An exploration of educational psychologists' views and experiences of neurodiversity-affirming practice

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Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of Applied Educational Psychology

May 2025

Word count: 40,207

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Abstract

Since the late 1990s, neurodiversity discourse has increasingly shaped educational policy and practice. Educational Psychologists (EPs) frequently support neurodivergent children and young people, often through inclusive practices that promote meaningful participation and a sense of belonging. However, the rise of the neurodiversity-affirming (NDA) movement has prompted a closer look at conventional approaches to inclusion, highlighting how they often push neurodivergent children and young people to 'fit in' with neurotypical expectations rather than changing environments and practices to be genuinely affirming and inclusive.

This qualitative study explored EPs' views and experiences of NDA practice. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six EPs from Local Authority (LA) services in England. Interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Five main themes emerged: Systemic barriers to NDA practice; Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice; Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice; Prioritising neurodivergent voices; The importance of collaboration.

The findings contribute to the emerging research on the implementation of NDA approaches by revealing the struggles EPs face between their commitment to affirming principles and institutional constraints. Barriers such as standardised assessments, inflexible curricula, funding limitations and academic performance targets were identified by participants as significant obstacles. They also described how resistance stemming from cultural attitudes towards disability and difference create additional barriers to implementing NDA practices in schools. Despite the challenges, EPs emphasised the many opportunities for developing effective NDA practice through increased public awareness, advocacy and greater recognition of neurodivergent voices.

Implications of the findings are discussed with reference to professional development, policy reforms and increased collaboration between educators, families and the neurodivergent community.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank everyone who has supported me over the last three years.

- To the educational psychologists who participated in this study. I am profoundly grateful for your generosity in sharing your time, perspectives and professional experiences with such openness and honesty.

- To the tutor team at the University of Nottingham for all your support, particularly Victoria Lewis and Nick Durbin whose guidance, thoughtful feedback and encouragement have been invaluable.

- To my colleagues at Derby City EPS who provided both professional support and personal encouragement.

- To my fellow trainees in Cohort 17 for the support and friendship that sustained me through the challenges of doctoral study. The shared experiences, tears, laughter and mutual encouragement made this journey not only possible but meaningful.

- To my mum and dad for their encouragement and for always believing in my abilities.

- To Justin, Will and Jessica, who have lived every moment of this journey alongside me. Thank you for your patience during the long hours, your understanding during the stressful times, your celebration during the victories, and most importantly, for keeping me grounded throughout. Your unwavering belief in me has been my greatest source of strength.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context

Since the late 1990s, neurodiversity discourse has increasingly influenced educational policy, research and practice. Historically, approaches to supporting neurodivergent children and young people were predominately shaped by medical models that framed neurological differences as deficits requiring remediation (Botha & Kapp, 2023). However, the emergence of a positive neurodiversity movement has introduced alternative perspectives, advocating for the recognition of neurological difference as a natural variation of human diversity rather than pathology (Chapman & Botha, 2022; Milton & Sims, 2016).

These evolving perspectives have significant implications for educational psychologists (EPs) who work at the intersection of psychological theory, educational practice and policy implementation, and are positioned to influence how neurodivergent learners are understood and supported. Some people have argued that neurodiversity-affirming (NDA) practice represents more than a set of strategies – it describes a broader rethinking of professional values and relational approaches (Pellicano et al., 2022). Yet, tensions remain between affirming practice and the more traditional models of assessment, intervention and inclusion that continue to shape practice within educational settings (Norwich and Eaton, 2015). This raises important questions about how EPs conceptualise and navigate these shifts within the systemic and cultural constraints of their practice. Understanding how these developing ideas are interpreted and enacted is critical to ensuring that professional practice remains responsive and ethical as well as grounded in the diverse realities of those it aims to support.

1.2 Research gap

Although research on neurodiversity has expanded considerably in recent years, much of the focus remains on theoretical frameworks (Bottema-Beutal & Kapp, 2021; Chapman & Botha, 2022) and the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals (Crane et al., 2021, 2023). Less attention has been given to how EPs are interpreting and applying NDA principles in their everyday practice. This gap matters because EPs play a critical role not only in direct support and assessment, but also in shaping the systems and structures that either

enable or constrain inclusive practices. At the same time, public conversations about neurodiversity are evolving rapidly. Social media platforms, advocacy movements and increased visibility of neurodivergent perspectives in mainstream culture (Botha, 2021; Skafle et al., 2024) have introduced new narratives that challenge traditional ways of thinking about difference and disability. These shifts create new pressures, as well as opportunities, for EPs whose professional understandings are shaped not only by formal training but also by the broader cultural conversation they are immersed in.

While there is growing interest in more affirming approaches, there is still much we don't know about how these ideas are being interpreted, challenged and put into practice within the realities of everyday EP work (Mulrooney, 2024). In light of these considerations, this study seeks to explore how EPs conceptualise NDA practice and how they experience the challenges and possibilities of putting these ideas into action.

1.3 Researcher positioning

My professional journey began in the police service. As part of my role, I regularly interviewed young people who had become involved with the criminal justice system and seemed to be caught in a cycle of offending. Although most of my experiences with them were brief and procedural, I would sometimes ask them about school and they would say they hated it or did not fit in, and many had been excluded. Looking back now, I wonder whether some of these young people might have been neurodivergent, struggling in systems not designed for their individual needs and differences. Of course, this is speculation informed by what I've learned since, but these early professional experiences made me acutely aware of how institutional systems can fail people, particularly those who do not fit in with standard expectations.

I then joined the education sector and worked as a secondary school English teacher for over ten years, before moving into a more specialist intervention role. During this time, I worked closely with many neurodivergent students, both those with formal diagnoses and those without. These experiences demonstrated how professional attitudes and educational environments can profoundly impact young people's confidence, self-perception and ability to participate meaningfully in school, both positively and negatively. I saw how systems designed primarily for neurotypical learners created unnecessary barriers for neurodivergent

students, while also recognising moments when small adjustments in approach could significantly enhance engagement and well-being.

These experiences inevitably shaped my decision to train as an EP and have informed my approach to this research. My transition from classroom teacher to trainee EP has been characterised by a growing commitment to understanding neurodivergence not as something to be fixed, but as valuable human diversity worthy of respect and authentic support. At the same time, I am very aware of the real-world challenges that come with trying to implement more affirming approaches within complex educational systems that face a range of competing demands.

This positioning has undoubtedly influenced both the questions I chose to ask and how I interpreted participants' responses. Rather than trying to eliminate this influence, I have tried to work reflexively throughout the research process, continuously examining how my own experiences and evolving understanding might shape my engagement with the data and colour my understanding. Throughout the research, I maintained an openness to perspectives that might challenge or complicate my own views, recognising that a full exploration of this topic requires engagement with diverse viewpoints and experiences. This approach follows Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) emphasis on acknowledging the researcher's active role in meaning-making and acknowledges that my interpretation of EPs' experiences is inevitably filtered through my own professional journey.

1.4 Thesis overview

Following on from this introductory chapter, the thesis is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: Literature review - Critically examines existing research on neurodiversity and maps the evolution of affirming approaches in educational contexts. The chapter establishes key theoretical frameworks while exploring tensions between medical and social models.

- Chapter 3: Methodology - Details the study's philosophical underpinnings, research design, participant recruitment and analytical approach. Ethical considerations and strategies for ensuring research quality are also addressed.

- Chapter 4: Findings - Presents five main themes derived from the thematic analysis of interview data, revealing participants' conceptualisations of NDA practice and the

factors influencing its implementation. Illustrative quotations from the transcripts highlight the authentic voices of EPs.

- Chapter 5: Discussion - Interprets the findings within the context of existing literature, examining how they extend current understandings of NDA practice. Methodological reflections are offered alongside implications for EP practice, policy development and professional training.

- Chapter 6: Conclusion – Synthesises key insights, acknowledges limitations and proposes directions for future research. The chapter closes by considering the broader significance of the study for educational psychology and neurodiversity in educational settings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The concept of neurodiversity is being more widely recognised across education, workplaces and broader society, representing a paradigm shift from a traditional deficit-based understanding of neurological differences to an appreciation of cognitive diversity as a natural and valuable aspect of human variation (Armstrong, 2012; Singer, 1999;). Neurodiversity-affirming (NDA) practice extends this idea by promoting approaches that respect and support neurodivergent individuals, including those identified as having autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and other neurodevelopmental differences, without attempting to 'normalise' or 'correct' their differences (Chapman & Botha, 2022).

EPs play a fundamental part in promoting inclusive educational environments, supporting neurodivergent children and young people, as well as guiding educators and families in evidence-based interventions (Frederickson & Cline, 2015). However, EP practice has historically been influenced by medicalised models of disability, which often focus on diagnosis and remediation rather than identity-affirming support (Gibbs, 2022). As NDA approaches gain traction, there is a growing need to explore how EPs view, interpret and integrate these principles into their work. However, despite the increasing call for NDA approaches in education, empirical research on how EPs understand and respond to the practical implementation remains limited. Although studies have examined EPs' roles in inclusion and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision (Lee & Woods, 2017; Norwich & Eaton, 2015, Winter & Bunn, 2019), little research has explored their views and experiences in adopting NDA frameworks. This literature review aimed to address this gap by synthesising existing knowledge and identifying directions for future research and practice.

2.2. Search process

This section compares systematic and narrative literature review methodologies and explains the rationale for selecting a narrative approach for this study.

2.2.1 Systematic literature reviews

Systematic literature reviews (SLRs) provide a structured and transparent approach to identifying, evaluating and synthesising existing research on a specific topic (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). They are characterised by a rigorous methodology which involves defining a clear research question, establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria and conducting a comprehensive and replicable search of the literature (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The main focus of an SLR is to minimise bias and provide a reliable synthesis of evidence using standardised tools for quality appraisal and analysis (Snyder, 2019). SLRs are widely used in fields where evidence-based practice is prioritised, such as psychology, medicine and education. They allow researchers to combine findings across studies and draw informed conclusions, whilst also recognising knowledge gaps in the literature (Davis et al., 2014). Although systematic reviews provide a high level of rigour and replicability, they may, however, be less suitable for exploring emerging topics or theories where the literature base is limited or diverse. This limitation stems from the fact that SLRs often rely on predefined criteria and focus on measurable outcomes, which may not capture the complexities of evolving fields or conceptual debates (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). Given the nascent nature of research on NDA practice in educational psychology, a systematic review may risk excluding important theoretical discussions and qualitative insights that are essential to understanding the topic.

2.2.2 Narrative literature reviews

In contrast to SLRs, narrative literature reviews provide a more flexible and interpretative approach, enabling a thorough overview of existing research within a broader conceptual context (Sukhera, 2022). This method is particularly useful for synthesising diverse types of literature, exploring emerging topics and developing theoretical insights (Green et al., 2006). Unlike SLRs, narrative literature reviews are not restricted by rigid protocols; instead, they allow researchers to adapt their methods to meet the specific objectives and scope of the review (Henry et al., 2018). The narrative approach also emphasises critical engagement with the literature, allowing researchers to identify patterns, contradictions and conceptual developments. This flexibility is particularly helpful when approaching complex or developing topics as it allows for a more holistic and interpretative synthesis of findings (Sarkar & Bhatia, 2021). Despite clear advantages, a narrative approach

requires careful attention to transparency and rigour, as its less formal structure can make it susceptible to bias if not conducted systematically and reflexively. To address this, researchers should ensure a clear scope, define specific objectives and apply systematic processes wherever possible (Byrne, 2016).

Given the exploratory nature of this study and the evolving understanding of NDA practices within the field of educational psychology, a narrative literature review was deemed the most suitable approach, rather than an SLR. This method enables a more interpretive exploration of emerging concepts and theoretical frameworks, which would be less feasible with a systematic review, particularly given the current, limited body of research on this topic.

To ensure a well-structured review, this study follows Byrne's (2016) principles for rigorous narrative literature reviews, including defining clear scope and objectives, employing a transparent search strategy, including diverse literature sources and accurately synthesising findings across the reviewed literature. By following these guiding principles, the review aims to provide a meaningful and thorough exploration of the topic while maintaining the flexibility needed for investigating an evolving area of practice.

2.2.3. Search strategy

A preliminary scoping search was carried out in April 2024 to gain an initial overview of the existing literature and to refine appropriate search terms. Comprehensive literature searches were then conducted across the following databases: APA PsycINFO, ScienceDirect, Web of Science Scopus and Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC). Due to the limited amount of published literature on NDA practice, the search was expanded to include grey literature using Google Scholar and EThOS, the British thesis repository. Reference lists of relevant papers were also searched. As recommended by Petticrew and Roberts (2006), search terms were intentionally broad, and Boolean operators were applied (Table 2.1). Searches took place between June 2024 and April 2025.

To ensure relevance to NDA practice in educational psychology, sources were included if they focused on identity-affirming approaches, strengths-based perspectives or the role of EPs in supporting neurodivergent students. Literature exploring the presentation, strengths and

challenges associated with different neurotypes was also incorporated to provide a comprehensive understanding of neurodivergent experiences in educational settings.

Table 2.1

Literature search terms and Boolean operators

Concept	Keywords/Search terms
Neurodiversity	"neurodiversity" OR "neurodivergence"
Affirming practice	"affirming practice" OR "inclusive practice" OR "support strategies" or "inclusion"
Professional roles	"educational psychologist*" OR "school psychologist*" OR "teacher*" or "educator*"
Neurodivergent profiles	"autism" OR "ADHD" OR "dyslexia" OR "dyspraxia" OR "Tourette*"
Example combined search strategy	("neurodiversity" OR "neurodivergence") AND ("affirming practice" OR "inclusive practice") AND ("autism" OR…)

Studies that did not necessarily align with NDA principles, such as those emphasising medicalised or deficit-based perspectives, were also reviewed to enable an examination of barriers to NDA practice. This approach ensured a balanced analysis of the tensions between traditional and emerging perspectives. Literature published from 1990 onwards was prioritised to reflect the evolution of the neurodiversity movement and its increasing impact on educational psychology.

2.2.4 Maintaining balance and rigour in the review process

To minimise bias and ensure comprehensiveness, the following steps were taken:

- The search process was iterative, with repeated rounds of searching between June 2024 and April 2025 to capture emerging literature.

- Efforts were made to include literature from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, education and disability studies. Incorporating the voices of neurodivergent individuals and advocacy groups was also important.

- As the researcher, I kept a reflective journal to document my thoughts, assumptions and possible biases throughout the review process. This helped to ensure that the synthesis remained as objective as possible and aligned with the principles of NDA practice.

To ensure the credibility of the literature included in this review, priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters and reputable grey literature such as policy documents and doctoral theses.

2.3 Conceptual and theoretical foundations

The term *neurodiversity* is difficult to define due to its broad and evolving nature. As social theorist Chapman (2020) notes, "*neurodiversity means a lot of different things to different people*" (p. 218), reflecting the variety of contexts in which it is used and the differing interpretations that arise as a result. The challenge in establishing a precise definition, highlights both the complexity of the concept and its intersection with diverse scientific, social and cultural perspectives (Dwyer, 2022). Although neurodiversity is often associated with autism, it encompasses a wider spectrum of neurocognitive variations, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia and Tourette's syndrome (Dind, 2021).

Outside the field of psychology, the origins of the term *neurodiversity* are widely attributed to journalist Harvey Blume and autistic sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s (Armstrong, 2010b; Blume, 1998; Singer, 1998). Singer, in her pioneering work, reframed neurological differences as a natural and valuable form of human diversity, much like race, gender or culture. In her influential book chapter *Why Can't You Be Normal for Once in Your Life?*, Singer (1999) argued that,

*The 'Neurologically Different' represent a new addition to the familiar political categories of class, gender, and race and will augment the insights of the social model of disability. (*Singer,1999)

Blume, writing for *The Atlantic Magazine*, had introduced this idea by drawing connections between neurodiversity and technological advancements:

Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment? Cybernetics and computer culture, for example, may favor a somewhat autistic cast of mind. (Blume, 1998)

His writing helped to open up the concept to a wider audience, further challenging the traditional medical view that neurological differences are merely disorders to be treated or cured.

2.3.1 Traditional medical perspectives and pathologisation

Within education, neurodivergent individuals, particularly those diagnosed with autism, were often pathologised and subjected to stigmatising interventions (Dawson & Fletcher-Watson, 2022). Early treatments included institutionalisation, electroconvulsive therapy and behaviour modification programmes designed to "normalise" individuals rather than accommodate their cognitive differences (Silberman, 2015; Foxx & Mulick, 2016).

Educational and psychological frameworks were largely informed by medicalised classifications, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD 11) (World Health Organisation, 2022) which categorised neurodevelopmental differences primarily in terms of deficits. This approach reinforced the assumption that neurodivergent individuals required correction or remediation to align with neurotypical norms (Dinishak, 2022).

2.3.2 The emergence of the neurodiversity movement

The neurodiversity movement emerged in the late 1990s as a direct response to deficit-based models of neurological difference, challenging dominant medicalised perspectives that framed conditions such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia as disorders

requiring remediation (Thomas, 2024). A defining characteristic of the movement is its roots in self-advocacy. Autistic activists, including those affiliated with organisations like the Autism Network International (ANI), played a critical role in shifting discourse away from cure-based approaches towards identity-affirming frameworks (Sinclair, 1993). Their work was instrumental in reframing autism as a form of neurodivergence rather than a disorder, also challenging the dominance of person-first language (PFL) – advocating instead for identity-first language (IFL) such as 'autistic person' to reflect neurodivergence as an integral part of a person's identity (Kenny et al., 2016; Naylor, 2023). Similarly, advocacy within the ADHD and dyslexia communities contributed to the growing recognition of alternative cognitive strengths and the limitations of traditional educational and psychological approaches (Pasarín-Lavín, 2024). The movement gained traction in academia and policy over the following decades, leading to increased acknowledgment of neurodiversity in education, workplace inclusion and psychological practice (Armstrong, 2012).

However, this shift has not been without resistance. Many institutions and professionals continue to rely on medicalised frameworks that emphasise diagnosis, intervention and remediation rather than adaptation and acceptance (Chapman & Botha, 2022; Marschall, 2025). This ongoing tension reflects the broader challenge of implementing NDA principles into mainstream educational and psychological practice.

2.3.3 Defining neurodiversity-affirming practice: an operational framework

For the purposes of this study, neurodiversity-affirming (NDA) practice is defined as a multi-dimensional approach to educational psychology that includes:

- Explicit recognition of neurodivergence as a natural form of human diversity (Armstrong, 2012, 2015; Singer, 1999).
- Professional practices that prioritise the autonomy, strengths and self-determination of neurodivergent children and young people (Kapp et al., 2019; Milton & Sims, 2016).
- Adaptations to environments and processes instead of focusing on changing the individual (Chapman & Botha, 2022).

- Inclusion of neurodivergent perspectives in all aspects of practice, including assessment and intervention. (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Naylor, 2023; Nicolaidis, 2012).

NDA practice is distinguishable from broader concepts of inclusive practice through its emphasis on neurodivergent identity as a valued aspect of human diversity, rather than simply a difference to be accommodated. It also differs from neurodiversity-informed approaches that may acknowledge neurodivergence without fully embracing the political and social justice factors that underpin affirming practice (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Chapman & Botha, 2023).

2.3.4 Epistemological shifts towards affirming practice

The emergence of NDA practice reflects a broader epistemological shift in how psychology understands and values knowledge, particularly when it comes to neurodivergent experience. Thomas (2024) describes this as a fundamental rethinking of whose voices count in the construction of psychological knowledge. Traditionally, professionals have been positioned as experts, with neurodivergent individuals often being treated a passive subjects of intervention. Contemporary approaches increasingly recognise lived experience as a valid and essential source of insight, complementing rather than opposing professional expertise (Collins & Evans, 2007; Leadbitter, 2021; Messiou et al., 2024; Naylor, 2023).

This shift has implications not just for professional identity, but for systems and policies that structure participation. In the UK, legislation such as the Children and Families Act (2014) and the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) emphasises the importance of involving children and young people with SEND in decisions about their support (Gray et al., 2022). Person-centred approaches aim to promote this, although their implementation remains inconsistent (Mullaley, 2024; White & Rae, 2016; Williams et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019).

Meaningful participation also depends on inclusive communication. Research suggests that neurodiversity discourse can unintentionally privilege verbally fluent individuals, potentially marginalising those who require alternative communication methods (Ashby & Woodfield, 2019; Wood, 2019). Tools such as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ACC), visual supports and other adaptive methods are essential to ensure all voices are heard

(Iacono et al., 2016). The development of self-advocacy is equally important. This is not an innate skill but one that needs to be supported and scaffolded, particularly for those navigating complex or inequitable systems (Anderson & Bigby, 2017; Test et al., 2005).

These shifts also challenge the idea of expertise. Edwards (2009) offers a model of 'relational agency', suggesting that effective practice arises through collaboration, where knowledge is distributed and co-constructed across networks rather than held by individuals. This idea is supported by Cherewick and Matergia (2023), who describe how some practitioners are actively centring neurodivergent perspectives, attributing this to a growing ethical awareness of what meaningful support entails. Petty and Ellis (2024) argue that this move redefines professional responsibility with the aim no longer being to 'normalise' neurodivergent individuals but to foster autonomy, participation and recognition of diverse contributions. However, Hodge and Runswick-Cole (2018) caution against idealising partnership while ignoring persistent power imbalances. Whitburn et al. (2022) also argue that authentic collaboration needs deliberate strategies to address these inequalities. These developments reflect broader movements in critical disability studies, where researchers such as Goodley (2013) and Hardy and Woodcock (2015) call for more inclusive, pluralistic models that challenge dominant assumptions about development and competence. With these perspectives in mind, NDA practice calls on EPs to do more than adopt new models of support, it requires their ongoing reflection about power, knowledge and the assumptions that underpin their professional roles.

2.3.5 Digital advocacy and representation

Online spaces and social media have been increasingly important in shaping how neurodivergence is understood and experienced. For many neurodivergent individuals, these spaces have become places to connect with others who share similar experiences and perspectives (Skafle et al. 2024). They can also provide a degree of safety, control and affirmation that can be lacking in traditional environment, fostering validation and resistance to pathologising narratives (Akhmedova et al., 2024; Andersson et al., 2015; Carruthers et al., 2019). At the same time, media representations of neurodivergence are evolving, with social platforms and celebrity disclosures contributing to greater awareness and social dialogue (Campbell, 2022; Hendrix, 2024). However, concerns remain about potential misinformation and over simplified portrayals (Baroutsis et al., 2023; Mittman et al., 2024).

These broader, sociocultural developments have implications for how NDA practice is conceptualised.

2.4 Key theoretical frameworks

Understanding how EPs conceptualise and implement NDA practices requires an exploration of the range of theoretical frameworks that inform approaches to neurodivergence. Historically, as discussed in section 2.3.1, neurodivergence has been understood through a biological or medical model that positions neurological difference as disorders or deficits rooted in biological impairment requiring diagnosis, treatment or remediation (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2006). The frameworks discussed below have largely emerged in response to this perspective and have influenced professional understanding as well as assessment methodologies, intervention strategies and policy development. Rather than representing a unified theoretical perspective, these frameworks often exist in tension with one another, creating complex navigational challenges for practitioners.

2.4.1 The social model of disability

Developed in the 1970s and 1980s, the social model of disability predates the neurodiversity movement by nearly two decades (Oliver, 1990) and established the foundational principles that would later influence NDA approaches. This model represents a fundamental departure from medicalised perspectives, proposing that disability is not solely an individual impairment but is constructed through societal barriers (Casanova & Widman, 2021). From this perspective, neurodivergence itself is not disabling; rather, it is the lack of inclusive environments, accommodations and societal acceptance that creates disability (Cromby & Johnstone, 2024). This model has had a significant impact on education and educational psychology and is reflected in national policy such as the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoHSC, 2015), both of which emphasise the importance of removing barriers to learning and promoting participation for all learners. Rather than forcing neurodivergent individuals to adapt to neurotypical standards, the social model emphasises structural change, such as alternative learning strategies, sensory accommodations and flexible assessment methods to ensure equitable access to education and professional opportunities (Shakespeare, 2006). However, while the social model has advanced discussions on disability rights and inclusion, critics argue that it sometimes

overlooks the lived experiences of individuals with complex support needs (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). While addressing systemic barriers is crucial, some individuals also require personalised medical and therapeutic interventions, necessitating an approach that integrates both social and medical perspectives.

2.4.2 Critical disability studies and poststructuralist perspectives

Whereas the social model reframes disability as an issue of systemic barriers, Critical Disability Theory (CDT) takes this further by examining the power structures that define and maintain norms of ability and disability (Davis, 2013; Goodley et al., 2018). CDT criticises the historical and cultural biases that shape how neurodivergence is classified, often questioning the legitimacy of standardised diagnostic categories like the DSM-5 (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004). CDT also aligns with poststructuralist perspectives that challenge rigid, binary distinctions between "able" and "disabled," advocating for a fluid and context-dependent understanding of neurodivergence (Goodley, 2013). This approach encourages EPs to critically examine their own biases and recognise the ways in which ableism may shape institutional frameworks and reinforce exclusionary practices (Angulo-Jiménez & DeThorne, 2019). While CDT provides valuable insights into dominant psychological frameworks, it has been criticised for its abstract focus, which sometimes lacks practical applications for educators and psychologists working directly with neurodivergent children and young people (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). With this in mind, bridging the gap between theory and practice remains a key challenge for integrating CDT into NDA practice.

2.4.3 The neurodiversity paradigm: a theoretical framework

Building upon the advocacy-driven origins of the neurodiversity movement, the neurodiversity paradigm offers a framework for understanding and supporting neurological differences (Walker, 2012). Unlike traditional deficit-based perspectives, the neurodiversity paradigm posits that neurological variations, such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia, are part of natural human diversity and should be recognised as valuable forms of cognitive difference rather than medical disorders (Chapman, 2020; Walker, 2021).

The neurodiversity paradigm sits alongside both the social model of disability and CDT by challenging the idea that the problem lies within the individual. Instead, it encourages us to question the systems, structures and assumptions that shape how we understand difference

and emphasises the need to create environments that are flexible and inclusive, rather than expecting individuals to adapt to rigid norms. For example, rigid school structures that prioritise written assessments may disadvantage dyslexic students, not because of their cognitive profile but because of a lack of accessible learning methods (Casanova & Widman, 2021). This concept resonates with the call to value diverse ways of thinking and being - not just as something to be accommodated, but as something to be respected and understood on its own terms. In this sense, the neurodiversity paradigm strengthens the push for broader cultural and institutional shifts, highlighting that meaningful inclusion requires more than surface-level adjustments; it requires rethinking how we define "normal" in the first place.

Originating from the broader neurodiversity and disability literature, applying the neurodiversity paradigm within EP practice involves several key principles that have been increasingly advocated by EPs and professional organisations. These include shifting the professional focus from deficits to appreciating the unique strengths and abilities of neurodivergent individuals (BPS, 2023; Chapman, 2019); advocating for the designing of schools and workplaces to accommodate diverse cognitive profiles rather than expecting neurodivergent individuals to conform to neurotypical norms (McGee, 2012; Riordan, 2022); and replacing pathologising terminology with neutral or strengths-based descriptors to affirm neurodivergent identities (Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023). The latter of these shifts has been increasingly adopted by practitioners who recognise that language can significantly influence the self-perception and educational experiences of neurodivergent learners (BPS, 2023; Riordan, 2022).

Although widely embraced in advocacy and research circles, the neurodiversity paradigm is not without its critics. Ortega (2023) argues that the paradigm, despite its inclusive rhetoric, risks homogenising diverse neurological experiences under a single conceptual umbrella, arguing that it risks overlooking the needs of children and young people with significant support requirements, particularly those with co-occurring disabilities. This supports Russell's (2020) claim that the movement has created what she terms 'neurodiversity lite' that privileges those with lower support needs while failing to adequately address the experiences of those with significant learning differences. Hughes (2021) also directly questions whether the heterogeneity of neurodivergence inherently undermines the

neurodiversity paradigm, arguing that wholly rejecting the 'disorder' label may ignore the sometimes harmful experiences associated with neurodivergence. This may inadvertently silence the voices of those with more complex support needs or those whose experiences do not sit comfortably within a strengths-based narrative (Dwyer, 2022; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). Kauffman et al. (2022) also suggest that celebrating neurodivergence without acknowledging real-world challenges could potentially minimise the lived experiences and difficulties faced by neurodivergent individuals and their families.

