview

- I am interested in you and your experiences of emotional wellbeing as an autistic girl who attends a mainstream secondary school.

- When answering the following questions, I would like you to think about to all your time throughout secondary school.

- There are no right or wrong answers. This interview will be more like a one-sided conversation. I might say very little as I want to hear what you have to say. You can take as much time as you like when thinking and talking about your experience.

(Smith et al., 2022)

Interview Question	Possible Prompts
1. Can you tell me about your school?	(1) How would you describe your school? (2) What do you like about your school? (3) How do you feel about your school? (4) What components of your school do you like most?
2. **How do you feel when you wake up on a school day?**	(1) What makes you feel more comfortable and ready for the day? (2) How is this feeling different/similar to waking up on a weekend? (3) What do you look forward to about school?
3. **Can you tell me about a time when you felt happy at school? What happened to make you feel that way?**	(1) What activities or subjects do you enjoy the most at school? (2) Do you have any friends at school who make you happy? (3) What do you like about them?

4. **How do you feel about being in school compared to being at home?**
Possible prompts:

(1) What is different about being at home vs school? (2) What do you look forward to about going home/going to school?

5. **Can you describe a time when you felt sad or upset in school? What happened to make you feel that way?**
Possible prompts:

(1) Was there something specific that triggered this emotion? (2) Did anyone help you manage your feelings?

6. **How does the school environment make you feel?**

(1) Do you safe and comfortable in the classroom and other areas of school? (2) Do you feel uncomfortable in certain parts of school? (3) how do you feel at break time or lunch time?

7. **Can you tell me about a time when you felt overwhelmed in school? What happened, and how did you cope?**

(1) Was it a social situation, an academic challenge, or something else that overwhelmed you? (2) What strategies have you learned for managing overwhelming situations?

8. **Can you describe a time when you felt like you didn't fit in at school? What happened, and how did you feel about it?**

(1) Did you feel left out or excluded by your peers? (2) Did anyone help you feel more included or accepted? (3) How did that impact your feelings?

9. **Can you tell me about a time when you felt anxious or worried at school?**

(1) Do you experience this feeling in specific situations?
(2) What strategies do you use to manage this feeling?
(3) Do these feelings happen more on certain school days? Lessons?

10. **Can you describe a time when you felt like your teachers or classmates didn't understand you? What happened, and how did you feel about it?**

(1) Did you try to explain yourself to others? How did they respond? (2) Did anyone help you feel more understood or accepted? How did that impact your feelings?

11. **Have you ever done something at school that made you feel really proud of yourself?**

(1) Can you tell me about it and what made you feel good about yourself? (2) What did this emotion feel like in your body?

12. **We've talked about different emotions you might feel in school. Can you reflect on what aspects of school you think promote positive emotions?**

(1) What would your ideal school look like? (2) How do these aspects differ to experiencing negative emotions? (3) What could school do more of? (4) Are there any things you wish staff knew were important in promoting positive emotions in school?

Closing questions

- Is there anything else you think I should know to fully understand your experiences of emotional wellbeing at school?

Appendix 13: Participant debrief sheet

Thank you!

I am interested in finding out about the emotional wellbeing of autistic girls at school and the experiences of emotional wellbeing in school. Thank you very much for telling me about what this has been like for you.

What happens next?

I will listen carefully to our conversation and transcribe it word by word. I will then delete the audio recording of our conversation.

I will look at what you and other autistic girls have told me and think about what the main themes may be.

I would like to share what you and other autistic girls have told me with other researchers and teachers. Your name and school will not be shared and anyone reading my report will not know who said what.

What if I've changed my mind and I wish I hadn't taken part?

Do not worry, that is okay! Our conversation can be removed from my study as long as you let me know before I have started to write up my report.

Please tell your teacher or parents/carers and ask them to contact me to tell me you do not wish to take part anymore. **Please tell them as soon as possible**, and before 31st August 2023.

I will then remove your conversation with me from the study and delete all information you have shared with me.

What if I feel sad, worried, or anxious about something we talked about?

If you feel upset about something you have spoken about or anything else, please speak to an adult you trust.

Here are some ideas of people you can talk to:
- Your parent or carer

- Your form tutor

- _____ (name of appropriate Pastoral staff member in school e.g. Head of Year 7 or Head of House, with agreement to be named)

- _____ (name of Designated Safeguarding Lead(s) in school, with agreement to be named)

- Childline: This is a free, confidential service where you can talk about anything-whatever your worry, whenever you need help. Phone (0800 11 11) or visit their website (https://www.childline.org.uk/).

- If you are feeling very upset and are worried about how you are feeling, you can also contact (Name of Local Authority Service): This is a free mental health and wellbeing support service for young people aged 11-25. Phone (X), text (X) or email: X

Thank you again for sharing your experiences with me.

Best wishes,

Katie

Appendix 14: Parent/carer debrief letter

Dear [Parent/Carer],

I am writing to provide you with a brief summary of your child's participation in the recent study on emotional wellbeing experiences in school. I am extremely grateful for your child's participation, as their involvement has contributed to my understanding of the emotional wellbeing experiences of autistic girls in a mainstream school setting. Throughout the study, I aimed to explore your child's emotional experiences in school and to gain insight into the ways in which they make sense of and understand their feelings in this environment. Your child was an integral part of this research, and I appreciate their willingness to participate.

What happened during the study?

During the study, I interviewed your child to gain a deeper understanding of their emotional wellbeing experiences in the school setting. I asked questions about how they feel in various situations, such as when they felt proud in school, when they felt anxious, or when they are happy at school. I also asked about how they feel about being in school compared to being at home.

The questions I asked were designed to be age-appropriate and not invasive. I made every effort to create a safe and comfortable environment for your child during the interviews. I also ensured that their confidentiality and privacy were protected throughout the interview. All data collected during the study will be kept strictly confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

I understand that talking about emotions and experiences of emotional wellbeing can sometimes be difficult or overwhelming, and I want to make sure that your child feels supported and comfortable following the study. If your child expresses concern about feeling sad, worried, or anxious about something discussed during the study, the following individuals at school and support services may be helpful:

- Your child's form tutor
- _____ (name of appropriate Pastoral staff member in school e.g. Head of Year 7 or Head of House, with agreement to be named)
- _____ (name of Designated Safeguarding Lead(s) in school, with agreement to be named)

- Childline: This is a free, confidential service where your child can talk about anything- whatever their worry, whenever they need help. Phone (0800 11 11) or visit their website (https://www.childline.org.uk/).
- (Name of local authority Service): This is a free mental health and wellbeing support services for young people aged 11-25. Phone (X), text (X) or email: X

What happens next?

Now that I have completed the interview with your child, I want to thank you for allowing them to take part in my study.

Going forward, I will carefully analyse the data collected from your child's interview, along with data from other participants, to identify patterns and themes that will inform my research. All data will be kept confidential, and your child's name, school, and local authority will not be named in the final write up.

What if my child changes their mind, or I no longer wish for them to be involved?

If you have decided that you no longer want your child to participate in my study, I completely understand and respect your decision.

To withdraw your child from the study, please inform me as soon as possible and before the deadline of 31st August 2023. You can contact me directly or through your child's teacher or other school staff who may have provided information about the study.

Once I receive the request to withdraw your child from the study, I will remove any information related to them from my records and their data will not be included in the final write up.

The decision to withdraw **will not** affect your child's experience in school or any other aspect of their day to day school experience.

Thank you again for your child's participation in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

Katie Roberts

email: X

Appendix 15: An example of steps 1-3 for IPA

Descriptive notes are in regular text, linguistic notes are <u>underlined</u>, and conceptual notes are *italicised*.

Experiential Statement	Ava's Interview Transcript lines 113-247	Exploratory Notes
Understanding keyworker offering emotional support and regulation	R: Did anyone help you to manage your feelings? A: Yeah. My keyworker [name of keyworker], was a big help for me then. She noticed I was upset and like went out of her way to check on me. We had a quiet chat in the quiet space, which did help calm my nerves a bit. It was nice to have someone who understood and wanted to hear me. But I like that room its good.	Ava's mention of her keyworker as providing significant help with her feelings. Description of a calming chat in the quiet space with the keyworker. <u>Ava's positive description of her keyworker's help and the quiet space as "good."</u> *The concept of the quiet space as a calming environment.*
Quiet environments help Ava to concentrate and improve her feelings of sadness	R: How does that room help when you're feeling sad? A: I think it's easier to work in that, so I can just get my head down and like just start doing it. Apart from looking up and like seeing what's everyone else doing, yeah.	Quiet space helps her when she's feeling sad, making it easier for her to concentrate and work. "get her head down" – confident in her ability to focus in quiet environment. *Seeing others is a distraction?*
	R: Are there any other situations when you felt sad or upset in school?	Leaving school due to upset.

Ava occasionally leaves school or can't attend when she's too upset, especially when dealing with friendship fallouts.

A: I have had to go home a few times 'cause I was upset and sometimes I've not even made it into school yet. I've had someone to come pick me up because I've had a fallout with someone, and it was just too overwhelming for me to stay at school. It's not easy when you're feeling upset, and school can be quite intense and busy at times. One time it was 'cause of my friendship with my best friend. I've known her from primary. She's been my best friend since. But like, there was this one time where we had a massive argument because I wanted to go home from school. So I asked her if she can message her brother cause my bag was at her house and she was like just wait till I get home but I had to go out then with my mum so I messaged her older sister instead and asked her if she can put my put my bag outside your house and she was like, yeah and then my friend was annoyed, and we fell out cause I'd gone behind her back and she's just like, well, what's the point? Like I needed my bag. I needed to get out of school.

R: How does the school environment make you feel?

Getting picked up from school when feeling sad.

School is intense and busy, which can be overwhelming when feeling upset.

Ava's account of a fallout with her best friend due to a disagreement over going home from school.

Description of the argument involving Ava needing her bag.

School is an environment which exacerbates emotional struggles.

"It's not easy when you're feeling upset." – *challenges dealing with emotions in school.*

Ava's characterisation of school as intense and busy: "school can be quite intense and busy at times."

A positive school environment is characterised by calming outdoor spaces for socialising	A: The school environment is like really good because like when you finish school, you can like go to like the town, OK? Cause town is literally just. Round the corner there and like. It's near [name of park] and like I think outside like the [name of place], whatever you wanna call it, there's like a place to sit with your mates and like. So there's so many places to sit outside and like I think it's just calm outside.	Outdoor spaces are calm and suitable for socialising. There are many places to sit outside. *Positive perception of the school surroundings – "Really good".* *Ava's words express contentment with the school environment and the opportunities it provides for socialising and convenience.*
Feelings of unease in the presence of judging peers in classrooms and the P.E changing rooms	R: Are there any places in school where you don't feel calm? A: Sometimes in some classrooms. It's just like the people like being silly and stuff, yeah. I feel a bit uncomfortable and worried changing really, for P.E, *[pause]* in the changing rooms. So that makes me feel uncomfortable getting changed in front of like some judging people but like the boys have theirs, and the girls have theirs.	Feeling uncomfortable when changing for P.E: "I feel a bit uncomfortable and worried changing really, for P.E." – *conveys need for privacy and her concerns around how peers perceive her.* People behaving silly and making her feel uneasy.
Happiness is experienced in the company of friends and in the presence of	R: How do you feel at break times and lunch times? A: I feel happy because I'm with my friends and I, they make me feel more happy. If they aren't in I just find a classroom and sit in there or just walk out. Sometimes if	Positive impact of friends on her happiness during break and lunch times. *Ava's account of the positive impact of friends on her happiness during break and*

favourite teachers when friends are absent from school	I'm alone I sit in on the floor with my head down really, then [name of teacher] will come but she's not been in for ages, so sometimes now I'll sit in my favourite teacher's room. She's a science teacher. She just lets me go in there and like lets me text and call my mum and dad just in case. I like to keep messaging them just to make sure that I'm OK because like I used to like always text them and tell him that I'm stressed out.	*lunch times: "I feel happy because I'm with my friends and I." - The concept of social support and its role in boosting her mood.* <u>"They make me feel more happy," – conveys her bond with her friends.</u> *The concept of utilising coping mechanisms to manage stress and discomfort.*
Messages of love and support from parents ease worries and provide reassurance	R: Does messaging help you throughout the whole school day?	
	A: Yeah. And like I had a message from mum and like, it just said are you OK? Have a good day and I just felt so much better cause I knew she was thinking about me in here. R: How do you feel when you get those messages? A: I feel like I'm loved and that someone in school knew that I needed that. They love me and I know that they still think about me so I don't have to worry.	<u>"I feel like I'm loved," to convey her emotional response to the messages.</u> Knowing people care about her. Receiving text messages evokes positive emotions. Messages lift her worries.

Feeling stressed during tests, overwhelmed by lots of homework, and anxious when there are new teachers in school

R: That's good. So before you said, you've said you texted your dad saying you feel stressed out, can you describe a time where you felt stressed in school?