Furthermore, the neurodiversity paradigm's focus on innate neurological differences has been criticised for potentially reinforcing biological determinism (Nadesan, 2013). By locating difference primarily within the brain structure, the paradigm may inadvertently reinforce medicalised frameworks by simply reframing neurological differences rather than challenging how they are understood. Critics also argue that the adoption of neurodiversity rhetoric can dilute its original focus on social justice, emphasising workplace inclusion while neglecting systemic barriers in education, healthcare and policy (Jones & Orchard, 2024; Kapp, 2020).

Despite these tensions, the neurodiversity approach represents a significant step towards making educational psychology more inclusive. It encourages practitioners to view neurodivergence in a broader way, considering not just how people think and learn differently, but also how society and personal experiences influence those differences. For this approach to make an impact, the research suggests that EPs and educators need to do more than simply agree with the concept; they have to make real changes in how they assess, support and create policies for neurodivergent individuals (Rajotte et al., 2024).

Having examined key theoretical frameworks, the following sections look at how different neurotypes are conceptualised in the literature and how NDA principles can be used to support them.

2.5 Neurotypes

Before exploring individual neurotypes, it is important to clarify key terminology. Legault et al. (2021) argue that although 'neurodiverse' and 'neurodivergent' are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct categories with different implications. 'Neurodiverse' refers to the presence of a range of neurological profiles within a given

group, implying that all groups of people are, by definition, neurodiverse. In contrast, 'neurodivergent' applies to individuals whose cognitive profiles deviate from neurotypical norms (Walker, 2021). This distinction is particularly significant in educational and psychological contexts, where the language used can shape perceptions, policies and interventions. For example, describing an individual as 'neurodiverse' is technically inaccurate, as no single person can be 'diverse' in isolation. Instead, an individual is neurodivergent if their cognitive functioning diverges from societal expectations of neurological typicality. The term 'neurodiverse' is more appropriately applied to classrooms, workplaces or communities that include a mix of neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals (Armstrong, 2015).

Understanding these distinctions also helps to clarify the socio-political dimensions of neurodivergence. The term 'neurodivergent' has been embraced within disability rights and NDA movements to highlight experiences of marginalisation and systemic barriers faced by those whose cognitive styles fall outside dominant norms (Chapman, 2020). Conversely, as highlighted by Russell (2020), using 'neurodiverse' too broadly may unintentionally dilute conversations about specific challenges and accommodations needed by neurodivergent individuals within education and employment (Den Houting, 2019). By applying these terms with precision, researchers and practitioners can ensure that discussions around neurodiversity remain both accurate and meaningful in shaping inclusive practices.

2.5.1 Diversity within divergence

The term neurodivergence is commonly used to describe a wide spectrum of neurological variations, including profiles such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia and Tourette's syndrome (Walker, 2024). However, the boundaries of neurodivergence remain contested, with ongoing debates about which neurological differences should be included under this umbrella (Naylor, 2023). For example, while some argue that neurodivergence should be limited to innate neurodevelopmental profiles, others advocate for a broader definition that includes acquired conditions and mental health diagnoses (Baker, 2011; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023). This lack of consensus reflects the complexity of neurodivergence as a concept and highlights the need for a more in depth understanding of how different neurotypes interact with social and environmental factors. For example, considering how societal attitudes and institutional practices shape the experiences of individuals with acquired neurodivergence,

compared to those with congenital differences. Addressing these questions is essential for developing inclusive and equitable approaches to NDA practice.

2.5.2 A focus on autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an umbrella term encompassing various historical and now outdated diagnoses, including Asperger's syndrome, low-functioning autism, and pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) (National Health Service England [NHSE], 2022). Autism was first identified in the 1940s by Leo Kanner, an American psychiatrist who described 'early infantile autism' in children exhibiting specific patterns of 'abnormal behaviour' (Kanner, 1943). Around the same time, Hans Asperger, an Austrian psychiatrist, observed a similar pattern of traits in individuals who exhibited higher cognitive abilities compared to Kanner's descriptions, later forming the basis of Asperger's Syndrome (APA, 1994; Asperger, 1944; WHO, 1992).

By the late 20th century, autism was increasingly understood as a spectrum, reflecting a broader range of traits and abilities (Wing & Gould, 1979). One of the key conceptual models that influenced this shift was the Triad of Impairment, developed by Lorna Wing and Judith Gould (1979). This model framed autism as a profile involving difficulties across three interrelated domains:

- Social interaction – challenges in forming and maintaining relationships.
- Social communication – differences in verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Flexibility of thought and behaviour – restricted and repetitive behaviours, special interests and resistance to change.

While the Triad of Impairment provided a foundational structure for autism diagnosis, it was later revised in DSM-5 (2013) and ICD-11 (2022), which consolidated the first two domains into one category:

- Difficulties with social communication and social interaction.
- Restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, interests, and activities.
  (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013)

This change was intended to reflect research showing the interconnected nature of social interaction and communication challenges (Mandy et al., 2018). However, researchers argue that this revision narrowed diagnostic criteria, leading to the exclusion of individuals who do

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not fit the revised framework (Milton, 2014), which again draws attention to the socially constructed nature of such diagnoses.

The prevalence of autism has increased significantly in recent decades. The British Medical Association (BMA, 2024) estimates that there are 700,000 autistic people in the UK, equating to just over one in 100 people. However, recent studies suggest that under-diagnosis means the true figure may be closer to 1.2 million autistic individuals in England alone (Lilley et al., 2021; O'Nions et al., 2023). In the United States, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that in 2020, one in 36 children were diagnosed with autism by the age of eight—an increase from one in 150 in 2000 (CDC, 2023). Boys are diagnosed four times more frequently than girls (CDC, 2023), though growing recognition of how autism presents differently in females suggests that this ratio may not fully reflect prevalence (Gesi et al., 2021; Naylor, 2023), with girls being diagnosed two to three years later than boys (Russell et al., 2022).

While these statistics provide a quantitative overview, understanding autism goes beyond numbers; it requires an appreciation of the lived experiences of autistic individuals across the spectrum. The concept of a spectrum recognises that autism presents with a high level of heterogeneity, with individuals experiencing different combinations of characteristics, challenges and strengths at varying levels of intensity (Happé & Frith, 2020). Bal et al. (2022), believe that recognising the individual strengths and needs of autistic people is crucial for fostering effective support and inclusion.

2.5.2.1 Sensory processing

From the earliest studies on autism, heightened sensitivity to sensory input has been recognised as a distinctive characteristic, with individuals displaying a range of responses to stimuli such as light, noise and texture (Ben-Sasson et al., 2009; Kanner, 1943; National Autistic Society, 2022). Ben-Sasson et al.'s (2009) meta-analysis of 14 studies found consistent patterns of sensory over-responsivity in autism. However, the authors noted significant heterogeneity across studies and measurement tools, highlighting the challenges in standardising sensory assessments.

Some children and young people may experience hyposensitivity, where they engage in sensory-seeking behaviours, such as rocking, spinning or intense focus on visual stimuli like

flashing lights (Bogdashina, 2016; Simmons et al., 2009). This can be described as a way of engaging with the environment and seeking sensory experiences that meet their unique sensory needs (Grapel et al., 2015). Conversely, those with hypersensitivity may have heightened responses to sensory inputs, such as strong smells, loud noises or particular textures of clothing which can have a significant impact on their day to day lives (Baker et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2009). Autistic individuals may also have a strong preference for structured environments and routines which is closely linked to their sensory and behavioural profiles, as disruptions to established routines can cause significant distress or anxiety (Alhuzimi, 2021). This need for predictability and routine helps manage the sensory overload and anxiety that can arise from unpredictable changes (Eshraghi et al., 2020).

2.5.2.2 Communication and social interaction

Autistic individuals may exhibit distinctive patterns in language development and use (Whyte & Nelson, 2015), which can include unique speech patterns, differences in verbal communication and alternative approaches to understanding and using language, such as interpreting nuances or idioms in ways that reflect their individual perspectives (Tager-Flusberg et al., 2009). Social interactions might also be experienced differently, with alternative ways of interpreting social cues, forming relationships and engaging with social norms (Finke, 2023; Watkins et al., 2015; Wing & Gould, 1979). Finke (2023), for example, found that autistic young adults show patterns of preferred friendship behaviours which differ from their neurotypical peers. Similarly, in his blog on adapting to the neurotypical world, Ori (2023) discusses his own social interaction differences, and shares how he navigates relationships and social contexts with an awareness of his individual preferences. Nonverbal communication may also differ, with less frequent use of gestures, facial expressions and eye contact, reflecting diverse methods of conveying and receiving information (Baird & Norbury, 2016).

Communication differences in autistic individuals can also influence their emotional regulation strategies, with young autistic children often exhibiting fewer effective strategies to managing their emotions compared to their neurotypical peers (Cibralic, 2019). Research suggests that many young autistic children rely on others to regulate their emotions to a greater degree than neurotypical children, suggesting that their ability to move from extrinsic to intrinsic strategies may be delayed in comparison to their peers (Cibralic, 2019;

Nuske et al., 2017). As noted by Mazefsky et al. (2013) and Samson et al. (2015), this reliance on external support may not be indicative of a deficit but rather a variation in the developmental process of emotional self-regulation. Longitudinal studies also show that autistic children with poorer emotional regulation, demonstrated a worsening of internalising and externalising behaviours over time which in turn affected their social behaviours (Berkovits et al., 2017). However, this relationship is also observed in neurotypical children (Blandon et al., 2010).

2.5.2.3 Behaviour and interests

Individuals with autism are often recognised for their engagement in repetitive behaviours, such as hand-flapping, spinning, rocking and echolalia (Kapp et al., 2019; Leekham et al., 2011; Mottron, 2017). Although these behaviours are sometimes perceived as unusual or problematic within neurotypical social contexts, studies have found them to be meaningful self-regulatory mechanisms that can serve multiple beneficial functions (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018; Chapman et al., 2022; Kapp et al., 2019; Nolan & McBride, 2015). According to the APA (2013), repetitive behaviours can play a crucial role in self-soothing, managing sensory overload and maintaining focus and concentration. Research has also found that these behaviours help autistic individuals to process sensory input effectively and establish predictability in an often unpredictable world (Joyce et al., 2017; Wigham et al., 2015).

In addition to repetitive behaviours, autistic individuals often exhibit intense focus on specific interests or activities. This deep engagement, known as 'restrictive interests', allows them to explore subjects with remarkable enthusiasm and depth (Howlin, 2003; Mottron et al., 2013). Far from being a limitation, this intense focus can lead to significant expertise and innovation in their areas of interest. Research suggests that these concentrated interests not only contribute to personal fulfilment but can also facilitate unique contributions to various fields, ranging from art and technology to science and education (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009; Grove et al., 2018; McCormack et al., 2023; Nowell et al., 2021).

These concentrated interests are part of a broader range of strengths commonly observed in autistic individuals. The literature highlights several attributes, including exceptional memory capabilities, meticulous attention to detail, a strong drive to identify patterns, preferences

for visual learning, analytical skills, innovative thinking, heightened sensory perception, a pronounced sense of justice and a tendency towards hyper-systemising (Baron-Cohen, 2006; Chamak et al., 2008; Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999; Mottron & Dawson, 2009; Mottron et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2019).

2.5.2.4 Educational psychology practice and autism

EPs play an important part in supporting autistic children and young people in educational settings. In the UK, formal diagnosis of autism is conducted by medical professionals as part of a multidisciplinary approach, with EPs often contributing through school-based assessments and participation in joint consultations (McCartney, 2019). EP assessments of behaviour, learning and social interaction are used to inform diagnostic processes and subsequent intervention and support. However, these processes often measure divergence from neurotypical norms, which, as previously discussed, conflicts with NDA principles by positioning autism as a deficit (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). In response, EPs can adopt alternative assessment approaches that aim to balance identification of support needs with more strengths-focused perspectives. Dynamic assessment, for example, sits well with NDA practice as it looks for learning potential rather than static abilities. Similarly, ecological assessments explore how environmental factors create difficulties for those with autism rather than locating the problem within the child or young person (Lebeer et al., 2012).

The language used in reports and consultations for autistic children and young people also has significant implications for how they are viewed by educators, parents and themselves (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). For example, when EPs describe stimming as repetitive behaviours requiring reduction rather than functional self-regulatory strategies, they are inadvertently reinforcing deficit narratives. An NDA approach, in contrast, would frame observed behaviours within the adaptive functions that they may be serving (Kapp et al., 2019).

Similarly, the interventions that EPs recommend can reveal tensions between traditional and affirming approaches. Interventions such as Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) aim to support autistic children to 'fit' better within mainstream settings by reducing self-stimulatory behaviours and targeting play skills and verbal language ability (Bauer, 2024). EPs

can often find themselves being pulled between evidence-based practices that support behavioural interventions and NDA advocacy that questions the ethics of such approaches (Lerner et al., 2023; Murillo & Cragin, 2023). Research by Anderson (2023), for example, shared insights from autistic adults who described the significant negative long-term consequences of being put through behaviour analysis interventions as children. Even communication-focused interventions like the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) have faced scrutiny from neurodiversity advocates. Roberts (2020, 2021) questions whether PECS, despite evidence of its effectiveness, may still prioritise compliance over authentic expression. Lynch and Totten (2022) similarly argue that implementation can reinforce power imbalances between practitioners and autistic individuals. Play-based approaches such as LEGO Therapy have also been criticised for the possibility that they may inadvertently encourage masking of autistic traits (Therapist Neurodiversity Collective, 2022). Ncube at al. (2021) also raise questions around the methodological limitations in LEGO Therapy research, noting that many studies lack rigorous design. Schreibman et al. (2015) explore the idea of intervention approaches that retain structure but also respect autistic autonomy, focusing on children's interests and motivations rather than imposing compliance-based goals. However, research on how EPs navigate these approaches in their practice remains limited (Dawson & Fletcher-Watson, 2022).

2.5.3 A focus on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) defines Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as a neurodevelopmental condition marked by impulsivity, hyperactivity, and inattentiveness. While widely accepted, this definition has been the subject of debate. Some researchers argue that it presents ADHD primarily through a deficit-based lens, overlooking the cognitive diversity and adaptive strengths associated with the condition (Charabin et al., 2023; Holloway, 2020). Others emphasise the contextual nature of ADHD traits, noting that characteristics perceived as disruptive in traditional school or workplace settings may prove advantageous in more flexible, creative or high-energy environments (Purper-Ouakil et al., 2004; Sedgwick et al., 2019).

Although there has been extensive research supporting the existence of ADHD, there is also controversy regarding its validity as a diagnostic category (Baughman Jr, 2006; Quinn & Lynch, 2016). Some researchers view ADHD as a social construction rather than a

neurological reality, describing behaviours labelled as ADHD symptoms as simply variations in temperament that have been pathologised because they are subjectively undesirable and do not fit within socially expected norms (Freedman & Honkasilta, 2017; Honkasilta & Koutsoklenis, 2022). Critics also point to the pharmaceutical industry's influence on ADHD diagnoses, arguing that commercial motivations have played a role in increasing diagnostic criteria and pushing medication as the appropriate 'treatment'. (Conrad & Bergey, 2014; Timimi, 2010). While these views are more pertinent in the United States (US) healthcare system, similar concerns have been raised in the United Kingdom (UK) despite the regulatory frameworks of the National Health Service (NHS) (Moncrieff & Timimi, 2013). Others suggest that ADHD diagnoses are the result of problematic and rigid educational structures or inadequate parenting practices (Prosser, 2006; Singh, 2004). These perspectives also highlight the variation in diagnostic rates across different cultural contexts and time periods, suggesting that social factors rather than biological ones could be driving identification (Freedman, 2016). Although these critical views appear to be in the minority in clinical research, they raise important questions about how we conceptualise and categorise neurodevelopmental differences. They also represent the range of views that continue to influence educators' and families' perspectives on ADHD and intervention approaches (Visser & Jehan, 2009).

In the UK, ADHD is estimated to affect 3% to 4% of the population, with a diagnosed male-to-female ratio of 3:1 (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence [NICE], 2024). However, this disparity in diagnosis has led to growing concern over gender biases in ADHD identification. Research suggests that ADHD in females often presents differently, with less overt hyperactivity and greater internalised struggles, such as inattentiveness and anxiety (Young et al., 2020; Quinn & Madhoo, 2014). As a result, many girls and women remain undiagnosed until adulthood, often after experiencing academic difficulties, emotional distress or workplace challenges (Rucklidge, 2010). In contrast, concerns have been raised about potential over-diagnosis in some populations, particularly among low-income children, where symptoms of inattention or impulsivity may be misattributed to ADHD rather than educational disadvantage or environmental stressors (Bruchmüller et al., 2012). These disparities highlight the complexity of ADHD diagnosis and the role of educational settings in both identifying and misidentifying students with ADHD traits.

ADHD frequently co-occurs with other conditions, such as mood disorders, anxiety and learning differences, as well as higher rates of substance use and impulsivity-related challenges (Cuffe et al., 2020; Reid & Prosser, 2013). One area of growing interest is its relationship with autism, with research indicating that over one-third of autistic individuals also show ADHD traits (Rong et al., 2021). The nature of this overlap remains debated. While some researchers argue that ADHD and autism are distinct conditions with overlapping characteristics (Rommelse et al., 2010), others suggest that they may exist along a shared neurodevelopmental spectrum, with diagnostic boundaries influenced by historical categorisations rather than clear biological distinctions (Antshel et al., 2014). It is also worth noting that the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) only recently permitted dual diagnosis, meaning earlier prevalence rates may have underestimated the extent of co-occurrence (Antshel et al., 2014). This shift has significant educational implications, as co-occurring ADHD and autism may require distinct learning support strategies, which are often poorly accommodated by traditional special educational needs (SEN) provisions (Ashwood et al., 2015).

Though ADHD is often considered a childhood condition, longitudinal studies suggest that traits persist into adulthood for many individuals (Franke et al., 2018; Grimm et al., 2020). However, rather than diminishing, these traits often evolve. Hyperactivity in children may manifest as restlessness or an internal sense of urgency in adults, while impulsivity can take the form of risk-taking behaviours or difficulties with emotional regulation (Kooij et al., 2010). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in adults seeking ADHD diagnoses which has largely been attributed to social media and online health communities enabling them to recognise previously unidentified symptoms in themselves (Eagle & Ringland, 2023). Persistent difficulties in educational attainment, workplace performance and relationship stability are being retrospectively attributed to undiagnosed ADHD (Sedgewick et al., 2019). For some, diagnosis can provide support and accommodations that were unavailable during their childhoods.

2.5.3.1 Inattention and learning challenges

ADHD is typically characterised by two core domains: inattention and hyperactivity-impulsivity (Kuntsi et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013). Difficulties with sustained attention, task completion, and working memory are among the most commonly reported challenges (Berenguer et al., 2018). However, rather than reflecting a simple inability to focus, research

suggests that attentional patterns in ADHD may be better understood as an issue of regulation rather than deficiency (Hupfeld et al., 2019).

Students with ADHD frequently experience hyperfocus, a state of intense concentration on tasks of interest, often to the exclusion of surrounding stimuli (White & Shah, 2016). While this can be advantageous in creative and inquiry-based learning, it can create challenges in traditional educational settings, where lesson structures require frequent transitions between topics and the ability to shift attention quickly (Daley & Birchwood, 2010). Research suggests that traditional mainstream pedagogical approaches, which prioritise linear task progression and prolonged focus, are poorly suited to ADHD cognitive profiles, leading to reduced academic engagement (Sherman et al., 2006). Multisensory approaches, project-based learning and flexible assessment methods have been suggested as alternative models that better support ADHD learners (Sayal et al., 2018).

2.5.3.2 Hyperactivity-impulsivity

Hyperactivity-impulsivity traits often conflict with conventional classroom expectations, where sitting still, following instructions and taking turns in discussions are key behavioural norms (Barkley, 2014). These expectations can create significant barriers for children and young people with ADHD, who may struggle with remaining seated, regulating speech volume or inhibiting impulsive responses (Sarkis, 2014).

While impulsivity and high energy levels may be framed as challenges, they can also be assets in learning environments that embrace active engagement (Lerner et al., 2023). Movement-based learning strategies, such as standing desks, fidget tools and short activity breaks, have been shown to increase focus and academic participation for students with ADHD (Daley & Birchwood, 2010). However, access to these accommodations remains inconsistent, particularly in mainstream education settings where compliance-based behaviour management strategies remain dominant (Sayal et al., 2018).

2.5.3.3 ADHD strengths

Although a significant amount of literature focuses on challenges, there is emerging research identifying a range of cognitive strengths associated with ADHD. For example, some individuals with ADHD, demonstrate strong verbal fluency, rapid problem-solving and creative thinking (Ek et al., 2007; Nejati et al., 2020). A study by Climie et al.'s (2013) found

significantly higher verbal fluency scores compared to controls on standardised measures, while Fugate et al. (2013) found that adults with ADHD demonstrated enhanced creative and problem-solving abilities. However, these studies relied on relatively small, clinical samples and varied in their definitions of creativity and problem-solving which makes them difficult to generalise across the ADHD population. Methodological variations across studies also make it difficult to determine whether these represent universal strengths or are present in specific subgroups. With this in mind, some academics advocate for a strengths-based educational approach, which focuses on leveraging ADHD traits in ways that align with individual strengths and interests (Climie & Mastoras, 2015). This may include academic and pastoral mentoring, a creativity-driven curriculum and alternative assessment strategies that allow ADHD students to demonstrate their knowledge beyond traditional exam-based practices (Sedgwick et al., 2019). Developing these approaches could provide a more equitable learning experience, ensuring that students with ADHD are not only accommodated but also empowered in educational settings.

2.5.3.4 Educational psychology practice and ADHD

EPs engage with ADHD through a range of professional activities including assessment, consultation and intervention planning, often having to navigate the complex tensions between medical models of ADHD and more affirming approaches. Assessments typically involve cognitive and behavioural measures that identify challenges with executive functioning, attention and regulation (Hill & Turner, 2016), and in a similar way to autism assessments, they often look for deviation from normative expectations rather than recognising differences as having potentially adaptive functions (Honkasilta & Koutsoklenis, 2022). Framed within NDA practice, EPs can adopt more contextual approaches to assessment by pursuing a more ecological understanding of ADHD. For example, examining how environmental factors such as classroom structure, curriculum design and teaching methods affect attention patterns can reveal ways to alleviate challenges in more systemic ways (Purper-Ouakil et al., 2004). However, research suggests that such approaches are inconsistently implemented across EP practice (Hill & Turner, 2016).

A particularly challenging dynamic for EPs is the intersection of behaviour management policies with NDA practice. Research shows that children and young people with ADHD are disproportionately excluded from school, reflecting how behavioural manifestations of

ADHD often conflict with traditional classroom expectations (Moore et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2014). This is compounded by commonly used deficit-based language such as "inability to focus", "off-task behaviour" or "non-compliance" which positions ADHD as problematic (Freedman & Honkasilta, 2017). Whereas EPs can advocate for policy reform and help schools to develop more inclusive approaches, their impact can often be limited due to institutional pressure for conformity and standardisation (Hill & Turner, 2016). The gap between NDA ideals and the practicalities of implementation remains a significant challenge for EPs.

2.5.4 A focus on dyslexia

The classification of dyslexia has long been contested, with some researchers questioning whether it represents a distinct neurocognitive variation or whether literacy challenges exist along a continuum rather than as a discrete profile (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014; Odegard & Dye, 2024). Although it is often described as a specific learning disability influenced by genetic, neurobiological and environmental factors (Catts & Petscher, 2022; Erbeli et al., 2021; Lyon et al., 2003; Snowling & Melby-Lervåg, 2016), the criteria for dyslexia remain debated.

A key question in this debate is whether dyslexia should be regarded as a fixed neurological condition or a socially constructed response to literacy difficulties. While neurobiological research has identified differences in brain connectivity and phonological processing among some dyslexic individuals (Snowling & Melby-Lervåg, 2016), critics argue that these findings are correlative rather than causative, making it difficult to establish dyslexia as a clearly defined neurodevelopmental disorder (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014). Furthermore, cross-cultural research has challenged the universality of dyslexia, showing that phonological processing difficulties are more pronounced in alphabetic languages such as English, than in logographic systems such as Chinese (Tan et al., 2005). Such findings raise questions about whether dyslexia is a universal cognitive condition or one shaped by dominant literacy expectations in Western education systems

2.5.4.1 Defining dyslexia: a heterogeneous profile

Dyslexia is commonly associated with difficulties in reading fluency, spelling and phonological processing (Stevens et al., 2022), but additional traits such as language

processing difficulties, motor coordination challenges, poor mathematical reasoning and executive function challenges are frequently discussed alongside it (Sewell, 2022). However, whether these associated traits form a cohesive dyslexic profile or simply reflect broader cognitive diversity remains debated (Elliott & Nicolson, 2016; Gibbs & Elliott, 2020).

Within UK education, literacy instruction is predominantly structured around phonics-based models, such as Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) (Rose, 2009). While this approach is effective for many learners, some researchers argue that it may not adequately support students who benefit from more flexible, multimodal approaches that incorporate visual, kinaesthetic and contextual learning strategies (Macdonald, 2021). Despite this, phonics-based instruction remains central to UK education policy, reflecting a broader shift towards 'evidence-based' literacy instruction (Castles et al., 2018). However, critics argue that this focus prioritises standardised assessment outcomes over individual learning needs, raising concerns about whether literacy interventions are designed to support neurodivergent learners or to align them with dominant literacy expectations (Macdonald, 2021).

2.5.4.2 Socioeconomic disparities in dyslexia diagnosis

Dyslexia diagnosis is not equally accessible across different socioeconomic groups, with research highlighting systemic barriers in identification and support (Macdonald, 2021). Students from higher-income backgrounds are more likely to receive private dyslexia assessments, one-to-one tutoring and additional exam accommodations, while students from lower-income households, despite facing similar literacy challenges, may instead be labelled as 'low achievers' rather than dyslexic (Elliott & Gibbs, 2020).

Structural factors within state-funded assessment processes contribute to these disparities, as access to EPs and dyslexia specialists is limited, often leading to long waiting lists and inconsistent diagnostic criteria (Macdonald, 2021). In contrast, private assessments allow wealthier families to bypass these barriers, raising concerns about whether dyslexia is a neurodevelopmental condition or a label more readily available to those with financial resources (Kirby, 2020; Ramus, 2014). Moreover, research suggests that working-class and ethnically diverse students are more likely to be misidentified as 'low ability' rather than dyslexic, reinforcing structural inequalities in education (Macdonald, 2021).

2.5.4.3 Dyslexia strengths

While dyslexia is primarily framed as a literacy difficulty, emerging research suggests that dyslexic individuals may demonstrate strengths in visual-spatial reasoning, holistic thinking and creative problem-solving (Von Karolyi et al., 2003; Sewell, 2022). Some research suggests that dyslexic individuals tend to process information in a more global, pattern-based manner, which may contribute to strengths in fields such as architecture, engineering and design (Kannangara et al., 2018). However, the extent to which these strengths are intrinsic to dyslexia remains debated. Von Karolyi et al.'s (2003) study into the visual-spatial abilities of individuals with dyslexia showed clear strengths, but these findings have been inconsistently replicated, with more recent work by Sewell (2022) suggesting that these strengths may be present in only a subgroup of dyslexia individuals.

Some researchers argue that dyslexic strengths emerge from compensatory strategies, where individuals develop alternative cognitive approaches to navigate written language difficulties (Eide & Eide, 2023). Furthermore, there is concern that the narrative of dyslexia as a 'gift' may place unrealistic expectations on dyslexic individuals, leading to increased pressure to 'compensate' for literacy difficulties through exceptional abilities (Snowling & Melby-Lervåg, 2016). This raises questions about whether dyslexic strengths are genuinely valued within education and the workplace or only when they align with marketable skills (Macdonald, 2021).