A: I just done my end of year tests I like always like feel so stressed and overwhelmed in them. It's like I just know I'm gonna be behind everyone and getting the lowest score. [*pause]* I think having loads of homework to do as well 'cause, and it just feels like this huge mountain of tasks that are like building up and up it's just like loads of pressure which made it overwhelming. Then, when we have those days when another teacher comes, 'cause yours is off sick, and it changes what you're used to and having different teachers can be confusing. When that happens I'd get anxious because I didn't know what to expect so now I just go up to them and say who I am cause then they'll know but like it's still overwhelming to do.

Stress during end-of-year tests – "feel so stressed".

Pressure from homework – "having loads of homework".

Feeling behind and low self-expectations – "getting the lowest score".

<u>"huge mountain of tasks" – metaphorical language to illustrate the pressure she feels.</u>

Overwhelmed by a growing task list – "huge mountain of tasks".

Anxiety about teacher changes – *indicates dislike of changes to her routine.*

Ava's description of becoming anxious when a different teacher replaces the usual one, leading to confusion.

Confusion with different teachers.

Anxious introduction to new teachers.

"I'll say who I am" – *Avas coping strategy when faced with change.*

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R: That sounds really brave. Are there any other situations in school?

Feeling lonely and anxious due to social isolation and noisy, busy school classrooms and corridors

A: There were times when I couldn't sit with my friends during lunch or in class because of the seating plan or when I got moved from my set to another and no one said why. That made me feel lonely. The classrooms and corridors are always so busy and noisy, which like makes me, it puts onto my anxiety. So, it's not just one situation but it's a lot in school.

Isolation due to seating plan – *the need for friendships.*

Feeling lonely – "that made me feel lonely" – when separated from friends without explanation.

Busy and noisy classrooms and corridors – promotes anxiety.

Cumulative situations in school where noise impacts her anxiety – *noise experienced throughout school.*

R: Can you describe a time when you felt like you didn't fit in at school? What happened?

Feelings of exclusion and social isolation due to communication challenges and fear of judgement

A: It happened loads in primary school and in this school a couple of times. It's just people would just walk off and leave me and all like letting me know I'm behind them, like I'm worse than them. Every day in the classroom too but that's 'cause I don't talk at all. I can't talk in there 'cause I

Experiences of not fitting in.

"people would just walk off and leave me" – peer exclusion.

Feelings of being worse than her peers – *Avas perceptions linking to emotions.*

feel like I'm gonna say something wrong. So if the teacher asks me to talk I just put my head down and don't say anything. Then people judge, and it's like I'm like left out again because I'm different.

Faces challenging in the classroom related to feeling judged or making mistakes.

Fear of pear judgement- "then people judge" – *links to feelings of social isolation.* Use of emotive language, like "left out" and "fear," to convey her emotions and experiences.

Ava's best friend helps her feel included and to be herself at school.

R: Has anyone ever made you feel more included or accepted?
A: I think my best friend well, my boy best friend [name], because he is like who's not afraid to be himself around other people. So yeah I'm always happy with him cause he helps me just like, he's not embarrassed to be like. Look at me. Look at me. I'm so weird [laughs] he makes me feel OK to be myself.

Inclusive best friend - Ava's description of her best friend, who makes her feel more included and accepted.
Authentic friendship - her best friend as someone who is "not afraid to be himself around other people."
Ava's acknowledgment that her best friend's behaviour and attitude have a positive impact on her.
Embracing uniqueness with friends - describes her best friend as someone who is "not embarrassed to be like... Look at

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		me. Look at me. I'm so weird [laughs]," *emphasising that he makes her feel okay to be herself.*
		Ava is feeling "happy" when she's with her best friend.
		Ava's use of expressive language, including phrases like "Look at me" and "I'm so weird," to capture her best friend's attitude.
	R: Can you tell me about a time when you felt anxious or worried in school?	Cancelled sports day – "it didn't happen cause of the weather." – *relief.*
Sports day promotes feelings of anxiety due to the fear of being watched and judged	A: It was meant to be sports day today but it didn't happen cause of the weather. I didn't sign up for anything so I wouldn't do it, but I was put down for the running, I mean, I'm not lazy, though sometimes I can be but it's just like running like running, running and like probably being the last one. It's just like I I'm not cool with that so I'm glad its not on cause I've been worrying so much about it. [*pause*]. In the classroom like I said I don't talk so when [name of teacher] tells me to answer and put my hand up I just can't. then I'm anxious.	Unwanted participation – "I didn't sign up for anything…" – *indicates possible performance anxiety.* Expression of anxiety and worry about participating in running events and potentially being the last one. Ava's use of language to express her relief from the cancellation of the event - "I'm glad it's not on cause I've been worrying so much about it."

Anxiety in school causes Ava's heart to race, accompanied by thoughts of making a mistake.

R: How does that feel in your body? What's it like?

A: I feel like that worry and anxiety and my heart like keeps like pounding and like I'm stressed trying to find the answer. Do you ever get that heart pounding? It's like a horrible feeling and then I'm like thinking that I've done something wrong and that gets my heart pumping.

Physical manifestation of anxiety.

Elevated heart rate.

Heart "keeps pounding" – conveys fear and anxiety.

Stress-induced bodily sensations.

Feeling stressed.

Emotional distress.

Heart pounding.

Psychological and physical connection.

Sensation of wrongdoing.

Anxiety-related bodily response.

Emotional distress impact on the body.

Feeling overwhelmed.

Stress-related thoughts.

Bodily reaction to anxiety.

"heart pounding" (repeated) – conveys physical manifestation of anxiety.

Anxiety and self-doubt arise when Ava is called or when her name is mentioned in class

Ava seeks solace in the quiet space and uses deep breaths to reduce anxiety, but she finds the most effective support from her understanding keyworker.

R: Does that happen in any other situations in school?

A: Yeah, like when someone calls my name, when they're shouting my name and I'm thinking then I've done something wrong again.

R: That sounds really tricky Ava. Do you have any strategies to help manage these feelings?

A: Well, sometimes I try to take deep breaths to calm down, but it's hard because my heart is still racing and if I can, I might go to the quiet space in school to be alone for a bit until I feel better. But the best thing is when my keyworker

"horrible feeling" – *relationship between thoughts and bodily sensations.*

"thinking that I've done something wrong" – *cognitive impact of stress.*

Anxiety triggered by being called

Fear of having done something wrong

Emotional response to hearing her name

Associating being called with mistakes

Attempting deep breaths to manage anxiety – "sometimes I try to take deep breaths.." – *coping strategies for managing anxiety.*

Difficulty in calming a racing heart.

Seeking solitude in the quiet space at school – *safe spaces?*

Support and understanding from her keyworker in managing emotions. – *communication is key to managing emotions?*

is there to help me, she understands and talks to me to figure out what's wrong.

Using small toys or fidget spinners as calming tools for anxiety and stress relief.

R: It's great that you have a keyworker who can support you. Is there anything else that helps when you're feeling this way?

Using a small toy or fidget spinner as a calming and focusing tool - *sensory feedback helps with her emotional wellbeing?*

A: Yeah, sometimes if I have a small toy or a like fidget spinner with me, I can use it to help calm down and focus. It's like a distraction from all the noise and stress and what I'm feeling.

Utilising these items as a distraction from noise and stress.

Feeling like an outsider because teachers don't understand her, and the school's size hinders her ability to be herself.

R: Can you describe a time when you felt like your teachers or peers didn't understand you?

Perception of teachers not understanding her needs - "I feel like none of the teachers really understand me."

A: I feel like none of the teachers really understand me. I feel like they don't understand like what I need help on. I'm like this thing to them because I like don't understand most of the work. I can't just be myself here it's too big, larger than my primary school anyway.

Feeling like an outsider who doesn't fit in. "I can't just be myself here, its too big" – conveys self-expression struggles.

Ava feels like herself during break and lunchtime when she's with her friends.	R: When do you feel like you are yourself in school?	Being herself – *feels comfortable with her friends.* With my friends" – need for social connection.
	A: Break and lunch when I'm with my friends.	
Ava keeps her true self hidden at school because she perceives herself as different.	R: Have you ever tried to explain yourself to others? To help them understand you?	Avoidance of self-disclosure. Expressing reluctance – "I'm not just like gonna tell them".
	A: No. I don't really like it, but like I'm not just like gonna tell them all about me 'cause I'm different like I couldn't fit in here anyway. I'd rather keep quiet even if I do feel a bit shy.	"'cause I'm different" – *perceives herself different to her peers.*
	R: Have you ever done something at school that's made you feel really proud of yourself?	Public speaking anxiety: "I think if I did it like in front of everyone I would be stumbling and everyone would laugh."
Ava is comfortable privately speaking with her English teacher but	A: Standing up at the front of the class in English, just for my teacher though. We were just meant to do something about William Shakespeare but I asked my English teacher if I could like read it in front at break because I thought we	Seeking teacher's approval: "I asked my English teacher if I could like read it in front at break because I thought we were

feels anxious addressing the entire class.

were reading out the whole script in front of everyone and I couldn't do that but I did it out loud to her, in like words, so I felt proud. I think if I did it like in front of everyone I would be stumbling and everyone would laugh.

reading out the whole script in front of everyone..."

Personal growth: "I felt proud. I think if I did it like in front of everyone I would be stumbling and everyone would laugh."

Overcoming fear: "i did it out loud to her, in like words, so i felt proud." – *conveys usual fear of public speaking.*

Personal growth.

Self-esteem boost – "I felt proud".

Stepping out of comfort zone – *linked to positive interaction with teacher.*

Feelings of happiness are promoted by a calm and understanding classroom environment.

Ava's positive relationship with a key teacher plays a big role in her happiness.

R: What aspects of school do you think promote positive emotions?

A: Well, when the classroom is quiet and calm, it's better for me, it's like heaven then. I also like it when my teacher understands and lets me do things in a way that I'm comfortable with. But mostly being with my friends and like knowing my parents are OK at home, cause I worry about them. My teacher [name of teacher] cause I went to see them. I think he's just like one of those teachers who you can like just go to and like, talk to and like you'll help you with anything.

"Quiet and calm, it's like heaven then" – Ava's metaphorical description of the ideal classroom environment, indicating a sense of peace, comfort, and emotional wellbeing. – *implies a contrast with other less desirable experiences, such as noisy or chaotic environments, which could be likened to less desirable conditions.*
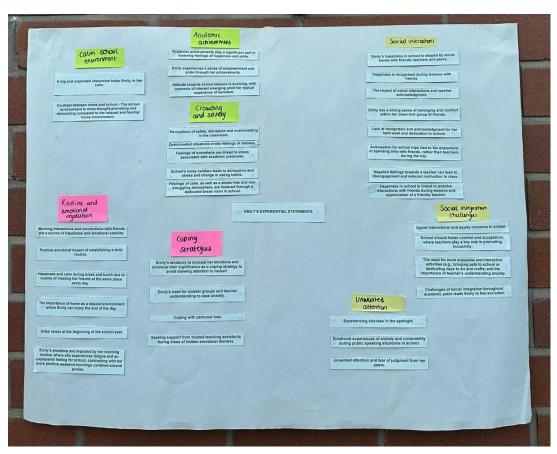
"Lets me do things in a way that I'm comfortable with" - Indicates a sense of autonomy and personalised learning.

Concern for parent's wellbeing – has a *sense of responsibility and care*

Values supportive relationship with teacher

Positive friends at school – *social connections necessary*

Appendix 16: The clustering process and formulation of Personal Experiential Themes

Emily's board

Calm school environment
- A big and organised classroom helps Emily to feel calm.
- Contrast between home and school - The school environment is more thought-provoking and demanding compared to the relaxed and familiar home environment.

Academic achievement
- Academic achievements play a significant part in fostering feelings of happiness and pride.
- Emily experiences a sense of empowerment and pride through her achievements.
- Attitude towards school lessons is evolving, with moments of interest emerging amid her typical experience of boredom.

Crowding and safety
- Perceptions of safety, disruption and overcrowding in the classroom.
- Overcrowded situations evoke feelings of distress.
- Feelings of overwhelm are linked to stress associated with academic pressures.
- School's noisy canteen leads to annoyance and stress and change in eating habits.
- Feelings of calm, as well as a stress-free and non-struggling atmosphere, are fostered through a dedicated break room in school.

Social interactions
- Emily's happiness in school is shaped by social bonds with friendly teachers and peers.
- Happiness is recognised during lessons with friends.
- The impact of social interactions and teacher acknowledgment.
- Emily has a strong sense of belonging and comfort within her close-knit group of friends.
- Lack of recognition and acknowledgment for her hard work and dedication in school.
- Anticipation for school trips tied to the enjoyment of spending time with friends, rather than teachers, during the trip.
- Negative feelings towards a teacher can lead to disengagement and reduced motivation in class.
- Happiness in school is linked to positive interactions with friends during lessons and appreciation of a friendly teacher.