2.5.4.4 Educational psychology practice and dyslexia

EP assessment of literacy differences typically involves a range of measures including observation, consultation and standardised testing (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). Although EPs continue to provide these services regardless of ongoing debates into the validity of dyslexia as a distinct profile, their interpretations of assessment results and subsequent recommendations may be influenced by where they position themselves within these theoretical discussions. The British Psychological Society (BPS, 2023) guidance acknowledges these tensions and encourages EPs to move beyond discrepancy models, looking instead at specific literacy skills and contextual factors that support or hinder literacy development. This reflects growing recognition that literacy difficulties emerge through the interaction between individual processing differences and educational environments (Cooper, 2009), promoting more holistic and person-centred support.

In line with this ecological approach, Capp (2017) argues that interventions for literacy should move beyond remediation-based approaches towards models that recognise and value diverse ways of learning and demonstrating knowledge. For EPs working within an NDA framework, this shift has implications for the ways in which they approach consultations with educational settings – advocating for flexibility in teaching, assessment and intervention methods can be difficult when school systems and processes are constrained by rigid curriculum demands and resource limitations. Despite these challenges, EPs are uniquely positioned to bridge theoretical understanding and practical implementation, helping schools to support literacy differences regardless of diagnostic labels.

2.5.5 Other key neurotypes

While autism, ADHD and dyslexia are the most frequently discussed neurodivergent profiles, neurodiversity encompasses a broader range of cognitive differences, including dyspraxia/developmental coordination disorder (DCD), Tourette's syndrome, sensory processing disorder (SPD), foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Each of these profiles presents distinct challenges and strengths, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of cognitive and sensory diversity.

However, questions remain about which neurotypes appropriately fall under the neurodiversity paradigm. While dyspraxia and Tourette's syndrome are increasingly recognised as neurodevelopmental differences (Kirby, 2021; Cravedi et al., 2017), other profiles, such as OCD and FASD, are more contentious. Some researchers argue that OCD and FASD are better classified as medical experiences rather than innate neurotypes (Stein et al., 2019; Streissguth et al., 2004). This distinction arises because FASD is linked to environmental factors, specifically prenatal alcohol exposure (Streissguth et al., 2004), and OCD is often framed within mental health frameworks (APA, 2013). Unlike autism or ADHD, which are typically lifelong and considered innate neurodevelopmental ways of being, FASD and OCD challenge the boundaries of the neurodiversity paradigm.

These distinctions raise important questions about how neurotypes are categorised and supported, particularly in educational contexts. If NDA practice is framed as a strengths-based model, how do profiles involving progressive cognitive differences or significant

distress, such as FASD or OCD, fit within this framework? This tension highlights the need for a greater understanding of neurodiversity, one that acknowledges the diversity of experiences and challenges while remaining inclusive of neurotypes that may not fit neatly into traditional neurodevelopmental categories.

2.5.5.1 Overlapping neurotypes and the limitations of diagnostic categories

Research increasingly suggests that neurodevelopmental conditions exist on a spectrum, with significant overlap between different neurotypes (Gillberg, 2021). Gillberg's 'ESSENCE model' (Early Symptomatic Syndromes Eliciting Neurodevelopmental Clinical Examinations) proposes that conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyspraxia and Tourette's syndrome share overlapping traits, challenging the notion of distinct diagnostic categories. For example, children diagnosed with dyspraxia/DCD often exhibit traits associated with ADHD, while individuals with autism frequently experience sensory sensitivities, OCD traits or tics (Kushki et al., 2019).

This raises concerns about the rigid categorisation of neurodivergence in education and psychology. Diagnostic labels often determine access to support, yet students with complex, overlapping needs may not receive adequate intervention if their primary diagnosis does not account for all aspects of their learning profile (Sonuga-Barke & Halperin, 2010). Some researchers advocate for a transdiagnostic approach, which recognises shared cognitive and sensory processing differences across conditions rather than treating them as isolated disorders (Kushki et al., 2019).

Additionally, reliance on medicalised diagnostic frameworks can create barriers to support. For example, sensory processing disorder (SPD) is not formally recognised as a standalone diagnosis in the DSM-5, despite evidence that sensory sensitivities significantly impact learning and classroom participation (Miller et al., 2021). This highlights how educational policies often lag behind emerging research on neurodivergence, restricting access to interventions for students who do not fit within traditional diagnostic categories.

2.5.5.2 Implications for educational support

The discussion of other neurotypes highlights the complexity of neurodivergence and the limitations of traditional diagnostic frameworks. While some conditions (e.g., dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome) are widely accepted within neurodiversity discourse, others (e.g., OCD,

FASD) remain contested, raising questions about how neurodivergence is classified and supported. The significant overlap between neurotypes further challenges inflexible diagnostic models, suggesting a need for more flexible, needs-based approaches to educational support.

As discussed previously, traditional educational approaches often frame neurodivergent traits as deficits, which can limit access to appropriate support. However, emerging perspectives advocate for adapting educational environments to meet diverse cognitive and sensory needs, rather than focusing solely on remediation (Johnson, 2017; Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). This reinforces the need for a shift towards strengths-based, individualised approaches in both research and practice.

As neurodiversity discourse continues to evolve, it is important that educational research and practice remain responsive to emerging understandings of neurological difference. Supporting all learners effectively requires moving beyond rigid diagnostic labels towards more inclusive and flexible approaches that recognise both strengths support needs.

2.6 Intersectionality and neurodivergence

Although the neurodiversity movement has made significant strides in promoting inclusion, neurodivergence does not exist in isolation. For EPs, failing to consider how race, gender, socioeconomic status and cultural background shape neurodivergent experiences can lead to biased assessments, inadequate interventions and reinforcement of systemic inequalities. However, as Jones and Orchard (2024) argue, neurodiversity discourse often fails to address the needs of those at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. They criticise the exclusion of marginalised groups within neurodiversity, particularly those facing structural violence and systemic ableism. This highlights the need for EPs to critically examine systemic biases and advocate for policies that address structural inequities and are able to support the individual as well as groups.

2.6.1 Race, culture and neurodivergence

Research indicates that racial and cultural factors significantly impact the identification, diagnosis and support of neurodivergent individuals. Historical and structural biases in diagnostic frameworks, including cultural stereotypes held by practitioners and diagnostic criteria developed primarily from Western, white-centric samples, have led to

systematic underdiagnosis and misdiagnosis of children from racialised minority backgrounds, particularly in autism and ADHD (Mandell et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2013). These biases manifest in clinical practice where behaviours may be misinterpreted due to practitioners' lack of cultural competence, leading to delayed or incorrect diagnoses. For example, a study by Begeer et al. (2009) demonstrated compelling evidence of diagnostic bias, with clinicians less likely to diagnose autism in children from minority backgrounds despite identical symptom presentation. Diagnostic tools have traditionally been normed on white, Western populations, leading to the misinterpretation of neurodivergent traits in racialised children, particularly when cultural differences in behaviour and communication diverge from neurotypical Western norms (Diemer, 2022).

Beyond diagnostic bias, cultural background also influences how neurodivergence is perceived, understood and managed. In some cultures, neurodivergent traits are stigmatised, leading to delayed diagnosis or reduced access to support (Grinker et al., 2012). In others, neurodivergence may be interpreted through spiritual or traditional lenses, which can either provide a supportive framework or further marginalise individuals (Daley, 2004). For example, in some South Asian and African communities, neurodivergence may be attributed to spiritual causes, leading families to seek traditional healers rather than medical or educational support (Ravindran & Myers, 2012; Robertson, 2021). These differing cultural interpretations affect how families engage with educational and psychological services, often influencing whether they seek formal diagnoses and interventions.

While racial disparities in autism and ADHD diagnosis have been extensively studied (Aylward et al., 2021; Cénat et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024), there is comparatively less research exploring how race and culture intersect with other neurodivergent profiles, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and Tourette's syndrome (Doyle, 2024). Furthermore, most existing research draws heavily on samples from the US and UK, limiting understanding of how neurodivergent individuals from minority backgrounds experience discrimination in non-Western contexts. Even after obtaining a diagnosis, children from racialised minority backgrounds often face unequal access to support. For example, autistic children from these communities are less likely to receive referrals for speech and language support or occupational therapy and are more frequently placed in segregated special education settings (Mandell et al., 2010). Additionally, families whose first language is not English face

challenges in navigating disability services due to language barriers and a lack of culturally appropriate resources (Norbury & Sparks, 2013).

These intersecting challenges underscore the urgent need for EPs to adopt culturally responsive and anti-racist practices. A critical step is developing culturally competent assessment tools that account for diverse communication styles, behavioural norms and cultural contexts. Dynamic assessment has been proposed as a non-biased approach to evaluating language abilities in bilingual children, offering more accurate differentiation between language impairments and language differences (Peña et al., 2001; Lidz & Peña, 2009). However, its widespread adoption remains limited due to insufficient training and resources (Carl, 2024; Hill, 2015; Le et al., 2023). This highlights a significant gap between research and practice, where innovative tools are often underutilised in favour of traditional, culturally biased methods (Harry & Klingner, 2014).

Integrating comprehensive anti-racist training into educational psychology programs is also essential to challenge systemic biases in the identification and support of neurodivergent children and young people from diverse backgrounds. Researchers emphasise the importance of preparing psychologists to address the intersection of racial identity and neurodivergence (Diemer et al., 2022; Zukerman et al., 2014). However, critics argue that such training often focuses on awareness rather than actionable strategies to dismantle systemic inequities (Botha & Frost, 2020). While implicit bias training has become increasingly common, its long-term impact on reducing racial disparities in neurodevelopmental support remains unclear (Zuckerman et al., 2014), suggesting the need for more rigorous evaluation of training programs.

Finally, collaborative, culturally sensitive approaches that respect families' values while ensuring neurodivergent children receive appropriate support are vital. Yet, implementation often falls short due to systemic power imbalances between professionals and families, particularly in marginalised communities (Harry, 2008). This raises important questions about how to genuinely empower neurodivergent children and their families as equal partners in the intervention process, rather than treating them as passive recipients of professional expertise.

By addressing both racial disparities and cultural perceptions of neurodivergence, EPs can bridge the gap between neurodivergent communities and accessible, affirming support services. A critical examination of the literature, however, reveals significant challenges in translating these ideals into practice. For example, while the need for culturally responsive assessment and intervention is well-documented, there is limited research on how these approaches can be implemented effectively across diverse educational contexts (Artiles et al., 2010). Moreover, the voices of racially and culturally diverse families are often marginalised in the development of policies and practices, perpetuating a top-down approach that fails to address their unique needs and perspectives (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). This underscores the importance of not only adopting culturally responsive practices but also critically evaluating their implementation and impact to ensure they achieve their intended goals.

The challenges in providing equitable support highlight the need for frameworks which aim to address power imbalances in professional practice. Cultural humility, a concept developed by Tervalon and Murray-García (1998), offers a valuable approach for EPs working across intersecting identities. Unlike models that encourage mastery of knowledge about marginalised groups, cultural humility emphasises ongoing self-reflection, recognition of power dynamics and learning directly from those with lived experience (Fisher, 2020). The framework encourages the critical examination of how personal and professional biases may influence decisions such as assessment and intervention options (Wright, 2019; Shriberg & Clinton, 2016). This approach is particularly relevant when navigating the complex interactions between neurodivergence, race, ethnicity and cultural background.

2.6.2 Gender and neurodivergence

Gender represents an important dimension in NDA practice, as biases in identification and support can affect how EPs recognise and respond to neurodivergent children and young people. These biases can contribute to disparities in assessment and provision of resources, with female-presenting individuals often overlooked or misdiagnosed (Hull et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2015).

Within the UK, autistic girls and women are often underdiagnosed or diagnosed later in life compared to their male counterparts, as their presentation may not align with traditional,

male-centric diagnostic criteria (Hull et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2015). Research suggests that autistic girls are more likely to engage in social camouflaging - consciously or unconsciously masking their autistic traits to fit in with peers (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2020). Hull et al. (2020) found that these camouflaging behaviours, which include supressing stimming, forcing eye contact and scripting conversations, often lead to significant psychological costs including anxiety and exhaustion and can lead to their needs being overlooked in educational and clinical settings (Lai et al., 2016). While some researchers have proposed a "female protective effect" (Robinson et al., 2013; Wigdor et al., 2022), suggesting that biological or social factors may reduce the likelihood of females being identified as autistic, others argue that this is largely a reflection of diagnostic bias rather than actual prevalence differences (Dworzynski et al., 2012). The consequence of this underdiagnosis is significant, with autistic women frequently reporting late or missed diagnoses, leading to inadequate support, mental health difficulties and challenges in adulthood (Bargiela et al., 2016).

Similarly, ADHD in girls is frequently overlooked because their symptoms, such as inattentiveness and daydreaming, are less disruptive than the hyperactivity often seen in boys (Quinn & Wigal, 2004). As a result, girls with ADHD are more likely to be misdiagnosed with anxiety or depression, delaying access to appropriate support (Mowlem et al., 2019). This gendered bias not only affects their academic performance but also their self-perception and emotional wellbeing, as many internalise their struggles as personal failures rather than recognising them as part of their neurodivergent profile (Hinshaw et al., 2012). The long-term consequences of undiagnosed ADHD in women have been linked to increased risk of mental health difficulties, workplace challenges and difficulties in self-regulation and executive functioning in adulthood (Attoe & Climie, 2023; Lynn, 2019).

Beyond autism and ADHD, gendered patterns have also been reported in other neurodivergent profiles, though these should be understood within the context of ongoing debates about classification and identification. Within the debated space of dyslexia identification discussed in Section 2.5.4, UK studies report male-to-female diagnostic ratios ranging from 2:1 to 4.5:1, depending on the criteria applied (Rutter et al., 2004; Snowling, 2008). These differences may reflect genuine prevalence variations but are also likely shaped by referral and identification biases. Girls have been shown to develop compensatory

strategies such as memorising texts or avoiding reading aloud, which can mask literacy difficulties (Arnold et al., 2005). Similarly, research suggests that that girls with dyspraxia/developmental coordination disorder (DCD) often display less overt motor difficulties compared to boys, potentially contributing to lower referral and diagnosis rates (Cleaton et al., 2021; Zwicker et al., 2012).

These gendered differences highlight the need for EPs to adopt a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of neurodivergence, ensuring that diagnostic frameworks and support services reflect the full diversity of neurodivergent presentations across genders. This requires revising diagnostic criteria to move beyond historically male-centric models, as well as providing targeted training for educators and practitioners to recognise and address gender biases in their practice (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). Additionally, fostering an approach that celebrates the unique contributions of neurodivergent girls and women can help counteract stigma and promote a more inclusive educational landscape (Dean et al., 2017).

For EPs considering NDA approaches, an awareness of these gendered patterns is important. The intersection of gender and neurodivergence represents a critical point in efforts to develop appropriate and equitable NDA practice.

2.6.3 Socioeconomic status and neurodivergence

Socioeconomic status (SES) can also affect access to support and provision for neurodivergent individuals. As previously discussed in relation to those with dyslexia (section 2.5.4.2), some research, particularly in the US, suggests that SES can affect access to assessment, support and accommodations for neurodivergent children and young people (Macdonald, 2021). For example, research by Durkin et al. (2010) and Thomas et al. (2012) found that children from affluent families are diagnosed with autism earlier than those from low-income households, even when controlling for symptom severity. These disparities appear particularly pronounced in case without co-occurring intellectual disability, historically diagnosed as Asperger's syndrome, where access often depends on parental awareness, persistence and the ability to navigate complex health and support services (Madell et al., 2009) highlighting the potential disparities in access to assessment, early intervention and support services. Families from disadvantaged backgrounds can face a

range of barriers, such as limited funds for private assessments, reduced access to professional advice, fewer advocacy resources and practical challenges such as a lack of affordable transport to attend appointments or access support facilities (Emerson & Hatton, 2007).

In a UK longitudinal study, researchers found that children growing up in a family experiencing financial difficulties presented with higher levels of ADHD traits and concluded that environmental stress and household instability could be the cause (Russell et al., 2018). Monthly income has also been identified as a factor in the daily functioning and wellbeing of children and young people with ADHD (Araten-Bergman, 2015), reinforcing the impact of economic stressors on developmental outcomes. Furthermore, the consequences of these economic disparities can extend into adulthood, with some neurodivergent individuals facing greater barriers to employment and independent living than their neurotypical peers (Roux et al., 2013; 2015).

It is important to acknowledge, however, that findings across different countries are inconsistent. The majority of studies cited above were carried out in the US, with studies from other countries offering mixed results. For example, in terms of rates of autism diagnoses, a study in Denmark found that SES did not affect diagnosis rates (Larsson et al., 2005) and in Sweden, researchers found higher rates of diagnosis for children of lower SES (Rai et al., 2012). In the UK, Baird et al., (2006) screened 50,000 children across South London and found lower rates of autism diagnosis for those of lower SES. Yet, more recently, researchers in Cambridgeshire found no association between diagnoses and SES (Sun et al., 2014).

2.6.5 Implications for educational psychology

The intersection of neurodivergence with race, culture, gender and socioeconomic status demands a shift in how EPs approach NDA practice. Drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) foundational theory of intersectionality, which examines how overlapping social identities relate to systems of oppression, an intersectional perspective is essential to NDA practice. Without this perspective, NDA efforts risk reinforcing existing inequities rather than dismantling them. To truly support neurodivergent individuals through affirmative approaches, EPs must critically examine systemic biases, ensuring that their assessments

and interventions are culturally responsive and reflective of diverse neurodivergent experiences.

Recognising how systemic inequalities shape the identification and support of neurodivergent individuals is essential to affirmative practice, as disparities in diagnosis and intervention often stem from structural barriers within education and healthcare systems (Annamma et al., 2013). Developing culturally responsive assessment tools and interventions is particularly important for NDA approaches, as neurodivergence may present differently across various demographic groups, and rigid diagnostic frameworks risk overlooking individuals who do not fit dominant profiles (Harry & Klingner, 2014). Beyond assessment, EPs committed to NDA principles must actively advocate for policies that address structural inequities, such as disparities in access to resources and support services, which disproportionately affect marginalised communities (Artiles et al., 2010).

Engagement with families and communities is also crucial to effective NDA practice, as cultural beliefs and practices influence how neurodivergence is understood and whether individuals seek formal support (Ravindran & Myers, 2012). By fostering collaborative relationships with diverse communities, EPs can develop interventions that are both effective and culturally meaningful. Integrating an intersectional perspective into NDA practice ensures that support is not only inclusive but also adaptable to the varied and complex needs of neurodivergent individuals, moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to a framework that is truly equitable and responsive.

2.7 Barriers to neurodiversity-affirming practice in EP Work

Having examined how NDA principles apply to specific neurodivergent profiles as well as the impact of intersectionality, this section considers the broader systemic factors that affect implementation within EP practice. Despite increasing advocacy for NDA and inclusive approaches, research has identified numerous barriers (Cook, 2024; Harbin et al., 2024; Manalili, 2021; Shevidi, 2024). A significant challenge lies within the institutional structure of education itself (Ferguson, 2008). As highlighted by both Cook (2024) and Hamstead (2024), many school policies remain anchored in deficit-based models, requiring formal diagnoses before students can access support. Even with increasing inclusion of neurodiversity terminology in policies, researchers argue that substantive implementation

lags behind stated commitments (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022; Slee, 2019). In the UK, the emphasis on standardised testing further reinforces a system that values conformity over personalised learning, leaving little room for the kind of flexibility that neurodivergent students may require (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Norwich & Eaton, 2015; Ruppar et al. 2016). Moreover, financial constraints within local authorities often limit the availability of specialist resources and training, making it difficult for schools to implement meaningful change (National Audit Office [NOA], 2024). A survey-based study by Warnes et al., (2021) questioned 93 teachers about their concerns regarding inclusive education for children with SEND and found that standardised testing, financial pressures and inadequate resources were key barriers to inclusion, with the national mandatory testing system identified as their highest area of concern due to its potentially exclusionary effects on children with additional needs.

Educational reform movements can further impact these structural challenges. Neoliberal educational frameworks prioritising standardisation and performance outcomes inherently conflict with the flexible, personalised principles central to NDA practice (Goodley, 2020; Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2020). In England, the academisation of schools exemplifies these tensions, as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) are expected to balance opportunities for collaborative resource sharing with performance-driven accountability pressures, which can undermine inclusive values (Lane, 2020). In fact, Black et al., (2019) found that academisation has correlated with reduced identification of SEND, suggesting that market-driven structures may disadvantage neurodivergent learners. Webster and Blanchard (2019) similarly highlight that marketisation tends to prioritise standardised approaches benefiting the majority, further marginalising neurodivergent children and young people whose needs require individualised support.

Research also suggests that limited training and professional development opportunities for teachers may also present a barrier to implementing NDA principles in schools. The Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019) outlines minimum expectations for SEND training, including identifying and supporting pupils with diverse needs. Yet, an Ofsted review of SEND provision (2020) found inconsistent teacher preparation for supporting neurodivergent learners, stating that training frequently prioritises adherence to statutory requirements rather than developing an understanding of neurodivergent

experiences, such as sensory processing, communication differences and social interaction styles. The National Association for Special Educational Needs (nasen, 2021) similarly suggests that continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities focused on neurodiversity remain limited in many educational settings. Their research indicates that training can often adopt deficit-based perspectives rather than promoting strengths-based, affirming approaches. These training limitations are also acknowledged in the recent SEND Review (DfE, 2022), which recognises that mainstream schools frequently lack adequate training and the structural supports necessary to meet diverse needs effectively. Without sufficiently trained staff, even well-intentioned inclusive policies often fail to translate into meaningful practice (Boyle et al., 2013), placing neurodivergent learners at greater risk of exclusion, emotional distress and underachievement. For EPs, these training gaps can pose significant challenges. Even where EPs advocate for NDA practices, their effectiveness will likely be limited if school staff lack the foundational training necessary to understand, embrace and confidently implement NDA recommendations.

While these structural and policy barriers create significant challenges, they exist alongside and are reinforced by broader societal attitudes towards neurodivergence, which can complicate efforts to implement affirming approaches. Many schools and policymakers continue to view accommodations as additional provision rather than essential components of an inclusive educational environment (Able et al., 2015). Resistance to systemic change can be rooted in ableist assumptions that equate neurodivergence with dysfunction, leading to policies that prioritise behavioural compliance over genuine support (Manalili, 2021). In this context, EPs often find themselves in the difficult position of advocating for change within institutions that may be reluctant to adopt new approaches. While individual EPs may embrace affirming principles in their practice, their effectiveness can be constrained by these broader institutional and societal factors.

2.8 Summary

This chapter has explored NDA practice through its historical evolution, theoretical foundations and practical applications in educational settings. It has examined the concepts of neurodiversity and neurodivergence, describing a range of neurotypes and the impact of their differences day-to-day experiences as well as longer term outcomes. The literature demonstrates that NDA approaches offer a progressive shift away from deficit-based

models, promoting strengths-based approaches, genuine inclusivity and respect for neurodivergent identities. However, significant challenges remain, particularly in relation to intersectionality, policy constraints and the translation of theory into practice.

Despite the growing emphasis on NDA principles within educational psychology, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the role of EPs in this context. EPs are uniquely positioned to influence educational practices at multiple levels, from individual support and consultation to advising on systemic policy changes. Their professional expertise and ethical responsibilities underscore the importance of their voices in the discourse on NDA practice. Yet, empirical research on EPs' perspectives remains scarce, leaving a critical gap in understanding how NDA is being applied in real-world settings.

This research addresses this gap by examining EPs' perspectives on NDA practice. By exploring their views, experiences and challenges in adopting NDA approaches, this study aims to provide insights into the practical realities of NDA implementation. The findings are expected to contribute to the evolving discourse on inclusive educational psychology, highlighting potential barriers and informing the development of more effective and inclusive educational frameworks.

The following chapter outlines the methodology for this study, detailing how qualitative interviews with EPs will be used to explore their perspectives, experiences and challenges in adopting NDA practices.

2.9 Research question

How do educational psychologists conceptualise neurodiversity-affirming practice and what challenges and opportunities shape its implementation?

2.10 Research aims

The aim of this research is to explore how EPs conceptualise NDA practice and to understand the challenges and opportunities that influence it implementation in local authority settings. The study seeks to contribute to the growing literature by providing insights into how NDA approaches are interpreted and applied by EPs in their everyday practice, supporting future policy, training and service development.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction to chapter

In this chapter I provide an overview of the methodology used in this research study, outlining its philosophical foundations, research design and analytical approach. The research is grounded in a critical realist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. Together, these perspectives recognise that while real social structures and systems shape EPs' work, our understanding of them is always mediated through individual interpretation, shaped by culture, context and experience (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Fletcher, 2016). I chose this philosophical positioning as it felt like the most appropriate foundation for exploring EPs' views and experiences of NDA practice within the wider systemic, cultural and professional contexts of their work. The chapter goes on to describe the research design, participant recruitment and demographics and the data collection procedures used. The chosen method of analysis, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), is explained in detail, with a discussion of its strengths, limitations and its appropriateness for addressing the research aims.

3.2. Philosophical assumptions

Philosophical assumptions form the foundation upon which research is built, shaping both the approach to data collection and its interpretation. These assumptions, encompassing ontological and epistemological perspectives, address the nature of reality and the ways in which knowledge is created and understood. In this research I adopt a critical realist ontology, which recognises that real social structures, such as educational systems, policy frameworks and diagnostic practices, exist independently of our perceptions, yet cannot be fully accessed or understood outside of the social, cultural and historical contexts that mediate our knowledge (Bhaskar, 2008; Fletcher, 2016). In relation to neurodiversity, this allows me to acknowledge neurobiological differences while remaining critically engaged with the societal structures and power relations that shape how those differences are interpreted and responded to. In parallel, my research is underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology, which assumes that knowledge is constructed through individual meaning-making rather than an objective truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). From this position, I assume that EPs' understandings of NDA practice are shaped by their personal experiences,

professional training, language, institutional norms and interactions with others. Knowledge is therefore seen as open to multiple interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The combination of critical realism and interpretivism creates a framework which enables an in-depth exploration of EPs' experiences, acknowledging the influences of broader, structural contexts as well as the subjective, interpretive ways individuals make sense of their work. This approach also helps me to address the intersectionality issues discussed in Chapter 2, recognising that neurodiversity cannot be understood in isolation from other social and cultural factors.

3.3. Research Procedure

Building on the philosophical foundations that inform the principles of this research, I now turn to a discussion of the methodological approach that underpins the design of this study. This section outlines the rationale behind the chosen methods and explains how they work well with the overall research aims, providing a framework for understanding how the data will be collected, analysed and interpreted.

3.3.1 Quantitative and qualitative approaches

Quantitative and qualitative methodology should not be viewed as polar opposites (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024), but rather as different ends on a continuum (Bazeley, 2018; Newman & Benz, 1998). Understanding the differences between them depends on both the philosophical assumptions that researchers bring to their studies and the specific research strategies used (Creswell, 2009). Quantitative methods often gather numerical data for statistical analysis, measuring the 'what' and 'how much', with a focus on measurement, objectivity and generalisability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative methods, in contrast, look to generate richer textual descriptions that explore the 'why' and 'how', reflecting an emphasis on understanding meaning and context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). However, as argued by Hammersley (1992) and Bryman (2006), methodological choices are not rigidly tied to particular paradigms and researchers are increasingly choosing their methods based on their research questions rather than philosophical allegiances. In the current study, I adopted a 'big Q' Qualitative approach (Kidder & Fine, 1987), where qualitative principles informed my data collection and analysis methods, as well as the underlying philosophical assumptions, research design and interpretative framework.

3.3.2 Qualitative approaches

I initially considered three qualitative methodologies: Grounded Theory (GT), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Thematic Analysis (TA). Within TA, I specifically explored Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a distinctive approach that emphasises researcher reflexivity and the subjective, iterative nature of thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Each methodology has unique strengths and considerations, making them valuable tools depending on the study's objectives. GT facilitates the development of theories grounded in data, IPA focuses on a detailed exploration of individual, lived experiences and TA, particularly RTA, provides a flexible method for identifying and analysing patterns within qualitative data. The following sections provide an overview of these approaches and explain the selection of RTA as the most appropriate method for achieving the study's aims.

3.3.2.1 Grounded theory

Grounded Theory (GT) is a qualitative methodology designed to develop theories directly grounded in data rather than based on preconceived hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It employs a simultaneous process of data collection and analysis, using systematic coding procedures to identify patterns and construct theoretical insights (Charmaz, 2006). GT is particularly well-suited to research areas with limited prior knowledge, where the primary aim is to generate new theoretical frameworks. Although GT excels in producing theoretical insights, it was not the most suitable methodology for this study. My primary aim was to explore the views of EPs and understand their perspectives, rather than to construct a new theoretical framework. The exploratory nature of my research question aligned more closely with approaches that allow for detailed analysis of participants' viewpoints. Additionally, GT requires the researcher to maintain a high level of objectivity to ensure theories emerge free from preconceptions (Glaser, 1978). Given my professional role within the same field as my participants, I recognised that achieving complete objectivity might prove challenging. Furthermore, the resource-intensive and cyclical nature of GT was not necessary for effectively addressing the study's objectives.

3.3.2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) explores how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiographic analysis, IPA emphasises the detailed examination of personal accounts to uncover the meanings participants attribute to their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This approach is particularly suited to studies exploring subjective experiences in depth, often with a small, homogeneous sample. Despite its strengths, I did not feel that IPA was an appropriate methodology for this study. My research focused on exploring the perspectives and professional insights of EPs rather than their lived experiences in a phenomenological sense. Additionally, IPA's idiographic focus on deeply analysing individual cases felt less aligned with the broader exploratory aim of identifying patterns across participants' perspectives.

3.3.2.3 Thematic analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a widely used qualitative methodology for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a flexible method, TA is adaptable to a variety of research questions and epistemological positions, making it a valuable tool for exploring participants' perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2022). It offers a systematic approach to organising data while allowing for the exploration of both explicit and implicit meanings.

While several approaches to TA exist (Braun & Clark, 2020), I chose reflexive TA (RTA) for this study. Unlike more structured approaches that prioritise coding reliability or follow predefined codebooks, RTA embraces the researcher's active role in theme development, viewing subjectivity and reflexivity as integral to the interpretative process (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2022). This flexible approach aligns well with my philosophical stance, allowing themes to emerge from the data while acknowledging my own interpretative engagement. The following section provides a detailed rationale for choosing RTA.

3.3.2.4 Reflexive thematic analysis

First described by Braun and Clarke (2006), RTA involves six flexible phases:

- Familiarisation with the dataset
- Data coding

- Initial theme generation

- Theme development and review

- Theme defining and naming

- Writing up

These phases are intended as adaptable guidelines, encouraging fluidity rather than rigid adherence to sequential steps (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022).

A defining feature of RTA is its emphasis on reflexivity, requiring researchers to continually reflect on their assumptions, biases and decision-making processes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This ongoing reflection ensures coherence and rigour, acknowledging that the researcher actively constructs and interprets the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Reflexivity involves critically engaging with the researcher's positionality and the ways it shapes the analysis.

RTA was particularly well-suited for this study for several reasons. Its flexibility accommodates the exploratory nature of my research, which seeks to understand the individual perspectives of EPs. Unlike methodologies requiring strict adherence to predefined frameworks or themes, RTA allows for an inductive, organic approach to data analysis. This inductive process is essential for uncovering emergent patterns and themes that reflect the complexity of participants' professional insights and experiences.

Furthermore, RTA's emphasis on reflexivity resonates with my position as a researcher working within the same professional field as my participants. This approach supports transparency and critical reflection on my positionality, ensuring that my interpretations are both grounded in the data and contextually informed. The capacity of RTA to acknowledge and incorporate subjectivity aligns with my epistemological stance, which holds that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by individual and contextual factors. By enabling a detailed exploration of contextually rich data while embracing my own interpretative role, RTA provided a robust and coherent framework for addressing the aims of this study. A more detailed discussion of how RTA was applied to the data will follow in section 3.6.

3.4 Design and procedure

In the following section I detail the design of the study, including the recruitment strategy, data collection method and stages of analysis. I also explain how ethical principles,

such as informed consent, confidentiality and reflexivity were integrated throughout the research process to ensure rigour and respect for the participants.

3.4.1 Recruitment

The study employed opportunity sampling (Warren et al., 2014) to recruit EPs from Local Authority (LA) Educational Psychology Services (EPS). To take part in the study, the participants needed to meet the following criteria:

- Be a qualified EP registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC);
- Have received either training or CPD input on NDA practice within the last two years.

The criteria ensured that the participants were able to contribute to the area of study and had some awareness and understanding of the language associated with NDA practice. Invitations to participate in the research were sent out via email to the Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs) at three LA EPSs. These particular regions were selected using convenience sampling (Robinson, 2014), with one being the authority that I work for and the other two being neighbouring services. Although this approach limits geographical diversity, it provided access to EPs working across different local contexts with relevant experience, acknowledging practical constraints such as time and resources (Etikan et al., 2016). The PEPs were asked to forward the recruitment poster (Appendix 2) to all main grade and Senior EPs working in their authority. Six EPs volunteered to take part in the research ranging from newly qualified to Senior EPs with many years of experience (Table 3.1). Three of the six participants worked at the same EPS as I did so they were known to me professionally, which raised ethical considerations and concerns about potential bias or perceived pressure to take part in the study. Measures taken to address and minimise these issues are outlined in the ethics section of this research.

Each participant was sent a consent form (Appendix 3) via email as well as a Standard Information Sheet (Appendix 4) which outlined the purpose of the research and information regarding confidentiality and their right to withdraw. Once participants confirmed that they wanted to take part in the research, a date and time was arranged for a semi-structured interview to be carried out over Teams. To prepare participants and give them the opportunity to reflect on the topic being explored, I sent an overview of the interview questions at least 24 hours in advance (Appendix 5). This approach was intended to help

participants feel more comfortable with the research process, fostering trust and transparency. By providing the questions ahead of time, I aimed to encourage thoughtful and meaningful responses while alleviating any potential anxiety about the interview. Haukås and Tishakov (2024) argue that sharing interview questions beforehand enables participants to reflect on their beliefs and environment, leading to more insightful responses that enrich research outcomes. Additionally, this practice supports ethical standards by promoting informed consent, enhancing the benefits of research and minimising potential harm.

Table 3.1

Participant roles ordered by length of experience

Role	No. of years' experience	Pseudonym
Educational psychologist	27	Molly
Senior educational psychologist	18	Melanie
Senior educational psychologist	10	Jen
Senior educational psychologist	10	Ruby
Educational psychologist	8	Lara
Educational psychologist	1	Holly

3.4.2 Sample size

Sampling is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research, influencing the depth and scope of insights that can be drawn from a study. Determining the appropriate sample size often involves balancing practical constraints with methodological considerations, with the goal of reaching a sufficient amount of data to address the research questions meaningfully (Boddy, 2016; Edwards & Holland, 2013). The concept of data saturation, often referred to as the point where no new themes or perspectives emerge, is a common consideration in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2020). Originally rooted in grounded theory (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021), saturation, coined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), marks the stage where data collection can end as no additional insights are revealed about a theoretical construct (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2021b) summarise its broader application as the moment when no new themes can be identified in the data. Hennink and Kaiser's (2021) review suggests that saturation for interview studies is often reached with sample

sizes between nine and 17 participants. However, this framework aligns more closely with positivist approaches, where themes are conceptualised as being 'found' in the data rather than constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Additionally, there is limited evidence regarding the factors that influence when saturation is achieved (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021).

Critics of the saturation concept, particularly within Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), argue that it is problematic. Braun and Clarke (2021b, 2021c) contend that new meanings can continue to emerge through deeper engagement with the data and that statistical tools to determine sample sizes are incompatible with the iterative and interpretive nature of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). Instead, Malterud et al. (2016) propose the concept of 'information power,' which emphasises considering the richness of data in relation to the study's aims, theoretical underpinnings and the quality of accounts, rather than seeking saturation.

Braun and Clarke (2021b) offer practical considerations for determining sample sizes in RTA, including the breadth and focus of the research question, data collection methods and diversity in participant perspectives. They also recommend ongoing reflection throughout data collection to ensure the richness of data and to consider whether additional sampling is required to capture varied narratives. For this study, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2016) recommendation for postgraduate research, suggesting a sample size of six to 15 participants. Although I was intending to carry out a second recruitment drive, having interviewed six participants and continually reviewed the data being gathered, I felt I had accumulated a rich dataset with sufficient variation and depth to address the research question and provide a robust foundation for interpreting shared patterns of understanding among my participants.

3.4.3. Data collection

Individual, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the primary data. Initially, I considered group interviews or focus groups but determined that respondent interviews would offer greater flexibility to explore participants' views in depth whilst also providing a more comfortable and confidential environment for discussing complex and potentially sensitive viewpoints. Unlike group methods, such as focus groups, which emphasise interaction and collective discussion, my research aimed to understand individual perspectives rather than the dynamics of group discourse. Although group discussions could

provide interesting insights for future studies, my priority was to explore personal perspectives and experiences.

Semi-structured interviews facilitate the collection of rich, qualitative data, capturing detailed narratives and personal insights that are invaluable for an emerging topic such as neurodiversity-affirming practice, where individuals' perspectives and experiences are still evolving (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of nascent viewpoints, providing comprehensive insights into a relatively new area of study (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Additionally, one-to-one interviews minimise the influence of group dynamics on responses, fostering open and honest discussions in a confidential setting (Morgan, 1996).

3.4.4 Interview structure

A set of interview questions, including prompts, was developed to ensure a consistent and reliable approach to data collection across all interviews. This structure provided enough guidance to maintain focus while remaining flexible enough to allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' views. The questions were developed as a result of the literature review and a desire to guide the discussion through a natural exploration of participants' experiences. Drawing on the themes identified in the literature, the questions were structured to encourage participants to speak specifically about examples from practice, ensuring that discussions remained grounded in real-world experience rather than becoming overly theoretical – a challenge encountered during the literature search where discussions of neurodiversity often remained abstract. The questions were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their practice 'on the ground' rather than just conceptually. I also chose to end the interview with an aspirational question to explore participants' visions for future practice and ensure the interview ended on a positive, forward-looking note.

I piloted the interview questions with a colleague to ensure clarity, accessibility and engagement potential. This pilot review focused on the refining the wording and structure of the questions, ensuring they were appropriately open-ended with suitable prompts. Based on the feedback received, some questions were removed for being too broad or wordy, while others were revised to better align with the research objectives and enhance their

clarity. This process helped ensure that the final set of questions (Appendix 5), was both effective and appropriate for the study's aims. To help participants feel more at ease, I provided them with an overview of the main interview questions (excluding probing questions) at least 24 hours in advance (Appendix 5). While this approach might have encouraged more prepared responses, Buys et al. (2022) argue that it does not compromise the exploratory nature of the interview. Instead, it fosters a sense of comfort and trust, creating an environment conducive to open and authentic discussions. This approach helped participants engage thoughtfully and meaningfully with the topics under exploration.

3.4.5 Interview procedure

All interviews were carried out online using Microsoft Teams. Each participant was given the option to meet in-person, but all chose to meet online. Although face-to-face interviews are often preferred for their ability to foster rapport and enable deeper interaction (Irani, 2019; Keen et al., 2022), the online format was offered for its practicality and accessibility (Gray et al., 2020), particularly given the logistical challenges of coordinating in-person meetings. I prepared for the interviews by consulting guidance for conducting qualitative research virtually (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Janghorban et al, 2014; Salmons, 2015; Seitz, 2016). Key considerations included:

- Ensuring a stable internet connection.
- Testing audio and video quality before each interview.
- Creating rapport with participants through initial small talk.
- Minimising environmental distractions, ensuring privacy and being prepared for technical interruptions.
- Clearly explaining how the interview recordings would be managed, stored and transcribed, with participants' explicit consent.

Beyond these practical considerations, I was mindful of creating a psychologically safe environment where participants felt comfortable sharing honest reflections about their professional practice. This involved creating a warm, conversational tone from the outset, using active listening techniques to validate participants' experiences and remaining genuinely curious about their perspectives. I was particularly conscious of creating space for participants to explore complex or uncertain feelings about NDA practice, acknowledging

that this is an evolving area where practitioners are still developing their understanding and approaches.

At the start of each interview, I introduced myself as a trainee EP and explained my dual role as a practitioner and researcher, clarifying that I was acting in a researcher capacity during the interview (Appendix 6). This clarification made it explicit that I would maintain a neutral, non-judgmental stance towards their responses, establishing clear boundaries and minimising potential role confusion, particularly with the three participants who I worked with professionally. I reminded participants of the study's aim and confirmed that the interview would be audio recorded. Participants were assured of their right to choose not to answer any questions without needing to justify their decision. I also confirmed that their data would be stored securely, and anonymity ensured, reiterating their right to withdraw from the study up until their data was anonymised. Before starting the recording, I provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions, reviewed the consent form (Appendix 3) shared at least 24 hours in advance, and obtained verbal consent. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they had any questions and sent a debrief sheet via email (Appendix 7).

Interviews were recorded using the Microsoft Teams recording and transcription function. At the end of each interview the audio file and transcription document were downloaded and saved to my personal file within the University of Nottingham's Microsoft OneDrive (GDPR-compliant). Once the secure transfer to OneDrive was confirmed, all recordings and transcripts were immediately deleted from the Microsoft Teams platform to minimise any risk of unauthorised access.

3.4.6 Data transcription

For data transcription, I used the Teams-generated transcript as a starting point, carefully reviewing and correcting it while listening to the audio recording. All spoken words were transcribed verbatim to accurately capture the participants' experiences and perspectives. Repeated words and non-verbal utterances, such as 'erm,' were omitted, as they were not considered meaningful for the analysis. Punctuation was added to improve each transcript's readability. I also included my own questions and contributions to provide context for participants' responses and to approach the data with reflexivity. All identifying

information, including participants' names and locations, was anonymised in the transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms. Each transcript was then thoroughly reviewed to ensure accuracy.

3.4.7 Reflexivity during interviews

As qualitative interviewing is inherently subjective, reflexivity has increasingly been recognised as an essential part of generating knowledge in exploratory research (Berger, 2013; Buys et al., 2022). Reflexivity requires the researcher to continuously reflect on their own assumptions, prejudices and biases to understand how these could affect the research (Clancy, 2013). This involves grappling with complex questions, such as how to interpret and understand one's own perspectives while simultaneously understanding the perspectives of others - or whether this is even fully possible (Gerstl-Pepin et al., 2012). During the interview process, I remained acutely aware of my own potential biases (as outlined in my positionality statement in Section 1.3) and how they might influence the data collection. To foster a neutral and open environment, I engaged in reflective practices before, during and after each interview. Before conducting interviews, I critically examined my own preconceptions and assumptions about the topic of neurodiversity-affirming practice, ensuring that I approached each conversation with an open mind. Throughout the interviews, I maintained a conscious effort to listen actively and refrain from leading questions that might steer participants' responses. I kept a reflexive journal where I documented my thoughts, feelings and observations related to each interview. This journal served as a tool for continuous self-reflection, allowing me to identify and address any moments where my own thoughts or reactions could have influenced the interaction (examples can be seen in Appendix 17). By reviewing my reflexive journal regularly, I was able to maintain a balanced and respectful dialogue, allowing participants to talk freely about their experiences and perspectives. Reflexivity also enhances awareness of ethical issues inherent in conducting research, allowing the researcher to protect participants from potential harm and ensure the integrity of the research process (Gullemin & Gilliam, 2004). Further discussion on reflexivity as it applies to the data analysis phase will be addressed in Section 3.6.

3.5. Ethical considerations

This research adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct and Code of Human Research Ethics (Oates, 2021; The British Psychological Society, 2021), as well as the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2016) professional standards and the Data Protection Act (2018) to ensure participant protection. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Nottingham School of Psychology Ethics Committee in May 2023 (Appendix 1). Recruitment and data collection commenced only after obtaining this approval. Safeguarding participants' rights is a core principle of conducting interviews, with particular emphasis placed on ensuring informed consent, as well as maintaining anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process (Ryan et al., 2009).

This section outlines the ethical framework guiding this study, grounded in the core principles of the BPS' Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021): respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. I implemented various safeguards throughout the research process, including, obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and addressing potential power dynamics and participant well-being.

3.5.1. Informed consent

Prior to the interview, participants were provided with an information sheet (Appendix 4) outlining the research aims, procedures and their right to withdraw. Informed consent to record and transcribe the interview was obtained in written form based on this information and reaffirmed verbally just before the interview started. At the end of the interview, participants were debriefed and reminded of their right to withdraw from the research. They were also provided with a debrief sheet (Appendix 7), which summarised the research aims and encouraged them to seek support in supervision if the interview prompted any uncomfortable feelings or reflections about their professional practice or personal experiences.

3.5.2. Confidentiality and anonymity

To protect participant identity, all names and identifying details were anonymised in the transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms to safeguard confidentiality. Care was taken to ensure that no information remained in the final dataset that could inadvertently reveal

participants' identities, such as references to specific locations, workplaces or unique personal details. This process involved a meticulous review of the transcripts to identify and remove any potentially identifying elements.

In addition to anonymisation, stringent measures were taken to secure the data. All files, including audio recordings, transcripts and analysis documents were stored in a password-protected and encrypted storage system (OneDrive) ensuring compliance with the Data Protection Act (2018) and ethical guidelines. Participants were also provided with a Privacy Notice (Appendix 8) outlining how their data would be collected, processed, stored and their rights regarding their personal information under GDPR regulations.

3.5.3. Power

Power imbalances are often cited as a point of ethical concern in semi-structured interviews (Husband, 2020; Jianbin, 2024). In the context of this study, 'the researcher' and 'the researched' begin on fairly even ground due to our shared professional roles as EPs, with the key distinction being that I am in a trainee role. This shared professional identity helps to mitigate some traditional power dynamics (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; Limerick et al., 1996), as participants are more likely to perceive me as a peer rather than an authority figure. However, the act of conducting research and framing questions can still introduce subtle dynamics where participants may feel compelled to provide responses that align with perceived expectations or the aims of the study.

To address this, I consciously adopted a collaborative stance during interviews. I took time to build rapport with participants and maintained transparency about the research process and the use of data. I encouraged participants to share their thoughts openly and reminded them of their rights, including the right to skip questions or withdraw from the study. I maintained a neutral and non-judgmental approach throughout the interviews, ensuring that participants felt at ease sharing their genuine perspectives. By adopting a reflexive approach (as discussed in Section 3.4.6.), I continuously examined my own positionality and its potential impact on the research process, ensuring a fair and respectful environment for all participants (Appendix 16).

3.6. Data Analysis

As outlined in Section 3.3.2.4, analysis of the research data was carried out using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) six phases of RTA. Although the phases are presented in a linear way, it is important to note that the process was iterative and fluid, allowing for movement back and forth between phases as new insights emerged and themes developed (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phase 1: Familiarisation

In the initial phase I focused on immersing myself in the dataset. Before turning to the transcriptions, I listened to each interview recording and made notes using a technique Braun and Clarke (2022) call a 'familiarisation doodle', which is a visual representation of my initial impressions, emerging ideas and reactions to the data. This idea appealed to me as I often find sketching and mind-mapping to be helpful in keeping myself engaged with content during lectures or other learning activities. As described by Braun and Clarke (2022), the doodles are intended to be meaningful only to the researcher, serving as a foundation to more formal analytical thinking. This proved to be an effective way of actively making sense of the data. Examples of my familiarisation doodles can be seen in Appendix 9. I then completed the transcriptions of the interviews (as described in Section 3.4.7) and re-read each one at least twice to develop a comprehensive understanding of the content and context. During each reading, I made notes on initial ideas and broad patterns, as well as similarities and differences in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Examples of these notes are shown in Appendix 10.

Phase 2: Data coding

The coding phase involved systematically identifying and labelling meaningful features of the data which were relevant to my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Codes represent key concepts, ideas or meanings and can be semantic (explicit, surface-level meanings), latent (deeper, implicit interpretations) or a combination of both, depending on the context (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Although Braun and Clarke (2021a) caution against strict line-by-line coding to avoid over-fragmentation and a loss of context, I adopted this approach flexibly to ensure a thorough examination of the dataset. Through repeated readings of the data, I coded relevant

phrases, sentences or longer passages. I used a combination of semantic and latent coding, identifying both explicit statements about NDA practice and underlying assumptions or implicit meanings. The initial coding was open in nature, allowing the codes to emerge from the data without predetermined categories. I focused on coding meaningful and contextually rich segments that were relevant to the research questions whilst maintaining the integrity of participants' narratives. Codes were predominantly data-driven, stemming from an inductive approach, but also informed by the theoretical framework and research aims. For example, I coded explicit references to neurodiversity-affirming practices, as well as implicit mentions of inclusive strategies or challenges in practice (Appendix 11). The coding process was iterative, with several rounds of review across the dataset to ensure even and thorough coverage. Throughout this phase, I continued to engage in reflexive practice, documenting my assumptions, thoughts and decisions in my research journal.

Phase 3: Initial theme generation

In the third phase of the analysis, I organised the initial codes into potential themes by examining the coded data for patterns and connections (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). This process involved grouping related codes together to form overarching themes that encapsulated key aspects of the dataset, capturing both explicit and implicit meanings. To facilitate this, I employed a hands-on approach, cutting out the codes and physically laying them on a large table (Appendix 12). This method allowed me to visually explore relationships, overlaps and distinctions between codes. Consistent with RTA, I did not employ traditional reliability measures such as inter-rater reliability or coding comparison. Braun and Clarke (2019; 2021a) explicitly argue against such measures, as they are based on positivist assumptions that coding can be 'correct' or objective rather than inherently interpretative.

After completing the initial groupings, I transferred them to a thematic map for further review and refinement (Appendix 14). Through an iterative process, I merged, renamed and restructured codes, ensuring that themes remained closely aligned with my research question. For example, I merged the codes 'neuro-affirming communication strategies' and 'use of visual supports for communication' into a broader code called 'alternative communication approaches' after recognising their conceptual overlap. Mapping the themes manually also allowed for a more reflexive approach, encouraging deeper engagement with

the data and preventing themes from being dictated purely by software-driven clustering. This phase required balancing a close engagement with the data and a broader interpretative lens to generate meaningful and coherent themes. I continued to be reflexive throughout this phase, ensuring that the themes emerged from the data rather than being shaped solely by my preconceptions.

Phase 4: Theme development and review

Building on the themes identified in phase 3, I moved into the theme development and review phase. This stage involved a thorough examination of the themes to ensure they were coherent, consistent and accurately represented the data (Appendix 15). For example, I has initially identified a theme called 'Professional challenges', but on reviewing the data, I decided this theme was too broad and contained two distinct narratives. Some extracts dealt with systemic barriers, such as rigid assessment processes, while others focused on internal professional conflicts, such as feeling caught between idealism and practice. I revisited all the data extracts associated with each theme, assessing whether they formed a meaningful and distinct narrative.

To validate the themes, I checked if they worked both independently and in relation to the entire dataset. This involved evaluating the internal homogeneity (consistency within themes) and external heterogeneity (distinctiveness between themes) to ensure that each theme was clear and well-defined. Adjustments were made as necessary, such as combining overlapping themes, breaking down complex themes into sub-themes, or discarding themes that were not sufficiently supported by the data.

The outcome of this phase was a refined set of themes, ready for the final stages of definition and naming. These themes provided a comprehensive understanding of the dataset, laying the groundwork for a detailed and insightful analysis.

Phase 5: Theme defining and naming

In the theme defining and naming phase, I focused on articulating the essence of each theme and assigning clear, concise names that captured their core meaning (Byrne, 2022). The naming process required careful consideration of both semantic and latent elements, ensuring that themes names captured not only what participants explicitly stated but also

the deeper meanings and assumptions underlying their accounts. This phase was not entirely separate from the theme development and review phase (Phase 4); rather, the process of defining and naming themes was woven throughout Phase 4 as I iteratively refined the themes. As patterns emerged and connections were made, I began to develop provisional definitions and names for each theme, which were continuously revisited and adjusted as the analysis progressed.

To define the themes, I wrote descriptions outlining their scope, central ideas and the specific aspects of the data they encompassed (Appendix 16). This process involved a thorough review of the data extracts within each theme, ensuring that the definitions were both specific enough to convey each theme's unique characteristics and broad enough to capture the diversity within the data. These definitions evolved alongside the grouping of codes and refinement of themes during Stage 4.

Naming the themes was an iterative process as well. Initially, I assigned working titles to themes, which were refined as the analysis deepened. I aimed to create names that were clear, engaging and reflective of the essence of each theme, with a balance of being both descriptive and evocative (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Byrne, 2022). Throughout this phase, I independently revisited the data to ensure the names and definitions remained true to the participants' perspectives and the overall dataset.

Phase 6: Write up

The final stage involved writing up the findings in a clear and cohesive manner. Although presented as a distinct phase, this process involved movement between writing and the earlier stages, particularly theme defining and naming (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The aim was to present the themes in a way that truly reflected their core meaning while addressing the research question.

The results of the analysis are presented in the next chapter, where each theme is discussed in detail. Themes are illustrated using data excerpts, accompanied by an analytic commentary to highlight key insights and connections. Particular attention was given to ensuring the narrative was coherent and reflected the complexity and depth of the participants' perspectives.

Additionally, the organisation of themes was carefully considered to create a logical flow that aligned with the research aims and theoretical framework. Links to the broader literature and implications of the findings are explored in Chapter 5.

3.6.1 Trustworthiness and validity measures

To ensure the rigour of my analysis, I engaged in a reflexive and iterative process of coding, theme development and interpretation. Although I did not apply a formal checklist during analysis, I drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist as a reflective tool to support transparency and coherence in how I approached the analytic process. It served as a useful reference point, prompting me to remain mindful of good practice in theme generation and data representation. This checklist provided a practical framework for evaluating each stage of the analytic process, from coding to theme generation and interpretation. Systematically applying these criteria enhanced the credibility, coherence and transparency of my analysis.

Equal attention was given to each transcript throughout the analytic process to uphold the principles of 'commitment and rigour' as outlined by Yardley (2000). This involved fully immersing myself in each participant's narrative to ensure that their perspectives were consistently valued and accurately reflected in the analysis. By engaging deeply and systematically with each transcript, I avoided privileging certain voices over others and maintained consistency across the dataset.

This iterative process required revisiting the data multiple times, particularly during the coding and theme development stages, to ensure thoroughness and balance. By dedicating equal effort and scrutiny to each dataset, I upheld the standards of good qualitative research, ensuring that the findings represented the richness and diversity of the data. This commitment to balance and detail supported transparency, as each participant's contribution was given equal weight in shaping the emergent themes.

3.7 Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the philosophical positioning of the research, detailing how these perspectives influenced the methodological approach and analytic strategy. I provided a rationale for the use of semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, describing the steps taken during data generation, coding and theme development. I also

addressed considerations of research quality and rigour, including ethical practices and measures to ensure trustworthiness and validity. This chapter has offered a comprehensive overview of the research design and analytic process, providing the foundation for the presentation and discussion of findings in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter presents the findings from the study. The findings are organised into themes which emerged from the analysis detailed in Chapter 3. Each theme is presented as an illustrative account, accompanied by relevant data extracts from the interviews, to provide a rich understanding of the participants' views. As outlined in Chapter 3, this study involved six female EPs with varying levels of experience in the UK, ranging from one to 27 years. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identities. For a breakdown of participant roles, experience and pseudonyms, see Table 3.1 in Chapter 3.

4.2 Introduction to the themes

Five themes were generated through reflexive thematic analysis, as shown in Figure 4.1. These themes are interconnected and collectively reflect EPs' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in embedding NDA practices within educational settings. They highlight the structural barriers, professional shifts and evolving approaches within educational psychology, illustrating the complexity of integrating NDA principles into practice.