EMILY'S EXPERIENTIAL STATEMENTS

Routine and emotional regulation
- Morning interactions and connections with friends are a source of happiness and emotional stability.
- Positive emotional impact of establishing a daily routine.
- Happiness and calm during break and lunch due to routine of meeting her friends at the same place every day.
- The importance of home as a relaxed environment where Emily can enjoy the end of the day.
- Initial stress at the beginning of the school year.
- Emily's emotions are impacted by her morning routine, where she experiences fatigue and an unprepared feeling for school, contrasting with her more positive weekend mornings centered around ponies.

Coping strategies
- Emily's tendency to conceal her emotions and minimize their significance as a coping strategy to avoid drawing attention to herself.
- Emily's need for smaller groups and teacher understanding to ease anxiety.
- Coping with personal loss.
- Seeking support from trusted teaching assistants during times of hidden emotional distress.

Social integration challenges
- Social interactions and equity concerns in school.
- School should foster comfort and acceptance, where teachers play a key role in promoting inclusivity.
- The need for more enjoyable and interactive activities (e.g., bringing pets to school or dedicating days to art and crafts) and the importance of teacher's understanding anxiety.
- Challenges of social integration throughout academic years leads Emily to feel excluded.

Unwanted attention
- Experiencing shyness in the spotlight.
- Emotional experiences of anxiety and vulnerability during public speaking situations in school.
- Unwanted attention and fear of judgment from her peers.

Sophie's board

Supportive environments
- Sophia has an emotional attachment to the large school environment.
- A cherished outdoor meeting place; fostering friendships and traditions at "our bench".
- The bench is an essential meeting point and source of comfort in school time.
- The hub is a source of happiness, connection, and comfort in school.
- The "hub" is a convenient space that provides respite and breaks in school.
- Sophia's initial sadness from her braces was mitigated by the understanding atmosphere in "the hub".

Transitions and emotional adaptation
- The emotional evolution in a large school: from initial fear to calm adaptation.
- Transitions and unexpected changes in school can bring feelings of stress and overwhelm, but the support of friends leads to improved confidence and a sense of security in school.
- Contrasting school and home Environments: The interplay of routine, stress, and emotional wellbeing.
- The transition to home - Looking forward to happiness and emotional respite through equestrian interests.
- Discomfort resulting from the crowded and congested corridors in school when transitioning to another lesson.

Friendships as emotional support
- Supportive friendships and shared passions nurture feelings of happiness in school.
- Break and lunchtimes are for enjoyment and happiness when socialising and relaxing with friends.
- Positive emotions are fostered through frequent breaks, peer support, and the importance of friendship.
- Strong bonds with friends and sibling foster a sense of belonging at school.

Navigating classroom social dynamics
- A positive classroom dynamic is created by the presence of caring friends, good teachers, and effective coping strategies.
- School-related unhappiness stems from tests, maths aversion, and "annoying" peers.
- Happiness is the outcome of working with friends in a quiet environment that is separate from the usual classroom.
- Feelings of isolation and exclusion resulting from peer misconceptions about autism.
- Feelings of overwhelm and exhaustion stem from disliked teachers, unfriendly and disruptive peers, and isolation from friends.
- Emotional contrasts in lessons - from happiness to boredom to frustration due to classroom dynamics.

Academic success
- Sophia's academic journey is closely tied to her passions and interests, resulting in positive emotions and academic success.
- Pride emerges through academic success and lessons where Sophie perceives her competence.

SOPHIE'S EXPERIENTIAL STATEMENTS

Teacher specific emotions
- Sophie's annoyance in English lessons result from comprehension challenges, teaching style, and the desire to avoid attention.
- Annoyance is rooted in Sophie's unfavourable perception of her English teacher, resulting in her experience of both dislike and sadness.

Positive teacher relationships
- A positive teacher-student relationship fosters a conducive learning environment.
- Happiness is promoted by "nice" teachers who know Sophie well.
- The importance of a good teacher who knows you in creating safe and comfortable classroom environments.

Classroom related anxiety
- Anxiety arises from a disruptive classroom environment and supply teacher's presence.
- Sophie's independent coping with anxiety and hesitance to share her feelings.
- Easing anxiety through enjoyable lessons and supportive friends.
- Proactive strategies for managing homework stress include prioritising timely completion of homework and effective use of classroom time.

Influence of routines
- The importance of morning routines and familial relationships in Sophie's life.
- Sophie has a structured post-school routine that balances relaxation, outdoor recreation, and evening entertainment to unwind and manage her emotions effectively.
- On school mornings, emotions are characterised by fatigue, reluctance to attend school, and a strong desire to stay at home with pets.

AVA'S EXPERIENTIAL STATEMENTS

Impact of the Classroom culture
- Challenging classroom noise, uncomfortable group work, and difficulties in understanding contribute negatively to Ava's school emotions.
- Feeling lonely and anxious due to social isolation and noisy, busy school classrooms and corridors.
- Ava faces concentration difficulties and a sense of feeling lost, both stemming from the noisy and disruptive school environment.
- Physical encounters from peers in crowded school corridors.
- Negative feelings evoked by unwelcoming interactions from peers.

Ideal School
- In the ideal school, quiet spaces, flexible work time, and supportive teachers are essential.
- Providing support for Ava's learning and recognising her feelings of isolation are essential for fostering positive emotions.
- Feelings of happiness are promoted by a calm and understanding classroom environment.
- A positive school environment is characterised by calming outdoor spaces for socialising.

Academic Pressures
- Anxiety in school causes Ava's heart to race, accompanied by thoughts of making a mistake.
- Anxiety and self-doubt arise when Ava is called or when her name is mentioned in class.
- Feeling stressed during tests, overwhelmed by lots of homework, and anxious when there are new teachers in school.

Feeling Understood
- Ava feels like herself during break and lunchtime when she's with her friends.
- Ava's best friend helps her feel included and to be herself at school.
- Feeling like an outsider because teachers don't understand her, and the school's size hinders her ability to be herself.
- Ava's positive relationship with a key teacher plays a big role in her happiness.

Positive Interactions
- Happiness is experienced in the company of friends and in the presence of favourite teachers when friends are absent from school.
- Moments of happiness at school revolve around friendship, laughter, and supportive teacher relationships.
- Looking forward to school thanks to the growth in social connections over the past year.
- Navigating a big school with ease due to friendly faces and supportive teachers.

Concealing true self
- Feelings of unease in the presence of judging peers in classrooms and the P.E changing rooms.
- Feelings of exclusion and social isolation due to communication challenges and fear of judgement.
- Coping with feelings of embarrassment and peer judgment from being late.
- Ava keeps her true self hidden at school because she perceives herself as different.
- Ava is comfortable privately speaking with her English teacher but feels anxious addressing the entire class.