Figure 4.1

Final themes

1. Systemic barriers to neurodiversity-affirming practice

2. Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice

3. Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice

4. Prioritising neurodivergent voices

5. The importance of collaboration
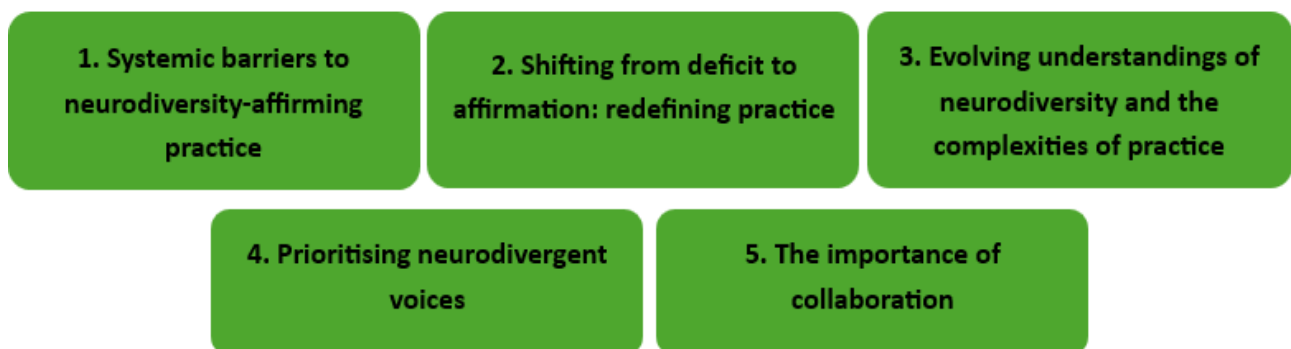
Table 4.1 illustrates examples of how the five themes emerged through the analytical process. It demonstrates the progression from raw interview data through initial coding to the final themes. A more comprehensive worked example of this analytical process can be seen in Appendix 13.

Table 4.1

Theme development

Example data extract	Initial code	Final theme
"...very strict nature of the curriculum... isn't necessarily neurodiverse affirming..." (Jen)	Systemic constraints and rigid education system	Theme 1: Systemic barriers to neurodiversity-affirming practice
"...moving away from the deficit model... thinking about sensory processing differences rather than difficulties." (Jen)	Moving away from deficit-based thinking	Theme 2: Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice
"...a real kind of sea change in everybody's understanding of what autism is..." (Molly)	Growing awareness of neurodiversity	Theme 3: Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice. *Subtheme 3.1: Growing awareness and advocacy*
"...what does this child need in order to be successful in this society today?" (Ruby)	Helping ND children navigate an NT world	Theme 3: Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice. *Subtheme 3.2: Balancing affirmation with navigating*
"...talking to the children because it staggers me... schools still don't talk to the children about what they want." (Molly)	Prioritising voice of ND children	Theme 4: Prioritising neurodivergent voices
"It's got to be a partnership. Otherwise, it just doesn't work." (Ruby)	It's a collaborative effort	Theme 5: The importance of collaboration

4.3 Theme 1: Systemic barriers to neurodiversity-affirming practice

All participants identified significant barriers that hinder the effective implementation of NDA practice in educational settings. These barriers operate at multiple levels, from rigid institutional structures and engrained deficit-based narratives to chronic resource limitations and policy constraints.

A prominent barrier discussed by participants was the rigid structure of mainstream education, which creates fundamental obstacles to inclusive practice. Jen observed that current school policies, including curriculum expectations and uniform requirements, fail to accommodate the range of needs and differences experienced by neurodivergent learners:

> *I wonder if the sort of very strict nature of the curriculum at the moment and environments and uniforms and all that kind of stuff isn't necessarily neurodiverse affirming... all children in terms of their diverse learning styles or thinking styles or sensory processing needs are sort of all treated in the same way at the moment as though they shouldn't be diverse, but all the same*. (Jen)

This observation reveals how standardisation within education can actively work against the principles of NDA practice, which require flexibility and personalisation. Molly expanded on this by connecting current educational structures to historical and outdated origins:

> *I read a really interesting article a few years ago where it was talking about how our school system was developed in Victorian times and it was developed to create absolute symmetry throughout all of the schools so that every child could become an interchangeable cog in the wheels of industry... But our school systems are still the same.* (Molly)

This historical perspective highlights how educational structures designed for industrial-era standardisation continue to affect contemporary practices, creating environments that are poorly suited to neurodivergent children and young people who may require more flexibility.

Holly further emphasised how deeply embedded these rigid structures are, making systemic change particularly challenging:

> *I think the systemic factors are really stacked against people, and for those that have been using very deficit-based narratives their whole career, it's quite difficult to change*. (Holly)

Participants also highlighted how deficit-based perspectives remain deeply ingrained in educational discourse despite increasing awareness of neurodiversity. Holly spoke about the tension between surface-level acceptance and deeper attitudes:

As much as people kind of say the right things about difference, not deficit, I think when you hear people talk, that deficit narrative is just so ingrained in everything that's said and done. (Holly)

This reveals the gap between rhetorical acceptance of NDA principles and their practical implementation. Molly suggested that these entrenched perspectives are partly driven by the overwhelming pressures that schools face:

A lot of the misconceptions are driven by the tendency that all schools have to kind of take the shortcut ... because they're dealing with so many children and because they're dealing with so many different challenges ... it's not surprising that they're looking for quick fixes. (Molly)

This insight connects deficit-based thinking to broader systemic pressures, suggesting that under-resourced environments are naturally drawn to reductive frameworks that focus on 'fixing' individual learners rather than adapting environments.

Melanie described how the medical model continues to shape EP practice:

I think it's that medical model, isn't it? That kind of permeates through and I think we are kind of as an educational psychology service and school and parents are very heavily influenced by that medical model. And there's still that... need for diagnosis. There's still resources attached to labels. (Melanie)

Beyond entrenched attitudes, participants identified specific policy directions that constrain NDA practice. Holly described how recent policy trends towards greater standardisation directly conflict with neurodiversity affirmation:

I don't think going in the direction that the DfE are, where we're all going to have the same for and it's all going to be completely standardised is the right move. I think the opposite is probably what's needed to really be neurodiversity affirming because it's about individuality, isn't it? It's not about standardisation. (Holly)

Molly similarly criticised policy assumptions about mainstream inclusion:

Local authorities need to let go of this notion that they have that the best thing for children is always that they will be in mainstream school and that we just need to

find out what we need to change to make it work for them, when actually just the fabric of mainstream school might be the problem. (Molly)

Several participants emphasised how resource constraints severely limit schools' capacity to implement NDA approaches. Melanie talked about this challenge:

I think when I've worked with schools, when we think about how we're supporting these children and young people and often schools will say, well, I would love to do that, but I just don't have the resources. (Melanie)

Ruby further described the emotional toll these resource limitations take on the staff:

I've literally seen in week 3 of term, teachers on their knees literally in tears. And then, and it's, you know, it's huge class sizes. So where I work, we have a big issue with not enough schools, so we've had an influx of lots of new housing developments, but no new schools built. So the schools are really oversubscribed. The staff are completely exhausted. (Ruby)

Lara acknowledged the challenge this creates when working with schools:

So, it's kind of, I think, one of the big barriers is thinking about how hard it is for schools to actually do that in a system that's already stretched, under-funded and under-staffed. (Lara)

Several participants also reflected on missed opportunities to embed NDA approaches more systemically. Holly noted how NDA work is often treated as supplementary rather than core practice:

I feel like that aspect of practice shouldn't be an add-on. It shouldn't be something that I have to do in my own time because the school wouldn't allocate time for it. (Holly)

Ruby further observed that the overwhelming level of need in schools often leaves staff with limited capacity for positive change:

I think the staff do genuinely believe that there is a higher level of need and I think they're right in saying that. I mean, I was in a Reception class last week and ten of the children weren't toilet trained. (Ruby)

4.3.1 Theme 1 Summary

The systemic barriers identified by participants reveal the significant gap between the theoretical understanding of NDA practice and its practical implementation. While many educators and EPs value these principles, rigid educational structures, entrenched deficit narratives, policy constraints and resource limitations create substantial obstacles to meaningful change. These barriers operate not only at the level of individual practice but are embedded within the broader educational system. Rather than simply changing individual attitudes or approaches, fundamental structural and systemic issues need to be addressed to create environments that can genuinely support NDA practice.

4.4 Theme 2: Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice

Within this theme, participants described a significant conceptual and practical shift in how neurodivergence is understood and addressed within educational psychology. The move away from deficit-based frameworks towards strengths-focused, affirming approaches represents an evolving professional landscape where competing perspectives create both opportunities and tensions.

Throughout the interviews, participants articulated a clear commitment to moving away from deficit-focused understandings of neurodivergence. Jen described her developing perspective, particularly regarding sensory processing:

> *I think moving, definitely moving away from the deficit model of neurodiversity... and I think that's been a big shift as well -- thinking about sensory processing differences. And thinking about them as differences rather than difficulties*. (Jen)

This linguistic and conceptual shift from 'difficulties' to 'differences' represents more than a superficial change in terminology; it reflects a fundamental reframing of how neurodivergence is understood. Holly similarly emphasised the importance of a 'difference, not deficit' perspective:

> *I guess acknowledging the differences rather focusing on the deficits and trying to celebrate those differences and the fact they can go, you know, they bring a lot of positives to the world as well.* (Holly)

This reframing positions neurodivergence as a natural form of human variation rather than a pathology requiring remediation. Melanie further highlighted how this shift changes the focus of intervention:

> *I think that that would kind of be the main one that it's all about what's lacking or what needs to be fixed rather than how can we look at the positives and how can we nurture and how can we support strengths.* (Melanie)

Participants also emphasised how language plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of neurodivergence. Jen described her conscious efforts to model NDA language:

> *I'm just trying to model as much neurodiversity-affirming language as possible... And then in my report writing as well, I've definitely changed the way that I write about difference and about neurodiversity.* (Jen)

Ruby provided concrete examples of how subtle language choices can significantly impact perceptions:

> *I genuinely think it's even the things like using 'pre-verbal' and 'non-speaking' instead of 'non-verbal'. It's a very small change, but actually you can understand what a difference it makes.* (Ruby)

Molly highlighted the influence of neurodivergent self-advocates in driving these linguistic changes:

> *The whole concept of neuro-affirming language ...so we were not using affirmative language not many years ago, and I think it was the power of the ND community really that has suggested very strongly that that needs to change.* (Molly)

Despite their commitment to NDA approaches, participants acknowledged that medical models continue to dominate many aspects of practice. Molly criticised how diagnostic language reinforces medical perspectives:

> *So when you look at the fact we call it a diagnosis, it suggests that it's an illness. The fact that most of these diagnostic letters will say autism spectrum disorder still.* (Molly)

Melanie similarly noted how medical models influence resource allocation:

I guess it's that medical model, isn't it? That kind of permeates through ... and there's still that need for diagnosis. There's still resources attached to labels. (Melanie)

Several participants described the specific challenges that statutory assessment processes pose for implementing NDA practice. Holly articulated the pressure to emphasise deficits to secure resources:

The way the system works is all based on competing for funding and competing for resources, which means there's a huge amount of pressure to be really, really negative and highlight all the deficits and highlight all the problems and highlight everything the child can't do. (Holly)

Lara similarly described the tension between her professional values and statutory responsibilities:

It's different, isn't it, because you definitely feel like you've got a job to do with a statutory piece of work... I guess the challenge is you are being asked to write a description of need and what they find hard and I think automatically you switch to deficit language when you've got that job to do. (Lara)

Participants expressed significant concerns about interventions that focus on "fixing" neurodivergent individuals rather than adapting environments. Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) emerged as a particularly contentious approach. Jen offered a strong critique:

From a neurodiverse-affirming perspective, I think ABA is not helpful, and I think it's sometimes very damaging... It's one of the best examples of how we're trying to force a child to adapt to neurotypical thinking and behaviour. (Jen)

Holly similarly questioned the goals of such interventions:

I think in general, most of these interventions, and ABA in particular, are not set up from a neurodiversity affirming lens. And they're not there to help neurodivergent people be the best they can be - they're there to help them fit in and they often focus on things that are not the child's priorities, and they're not really important to the child. (Holly)

Lara further emphasised the fundamental incompatibility between certain approaches and NDA practice:

> *I can't see how ABA would fit in with... a neurodiversity affirming approach. For me, they seem very much at the opposite end of the spectrum. Similar to anything, anything where you're expecting neurotypical skills for a young person who is not neurotypical, I think has to be challenged*. (Lara)

While participants were critical of many traditional interventions, they also recognised that some approaches could potentially align with affirming principles if implemented thoughtfully. Holly emphasised the importance of examining the underlying purpose of interventions:

> *I think there really needs to be more reflection at the start point of an intervention of what are we trying to achieve and how will that actually help the child? Do we have this target because it will be beneficial for the child, or do we have this target because it will be beneficial for us.* (Holly)

Participants advocated for approaches that recognise and build upon neurodivergent strengths rather than focusing exclusively on challenges. Ruby emphasised the importance of embracing neurodivergent perspectives:

> *The affirming part is, I guess about accepting, not accepting, but actually embracing pluralism... wanting to explore and understand how different people experience the world and how they engage with it and not putting barriers in place so that actually we can get as much from each individual as we can so that they can contribute.* (Ruby)

Participants also identified broader societal misconceptions about neurodivergence that influence professional practice. Holly criticised the assumption that neurodivergence inherently limits potential:

> *I think the biggest one is just that being neurodivergent will make you less successful... I think, I even with very academically able learners, I feel like schools and parents often have this idea that they won't be able to do what their peers are going to do.* (Holly)

4.4.1 Theme 2 Summary

This theme reveals the complex process of shifting from deficit-based to affirming approaches in EP practice. While participants demonstrated clear commitment to NDA principles, they also acknowledged significant tensions between these values and existing institutional structures, particularly statutory assessment frameworks and resource allocation systems. The ongoing influence of medical models, despite growing recognition of their limitations, creates practical challenges for implementing genuinely affirming approaches.

The participants' reflections also highlight that moving toward NDA practice involves more than simply adopting new terminology; it requires fundamental reconsideration of how neurodivergence is conceptualised, how interventions are selected and implemented and whose perspectives are centred in decision-making processes. Truly transformative practice requires addressing both individual actions and systemic structures to create environments where neurodivergent individuals are valued for their differences rather than defined by perceived deficits.

4.5 Theme 3: Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice

Theme 3 describes the complex, evolving context in which EPs are developing and implementing NDA practices. It is organised into two interconnected subthemes. The first explores how EPs understand and adapt to a changing conceptual landscape, examining the factors driving this change including increased media representation, generational shifts, the influence of social media and the growing voice of neurodivergent advocates. The second subtheme explores the tension between affirming neurodivergent identities and supporting neurodivergent individuals to understand and function within existing social structures.

4.5.1 Subtheme 3.1: Growing awareness and advocacy

Each of the participants described a significant shift in societal and professional understanding of neurodiversity, highlighting how awareness has evolved in recent years. This subtheme captures the perceived momentum toward more affirming approaches, while also acknowledging the tensions, challenges and complexities in this evolving landscape.

Molly articulated this as a significant cultural change:

I've seen a real kind of sea change in everybody's understanding of what autism is... I think there's a better understanding that there's as much kind of variety within neurodiversity as there is without neurodiversity. So that's been quite a big change. (Molly)

Holly similarly noted the gradual but meaningful shift in professional discourse:

There is a little bit of a shift and I think particularly... there are more and more people who are kind of adopting the language, and I do think that is a starting step, isn't it? Because the way the narratives that we produce reinforce things in our head, they reinforce things in other people's heads, so if you can use better words, that starts a bit of a chain reaction. (Holly)

Several participants positioned this evolving awareness as an ongoing journey, both personally and professionally. Jen described her experience:

So I'm still, I feel still sort of in the early days of...thinking about this or maybe sort of, I've still, I feel like I've definitely still got further to go. (Jen)

Lara similarly reflected on her own growth:

I think I would be quite embarrassed to look back at some of my previous reports now and think oh gosh, that's a very negative way of describing a young person's needs. So yeah, definitely, definitely evolved. (Lara)

Several participants identified differences in how neurodiversity is understood and discussed across generations. Jen observed:

And I feel like within younger generations that's already happening I think. Maybe older generations do find it a bit difficult to...include or think in that way. But I think just like the mental health debates as well, I think....neurodiversity is discussed more openly, and it's seen as less unusual, but more something that can be adapted. (Jen)

Molly similarly reflected on how generational changes might influence future directions:

I mean there's all that talk about oversharing now in Gen Z as just as a matter of course. So you know, maybe when the generation rumbles through and these people get a little bit more of a sense of their own power and their own voice, then they will

have more to say. And we need to get... We need to not do what is really tempting and go, yeah but, yeah but, yeah but, which is our automatic defence mechanism, isn't it? Against people telling us we're doing things wrong and listen and learn and continue the evolution. (Molly)

Participants described social media as a powerful but complex influence on neurodiversity awareness, highlighting both its benefits and challenges. Molly emphasised its role in connecting neurodivergent individuals:

I think the biggest change from the kind of explosion in social media is the kind of finding your tribe. So I think there are an awful lot of neurodivergent people who possibly didn't have that sense of community before, who are finding their community online. (Molly)

Molly further explained how online communication can be particularly accessible for neurodivergent individuals:

You can do it from the safety of behind your screen where it's slower. And you know, people can think, have longer to think about those things, how they respond, what they say. (Molly)

However, participants also identified concerns about social media's influence. Ruby emphasised potential vulnerabilities:

And again you can, you can imagine how you know, there's just so many different, various kind of avenues and paths that people can choose on social media and actually if they don't have, particularly for neurodivergent children because they might not have established very strong kind of social groups in school in person, they're enormously at risk, you know. (Ruby)

Melanie further noted the complex influence of celebrity disclosures of neurodivergence:

So I do think in some ways that has been supportive, but I suppose the other side of that is that it kind of pushes that need for a label again... So it's like, so now, and I do understand it, I think a lot, a lot of celebrities have said, well, it's been supportive to me to have a label so now I understand these needs, but it's kind of pushing that

again, isn't it? It's like, OK, if you don't have this label, you might have these needs and it's quite a negative thing. (Melanie)

Participants described various approaches to promoting neurodiversity awareness and creating more inclusive environments. Molly emphasised the importance of bidirectional adaptation:

I think the things like the classroom community approach is one that I use a lot. So the idea of encouraging other children who are maybe not neurodivergent or less neurodivergent to have an understanding of what that child needs, how that child interacts, how that child sees the world and how they can change what they do to make it better for that child. (Molly)

Molly further challenged unidirectional adaptation expectations:

I would always, always recommend that so that it's not - this is what we need to do to that child so that child is better at being part of a neurotypical group. But how can a neurotypical group change what they're doing to make it easier for the neurodivergent children? (Molly)

Some participants identified gender as a significant factor in how neurodivergence is expressed, recognised and supported. Jen highlighted the particular challenges for neurodivergent girls:

Yeah, I think one that comes up quite a lot at the moment is neurodiversity and girls is the seems to be quite common and...yeah, the girls seem to be masking more. And seem quite good at masking for quite some time and then...find it really, really difficult, either because they go, because I don't know, expectations have changed, friendships have changed, the school setting has changed. (Jen)

Ruby further explored this issue:

I think that there's a really there's a lot of pressure, particularly sort of when I think about autistic girls. I think that there's a lot of pressure, social pressure for them to conform with the norm. And then there's, and that kind of follows them through school. (Ruby)

Despite acknowledging growing awareness, several participants expressed concern about superficial or tokenistic approaches to inclusion. Molly used a popular illustration to highlight this issue:

> *No. Yeah, and everybody quotes that lovely cartoon don't they, where there's a tree, and there's all those animals at the bottom and they say, right, everybody now climb a tree. That's inclusion, and there's the fish, you know. And that's exactly… people, we're aware of this as a concept. But we're not applying it. And the reason we're not applying it is because it's A. it's too difficult and B it's too expensive.* (Molly)

Lara similarly questioned the depth of implementation:

> *In terms of, you know, they've all got the strategies and interventions in place, but I don't know how they're embedded and how tokenistic it.* (Lara)

Several participants contrasted current understanding with historic approaches to highlight how awareness has evolved. Molly described previous dynamics between schools and families:

> *It's not that many years ago that one of the one of the most common things that we'd be up against would be a real kind of conflict between parents and school where school's view would very much be well, we don't see a problem. So there's no problem and there's obviously a problem with parenting because they're saying that there's a problem at home, whereas that ought to focus the concept of masking.* (Molly)

Molly further noted the evolution of language around emotional regulation:

> *So I think there was a time when it behaviour was very much viewed as kind of challenging and naughty. And now there's an understanding. So, so we went through a phases of people talking about meltdowns and now that's kind of moved on and people are talking about dysregulation now, which again is an end of the step forward.* (Molly)

4.5.2 Subtheme 3.2: Balancing affirmation with navigating the neurotypical world

Whereas subtheme 3.1 explores growing awareness, this subtheme presents the practical tensions between affirming neurodivergent identities and supporting

neurodivergent individuals to navigate a predominantly neurotypical world. Participants articulated the delicate balance between celebrating neurodivergence and acknowledging the complex realities of social expectations and structures.

Participants described approaches that help neurodivergent individuals understand neurotypical perspectives without requiring them to conform to neurotypical expectations. Jen articulated this position:

> So when I'm writing my reports, rather than expecting, you know, saying they need to... we need to sort of train them to think in a certain way. Helping them to understand and adapting things like social stories or whatever into a way of helping them understand why people think in a certain way rather than saying... this is how to behave, and this is maybe why it's better to behave in that way. (Jen)

This reflection highlights a shift from prescriptive approaches focused on behavioural conformity toward explanatory approaches that provide insight without demanding change. This distinction between understanding and conforming represents a core principle of NDA practice while acknowledging the social realities neurodivergent individuals navigate.

Ruby similarly emphasised the tension between affirming identity and developing pragmatic skills:

> This is where I guess the conflict also comes in with neuro-affirming practices, because when we talk about what types of skills should we be teaching children, I completely agree that we shouldn't be like kind of dictating to them that they have to make eye contact or that they have to learn to take turns. But actually, there's an element of what does this child need in order to be successful in this society today? (Ruby)

This observation acknowledges the ethical complexity of supporting neurodivergent individuals within existing social structures while respecting their authentic ways of being. It highlights the desire to balance identity affirmation with pragmatic skill development.

Holly further developed this idea by emphasising the importance of consent and awareness of possible detrimental effects:

I think there can be a role for interventions that maybe don't immediately strike as neurodiversity-affirming, where the young person wants it and where they want to learn a skill. And they want that support. But I think it should be done with consent. And it should be done with awareness that the masking comes at a cost. It's not a zero-sum game. (Holly)

This perspective centres neurodivergent agency in determining which social skills are personally valuable, while acknowledging the potential emotional toll of masking neurodivergent traits. It suggests that offering tools for social navigation can be compatible with affirming practice when centred on informed choice rather than imposed conformity.

Participants reflected on how educational environments often create significant challenges for neurodivergent students. Molly provided a particularly vivid description of these structural issues:

I firmly believe that schools, the very fabric of schools, the way that schools are designed is challenging for the majority of neurodiverse children because they are inherently sociable. So the majority of neurodivergent children are already struggling and feeling like they're failing in the social side of it. Then you've got the sensory side of it as well. (Molly)

This observation highlights how educational environments are fundamentally designed around neurotypical needs, creating inherent barriers for neurodivergent students regardless of individual accommodations. Molly further articulated the emotional impact of these structural barriers:

Because it doesn't matter what you say to a child, their experiences of 'I don't fit in and I don't understand what's going on, and I'm just an absolute failure.' And you know that's when they start using words like 'weirdo' and 'freak' and all of those things. (Molly)

This poignant reflection reveals how structural challenges translate into painful personal experiences for neurodivergent children, highlighting the real emotional costs of environments that fail to accommodate neurodiversity.

Lara similarly expressed concern about affirming approaches that might minimise these genuine challenges:

> *I do wonder whether when it's so normalised and celebrated and this is an amazing thing, that that need isn't then recognised and people are thinking, oh well actually, what does that mean for you? So, you know, thinking of the little ones who have an autism diagnosis, it is amazing that they're unique and they have so many things to be celebrated, but it's also important that how hard it is is noticed and acknowledged.* (Lara)

This reflection cautions against an uncritical celebration of neurodiversity that might inadvertently minimise the very real challenges that neurodivergent individuals face, suggesting that genuine affirmation includes acknowledging difficulties as well as strengths.

Participants described approaches to social skills development that respect neurodivergent autonomy while providing helpful tools for social navigation. Lara spoke about an alternative to traditional social skills interventions:

> *Perhaps the view that all children need to make friends and so you whack them in a social skills group. Actually, a young person might be perfectly happy not having friends and kind of accepting that but thinking, OK, but they still need to develop an awareness of social norms, for example, and how to typically respond to others. So you're giving them those life skills, but you're not labelling it as they need to make friends.* (Lara)

This approach respects neurodivergent individuals' potential preference for solitude while still offering tools that might help them navigate social interactions when necessary. It moves away from imposing neurotypical social priorities (like having many friends) while acknowledging the pragmatic value of understanding social conventions.

Ruby suggested a more reciprocal approach to social skills development:

> *We could set up a social skills program where actually they're discussing hypothetical situations and just describing what they think... trying to enable children to express how they see the world, and even just acknowledge and see that other people see it differently.* (Ruby)

This model reframes social skills intervention from a one-sided process of teaching neurodivergent children to conform to a mutual exploration of different perspectives. It positions social understanding as bidirectional rather than expecting neurodivergent individuals to do all the adaptation.

Several participants expressed concerns about approaches that might shelter neurodivergent children from developing skills they will need in adulthood. Jen articulated this concern:

> *I do worry that a child could be too sheltered and then find adult life or find being a teenager incredibly overwhelming because they have just had their small world adapted to them.* (Jen)

This reflection highlights the tension between creating accommodating environments and preparing children for less accommodating real-world contexts. It suggests that NDA practice must balance immediate comfort with longer-term preparation for independence.

Molly similarly emphasised the potential consequences of avoiding challenging skill development:

> *Because if we're not doing that, we're failing, in my view, the child. Because then if we protect the child from all of that and say, 'Oh, we don't put any undue pressure on you, we want you to be well and happy,' that's great when they're at school. But then eventually, they're going to be moving through society, not able to understand it or participate in it.* (Molly)

This perspective highlights the ethical challenges of balancing immediate well-being with long-term preparation for independence. It suggests that genuine affirmation includes equipping neurodivergent individuals with tools to navigate diverse environments rather than only creating specialised accommodations.

4.5.3 Theme 3 Summary

Subtheme 3.1 captures the significant but uneven progress in neurodiversity awareness and advocacy described by participants. Although they identified meaningful shifts in understanding, they also acknowledged that these changes remain incomplete and unevenly distributed across settings and professionals. Participants positioned themselves as

active participants in this evolving landscape, acknowledging their own ongoing learning while also taking responsibility for promoting further change. Their reflections highlight the complex interplay between individual attitudes, professional practices, institutional structures and broader social trends in shaping how neurodiversity is understood and addressed.

In subtheme 3.2 the participants' reflections highlight several key principles for balancing affirmation with practical support: centring neurodivergent agency and consent, focusing on understanding rather than conformity, acknowledging both structural barriers and individual realities and considering both immediate well-being and long-term independence. This theme underscores the complexity of implementing NDA practice in real-world contexts. It suggests that EPs must navigate competing ethical imperatives - respecting neurodivergent identity while also supporting individuals to function within existing social structures - requiring ongoing reflection and personalised approaches rather than rigid adherence to any single framework.

4.6 Theme 4: Prioritising neurodivergent voices

All participants emphasised the centrality of neurodivergent voices in guiding practice, highlighting how meaningful NDA approaches must be anchored in the expressed needs, preferences and perspectives of neurodivergent individuals themselves. This theme explores how participants conceptualised the role of voice and identity in their practice, including their approaches to elevating neurodivergent voices, supporting the development of positive identity, and navigating the complexities of living as a neurodivergent person in predominantly neurotypical environments.