Sensory coping Strategies
- Seeking a quiet space when feeling overwhelmed by the noise at school.
- Stress and peer judgement and misunderstanding - coping with autistic sensory needs through the use of pins.
- Quiet environments help Ava to concentrate and improve her feelings of sadness.
- Using small toys or fidget spinners as calming tools for anxiety and stress relief.

Supportive relationships
- Messages of love and support from parents eases worries and provides reassurance.
- Understanding keyworker offering emotional support and regulation.
- Ava's key worker offers emotional support and comfort, distinguishing them from less familiar teachers.
- Ava seeks solace in the quiet space and uses deep breaths to reduce anxiety, but she finds the most effective support from her understanding keyworker.
- Knowing her parents are safe at home alleviates her anxiety in school.
- The role of friends in promoting resilience during times of personal loss and sadness.

Avoidance strategies
- Ava's struggles with school attendance and the desire for a safer and more comfortable learning environment outside of her usual classrooms.
- Ava occasionally leaves school or can't attend when she's too upset, especially when dealing with friendship fallouts.
- Preferring home over school due to self-esteem struggles and fear of judgement from peers.
- Ava's conflicting feelings about safety at school and how a rumoured school intruder impacted her attendance.
- Finding cover from judging peers at the back of the classroom.

OLIVIA'S EXPERIENTIAL STATEMENTS

Positive relationships with teachers
- Olivia initially ignores her feelings of sadness before disclosing them to a trusted teacher.
- Having individuals to share thoughts and feelings with brings happiness.
- A sense of security is fostered through positive teacher relationships.
- Interactions with trusted teachers evoke a sense of niceness and goodness, fostering an environment where Olivia feels comfortable expressing herself.
- Friends and trusted teachers, especially those she likes the most, play a crucial role in making Olivia feel understood.

Safe spaces as coping mechanisms
- Olivia values the quiet hub for focused homework, contrasting it with distracting home environments.
- The hub emerges as a positive haven fostering concentration.
- Interpersonal dynamics and seating comfort contribute to Olivia's overall wellbeing at school.
- Olivia's inclination to go home is triggered by lessons she perceives as "bad" and that put her under pressure, prompting her to seek solace in the hub as a coping mechanism.
- Olivia feels safe and relaxed in a less crowded spaces like the "hub".

Social Dynamics
- Olivia faces challenges and feels overwhelmed by the social dynamics with a particular peer in some lessons, often leading her to seek refuge in the toilet to calm down.
- Negative group dynamics with unfamiliar peers in science class evoke feelings of anxiety and discomfort.
- Unwanted comments from peers and disliked lessons result in feelings of sadness and upset.
- Olivia encounters challenges in navigating humour within social interactions, resulting in misunderstandings with peers, which she attributes to her autism.

Feeling overlooked
- Experiencing a sense of isolation when left to work independently and pretending to know what to do to avoid drawing attention.
- Navigating experiences of being misunderstood by teachers and peers involves reconciling external perceptions—where she is seen as just like everyone else—with the internal reality of concealed struggles in lessons due to her hidden learning needs.
- Olivia experiences a sense of anxiety and isolation during maths and history lessons, primarily because there isn't any support staff available to assist her.
- Olivia feels overlooked and unsupported compared to other autistic peers.

Unwanted Attention
- Crowds cause discomfort and result in a desire to minimise visibility during lunch times.
- Olivia expresses discomfort when people stare at her during moments of uncertainty in lessons.
- Discomfort escalates as she senses others' gazes, creating an unwanted sense of being observed.

Friendships
- Olivia experiences joy and freedom during break and lunchtimes with friends.
- Olivia experiences a sense of inclusion and happiness when in close physical proximity with friends in lessons.
- Anticipating the joy of meeting friends at school.

Subject specific emotions
- Olivia experiences happiness in subjects of interest.
- Enthusiasm for school diminishes notably in unenjoyable lessons.
- While there are moments of feeling okay, the looming prospect of five school lessons ahead brings a wave of stress to Olivia.
- Olivia experiences an overall sense of safety in school however the quality of her day depends on the nature of her lessons.
- Unwanted subjects bring stress, reluctance, and anxiety.

Classroom Anxiety
- The practice of randomly selecting pupils to answer questions not only induces anxiety but also fosters a disliking for specific subjects.
- Feelings of anxiety and stress arise when called upon by a teacher.
- Feeling anxious to speak up in fast-paced classes.
- Emotions vary from an overall sense of "OK" to the challenges of navigating overwhelming situations as an autistic girl, particularly in crowded spaces.
- Olivia feels overwhelmed and anxious when expected to work independently without immediate teacher support and struggles to communicate her need for help.
- Olivia experiences discomfort and anxiety when asked to read aloud in front of the class, often expressing her reluctance and occasionally requesting an alternative reader.
- Anxiety emerges during group work and class presentations, prompting her to seek alternatives like requesting to sit out of the classroom.

Classroom disruptions
- Disruptive peers and absent friends result in feelings of exclusion.
- Challenges arise in the geography classroom, where disruptive behaviours from peers contribute to feelings of discomfort.

Emotional response to change
- Olivia expresses emotional discomfort and anxiety related to sudden changes in the school environment.
- Olivia feels uncertain and saddened by potential event cancellations, especially after investing effort in preparations.

Personalised learning approaches
- Tailoring learning approaches and incorporating emotional expression tools are key to enhancing positive academic and emotional outcomes.
- Olivia expresses a desire for a more functional and personalised colour-coded system to nonverbally communicate her emotions to teachers.
- Olivia feels safer and more at ease in a "lower set" where teachers understand her struggles in understanding work.
- Olivia desires autonomy to work at her own pace and her learning pace to be understood by peers.
- In the ideal school, pupils have autonomy over answering questions, which reduces panic.

Emotions linked to academic achievement
- Receiving certificates at school fosters feelings of being special and happiness.
- Academic success and recognition of achievement promote happiness in school.
- Olivia's sense of accomplishment and pride in academic achievements at school, coupled with her self-perception as a good student, becomes a source of genuine pride.

Managing emotions
- Olivia relies on a toilet pass as a non-verbal communication tool, providing relief from the need to verbally express her struggles.
- Olivia manages overwhelming feelings with a practical approach, suggesting the use of a card or pass for improved communication in busy lessons.

Appendix 17: Example Table of Personal Experiential Themes

Each PET is displayed in **UPPERCASE BOLD**, and subthemes in **lowercase bold**. Experiential statements are presented underneath the linked PET and subtheme, presented in regular case. Key quotes with their line number from the transcript are provided next to each experiential statement.