Participants consistently talked about the importance of centring neurodivergent individuals' perspectives in their practice. Molly expressed this as a fundamental element of her approach:

> *I think that the only thing that I would say that I recommend all the time is talking to the children because it staggers me after 27 years that schools still don't talk to the children about what they want.* (Molly)

Molly further emphasised the power imbalances that contribute to this marginalisation:

It's a bit like when we're when we're talking about changing the classroom. The people who are who are in need of something changing are the ones with the least power to make that change. (Molly)

Lara similarly stressed the centrality of children's perspectives in her assessment process:

I think making sure that you've captured the child's voice at the heart of it, so if you're going to be using an assessment tool that you're listening to what the child thinks and feels first, and I think for children who are particularly anxious that I'm doing a psych advice for instance, I always go in thinking my priority is to get the child's voice and anything else is like a bonus. (Lara)

Holly talked about the impact of being genuinely heard:

And I think that experience of being constantly shut down and not listened to is really damaging... For them to get, if they can go away from an appointment with me, feeling that actually I did hear them and I am going to do something about it and I genuinely understood them and cared about what they thought. That's something. (Holly)

This reflection captures the fundamental ethical imperative underlying this theme - that meaningful NDA practice must begin with genuine listening and valuing of neurodivergent voices, creating the foundation for interventions that truly serve neurodivergent individuals' self-determined needs and preferences.

Lara also discussed the contextual nature of neurodivergent experiences:

And even if it's anxiety that's the need, the trigger for that anxiety is so different, isn't it? And that's why it's so important to kind of, I guess, listen to the young person's voice. (Lara)

Participants recognised that respecting neurodivergent voices sometimes means accommodating preferences that might contradict professional assumptions about NDA practice. Holly described such an experience:

I met one teenager, a few months ago and he was like, no, my autism is a disability, I don't need you to tell me everything's fine and I've got all these strengths, I find these things really f-ing hard and I want you to acknowledge that please. (Holly)

Holly further articulated how this influenced her understanding of intervention selection:

You know, even if a teenager said to me, I want to learn what proper eye contact is, I want to learn how to get it right. I would want to have a conversation with them about, you know, let's also be aware of what this might cost you in terms of effort and energy. And that you shouldn't need to and that should be OK. But ultimately, if somebody wants to develop more social skills, they want to have friends, I think there are interventions that can be helpful and we should be listening to what individuals want for themselves. (Holly)

Beyond listening to neurodivergent voices, participants described actively working to develop children's capacity to express their needs and preferences. Holly emphasised the importance of building both language skills and confidence:

Because if a child has the words to express it, that's the first step to getting there and again helping kids to identify who their safe, adults might be or who the best person to go to might be. (Holly)

Holly further connected this to broader developmental opportunities:

I don't know, because they hadn't made a decision for so long and they never really felt that their opinions were that important. People chose their clothes. People chose their activities. And I think it's so important to give particularly teenagers, but right from kids at a young age, opportunities to be autonomous and make decisions and speak up for themselves and have their voices heard and valued. (Holly)

Lara similarly emphasised the developmental nature of self-advocacy:

I guess it's just acknowledging that for some people that ideal of being able to self-advocate is really achievable and near, but for others it might, they might be miles away from that. And so in the meantime, it's how we can support them to make sure that they can share their views and you feel confident enough to talk about what they need or don't need in school. (Lara)

Several participants acknowledged the challenges of meaningfully incorporating the perspectives of children who communicate in non-traditional ways. Jen highlighted this as an area of ongoing challenge:

> *It's difficult with the little ones, especially with children that, that don't have any spoken language, making sure that their voice is included because that is something that is difficult.* (Jen)

Ruby similarly questioned whether NDA approaches adequately represent the full diversity of neurodivergent experiences:

> *I mean, one of the things that I have battled with, actually, throughout this whole kind of exploring this approach to ND, and it's not to say it all that I disagree with it, but I do feel like that the voices that we're hearing here, sort of this approach is coming from, are autistic people who have verbal skills.* (Ruby)

Lara suggested that EPs might play a particular role in supporting voice for those who struggle to articulate their experiences:

> *Because I guess sometimes it might be that it's our job to kind of help the child to analyse what their own needs might be. So that's kind of what our unique contribution could be*. (Lara)

Participants also described how neurodivergent identity and sense of belonging significantly influence wellbeing and development. Holly articulated the centrality of identity exploration in many neurodivergent young people's experiences:

> *I think for a lot of a lot of young people, one of the massive things about being neurodivergent is just that narrative around their identity and their biography. And what does this mean for who I am and who I could be? Where I fit in with the world.* (Holly)

Molly similarly highlighted the importance of belonging for neurodivergent children:

> *Because this is another thing that I think is really important for all children. All children need to feel like they fit in somewhere.* (Molly)

Molly further described how this need can manifest in different ways:

Because my experiences, there's large body of young people who just develop those kind of protective behaviours, where it's almost like reject before... I'll reject you before you have the chance to reject me. I'll behave in a way that's so extreme that that's the reason, I will dye my hair all these colours now and have so many piercings. And I will, I will other myself, I will physically look as different on the outside as I feel on the inside. (Molly)

Several participants noted how diagnosis and labels interact with identity development in complex ways. Holly described the potential benefits of diagnostic labels in facilitating connection:

So having a label that enables you to kind of find your tribe of people who might be more similar to you, I think that can also be a really useful facet of the diagnosis, that it can then direct you towards more people who can help. (Holly)

However, Lara highlighted potential complications with label-based grouping:

Young people, perhaps not wanting to be part of that group and kind of being pigeonholed into that group because they've got that label. (Lara)

Several participants described experiences where they observed meaningful systemic change resulting from NDA approaches. Holly recalled noticing shifts in how professionals describe children:

I think the other thing that that has felt meaningful for me is at a more systemic level where I feel like I've gone into consultation after consultation after meeting after meeting and I've preached NDA practice and I've used the lingo and I've reframed and reframed and reframed and then someone comes to me and they say something, you know a SENCo or someone comes to me and they explain a child's needs. And I just think, you're getting it like, yeah, you are. You're describing this child differently to what you would have done two years ago, and that's huge. (Holly)

Several participants emphasised the importance of developing self-advocacy skills as a key element of NDA practice. Jen articulated this in terms of long-term independence:

When whenever I make recommendations, my focus is always on eventually, reaching independence, or becoming being more independent, less dependent on others to be able to have your emotional needs met or your sensory processing needs met. (Jen)

Ruby similarly emphasised self-advocacy as a more appropriate goal than traditional social skills:

I worked in secondary schools a lot, so I often talk about outcomes where the goal is to actually improve their self-advocacy skills to teach them actually assertive communication, because that's the skill that they need rather than teaching them how to. I don't know, say hello and thank you. (Ruby)

4.6.1 Theme 4 Summary

This theme reveals the fundamental importance participants placed on centring neurodivergent voices and supporting positive identity development in NDA practice. Their reflections highlight the complex interplay between respecting individual preferences, supporting skill development, acknowledging systemic constraints and working toward broader cultural change.

The data suggests that meaningful NDA practice requires both attitudinal and methodological shifts to genuinely centre neurodivergent perspectives, particularly for those who communicate in non-traditional ways. Participants articulated a vision of practice that balances respect for neurodivergent identity with pragmatic acknowledgment of existing social structures, seeking to expand possibilities for authentic self-expression while also supporting the development of skills that facilitate functioning in diverse environments.

4.7 Theme 5: The importance of collaboration

Participants emphasised collaboration as essential to NDA practice. Rather than positioning EPs as experts, participants described a collaborative approach that draws on multiple perspectives - including those of school staff, parents and, critically, the young person themselves.

Participants consistently talked about the fact that effective support requires multiple perspectives, challenging traditional hierarchies of professional expertise. Jen highlighted the limitations of her professional perspective compared to those with daily experience:

We aren't the ones that know them the best, but it's the teaching team and the parents. But at least being able to see them a couple of times and having a few more eyes on the child and being able to get a bit more information is useful in those situations. (Jen)

This reflection positions teachers and parents as primary knowledge holders, with the EP contributing complementary rather than superior insights. Holly similarly emphasised the value of school staff perspectives:

I think speaking to staff is really, really important for me. And I think part of it is that information-gaining from the people who know the child really well because how they are with a stranger isn't going to be how they are day-to-day. (Holly)

Collaboration was also seen as an opportunity to challenge assumptions and build shared understanding. Ruby emphasised the need for strong relationships with both staff and parents, suggesting that without rapport, meaningful engagement is difficult:

The main thing is engaging people, I think. Unless you develop that rapport and spend the time listening to the story, then you won't be able to really engage with the parent or the staff. (Ruby)

Lara further described collaboration as a mutual learning process:

I think just having those almost problem-solving conversations, we did that a lot, so school was so keen to know the why, rather than just wanting the report, so working collaboratively with them I very much saw that as my role rather than me being an expert coming in. And I think it was a partnership where I learned as much from them as you know they did from me. (Lara)

This reflection challenges traditional expert-client relationships, positioning collaboration as bidirectional knowledge sharing rather than unidirectional advice-giving. It aligns with NDA principles by demoting professional authority and recognising the value of diverse perspectives.

As Ruby succinctly observed:

It's got to be a partnership. Otherwise, it just doesn't work. (Ruby)

Participants described how collaborative approaches facilitate more strength-based understandings of neurodivergent students. Jen provided a powerful example of reframing seemingly "problematic" behaviours:

> *It does make it seem quite black and white sometimes, but sometimes, a child plays by lining dinosaurs up. Some people might see that as a need, like 'he only plays by lining up dinosaurs,' but actually... this is how this child enjoys spending their time. It doesn't have to be a need just because it's not what a neurotypical person would do.* (Jen)

This reflection demonstrates how collaborative meaning-making can challenge deficit interpretations, reframing behaviours as preferences rather than problems. It highlights how NDA practice involves questioning normative assumptions about appropriate play and engagement.

Holly similarly emphasised the importance of balanced perspectives that recognise both strengths and challenges:

> *To look at all learners through the lens of 'we all have strengths, we all have difficulties.' And for neurodivergent learners, their strengths and difficulties profile might be quite different, but they still have both.* (Holly)

Participants advocated for adapting environments to meet neurodivergent needs rather than expecting neurodivergent individuals to conform to existing structures. Jen described the ideal neurodiversity-affirming setting:

> *I think it would be a safe environment rather than a perfect environment. So where there's opportunities for people to regulate if they need to, where they're provided with sensory experiences if they would like those as well, and where there's opportunities to engage with people with a range of understanding...and time to think rather than places where time is rushed and expectations are that things are done quickly and everyone has to complete the same thing at the same time*. (Jen)

This vision centres flexibility and individualisation rather than standardisation, highlighting how environmental adaptations can support neurodivergent individuals without requiring them to mask or suppress their natural ways of being.

Molly similarly emphasised environmental adaptations as a primary intervention focus:

> *The sensory audit that I talked about, the sensory profile and the sensory toolkit, thinking about classroom settings, where children are sitting in a classroom, how they get in and out. What's happening at playtime, lunchtime, unstructured times, transition times. I'd always recommend having a really close look at that.* (Molly)

This approach focuses on identifying and addressing potential environmental barriers rather than attempting to change the neurodivergent individual, demonstrating a core principle of NDA practice.

While participants valued collaboration with adults in children's lives, they particularly emphasised the importance of collaborating directly with neurodivergent individuals themselves. Holly articulated this priority clearly:

> *I think the main thing, though, is actually talking to the young person and getting that young person's perspective and really understanding what is important to them. What do they want to do? What is their idea of success? What are they finding difficult? How do they feel about what's going on for them?* (Holly)

This perspective positions neurodivergent individuals as the primary experts on their own experiences, aligning with NDA principles that emphasise autonomy and self-determination. Holly further emphasised the importance of genuine listening rather than tokenistic consultation:

> *And I think that's something that I'm really passionate about because I think neurodivergent people have been told, 'this is what you need to do,' for far too long.* (Holly)

This reflection acknowledges a potential pattern of professional authority overriding others' perspectives, positioning genuine collaboration as a corrective to this problematic power dynamic.

Participants described how effective support involves facilitating collaboration among all those involved in a child's life rather than working in isolated professional silos. Ruby emphasised the importance of this networked approach:

The collaboration is so vital because there's so many different professionals involved and so many different people involved in that child's life, and it's about bringing everyone together to really get a true holistic picture. (Ruby)

This perspective positions the EP as a facilitator of collaborative networks rather than an isolated expert, highlighting how NDA practice involves systemic rather than individualistic approaches.

Lara similarly described facilitating collaborative problem-solving:

When you go into those multi-agency meetings, it's not about us being the expert. Whilst we have that domain-specific knowledge, actually it's about facilitating that conversation about the child's needs. (Lara)

Holly further emphasised how this collaborative, networked approach benefits the child:

When everybody around them knows how they work and what helps them to thrive, that's when things really start to shift. (Holly)

This observation highlights how collaborative approaches create consistency across contexts, suggesting that NDA practice requires coordinated environmental adaptations rather than isolated interventions.

4.7.1 Theme 5 Summary

This theme reveals how participants positioned collaboration as fundamental to NDA practice. Their reflections challenge traditional expert-client models of educational psychology, instead advocating for approaches that value diverse knowledge sources, centre neurodivergent perspectives and facilitate collaborative networks. This collaborative ethos aligns with NDA principles by shifting professional authority, emphasising environmental rather than individual change and respecting neurodivergent autonomy.

The participants' descriptions suggest that meaningful collaboration involves both attitudinal and procedural shifts - valuing diverse forms of knowledge, building trusting relationships, engaging in genuine two-way communication and facilitating rather than directing problem-solving processes. Their reflections position the EP not as an isolated expert but as a knowledgeable facilitator who contributes psychological insights within collaborative

networks focused on supporting neurodivergent individuals in ways that honour their identities, preferences and potential.

4.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have presented five interconnected themes, including two subthemes, that offer an insight into the views of EPs regarding NDA practice, the challenges in its implementation and the factors that influence its effectiveness.

The first theme, 'Systemic barriers to neurodiversity-affirming practice', examined how rigid educational structures, policy constraints and resource limitations obstruct meaningful change. Despite a growing awareness of NDA principles, participants highlighted the mismatch between the flexibility required for neurodivergent learners and the inflexible nature of school environments, which often prioritise standardisation over individual needs.

The second theme, 'Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice', captured participants' perspectives on moving away from a pathologising model of neurodivergence towards seeing it as a natural variation of human diversity. While participants demonstrated a clear commitment to this shift, they also acknowledged significant tensions between these values and existing institutional structures, particularly statutory assessment frameworks and resource allocation systems that continue to reinforce deficit-based approaches.

The third theme, 'Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice' was split into two subthemes. The first, 'Growing awareness and advocacy for neurodiversity', highlighted the increasing visibility of neurodivergent experiences, particularly through social media, professional development and evolving societal discussions. Participants positioned themselves as active participants in this evolving landscape, acknowledging their own ongoing learning while also taking responsibility for promoting further change. The second subtheme, 'Balancing affirmation with navigating the neurotypical world', examined the complex tension between affirming neurodivergent identities and supporting neurodivergent individuals to navigate predominantly neurotypical environments. Participants articulated approaches that help neurodivergent individuals understand neurotypical perspectives without requiring conformity, emphasising the importance of neurodivergent agency, consent and balancing immediate well-being with long-term independence.

The fourth theme, 'Prioritising neurodivergent voice', explored the centrality of neurodivergent voices in guiding practice. Participants emphasised that meaningful NDA approaches must be anchored in the expressed needs, preferences and perspectives of neurodivergent individuals themselves, while also acknowledging the challenges in ensuring those with non-traditional communication methods are equally heard and represented.

The fifth theme, 'The importance of collaboration', highlighted how effective NDA practice is built on collaboration between EPs, school staff, parents and neurodivergent individuals themselves. Participants challenged traditional expert-client models of educational psychology, advocating instead for approaches that value diverse knowledge sources and facilitate collaborative networks.

Collectively, these themes reveal both the progress and challenges in implementing NDA practice within current educational systems. While participants demonstrated a clear commitment to more affirming approaches, they also acknowledged the significant systemic and practical barriers that continue to hinder full implementation of NDA principles. The findings suggest that meaningful change requires not only individual practitioners adopting more affirming perspectives but also broader structural and cultural shifts within educational and psychological systems.

In the next chapter I will discuss these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, examining their implications for educational psychology practice, policy development and future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The current study aimed to explore how EPs view NDA practice and identify the challenges and opportunities that can shape its implementation. By examining EPs' perspectives, I hope to contribute to knowledge about how practitioners understand and define NDA practice, what barriers prevent its successful implementation in educational settings and what facilitating factors could support EPs in developing more affirming approaches in their work. The findings illustrate that EPs conceptualise NDA practice as a holistic and strengths-based approach that values neurodivergent identities and promotes meaningful inclusion both in education settings and in wider society. Participants emphasised that effective NDA practice involves recognising neurodiversity as natural human variation, advocating for individualised supports and challenging entrenched deficit narratives that continue to marginalise neurodivergent children and young people.

However, the study also found that translating these conceptualisations into effective and consistent practice remains complex. As shown in the data, EPs face numerous systemic, cultural and resource-driven challenges. Institutional barriers such as standardised assessments, inflexible curricula, funding restrictions and pressures towards academic performance and conformity were identified as significant obstacles. Such barriers were described as creating tension between EPs' professional values and systemic expectations, limiting their ability to fully implement NDA principles in practice. Additionally, resistance rooted in cultural attitudes toward disability and difference was identified as further complicating implementation efforts, highlighting a need for broader shifts in educational values and professional training.

Despite these challenges, EPs also talked about the clear opportunities for advancing NDA practice. Increasing public awareness, advocacy and a greater recognition of neurodivergent voices are creating an environment much more receptive to change. The EPs expressed a shared openness to adopting collaborative, participatory approaches, that reflects a growing commitment within the profession to move beyond traditional deficit-based models. These opportunities signal possibilities for meaningful systemic change if leveraged effectively

through targeted professional development, policy reforms and increased collaboration among educators, families, policymakers and the neurodivergent community.

Ultimately, this study contributes important insights by highlighting the ways in which EPs interpret NDA practice, acknowledging the complexity of translating inclusive values into practical realities and pinpointing critical areas for improvement.

The research question guiding this study was:

> How do educational psychologists conceptualise neurodiversity-affirming practice and what challenges and opportunities shape its implementation?

The following discussion is structured around the five key themes identified in the findings, each examined in the light of previous research and psychological theory. Following this discussion, the chapter will reflect on my methodological approach, considering its strengths and limitations. The implications of the findings for EP practice, schools, policy and training will also be explored, before concluding with a discussion of the study's overall limitations and suggestions for future research.

5.2 Systemic barriers to neurodiversity-affirming practice

The findings revealed that EPs perceive significant systemic barriers to the implementation of NDA practice in educational settings. These include rigid policies, curriculum standardisation, funding shortages and entrenched deficit-based narratives. These barriers are recognised in existing literature on inclusive education, which highlights the challenges of embedding genuinely inclusive approaches within systems largely designed around neurotypical norms. For example, Norwich & Eaton's (2015) examination of the impact of special educational needs legislation in England revealed several systemic obstacles including resource constraints, fragmentation of services, the persistence of deficit-focused approaches and a fundamental tension between the rhetoric of inclusion and the practical reality in schools. The authors highlighted how the bureaucratic nature of SEND processes often undermines the person-centred principles they claim to promote. The findings also align with Warnes et al., (2021) survey research which found that mainstream teachers identified standardised assessment as a primary barrier to inclusion. This mirrors the current study's findings, in which participants described being compelled to document deficits to secure support, an approach which is at odds with the principles of NDA practice.

This concept of standardisation was raised several times by participants who described how the standardised nature of the education system limits the flexibility needed to cater to diverse neurocognitive profiles. This resonates with Botha and Kapp (2023), who argue that neurodivergent individuals can remain marginalised due to institutional frameworks that prioritise conformity over individuality. Similar points have been raised by Cook (2024), who found that rigid curriculum expectations create significant barriers to implementing neurodiversity-informed pedagogies in mainstream settings.

Despite increasing advocacy for NDA principles, educational institutions were described as prioritising standardisation, conformity and measurable academic outcomes. Hedegaard-Soerensen and Grumloese (2020) argue this reflects broader neoliberal educational policies, shaped by performance tracking and accountability pressures that inherently disadvantage students who diverge from neurotypical norms. Within such systems, educational success remains narrowly defined by academic attainment, reinforcing deficit narratives around neurodivergent learners. Consequently, NDA practices, which emphasise flexibility and personalisation, are often perceived as incompatible with prevailing policy priorities.

As well as structural constraints, participants also highlighted cultural resistance, particularly among senior leadership teams. For example, Holly noted that despite growing awareness of neurodiversity, deficit-based narratives remain deeply ingrained in educational discourse, suggesting a reluctance among leadership to move beyond entrenched medicalised models. This supports Hamstead's (2024) observation that deficit-based thinking persists in educational leadership even when surface-level acceptance of neurodiversity-affirming discourse increases. Cultural resistance, combined with structural rigidity, creates significant barriers to meaningful change in supporting neurodivergent learners, suggesting that barriers are not only structural but also embedded in attitudes and beliefs about neurodivergence. As argued by Shevidi (2024), unless embedded cultural attitudes are addressed, structural changes alone are unlikely to be enough to create genuinely affirming environments.

Taken together, these findings reveal a critical gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and the realities of practice. They raise important questions about whether authentic NDA implementation is possible within systems that continue to prioritise standardisation and compliance (Slee, 2019; Goodley, 2020).

Some researchers point to the potential for progress within these constraints. Casanova and Widman (2021), for example, highlight recent policy shifts promoting strengths-based reporting and inclusive classroom adaptations. While these developments appear promising, participants in this study expressed scepticism about their impact, suggesting that such reforms often remain superficial and fail to challenge the structural norms that inhibit NDA implementation. Pellicano and den Houting's (2022) paper examines the gap between NDA language in policies and actual structural changes in educational systems, concluding that policy changes related to neurodiversity often remain superficial despite changing rhetoric. While some studies promote working within existing systems, the present findings suggest that genuinely inclusive, affirming education may require a radical reimagining and transformation of educational structures and priorities.

The academisation of schools in England further complicates EP efforts to implement NDA practice. As indicated by Lane (2020) Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) theoretically offer opportunities for inclusive collaboration and shared resourcing. However, as discussed by participants in this study, the reality of academies is often marked by tensions between equitable resource distribution and intense pressures for curriculum standardisation. Such pressures, as explored by Black et al. (2019), can result in a reduction in SEND identification rates, particularly in Sponsored Academies, where accountability metrics are paramount. Webster & Blatchard's (2019) findings further underline that market-driven educational institutions often default to standardised solutions, marginalising neurodivergent children and young people whose needs require more flexible, personalised approaches. This suggests that there is a need for policy interventions and EP advocacy aimed at resisting market-driven pressures and embedding NDA values more robustly within MAT governance and practice.

In addition, top-down policies that emphasise academic attainment place pressure on teachers to prioritise the majority of students and their measurable outcomes. Boyle et al. (2013) argue that such frameworks are perpetuated not simply by habit, but because they are deeply embedded in accountability systems that require schools to demonstrate measurable progress. Broader considerations around diversity and inclusion are often relegated, increasing the risk of marginalisation for students whose needs fall outside of normative expectations (Slee, 2011, 2019; Goodley, 2020). These dynamics foster

environments where neurodivergent identities are undervalued, limiting the scope for affirming and individualised practice. Addressing such barriers requires a critical reassessment of policy structures and institutional priorities to create space for genuinely inclusive approaches.

Institutional resistance to change further compounds these issues. Participants described a disconnect between the ideals of inclusion and the practical realities in schools, a gap echoed in the literature (Ferguson, 2008). This resistance often reflects institutional inertia and deeply rooted beliefs about ability, learning and difference (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Schools remain caught between inclusive aspirations and external demands for academic performance, making it difficult to embed practices that genuinely affirm diversity.

Participants also identified limited training and professional development for school staff as a key barrier to change, a finding that strongly aligns with previous criticisms of SEND training quality (Ofsted, 2020; nasen, 2021). Participants' accounts suggest that NDA advice and recommendations may frequently fail to influence practice due to entrenched deficit-based perspectives among teaching staff. Recent national policy efforts (DfE, 2022) to address these issues appear insufficiently transformative at the school level. Consequently, EPs' efforts to implement NDA approaches are not only met with structural obstacles but are also affected by the broader professional landscape where, as participants in this study described, outdated models continue to dominate due to insufficient, up-to-date training provision in schools (Ambitious About Autism, 2022). The implications for EP practice are significant, indicating a clear need for EPs to proactively engage in shaping schools' CPD programmes.

Yet, even if CPD quality and content were improved, participants claimed that broader resource constraints represent an additional barrier. Investment in professional development was described as essential in challenging deficit assumptions and enabling the adoption of NDA principles in everyday practice; however, resource constraints further exacerbate these challenges. EPs highlighted persistent underfunding and limited access to training, which restrict schools' ability to implement inclusive practices effectively. While the impact of funding shortages is well documented (Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Parsons et al., 2019), participants in this study also pointed to the ways standardisation policies exacerbate resource pressures. For example, Holly observed that DfE-driven standardisation undermines

the flexibility required for NDA approaches. Participants noted that these pressures disproportionately affect schools serving higher numbers of neurodivergent learners. Ruby spoke of the emotional toll on staff working in overstretched environments, where burnout and large class sizes prevent consistent, individualised support. These findings highlight the importance of equitable resource allocation, not only to improve inclusion generally but to ensure that schools serving more diverse populations are not unfairly burdened.

By exploring these intersecting structural, cultural and resourcing issues, the findings offer a deeper understanding of the barriers to NDA implementation. Without addressing the multiple obstacles and layers of challenge, efforts to embed NDA practices will remain disconnected and risk reinforcing the very inequalities they seek to address. Critically, these systemic barriers reflect deeper tensions within educational systems, rooted in long-standing cultural values surrounding conformity, ability and difference. As the data show, EPs are often caught between individual advocacy and systemic constraints. While they frequently act as mediators between policy and practice, the findings emphasise the need for EPs to take a more active role in systemic advocacy. This includes challenging existing frameworks, influencing policy and pushing for funding models and structural reforms that reflect NDA values.

5.3 Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice

Theme 2 developed from the ways in which participants talked about how their understanding and conceptualisation of NDA principles have evolved over their careers; even Holly, who only qualified a year ago, discussed how her approaches, including her language choices have changed over time. These discussions support Thomas's (2024) description of an epistemological shift occurring within psychological practice, which rejects the power imbalances that have historically marginalised neurodivergent perspectives and experiences. However, rather than simply critiquing deficit-based frameworks, participants spoke enthusiastically about the ways in which they actively engage in redefining their professional roles, interventions and relationships with neurodivergent learners, illustrating a meaningful shift within EP practice. This move from theory to practice supports Cherewick and Matergia's (2023) argument that ethical and relational commitments are now driving meaningful changes in how practitioners support neurodivergent children and young people. Participants' reflections suggest that this shift is not just conceptual but grounded in a desire

to act differently, challenging normative assumptions and prioritising affirming, responsive ways of working. This ethical motivation resonates with Petty and Ellis's (2024) call for a redefinition of professional responsibility. Instead of perceiving neurodivergence as something to be accommodated or managed, EPs described their increasing focus on promoting equitable participation, empowerment and recognising the positive contributions neurodivergent individuals make within educational settings. This evolving perspective connects to broader ethical movements in psychology, emphasising relational, collaborative and strength-based approaches that respect individual agency and diversity rather than prioritising conformity to normative standards (Botha & Kapp, 2023; Pellicano et al., 2022).

Central to this shift has been the purposeful and reflective use of affirming language. Several participants described replacing deficit-focused terminology with strengths-based or neutral descriptors. For example, Jen's conscious move away from viewing sensory processing as "difficulties" towards seeing them as "differences" illustrates a professional commitment to reframing neurodivergence in a positive way. Similarly, Ruby highlighted the importance of using terms such as "pre-verbal" and "non-speaking" rather than "non-verbal," reflecting advocacy efforts by neurodivergent individuals and communities who have emphasised the importance of identity-affirming language that values diverse forms of communication (Bottema-Beutel & Kapp, 2021). These language choices, although subtle, carry significant implications, actively challenging entrenched professional assumptions and promoting more respectful and empowering narratives around neurodivergence. This supports the work of Botha and Kapp (2023), who argue that language is not merely descriptive but constitutive, shaping how neurodivergent individuals are perceived and treated within educational systems.

Beyond shifts in language use, participants also described redefining their broader professional identities. Although collaboration and relationship-building have always been a fundamental part of EP practice (Wagner, 2000), participants talked about more subtle ways in which their relationships with stakeholders are conceptualised. Rather than taking on the expert, problem-solver role, participants described moving into more facilitative positions where they can amplify neurodivergent perspectives and use their knowledge to identify and challenge systemic barriers. Holly's emphasis on actively identifying neurodivergent strengths rather than focusing exclusively on areas of need exemplifies this transition,

reflecting deeper ethical commitments to empowerment and inclusivity. Melanie similarly advocated for nurturing strengths instead of pathologising differences, signalling a broader transformation in how EPs conceptualise their professional responsibilities.

However, this repositioning is not without challenges. As explored in Theme 1, EPs described navigating potential tensions between affirming, strengths-based relationships and external pressures demanding needs-based assessments to secure resources. Such tensions have been acknowledged in the literature, highlighting how organisational demands and accountability measures can constrain relational, ethically driven practice (Done & Murphy, 2018; Farrell, 2006). Despite these challenges, participants remained committed to developing their professional identities. This commitment not only aligns educational psychology more closely with contemporary inclusive values (Botha & Kapp, 2023; Pellicano et al., 2022) but also has the potential to transform how neurodivergent children and young people experience EP support.

The re-evaluation of intervention practices further highlights the depth of this shift. Participants expressed significant concerns about traditional, behaviour-focused interventions such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), suggesting that these approaches are fundamentally incompatible with NDA principles. Jen's critique of ABA as "forcing" neurodivergent children to conform to neurotypical standards was echoed by Holly and Lara, who questioned the underlying goals of such interventions. These perspectives resonate with the lived experiences of autistic adults documented by Anderson (2023), whose research uncovered the psychological distress caused by interventions that focused on compliance rather than understanding. Holly's concern about adult-drive agendas is raised by Anderson's participants who described how their natural behaviours were suppressed without taking into account their communicative or regulatory functions. This highlights the tension between authenticity and conformity that the participants in the current study identified.

The EPs reflections suggest an emerging professional perception that interventions should not prioritise compliance or conformity at the expense of children's needs and preferences. Instead, as Holly advocated, EPs must consider intervention goals, asking whether they primarily serve the child's well-being or reflect adult-driven agendas focused on normative expectations. These considerations align with the work of Milton and Moon (2012), who

argue that interventions like ABA often fail to respect the autonomy and agency of neurodivergent individuals, instead prioritising societal norms over individual well-being.

Despite these concerns, the findings also revealed perspectives suggesting that some existing interventions, such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) or LEGO Therapy, could potentially work within affirming practices if implemented thoughtfully. This involves taking a holistic approach that draws on the insights of those who know the child well, including the child themselves. Such practice should be grounded in person-centred psychology (Rogers, 1951), which emphasises respect for individual agency and lived experience. Thoughtful implementation also requires evaluating whether the intervention supports the child's intrinsic motivations, strengths and interests aligning with self-determination theory's focus on autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). It recognises that while some interventions may not suit every child, they can be highly effective when tailored to individual needs rather than imposed with deficit-based expectations.

At the same time, participants emphasised the importance of ongoing critical reflection and careful adaptation to ensure interventions empower rather than constrain neurodivergent learners. Even widely recognised and accepted approaches face significant scrutiny within the neurodiversity movement regarding their underlying assumptions and methodologies. PECS, despite its widespread use, has been critiqued for its roots in ABA, with concerns that it may prioritise compliance and conformity to neurotypical norms over authentic communication and agency (Roberts, 2020, 2021; Lynch & Totten, 2022). Similarly, LEGO Therapy, although often praised for promoting collaborative play and social engagement, has been criticised for its potential to reinforce neurotypical behavioural expectations. Critics argue that such social skills interventions may inadvertently encourage masking of autistic traits, contributing to increased anxiety and diminished authenticity (Therapist Neurodiversity Collective, 2022). A systematic review by Ncube et al. (2021) also cautions that while LEGO-based therapy shows promise, much of the supporting research is methodologically weak and the evidence base remains limited.

This stance signals an important development within education and educational psychology, suggesting that affirming practice does not necessarily reject existing interventions outright. Instead, it calls for ongoing critical reflection and thoughtful adaptation to centre

neurodivergent perspectives genuinely, respecting the individual's preferred ways of communicating and interacting. This ethos sits well with dynamic assessment principles, which emphasise flexibility, responsiveness and the recognition of learning potential rather than fixed ability. All participants in this study reported using dynamic assessment approaches in their practice, highlighting its perceived value as a tool for understanding individual strengths, scaffolding development and moving away from static, norm-referenced comparisons. By focusing on how learners respond to support rather than solely measuring performance in isolation, dynamic assessment reflects a broader shift within the profession towards more personalised, context-sensitive and affirming approaches to understanding how all learners learn (Deakin Crick, 2007). In this sense, dynamic assessment serves not only as a methodological tool but also as a practical expression of NDA-aligned values in action.

Despite these shifts, EPs described internal tensions and complexities associated with redefining their practice. As explored in Theme 1, participants acknowledged that statutory assessment requirements and funding mechanisms continue to pressure EPs toward deficit-based descriptions, reinforcing negative perceptions of neurodivergent learners. Holly's reflection on the statutory pressure to highlight deficits and Lara's acknowledgment that statutory duties inherently pull practitioners back toward deficit-oriented language, illustrate ongoing professional dilemmas. Addressing these tensions will require substantial changes, not only in professional training but also in statutory assessment criteria. Currently, resource allocation processes depend heavily on documenting deficits, thus making strengths-based descriptions challenging to justify in statutory reporting. This echoes the work of Runswick-Cole (2014), who critiques the medical model of disability for perpetuating deficit-based narratives and calls for systemic reforms that prioritise inclusion and equity.

Participants also reflected critically on wider cultural narratives around success and achievement, which reinforce deficit perspectives even when explicit interventions are affirming. Holly, for example, specifically challenged widespread assumptions that neurodivergence inherently limits success, illustrating how societal attitudes influence educators' and parents' expectations. These reflections point to a crucial role for EPs in actively challenging and reshaping societal perceptions through advocacy, consultation and professional dialogue. This evolving professional stance extends the principle of cultural

humility introduced in section 2.6.1, applying it specifically to EP practice and neurodivergence. Participants' accounts demonstrate how they are engaging in the type of critical self-reflection that Fisher (2020) identifies as central to culturally humble practice. For example, Holly's questioning of her own potential biases when interpreting stimming behaviours illustrates this reflective position. Similarly, Ruby's emphasis on "pluralism" in understanding neurodivergent experiences reflects the commitment to learning from those with lived experience rather than categorising them. This is particularly relevant when considering concerns raised by participants about traditional interventions that prioritise conformity over authenticity. When Jen questioned whether certain social skills interventions serve neurodivergent children or primarily benefit adults, she was demonstrating the power analysis that Tervalon and Murray García (1998) argue is an essential part of cultural humility. This approach to professional practice represents more than just a simple adjustment – it represents an ethical stance that fundamentally reorientates the EP role. By positioning themselves as learners rather than experts, participants are shifting their professional dynamic from one of authority to one of genuine connection and partnership.

The findings highlight a strong sense of professional responsibility among EPs in driving these cultural and systemic changes. Participants emphasised that genuine affirmation requires ongoing critical reflection, thoughtful adaptation of practice and collaborative engagement with neurodivergent individuals and communities. Ruby's call for embracing "pluralism" and Jen's insistence on considering the emotional and cognitive experiences of neurodivergent learners underscore the complexity and depth of truly affirming practice. These reflections demonstrate that EPs are not simply shifting their language but also transforming the core values and ethical commitments underpinning their professional roles. Ultimately, shifting from deficit to affirmation is a deeply reflective, professionally complex and ethically driven process.

5.4 Theme 3: Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice

This overarching theme encompasses two interconnected aspects of EPs' experiences. I chose to connect these views as they felt as though they represented two sides of the same coin – the growing sociocultural awareness and advocacy movement

(subtheme 3.1) and the practical challenges of balancing affirmation with preparing young people for neurotypical environments (subtheme 3.2).

5.4.1 Subtheme 3.1: Growing awareness and advocacy for neurodiversity

Participants described the increasing influence of neurodivergent-led online communities, noting that digital platforms provide a powerful and accessible representation of authentic narratives of neurodivergent experience. They emphasised how social media platforms allowed neurodivergent individuals to 'find their tribe,' connecting with others who share similar experiences and worldviews, often for the first time. Such digital interactions can be perceived as less threatening than traditional forms of socialisation, as they provide neurodivergent individuals greater control over the frequency, duration and timing of communication, thus reducing social anxiety (Akhmedova et al., 2024; Andersson et al., 2015; Carruthers et al., 2019). Consequently, these spaces offer more than just information; they provide solidarity, validation and a sense of belonging, enabling individuals to form affirming identities and resist marginalising narratives. This aligns closely with research highlighting how digital media serves as affirming spaces for marginalised groups, transforming online environments into vibrant communities of mutual support and advocacy (Akhmedova et al., 2024; Botha, 2021).

Alongside these online communities, another influential factor shaping societal perceptions of neurodiversity has been the increasing openness of high-profile celebrities. Participants reflected on how increased public disclosure by high-profile celebrities identifying as neurodivergent (particularly with diagnoses such as autism and ADHD) has influenced societal perceptions. The openness of celebrities, such as television personalities, musicians and influencers, was seen as critical in reducing stigma, promoting more public discussions and making neurodivergence visible and relatable, particularly for children and young people in schools. This sits well with contemporary research that emphasises the significance of celebrity narratives in shaping public attitudes towards disability and difference, promoting acceptance and expanding normative conceptions of success and identity (Hendrix, 2024).

However, participants also expressed caution regarding the potential oversimplification or commodification of neurodivergent identities in mainstream media, acknowledging the

tension between beneficial visibility and superficial representation. Holly's critique of stereotypical portrayals of neurodivergent people, particularly her frustration with characters like Sheldon Cooper in The Big Bang Theory, points to a deeper issue surrounding how autism is depicted in popular culture. As argued by Mittmann et al. (2024), too often, mainstream media reduces neurodivergent experiences to simplistic tropes: the quirky genius, the detached savant or the socially awkward outsider. As Holly's reflections suggest, such portrayals flatten the rich diversity of autistic lives. In contrast, social media spaces are quietly reshaping these narratives. Across platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and neurodivergent-authored blogs, more authentic and varied representations of autism are emerging (Campbell, 2022). Rather than simplified stereotypes, these digital communities highlight the complexity of neurodivergence, its everyday challenges, successes and ordinary moments. It could be argued that this shift is about more than just representation; it's about reclaiming power. As neurodivergent individuals craft their own stories, they challenge medicalised perspectives that have historically defined them from the outside. For EPs, these online conversations provide invaluable insight and real-world narratives that move beyond stereotypes, offering richer frameworks for supporting neurodivergent students and promoting more inclusive, affirming practices within schools (Akhmedova et al., 2024; Botha et al., 2021).

While social media platforms play a vital role in amplifying neurodivergent voices and fostering supportive communities, they also pose challenges around misinformation and oversimplification. Recent research highlights that platforms like TikTok frequently contain inaccurate or misleading information about neurodevelopmental profiles, such as ADHD and autism, often promoting misunderstandings of diagnostic criteria and symptoms (Baroutsis et al., 2023). This dissemination of misinformation can lead individuals to interpret common behaviours as clinical symptoms, potentially resulting in inappropriate self-diagnoses or reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Furthermore, as highlighted by Baroutis et al. (2023), the algorithm-driven nature of social media can create echo chambers, continuously reinforcing users' existing perceptions and potentially limiting critical engagement with diverse or more accurate representations of neurodiversity. For EPs, these dynamics not only underscore the need to actively promote media literacy and encourage critical thinking about online content among students, families and educators but also to engage with neurodivergent-led content

as a legitimate source of knowledge. Ensuring individuals seek professional guidance while valuing lived experience remains a key ethical responsibility for the profession (Chapman & Botha, 2022; Milton & Sims, 2016).

Given these complexities surrounding online narratives, participants described feeling a renewed sense of professional accountability to ensure that neurodivergent perspectives are actively integrated into their practice. Rather than framing advocacy as peripheral or optional, participants increasingly regarded awareness of NDA discourses as central to their professional integrity, supporting recent literature which argues that educational professionals bear a responsibility to critically engage with the communities they serve (Chapman & Botha, 2022; Milton & Sims, 2016).

A particularly compelling direction emerging from these findings is the potential reshaping of the EP's role in response to increased societal advocacy and awareness around neurodiversity. Rather than merely confronting existing barriers or critiquing limitations, EPs' growing engagement with neurodivergent perspectives is prompting a shift in their professional identities, emphasising partnership with neurodivergent communities and systemic advocacy. Participants suggested that direct exposure to neurodivergent-led narratives has encouraged deeper individual reflection, which may have implications for how EPs conceptualise their roles and practices. One promising avenue could involve EPs stepping more explicitly into roles as facilitators of dialogue and co-production between neurodivergent communities, families and educational institutions. This goes beyond traditional consultative models, positioning EPs as proactive agents who mediate and amplify neurodivergent voices within schools and policy discussions. The growing societal visibility and credibility of neurodivergent advocates offer EPs an opportunity to shift from being perceived solely as clinical assessors or intervention specialists, towards acting as culturally informed allies who support collaboration, inclusion and identity affirmation (Chapman & Botha, 2022; Woods & Waltz, 2019).

Moreover, enhanced societal awareness opens opportunities for EPs to actively participate in public education, extending their professional influence beyond immediate school contexts. Findings highlighted how EPs viewed themselves as uniquely positioned to bridge gaps between research and public understanding. Therefore, by engaging proactively in social media, public forums or community education initiatives, EPs could help ensure

accurate portrayals of neurodivergence counteract stereotypes and misinformation, promoting informed conversations and deeper public understanding (Mittmann et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the increasing emphasis participants placed on engagement with neurodivergent advocacy narratives suggests that educational psychology might benefit from explicitly incorporating 'advocacy literacy' as a key professional competency. Although participants did not explicitly articulate specific training needs, their reflections highlight gaps in current professional development, particularly around media literacy, cultural responsiveness and the interpretation of neurodivergent experiences. It could be argued, therefore, that proactively embedding these advocacy-informed competencies within professional training and standards would enable educational psychology to better align itself with contemporary ethical frameworks that emphasise justice, empowerment and genuine participatory practices (Kapp, 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017).

As these shifting public narratives continue to influence how neurodivergence is framed and understood in society, EPs are finding their way through the complex tension between affirming neurodivergent identities and preparing young people to function in systems that continue to reflect neurotypical norms. The next section discusses how EPs grapple with this complexity in their day-to-day work.

5.4.2 Subtheme 3.2: Balancing affirmation with navigating the neurotypical world

This theme centres on a familiar tension in educational psychology: how to support neurodivergent children and young people in ways that genuinely affirm who they are, while also helping them manage the realities of a largely neurotypical world. Whereas earlier themes focused more squarely on systemic issues and identity development, here the discussion turns to the more day-to-day dilemma EPs face - the practical and ethical balancing act between fostering self-acceptance and building the skills young people may need to navigate their environments.

Many participants emphasised how important it is to support neurodivergent children in feeling understood and accepted for who they are. They spoke about the value of helping young people recognise and feel confident in their identity. But they also recognised the reality that these children still have to find their way through a world that often runs on neurotypical rules and expectations. Ruby summed up this tension particularly well. She

reflected on how professionals need to avoid pushing rigid social 'norms', like always making eye contact or taking turns in a set way, while still giving children the tools to understand the social world around them, so they can navigate it on their own terms. This echoes recent work that does not reject social learning altogether but instead suggests that we rethink how it is done by focusing less on trying to make children fit uncomfortable moulds and more on giving them tools to feel confident and empowered in the ways that work for them (Ori, 2023).

A central thread running through participants' accounts was a thoughtful critique of traditional social skills interventions. Many questioned whether these approaches, which often aim to encourage neurotypical behaviours such as forming friendships or engaging in certain types of social interaction, are truly supportive or ethically appropriate. Lara reflected on the common assumption that all neurodivergent children benefit from structured social groups focused on friendship development. She challenged this notion, suggesting that such goals may not reflect the preferences or needs of every young person. Her view is echoed in the work of Woods and Waltz (2019) and Milton and Sims (2016), who caution against universalising friendship as a marker of success, without first considering what the individual values. Ruby also advocated for a more balanced, reciprocal model of social learning, one that includes neurotypical peers and promotes mutual understanding. Rather than placing the burden of change solely on neurodivergent children, Ruby proposed environments where everyone involved has the opportunity to learn from each other. This idea supports the growing calls in the literature for reciprocal adaptation, challenging long-held assumptions that neurodivergent children must be the ones to adapt in order to succeed socially (Bottema-Beutel & Crowley, 2021; Botha & Frost, 2020).

Recent work by Finke (2023) adds depth to this conversation by exploring how autistic and non-autistic young people experience and define friendship. The study found that autistic individuals often prefer structured interactions, such as shared activities, placing greater value on practical support than emotionally focused conversations. These findings support the idea that NDA practice focuses on recognising individual preferences and avoiding the imposition of neurotypical social norms. For EPs, this suggests a need to adapt social learning in ways that empower young people to engage on their own terms. By honouring different ways of connecting, EPs can help build relationships that are meaningful and

authentic, while contributing to a more inclusive understanding of what social success can look like.

Participants also discussed the ethical dimensions of this work, recognising the fine line between helping children and young people to understand social norms and pressuring them to conform. Jen described how she uses tools like social stories to support understanding rather than compliance. Instead of telling a child how they *should* behave, the focus is on helping them understand *why* others might behave a certain way, offering insight without judgement. This approach is supported by recent literature that emphasises consent and autonomy in intervention planning (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Milton & Sims, 2016). Holly made a similar point, explaining that some young people may want to learn social skills to feel more confident or connected, but argued that any such intervention should be guided by their wishes. She also acknowledged the emotional cost of masking, a concern widely supported in the literature, which links masking with negative outcomes such as anxiety and burnout (Hull et al., 2021; Pearson & Rose, 2021).

This ethical dimension highlighted by participants is a fundamental challenge in NDA practice: the balancing of immediate wellbeing, identify affirmation and future-focused skill development. This tension reflects what Milton (2012) describes as the double-empathy problem in practice, which recognises that while neurodivergent individuals benefit from understanding neurotypical perspectives, neurotypical society must also adapt its expectations. The way in which participants describe navigating this complex territory suggests that they are increasingly positioning themselves as mediators between different neurological ways of being. The distinction drawn between understanding and conformity represents more than a tactical approach to intervention; rather, it signals a significant epistemological shift in how EPs perceive their role. By prioritising neurodivergent autonomy over normative expectations, EPs like Jen and Holly are implicitly challenging traditional power dynamics that have positioned professionals as experts and neurodivergent individuals as needing to be changed. This supports Thomas' (2024) point that professional practices are evolving from 'doing to' towards 'doing with' approaches.

This discussion is further supported by recent perspectives from other neurodivergent advocates. In a reflective blog, Jack Ori (2024) describes how efforts to help neurodivergent individuals should not be framed as a battle between conforming and resisting. Instead, Ori

proposes a more collaborative vision, where society learns to adapt alongside the individual. Rather than seeing this as an "us versus them" situation, the goal becomes shared understanding. This shift aligns with participants' hopes for a more balanced approach, where EPs not only support young people in understanding the world around them, but also advocate for that world to become more accepting and flexible.

Structural issues within schools also emerged as a major concern. Molly spoke candidly about how school environments are often not designed with neurodivergent children in mind. She described how aspects of the school day, particularly its sensory and social demands, can lead children to feel out of place or like they are failing. This is consistent with critiques by Pellicano and Stears (2011), who argue that inclusion often falters not because of individual children, but because of systems that do not accommodate difference. Molly's reflections highlighted not only the structural barriers but also the emotional weight that neurodivergent children carry as a result of internalising messages of failure or difference in ways that can be deeply damaging.

Another insight raised by participants was the risk of losing sight of real difficulties when neurodivergence is celebrated without sufficient nuance. Lara questioned whether celebratory narratives sometimes obscure the genuine struggles children face. This is an important point echoed by Botha (2021) and Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019), who argue that authentic affirmation must also include space for acknowledging and addressing difficulty. In other words, affirming identity should not mean glossing over the barriers young people face within systems that are still largely neurotypical. Participants also raised concerns about long-term outcomes. Molly and Jen both spoke about the risks of over-sheltering children in ways that leave them unprepared for adulthood. While affirming environments can be protective, participants emphasised the importance of equipping children with real-world skills that support autonomy and resilience. Their reflections align with wider literature on transition planning and life skills development (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2020), reminding us that affirmation and preparation are not mutually exclusive, but must go hand in hand.

At the core of these reflections was the recurring emphasis on choice and agency. Participants stressed that supporting neurodivergent identity does not mean avoiding social learning altogether. Instead, it means ensuring young people are supported to make their

own choices about what they want to learn and how they want to engage. This aligns with self-determination theory, which places autonomy, competence and relatedness at the heart of ethical practice (Ryan & Deci, 2020). As Jen noted, the key is not whether social understanding is offered, but how it is offered. When support is rooted in autonomy, it becomes affirming rather than corrective.

Taken together, these insights have clear implications for educational psychology training and practice. To navigate this complex territory effectively, EPs need space for critical reflection, ongoing professional development and opportunities to learn from neurodivergent voices. They also need systems that support their ability to deliver flexible, context-sensitive and ethically grounded interventions. Without this, there is a risk that well-intentioned practices could inadvertently reinforce the very challenges they aim to address. Ultimately, Theme 3 highlights the need for a more dynamic understanding of affirmation - one that recognises it as a process of negotiation between supporting identity, enabling autonomy and preparing young people for the wider world. For EPs, this means being critically responsive, listening carefully and remaining open to the complexities of each individual's experience.

5.5 Prioritising neurodivergent voices

Building on the challenging landscape explored in Theme 3, Theme 4 demonstrates how EPs centre the voices of neurodivergent children and young people to guide their approaches, treating their viewpoints, identities and rights as foundational to inclusive practice. Research has found that educational systems have frequently marginalised the perspectives of neurodivergent young people, often prioritising adult interpretations of their needs and experiences (Milton & Bracher, 2013; Mullally et al., 2024; Naylor, 2023). Participants explicitly highlighted this issue, reflecting broader critiques within educational and psychological literature regarding the exclusion of neurodivergent voices in decision-making processes (Milton & Sims, 2016; Wood & Happé, 2021). Molly's frustration, particularly her disbelief at some schools' continued reluctance to directly engage young people, reflects wider concerns about tokenistic methods within educational practice (Messiou et al., 2024). Her views reinforce the importance of meaningful consultation with young people to ensure decisions reflect their lived experiences rather than merely satisfying obligations (Milton, 2014; Pellicano & Stears, 2011).

As described in Chapter 2, educational policy and statutory frameworks in the UK have increasingly emphasised the need to capture the views and opinions of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in decisions affecting their lives (Gray et al., 2022). The Children and Families Act (CFA, 2014) requires professionals working with neurodivergent children and young people to facilitate their active participation in decisions about their education and support. Further reinforced by statutory guidance in the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015), person-centred approaches have emerged as central mechanisms for promoting meaningful engagement with children's perspectives (White & Rae, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). Participants' commitment to prioritising the child's voice aligns directly with these policy mandates, reflecting a shift in educational psychology from historically professional-led decision-making towards more collaborative, empowering and rights-based approaches to assessment and intervention.

Participants also repeatedly highlighted how prioritising neurodivergent voices held both practical and emotional significance, viewing this as both an ethical obligation and fundamental to effective practice. Lara's commitment to capturing the child's perspective as her professional priority underscores an emerging consensus within educational psychology that inclusive practice requires genuine co-production of knowledge between professionals and young people (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). This stance aligns closely with person-centred planning approaches, which not only ensure authentic representation but can significantly mitigate anxiety and improve well-being by helping neurodivergent individuals feel valued and understood within their educational environments (Williams et al., 2019).

However, while the EPs in this study clearly advocated for greater participation and voice, findings also revealed ongoing complexities, especially for children with limited or no spoken language. Ruby and Jen's reflections highlight concerns about the potential exclusion of non-speaking children and young people from conversations. These concerns reflect similar discussions in the literature highlighting how neurodiversity discourses unintentionally privilege verbally fluent individuals who can navigate neurotypical social expectations, marginalising those whose communicative differences require alternative modes of engagement (Ashby & Woodfield, 2019; Wood, 2019). Consequently, EPs face the crucial challenge of developing and advocating for accessible, flexible communication approaches,

such as visual supports, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and other person-centred methodologies, ensuring genuine participation and inclusion of all neurodivergent voices in decision-making (Iacono et al., 2016).

Participants also reflected on the complex interplay between fostering self-advocacy skills and navigating the practical realities of educational settings. Holly and Lara both emphasised the importance of empowering young people to articulate their experiences and identify their needs independently. However, they also recognised that self-advocacy cannot simply be expected without adequate scaffolding. Melanie's point that self-advocacy should be actively supported, rather than assumed, resonates with literature emphasising that self-advocacy development is a dynamic, relational process requiring consistent adult facilitation and systemic support (Anderson & Bigby, 2017; Test et al., 2005). This positions self-advocacy as an integral part of broader developmental processes through which young people gain autonomy, confidence and independence.

The EPs' emphasis on voice and self-advocacy was further enriched by their reflections on the role of identity development. Holly and Molly highlighted how neurodivergent identity formation involves a complex negotiation of self-understanding, societal expectations and the search for belonging. Molly's belief that some young people deliberately externalise their differences through appearance or behaviour to manage societal rejection, reflects research that links identity expression to coping strategies among neurodivergent adolescents (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). This observation underscores the importance of identity-affirming environments within educational contexts, suggesting that EPs can play a critical role in fostering settings where neurodivergent identities are celebrated, validated and authentically included rather than marginalised.

The findings also highlighted concerns around identity pressures faced by specific neurodivergent groups, particularly autistic girls, as noted by Ruby. Her reflections echo a growing body of research highlighting the distinct challenges faced by neurodivergent girls in educational settings, particularly the heightened pressure to mask their differences in order to conform to normative social expectations, which can significantly increase their vulnerability to mental health difficulties (Hull et al., 2020; Pearson & Rose, 2021). Such insights indicate that EPs have a responsibility not only to promote self-advocacy and voice

but also to actively challenge gendered expectations and normative pressures that undermine authentic neurodivergent identity development.

Ultimately, this theme highlights a critical dimension of neurodiversity-affirming practice: the ethical and professional imperative of prioritising neurodivergent voices and identities within educational psychology. The reflections provided by participants emphasise the necessity of genuine, inclusive engagement that not only captures diverse neurodivergent experiences but also challenges exclusionary practices at both systemic and interpersonal levels. Crucially, ensuring meaningful participation for all neurodivergent young people, including those whose communication styles diverge significantly from neurotypical norms, emerges as an ongoing, critical area of development within the field. However, fully achieving these aims will necessitate continued investment in innovative communication practices, targeted professional development and critically reflective educational cultures that embrace the complexity and diversity of neurodivergent experiences.

5.6 The importance of collaboration

This final theme reveals how deeply collaboration matters in NDA practice, while also showing the real-world challenges of putting these partnerships into action. Throughout the interviews, participants described support for neurodivergent children and young people not as something they deliver alone, but as something that grows through conversations and shared understanding. This collaborative emphasis aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which recognises how development is shaped through interactions across multiple contexts. However, whereas Roberts and Simpson (2016) present collaboration primarily as a practical strategy, the findings from this study suggest a more fundamental ontological shift in that collaboration becomes not just what EPs do but fundamentally redefines who they are as professionals within a complex system. This repositioning of professional identity has implications for how knowledge is constructed and valued in EP practice with participants describing several ways in which this collaborative ethos challenges traditional power dynamics and understandings of professional expertise.