<u>**PET Table for 'Ava'**</u>

Theme	Page/Line	Quotes
A. THE INFLUENCE OF THE MAINSTREAM SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ON EMOTIONAL WELLBEING		
Emotional experiences influenced by the physical environment and interactions within the classroom		
Challenging classroom noise, uncomfortable group work, and difficulties in understanding contribute negatively to Ava's school emotions.	9/251	*"When it gets too loud, like I can't concentrate…"*
Feeling lonely and anxious due to social isolation and noisy, busy school classrooms and corridors.	6/176	*"I got moved from my set to another and no one said why. That made me feel lonely."*
Ava faces concentration difficulties and a sense of feeling lost, both stemming from the noisy and disruptive school environment.	4/107	*"…everyone's being too loud because it's like really hard to concentrate then. I feel lost."*
Physical encounters from peers in crowded school corridors.	1/8	*"…they can look at you funny and like push you into walls"*
Negative feelings evoked by unwelcoming interactions from peers.	1/16	*"…some people in my class just are like what are you looking at, and make me feel unwelcome…"*
Elements of an ideal school environment		
In the ideal school, quiet spaces, flexible work time, and supportive teachers are essential.	3/258	*"I wish there were more quiet spaces…"*

Providing support for Ava's learning and recognising her feelings of isolation are essential for fostering positive emotions.	9/267	*"like it's so hard to especially when I feel so alone."*
A positive school environment is characterised by calming outdoor spaces for socialising.	5/141	*"…there's so many places to sit outside and like I think it's just calm outside."*
Feelings of happiness are promoted by a calm and understanding classroom environment.	8/243	*"…when the classroom is quiet and calm, it's better for me."*

Emotions resulting from academic pressures

Anxiety in school causes Ava's heart to race, accompanied by thoughts of making a mistake.	7/204	*"I'm like thinking that I've done something wrong and that gets my heart pumping."*
Anxiety and self-doubt arise when Ava is called or when her name is mentioned in class.	7/207	*"…they're shouting my name and I'm thinking then I've done something wrong again…"*
Feeling stressed during tests, overwhelmed by lots of homework, and anxious when there are new teachers in school.	6/168	*"…it just feels like this huge mountain of tasks…when that happens I'd get anxious because I didn't know what to expect…"*

B. EMOTIONAL REGULATION COPING MECHANISMS

Sensory coping strategies

Seeking a quiet space when feeling overwhelmed by the noise at school.	4/112	*"So I just left the classroom and went to the quiet space."*
Stress and peer judgement and misunderstanding - coping with autistic sensory needs through the use of sensory tools.	2/37	*"…like I've got autism which makes it hard for me to concentrate but I can*

Quiet environments help Ava to concentrate and improve her feelings of sadness.	4/119	*concentrate with the pin art…"* *"…it's easier to work in that, so I can just get my head down…"*
Using small toys or fidget spinners as calming tools for anxiety and stress relief.	8/218	*"It's like a distraction from all the noise and stress and what I'm feeling."*

Supportive figures and relationships

Understanding key worker offering emotional support and regulation.	4/114	*"She noticed I was upset and like went out of her way to check on me."*
Messages of love and support from parents eases worries and provides reassurance.	6/157	*"…I just felt so much better cause I knew she was thinking about me in here."*
Ava's key worker offers emotional support and comfort, distinguishing them from less familiar teachers.	3/71	*"I can just go find her and talk to her and like they help me with my emotions…"*
Ava seeks solace in the quiet space and uses deep breaths to reduce anxiety, but she finds the most effective support from her understanding keyworker.	7/213	*"…the best thing is when my keyworker is there to help me…"*
Knowing her parents are safe at home alleviates her anxiety in school.	8/244	*"…knowing my parents are OK at home, cause I worry about them."*
The role of friends in promoting resilience during times of personal loss and sadness.	2/61	*"…I just kept going to my friends 'cause that helped me."*

Avoidance strategies

Ava occasionally leaves school or can't attend when she's too upset, especially when dealing with friendship fallouts.	4/123	*"I've had someone to come pick me up because I've had a fallout with someone and it was just too overwhelming…"*
Preferring home over school due to self-esteem struggles and fear of judgement from peers.	3/81	*"I didn't like how I looked. So I was, like, afraid of coming in cause of like people could judge me…"*
Ava's conflicting feelings about safety at school and how a rumoured school intruder impacted her attendance.	4/100	*"That made me not come for a bit too but now yes, I feel safe…"*
Ava's struggles with school attendance and the desire for a safer and more comfortable learning environment outside of her usual classrooms.	3/88	*"I think it'd be best if I stayed in school in like the actual building but another classroom maybe…"*
Finding cover from judging peers at the back of the classroom.	1/23	*"No one can really ask me like 'what you doing', cause I'm at the back."*

C. VARYING EMOTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIL IDENTITY, INTERACTION, AND EXLUSION

Authenticity when feeling understood

Ava feels like herself during break and lunchtime when she's with her friends.	8/227	*"Break and lunch when I'm with my friends."*
Ava's best friend helps her feel included and to be herself at school.	7/192	*"…he makes me feel OK to be myself…"*
Feeling like an outsider because teachers don't understand her, and the school's size hinders her ability to be herself.	8/222	*"…none of the teachers really understand me…I can't just be myself here it's too big…"*

Ava's positive relationship with a key teacher plays a big role in her happiness.	9/246	*"…he's just like one of those teachers who you can like just go to and like, talk to and like you'll help you with anything…"*

Positive interactions with teachers and friends

Happiness is experienced in the company of friends and in the presence of favourite teachers when friends are absent from school.	2/34	*"They make me feel more happy. If they aren't in I just find a classroom and sit in there or just walk out…"*
Moments of happiness at school revolve around friendship, laughter, and supportive teacher relationships.	3/66	*"We just like, keep making jokes with each other…"*
Looking forward to school thanks to the growth in social connections over the past year.	2/53	*"…but I've found it easier since I've got here…"*
Navigating a big school with ease due to friendly faces and supportive teachers.	1/5	*"…you can get around like really easily and stuff and and like the teachers help you with support…"*

Concealing one's true self from judging peers

Feelings of unease in the presence of judging peers in classrooms and the P.E changing rooms.	5/143	*"I feel a bit uncomfortable and worried changing really, for P.E, [pause] in the changing rooms."*
Feelings of exclusion and social isolation due to communication challenges and fear of judgement.	6/185	*"I can't talk in there cause I feel like I'm gonna say something wrong…"*
Coping with feelings of embarrassment and peer judgement from being late.	2/43	*"I feel so embarrassed being late…"*

Ava keeps her true self hidden at school because she perceives herself as different.	8/230	*"…I'm not just like gonna tell them all about me cause I'm different…"*
Ava is comfortable privately speaking with her English teacher but feels anxious addressing the entire class.	8/238	*"I did it out loud to her, in like words, so I felt proud"*

Appendix 18: Table of Group Experiential Themes

Each GET is displayed in **UPPERCASE BOLD**, and group level subthemes in **lowercase bold**. Key quotes with their line number from contributing participants are provided.

A. NAVIGATING THE MAINSTREAM SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

The emotional impact of physical surroundings

- *"It normally gets very crowded because there's not enough space in the corridor so I feel crowded and like I can't breathe…"* (Emily, 6/104).

- *"I don't like it. It's really crowded, so crowded, like when we're trying to get into a like the maths area it's really it's got quite a small corridor…"* (Sophie, 5/129).

- *"I'm like this thing to them because I like don't understand most of the work. I can't just be myself here it's too big, larger than my primary school anyway."* (Ava, 30/223).

- *"it's OK. But like it's hard being autistic in this school. It like, it does get, like a bit crowded and stuff, and I don't. I don't really like big crowds as much."* (Olivia, 1/4).

Establishing safe spaces for emotional wellbeing

- *"If you're like struggling and you want to break, then you can come here and take a break from everything."* (Emily, 1/7).

- *"Oh yes, the hub. It's so much better than the normal classrooms. [pause]. They're quite noisy and... well it reduces, reduce feelings of anxiety."* (Sophie, 8/214).

- *"I think it's easier to work in that, so I can just get my head down and like just start".* (Ava, 4/119).

- *"I just feel a lot more like a lot more safer in there, and especially if there's like not many people in the lesson".* (Olivia, 7/155).

Transition and change within the mainstream school environment

- *"So like at the start of the year, I'm always stressed 'cause I don't know where to go or what I'm doing, 'cause it's like a new school again".* (Emily, 7/132).

- *"Well actually going from year six to seven was like, it was a very big change. I I don't really like changes because it's, it's very different."* (Sophie, 6/148).

- *"It changes what you're used to and having different teachers can be confusing."* (Ava, 6/69).

- *"I worked really hard on them, so now I'm sad and unsure, I just don't know what to do now."* (Olivia, 20/464).

B. THE INFLUENCE OF CLASSROOM LEARNING DYNAMICS ON WELLBEING

Effective teaching practices

- *"My anxiety would be better if it was smaller amounts of the task to remember and if there were smaller groups".* (Emily, 10/184).

- *"My teacher doesn't always explain things in a way I can understand.* (Sophie, 5/121).

- *"I wish there were more quiet spaces…".* (Ava, 3/258).

- *"…like if I want to stand outside, I can turn it to red".* (Olivia, 17,374).

Recognition and praise promote wellbeing

- *"Wow, I can do this, [pause] 'cause I worked hard on it."* (Emily, 10/90).

- *"I feel proud because I can do that lesson."* (Sophie, 8/211).

- *"I actually got a certificate recently".* (Olivia, 5/100).

Navigating academic pressures

- *"When I'm doing tests because I get very stressed about them."* (Emily, 7/122).

- *"I do not like exams. It's not like my favourite."* (Sophie, 4/93).

- *"It just feels like this huge mountain of tasks."* (Ava, 6/168).

- *"I find it hard. I close down."* (Olivia, 1/15).

Having a personal interest in lessons

- *"…but I usually just feel bored. Boredom."* (Emily, 5/85).

- *"I'd rather learn German and know it well."* (Sophie, 3/72).

- *"When I see like maths or geography on my timetable, I just get like a bit anxious."* (Olivia, 5/95).

C. THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

The power of friendships in shaping emotional wellbeing

- *"We don't hide who we are…"* (Emily, 3/147).

- *"…they don't judge me about things I like."* (Sophie, 4/81).

- *"I feel happy because I'm with my friends."* (Ava, 5/147).
- *"I feel really happy cause I'm with my friends."* (Olivia, 8/183).

Positive relationships with understanding teachers

- *"…they know me 'cause they were my form teacher."* (Sophie, 3/85).
- *"…he'll help you with anything…"* (Ava, 9/246).
- *"I know that there's someone there who I want to talk to if I need…"* (Olivia, 14/323).

Perceptions of teachers and their contribution to an emotionally supportive environment

- *"When I don't really like the teacher it's not good."* (Emily, 3/53).
- *"He isn't my favourite teacher [pause]."* (Sophie, 4/116).

D. THE NEED FOR COPING MECHANISMS TO REGULATE EMOTIONS IN SCHOOL

Social support systems

- *"The teaching assistant needs to be one who knows you…"* (Emily, 5/93).
- *"I can just go find her and talk to her…"* (Ava, 3/71).

Personal coping strategies

- *"I choose to do homework 'cause I know I'll be stressed."* (Sophie, 6/163).
- *"I can concentrate with the pin art…"* (Ava, 2/37).
- *"I don't have to tell the teacher. I can just show them."* (Olivia, 10/231).

Avoidance strategies

- *"I don't really want to go. It is long and all day." (*Sophie, 2/40)
- *"I've had someone to come pick me up because I've had a fallout with someone…"* (Ava, 4/123).
- *"I do ask the teacher if I can just like sit sit out…"* (Olivia, 13/306).

Masking emotions and hiding one's true self

- *"I do a lot, you know, try to hide my feelings or pretend everything's okay."* (Emily, 9/174).
- *"I'd rather keep quiet even if I do feel a bit shy."* (Ava, 8/230).
- *"I just like try to ignore it."* (Olivia, 5/114).

E. SOCIAL INCLUSION AND BELONGING IN THE MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM

Navigating social dynamics in the classroom

- *"I think now, in the classrooms, happy and comfortable."* (Sophie, 8/225).

- *"…reading out the whole script in front of everyone, and I couldn't do that."* (Ava, 8/235).

- *"The teacher changed the seating plan and said I had to sit next to [peer]."* (Olivia, 11/246).

Social integration challenges

- *"…'cause they're in her class, her form, and that just doesn't seem fair."* (Emily, 11/208).

- *"…she tried to understand me having autism and it just ended up her laughing at it…"* (Sophie, 7/194).

- *"There were times when I couldn't sit with my friends during lunch."* (Ava, 6/175).

- *"I just don't think like people know that I do have a hidden disability and stuff like I'm autistic."* (Olivia, 15/334).

Unwanted attention

- *"When I've been asked a question. I go bright red and feel hot like, warm."* (Emily, 6/99).

- *"…they're shouting my name and I'm thinking then I've done something wrong."* (Ava, 7/207).

- *"I just feel like everyone's just like looking at me."* (Olivia, 17/395).