The value placed on shared knowledge over direct formal assessment represents a significant epistemological challenge to professional hierarchies with participants explicitly questioning the privileging of professional expertise over experiential knowledge. Jen and

Holly, for example, both acknowledged the limitations of their professional position. This recognition aligns with what Collins and Evans (2007) call "experience-based expertise," where the knowledge that comes from daily lived experience brings unique insights that professional knowledge alone cannot provide. Yet this creates an interesting point – although they described valuing parents' and teachers' knowledge, participants still saw themselves as having something distinctive to offer. This reflects the ongoing balancing act EPs face: respecting others' expertise while still bringing their own professional perspective.

Participants also described collaboration as fundamentally about relationships, not just information gathering. Ruby's emphasis on trust-building and Lara's description of collaboration as bidirectional learning represents a shift away from the traditional expert - client relationship towards Edwards' (2009) relational agency, where expertise is shared across networks rather than held by individuals. Edwards argues that the nature and quality of collaboration can evolve even within professions that have always valued working with others. However, unlike some idealised views of partnership (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2018), the EPs in this study reflected on the real power imbalances that complicate true collaboration. Their reflections suggest that while co-production is a worthy goal, achieving it requires honest recognition of how professional status and institutional roles continue to shape these relationships. Whitburn et al. (2022) also suggest that meaningful co-production requires more than just good intentions, arguing that there needs to be deliberate strategies to address power imbalances, particularly when working with marginalised groups. These perspectives suggest that effective collaboration in NDA practice involves not just skill but ongoing critical reflection about power, knowledge and professional identity.

The findings also revealed how collaboration can move practice away from deficit-focused to strengths-based approaches. When multiple perspectives are gathered, participants reported gaining a fuller understanding of children's capabilities and potentials. Jen's example of reframing repetitive play (lining up dinosaurs) demonstrates how collaborative meaning-making can transform interpretations of behaviour from pathology to meaningful expression. This builds on Runswick-Cole et al.'s (2016) critique of deficit approaches but goes further by showing exactly how collaborative conversations enable this shift in perspective. Although, this also raises important questions about whether such interpretive

flexibility benefits all neurodivergent children equally, or primarily those whose behaviours fit more easily within existing educational frameworks.

Participants also reported that collaboration gave them a greater ability to identify and address environmental barriers that might otherwise remain invisible from a single-professional perspective. This ecological approach reflects a growing recognition that effective support stems from improving the fit between individual and environment, rather than expecting the individual to conform (Shakespeare, 2006). However, the participants described ongoing challenges in initiating environmental changes within some school systems that still focus primarily on individual intervention. As Ruppar et al. (2016) argue, despite growing recognition of ecological frameworks, educational practice is often constrained by institutional structures that prioritise individual-focused interventions and limit access to inclusive, systemic support. This disconnect between ecological understanding and practical implementation directly connects to the systemic barriers identified in Theme 1, highlighting how institutional constraints that the participants identified as limiting NDA practice also restrict the translation of collaborative insight into meaningful change. These findings suggest that collaboration must go beyond identifying barriers to actively building collective capacity for systemic advocacy and reform.

These insights help us to see collaboration not just as a technical process but as a transformative practice that reshapes professional identity and challenges traditional knowledge hierarchies, leading to a disruption in power dynamics. Rather than focusing on the outcome of collaboration, the participants in this study discussed the processes of collaboration that emerge as both essential to NDA practice and inherently complex, requiring professionals to navigate difficult questions about knowledge, ethics and practical realities. Findings suggest that when collaboration is done well, it does more than improve outcomes - it builds trust, strengthens relationships and empowers everyone involved.

5.7 Intersectionality and neurodiversity-affirming practice

Although this study focused primarily on NDA practice as a broad conceptual framework, the findings reveal underlying tensions that connect to the wider intersectional issues discussed in Chapter 2. The systemic barriers identified by participants (Theme 1) may compound disadvantages for neurodivergent children and young people who experience

multiple marginalised identities. For example, limited resources and deficit-based assessment frameworks described by participants may disproportionately impact neurodivergent children from racially minoritised backgrounds or lower socioeconomic contexts, who already face additional barriers to equitable education. Similarly, participants' reflections on the challenges of balancing affirmation with navigating neurotypical environments (Theme 3.2) take on additional complexity when considering intersecting factors such as cultural expectations around behaviour, gender norms and class-based educational aspirations (Diemer et al., 2022; Jones & Orchard, 2024; Naylor, 2023). Although participants did not discuss these dynamics in depth, their emphasis on the importance of collaboration (Theme 5) and prioritising neurodivergent voices (Theme 4) suggests an implicit recognition that truly affirming practice must account for the whole child within their social context. Future research would benefit from exploring how EPs navigate NDA practice for children and young people experiencing intersecting marginalisations and examining how these multiple identities shape barriers and opportunities in educational settings.

5.8 Methodological reflections

This section critically evaluates the methodological choices made in this study, considering research quality, limitations and their implications for the interpretation of findings. The discussion explores how research design, data collection, analysis and ethical considerations shaped the study's outcomes and suggests areas for future improvement.

5.8.1 Research quality and rigour

Quality in research is essential for evaluating the contribution of a study to existing knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008). In designing this study, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) principles for qualitative research and applied Yardley's (2000, 2017) flexible quality criteria - sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance. The critical realist positioning adopted in this study recognised both the subjective nature of participants' experiences as well as the broader social structures and cultural forces that shape these experiences. Although the interpretivist nature of this research means that findings are context specific, the systemic factors

identified are likely to resonate more widely and may be relevant beyond the immediate context.

5.8.2 Research design and data collection

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for a flexible and responsive approach, enabling participants to talk openly and share their perspectives in a conversational way. This supports Braun and Clarke's (2022) emphasis on researcher reflexivity and active engagement with participants' narratives. While this approach was effective in generating rich data, reliance on self-reported experiences presents limitations, as participants may have framed responses in ways they felt were professionally appropriate. Social desirability bias was a potential concern (Karatsareas, 2022) particularly given the increasing professional emphasis on NDA practice. Future research could mitigate this by incorporating observational methods or case studies to explore how EPs enact NDA principles in practice.

Conducting interviews online provided logistical advantages, allowing participants to engage from familiar environments without the need for travel. The flexibility of online interviews appeared to encourage participation, as they could fit them in around their work commitments. However, the lack of in-person interaction may have limited access to non-verbal cues, which can provide additional depth in qualitative research. Future studies may consider a hybrid data collection approach, combining online and face-to-face methods to balance accessibility with richer interaction.

5.8.3 Reflexivity and researcher positionality

As a trainee EP researching EPs, my shared professional background with participants was both a strength and a potential limitation. This positionality may have facilitated greater trust and openness, encouraging participants to share candid insights into their experiences. However, it also introduced the risk of researcher bias, as my familiarity with the field may have influenced my interpretations of the data.

To address this, I engaged in reflexive practices throughout the research process, including maintaining a research journal (Appendix 17) and regularly reflecting on my assumptions and positionality. While these strategies helped minimise bias, the power dynamic between myself and participants may have influenced how openly they shared challenges, particularly

if they perceived me as aligned with certain professional perspectives. Future research could integrate anonymous survey elements alongside interviews to reduce potential social desirability effects.

5.8.4 Thematic analysis and interpretation

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), which was well-suited to exploring the complexity of EPs' perspectives. This approach allowed for flexibility in theme development, recognising the active role of the researcher in shaping interpretations. By engaging in an iterative coding process, I was able to refine themes to reflect the depth of participants' experiences. However, as RTA prioritises researcher subjectivity, there is a risk that themes were influenced by my own perspectives. To enhance the credibility of findings, I revisited the dataset multiple times and engaged in reflexive practice through my research journal to challenge my own assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This ongoing reflection and self-examination helped to minimise the extent to which my teaching background shaped the interpretation of participants' accounts, ensuring themes remained as grounded as possible in their professional experiences as EPs.

While RTA provided an in-depth exploration of EPs' views, alternative analytical approaches could have gathered different insights. For example, content analysis may have provided more structured comparisons between participants' perspectives. Future research could explore the use of mixed-methods approaches, integrating qualitative findings with survey data to examine broader trends in EPs' engagement with NDA practice.

5.8.5 Ethical considerations and study limitations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout this study guided by the BPS's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) and HCPC standards. In line with the principle of respect, participants provided informed consent and were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, protecting participants' professional identities. Given the focus on professional practice, there was minimal risk of emotional distress; however, efforts were made to create a neutral and open environment where participants could comfortably express both support for and concerns about NDA implementation.

Recruitment strategies influenced the composition of the sample. While EPs with varying levels of experience participated, the voluntary nature of recruitment meant that participants may have been more positively inclined toward NDA approaches, potentially limiting the representation of dissenting views. This is consistent with recruitment challenges identified in similar studies (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). A purposive sampling approach, targeting EPs with a wide range of perspectives and experiences, could help capture a broader range of professional experiences in future research. All participants were female and based in the East Midlands region of England, which may limit the transferability of the findings beyond this context. Perspectives from other regions and from a more diverse participant group may have returned different insights.

Another limitation was the timing of data collection, as participants were recruited during a period of high workload within educational settings. While flexible scheduling helped accommodate EPs' availability, it is possible that some perspectives were underrepresented due to time constraints. Future studies could consider longitudinal designs to track changes in EPs' engagement with NDA practice over time, providing a more comprehensive understanding of shifts in professional discourse.

5.8.6 Conclusion

Overall, the methodological approach adopted in this study allowed for a detailed exploration of EPs' perspectives on NDA practice, capturing both individual experiences and systemic challenges. The use of RTA, online semi-structured interviews and an interpretivist approach contributed to a rich dataset. However, limitations such as sampling bias, reliance on self-reported data and researcher positionality must be acknowledged. Future research could build on these findings by employing broader sampling strategies, mixed-methods approaches and observational techniques to gain a more comprehensive understanding of NDA implementation in educational psychology. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the evolving discourse surrounding NDA practice and highlights the ongoing tensions between affirming neurodivergent identities and navigating systemic constraints.

5.9 Implications

The findings from this study highlight key implications for educational psychology practice, policy and training. While there is increasing recognition of NDA principles, systemic barriers and professional restrictions continue to limit their full implementation. A coordinated effort across policy, practice and training is essential. At a policy level, current assessment and funding procedures often reinforce deficit-based models by requiring descriptions of impairment to access support, which runs counter to NDA principles. Strengths-based statutory frameworks that recognise support needs without pathologising neurodivergence could be used instead (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). EPs are central to this shift. Alternative assessment strategies and language are needed to describe needs affirmatively (Botha & Kapp, 2023). Intervention approaches such as those targeting communication and social development, should move beyond neurotypical norms, instead working to promote reciprocal understanding and autonomy (Bottema-Beutel & Kapp, 2021; den Houting, 2019). Strengthening multi-agency collaboration is also important for ensuring consistency and a shared understanding among professionals, school staff and families (Pellicano et al., 2022).

Training also emerged as a key area requiring further development. The findings suggest that NDA principles should be embedded in initial EP training, with CPD opportunities co-delivered by neurodivergent trainers to integrate lived experience (Botha et al., 2021; Chapman, 2020). Training should also address tensions within neurodiversity discourse, such as the risks of 'neurodiversity lite' described by Russell (2020) and issues of intersectionality. Furthermore, equipping educators and families with NDA-informed training ensures that inclusive practice does not fall solely on EPs.

Chapter 6: Summary and conclusions

This study explored how EPs conceptualise NDA practice and identified the challenges and opportunities that shape its implementation. Through semi-structured interviews with six EPs working in Local Authority settings, the research employed reflexive thematic analysis from a critical realist perspective to generate insights into professional understandings and experiences.

Five interconnected themes emerged from the analysis. Systemic barriers to NDA practice revealed how inflexible institutional structures, pathologising frameworks and resource limitations restrict the operationalisation of affirming principles. Participants described efforts to move away from deficit-based to affirmation-focused language, yet tensions remained between evolving professional values and statutory demands. EPs also reflected on the changing societal landscape, balancing commitments to affirm neurodivergent identities with the practical need to prepare young people for predominately neurotypical environments. Although prioritising neurodivergent voices emerged a common aspiration, participants' accounts highlighted the practical, day-to-day challenges of consistently embedding participatory approaches within existing service structures. Finally, the emphasis on collaboration signalled a move away from expert-driven models towards genuine partnerships with schools, families and neurodivergent individuals themselves.

This study contributes to original knowledge by examining how EPs actually apply NDA principles within the constraints of real-world settings – an area previously unexplored in the literature. The findings reveal that barriers to implementation exist across multiple levels simultaneously, from individual practice to organisational structures and broader societal attitudes. The research also documents a possible evolution in professional identity, as EPs increasingly position themselves as facilitators rather than experts, working to amplify neurodivergent voices within educational systems.

As previously discussed, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size limits the diversity of perspectives represented and the reliance on self-reported interview data may not fully capture the complexity of practice. The exclusive focus on EP perspectives, without including neurodivergent individuals, families or other professionals

represents a significant limitation given the emphasis on collaboration and centring neurodivergent voices.

Looking forward, the findings suggest several important implications. EPs need practical frameworks that allow for strengths-based assessment while satisfying statutory and LA requirements. Ongoing professional development should incorporate critical reflection on language use, power dynamics and underlying assumptions. Policy reform is also needed to move away from deficit-driven statutory processes and address the resource constraints that undermine inclusive practice. Future research should incorporate participatory methodologies to prioritise neurodivergent perspectives, explore how systemic factors shape the implementation of NDA practices across different contexts and investigate the impact of NDA approaches over time. Additionally, greater attention to intersectionality is critical for ensuring that NDA practice evolves to reflect the full complexity of neurodivergent experiences.

This research has revealed both significant commitment to NDA principles among EPs and substantial challenges to their consistent implementation. Although the path towards more affirming practice is not straightforward, the findings suggest that many EPs are actively engaged in navigating these complexities despite the systemic constraints. By understanding current perspectives, barriers and opportunities, this research aims to contribute to the development of educational psychology practice that genuinely affirms neurodivergent identities while supporting children and young people to thrive in educational environments.

6.1 Dissemination

The findings from this research will be disseminated in ways that directly link the study to EP practice and service development. I will be presenting key insights from the research at a regional Continuing Professional Development (CPD) day, creating an opportunity to engage EPs in discussions about opportunities and systemic barriers for neurodiversity-affirming practice.

My involvement in my service's Partnership for Inclusion of Diversity in Schools (PINS) project - which focuses on supporting neurodivergent children and families through innovative, inclusive approaches - provides a further avenue to apply the research findings to practice development and service improvement.

I am also involved in the Autistic and OK pilot project (developed by *Ambitious about Autism*), currently running across several local schools. This initiative aims to empower autistic young people to develop positive autistic identities and build a sense of community within school settings. My research findings, especially those emphasising the importance of neurodivergent voice and a shift from deficit-based to affirming language, will directly inform this work.

Finally, I will be joining a working group that is reviewing the language used in EP consultations and reports. Through these varied roles, the research will move beyond academic dissemination to inform real changes in practice, contribute to training and service development, and support wider cultural shifts within EP services toward NDA principles.

Chapter 7: References

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Ethical approval letter

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

T: +44 (0)115 8467403 or (0)115 9514344

SJ/tp

Ref: **S1612**

Tuesday 21st May 2023

Dear Kirsty Chambers & Victoria Lewis

Ethics Committee Review
Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'An Exploration of Educational Psychologists' Views of Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice'

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 3 – Participant consent form

School of Psychology
Consent Form

University of
Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Title of Project: An Exploration of Educational Psychologists' Views of

Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice

Ethics Approval Number:

Researcher: Kirsty Chambers - kirsty.chambers@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Victoria Lewis - victoria.lewis@nottingham.ac.uk

The participant should answer these questions independently:

- 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 you are free to withdraw from the study?   YES/NO
  (at any time and without giving a reason)

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

- Do you agree to take part in the study?   YES/NO

Participant signature: Date:

Name (block capitals):

Appendix 4 – Information sheet

> **School of Psychology**
> **Information Sheet**

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Title of Project: An Exploration of Educational Psychologists' Views of Neurodiversity-

Affirming Practice

Ethics Approval Number: S1612

Researcher: Kirsty Chambers

Supervisors: Dr Victoria Lewis

Contact Details: kirsty.chambers@nottingham.ac.uk

This is an invitation to take part in a research study exploring Educational Psychologists' views of neurodiversity-affirming practice. 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.

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how neurodiversity-affirming approaches are viewed and understood by Educational Psychologists, in terms of their own individual practice and at a wider, more systemic level. It is hoped that the findings of this research will contribute to the growing literature aimed at supporting neurodiversity in educational settings by identifying challenges, exploring interventions and provision and, ultimately, informing policy and best practice.

If you participate, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview, in person or over TEAMS. You will be asked to talk about your views on neurodiversity-affirming practice and how, if at all, it has impacted your own practice. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study. All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

If you have any questions or concerns, please get in touch. I can also be contacted after your participation at the above address.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 5 – Overview of questions

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Title of Project: An Exploration of Educational Psychologists' Views of Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice

General areas of questioning

- What the concept of neurodiversity-affirming practice means to you.

- Perceptions and misconceptions about neurodivergent learners.

- Experiences of approaches/practices that have been effective or meaningful.

- Observation and assessment of neurodivergent learners.

- Challenges and barriers (eg. statutory requirements).

- Experiences of any long-term benefits/changes in schools that have embraced neurodiversity-affirming practices.

- How traditional approaches can align or conflict with neurodiversity-affirming approaches.

- Ethical implications.

- Visions for the future of neurodiversity-affirming practice in educational psychology.

Appendix 6 – Opening script and final interview questions with prompts

Hi [Name], thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today - I really appreciate you being willing to share your experiences and perspectives.

Just to introduce myself properly, I'm Kirsty, and I'm a Trainee Educational Psychologist. As you'll know, that means I wear two hats - I'm both learning to be a practitioner and also completing my doctoral research. Today I'm very much here in my researcher role, so I want you to feel completely comfortable sharing your honest thoughts and experiences.

What I'm hoping to explore with you is how you understand and experience neurodiversity-affirming practice - so really just getting a sense of your views, any challenges you might face, opportunities you've noticed, that sort of thing. I sent you an overview of the main interview questions yesterday, so hopefully that gave you a chance to think about them a bit. There are no right or wrong answers - I'm genuinely interested in your perspective.

I mentioned in my email that the interview will be audio recorded and should take no longer than an hour. You can choose not to answer any question - you don't need to explain why, just say 'I'd rather not answer that' and we'll move on.

Just to remind you about confidentiality - everything will be stored securely, I'll make sure you're completely anonymous in anything I write, and the full transcripts won't appear in my thesis. You also have the right to withdraw from the research any time up until I anonymise your transcript.

Before we start, do you have any questions about the research or the process? Is there anything you'd like me to clarify? [Address any questions]

Great, so I have the consent form here that I sent to you. Could we just go through this together to make sure you're still happy to participate? [Go through consent form]

Perfect, thank you. I'll start the recording now. [Begin recording]

Could you start by telling me your current job title and how many years you've been working as an educational psychologist?

Interview Questions

1. What does the concept of neurodiversity-affirming practice mean to you?
    *   How has your understanding of it evolved throughout your career?
    *   What influences or experiences do you think have shaped your perspective on neurodiversity-affirming practices?

2. From your experience, what are some of the common perceptions or misconceptions that you've encountered about neurodivergent learners?

3. Can you share some experiences where you've successfully supported neurodivergent learners in educational settings?
   - Are there any particular approaches or practices that you've found to be especially effective or meaningful in those situations?

4. How do you think assessments and observations can best reflect the strengths and needs of neurodivergent learners?
   - In your opinion, what makes an assessment feel fair and inclusive?

5. In your work, what challenges or barriers have you encountered when it comes to meeting the needs of neurodivergent learners?
   - How do you typically navigate these challenges?
   - In what ways do statutory requirements influence your approach?
   - Have you encountered differing views regarding approaches to supporting neurodivergent learners, and how do you engage in these conversations?
   - Are there any potential downsides of neurodiversity-affirming practice?

6. Have you observed any long-term benefits or changes in schools that have embraced neurodiversity-affirming practices?
   - What needs to be in place to embed changes?
   - How do you see your role within this?

7. How do you see traditional approaches to educational psychology aligning or conflicting with neurodiversity-affirming practices?

8. What role do you think ethics play in neurodiversity-affirming practices, and have you faced any ethical dilemmas in your work?

What do you envision for the future of neurodiversity-affirming practices in   educational psychology?

Appendix 7 – Participant debrief statement

| School of Psychology | The University of |
| Debrief Statement | Nottingham |

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Name of researcher: Kirsty Chambers
Email of researcher: kirsty.chambers@nottingham.ac.uk

Name of supervisor: Dr Victoria Lewis
Email of supervisor: victoria.lewis@nottingham.ac.uk

Email of Chair of Ethics Committee (Stephen Jackson): stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Title of Study: An Exploration of Educational Psychologists' Views of Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice.

Purpose of study: The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how neurodiversity-affirming approaches are viewed and understood by Educational Psychologists, in terms of their own individual practice and at a wider, more systemic level. It is hoped that the findings of this research will contribute to the growing literature aimed at supporting neurodiversity in schools and early years settings, by identifying challenges, exploring interventions and provision and, ultimately, informing policy and best practice.

Please email the researcher at the email address above, if:
- You have questions about this survey or study.
- You have concerns about this interview or study and would like to speak to the researcher about them.
- You would like to be emailed a link to the final thesis once it is completed.

It is possible that the questions asked in the interview prompted uncomfortable feelings or reflections about your professional practice or personal experiences. If you feel this way, please consider seeking support during supervision.

Appendix 8 – Participant Privacy Notice

School of Psychology

Participant Privacy

The University of **Nottingham**

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

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 the completion of a research thesis for the Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology.

Legal basis for processing your personal data under UK 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 encryption protocol, pseudonymisation procedure and anonymisation of data.

Who we share your data with
Extracts of your data may be disclosed in published works that are posted online for use by the scientific community. Your data may also be stored indefinitely on external data repositories (e.g., the UK Data Archive) and be further processed for archiving purposes in the public interest, or for historical, scientific or statistical purposes. It may also move with the researcher who collected your data to another institution in the future.

Appendix 9 – Familiarisation doodles

Appendix 10 – Example of interview transcript with initial notes

Participant 4 9:05
Of having that conversation. So. So I find that really I found that really challenging.
And I don't know whether that's, you know, whether that was something that was always sort of in me in terms of my perspective of the world. So yeah, I don't know if I've answered your question at all.

Interviewer 9:24
You have. You have and some. No, absolutely. Thank you so much from just moving on slightly now thinking about the neurodivergent learners, young children, young people that you work with, from your experience, what do you think some of the common perceptions and misconceptions are about these children and young people?

Participant 4 9:34
Mm hmm. I think that so in terms of, for a lot of autistic young people that I see, I think that there's a really there's a lot of pressure, particularly sort of when I think about autistic girls, I think that there's a lot of pressure, social pressure for them to conform with the norm. And then there's, and that kind of follows them through school. So they, and I'm really interested actually to to understand better whether that's something that is a difference in maybe parenting a girl or a boy, or whether it's a general social kind of thing. Or whether that's part of how girls respond to, you know, more socially maybe than boys do. But I have noticed that there's this emerging kind of significant need of autistic girls where maybe they do try to kind of fit in as much as they can and often sort of year four, year five, year six, it all starts to fall apart, because of the social demands become so significant and the social situations are quite complex from that age. So that's one area that I think is is really difficult for neurodivergent kids. The other is obviously ADHD kids, I mean, we in our team have recurring conversations about ADHD and obviously with the area that I work in, there's a lot of poverty and kind of disadvantage. And we know that you know that there's that that's difficulty kind of distinguishing what is a result of maybe early childhood trauma versus actual ADHD. And there's been a significant kind of rise in number of kids who are being diagnosed and obviously then the curriculum comes into it as well. Where we're asking sort of 6-7 year old children to be sat at desks all day. So I think that the issue around ADHD, for example, is far more complex. Because. Amongst those children, obviously there are children that would you know, that that genuinely have neurodivergent type need. And but also there's far more factors there that are at play. So you know things like screen time and, you know violent video games, etc. So there's so many different facets to it that it's difficult sometimes to when you're working

Handwritten margin notes (left page): Raw reflection / uncertainty — who is shaping views? — held together boy? — Curriculum as contributing factor — tension? here? — Gender + masking – immediate focus on girls — Pressure to conform = a threat of NDA? — Autism about causation – reflective practition — Multiple hypothesis but no clear causes? — shift to ADHD links to disadvantage why "obviously" — diagnostic complexities / Systemic critique — trauma v. neurodivergence — "actual" ADHD? – interesting language choice — environmental expectations — resists simple categorisation

(page 3)

with a school to be able to shift staff perspectives on this when they're also stuck within a system.

Interviewer 12:43
Mmm.

Participant 4 12:50
So they know they're being judged on how much progress children make in year 2, and whilst they want to perhaps, you know, adjust their the teaching and just the whole setup of the school and make it more play based. They're actually being squeezed into more of an academic type approach. So there's there's lots of things to consider when you're working with families and schools when it comes to ND and I think that's one of me, so that's I guess where I sometimes feel the tension where you know I want to be neuro affirming, but equally, you know, sometimes there'll be a situation where you actually know that there are environmental factors here that are important, how this child is coping and it can be bordering on safeguarding issues. But you've got a very strong narrative from the parents saying, they're whatever, they're autistic, they're, they've got ADHD and it's being able to challenge that as well that I think professionally is really difficult and it puts us in a quite a sticky, you know, situation sometimes when you have very strong advocates for neuroaffirming practice, but you've actually also got a professional kind of concern.

Interviewer 14:20
So how? How would you approach situations like that? How do you kind of unpick all those other factors that might be contributing to that child's presentation? And you know how they're getting on? How would you approach that as an EP?

Participant 4 14:34
The main thing is engaging people, I think. Unless you develop kind of that support and spend the time listening to the story then you won't be able to really engage with the parent or the staff. You know, I mean, most people's response to any kind of sort of challenge is defence, so you need to take them on a journey with you and actually kind of try to introduce alternative ideas and see how they respond to that. But this is again, you know one of the challenges at the moment with the demands on EPs is it's we don't always have the time to kind of build that into our sessions and have a chance to actually explore things from wider, wider perspectives. I mean, good practice really should be that you know, you d triangulate, and you do make sure that you have enough sources of information to make an informed decision. And that's why I think we're quite lucky in that

Handwritten margin notes (right page): empathy for staff — empathy for teachers — Assessment / accountability vs developmentally appropriate practice — Professional dilemma? — should be be NDA but sees environmental factors — challenging parents "sticky situation" professional duty vs parent advocacy — Tension between accepting ND identity + potentially medicalising environmental disadvantage? — engagement as a foundation gradual? at their pace? — holistic thinking — good practice ideals? — relationship based practice — real-world complexities — Gap between ideal + reality?

(page 6)

Appendix 11 – Code generation using NVivo

Appendix 12 – Initial code grouping

Appendix 13 – Examples of theme development from raw data

Data extract	Initial code	Final theme placement
"I wonder if the sort of very strict nature of the curriculum at the moment and environments and uniforms and all that kind of stuff isn't necessarily neurodiverse affirming... all children in terms of their diverse learning styles or thinking styles or sensory processing needs are sort of all treated in the same way at the moment as though they shouldn't be diverse, but all the same." (Jen)	Systemic constraints and the rigid education system Systemic constraints and the rigid education system	Theme 1: Systemic barriers to neurodiversity-affirming practice
"I think when I've worked with schools, when we think about how we're supporting these children and young people and often schools will say, well, I would love to do that, but I just don't have the resources." (Melanie)	Barriers to implementation	Theme 1: Systemic barriers to neurodiversity-affirming practice
"I think moving, definitely moving away from the deficit model of neurodiversity... and I think that's been a big shift as well -- thinking about sensory processing differences. And thinking about them as differences rather than difficulties." (Jen)	Moving away from deficit-based thinking	Theme 2: Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice
"I think that would kind of be the main one that it's all about what's lacking or what needs to be fixed rather than how can we look at the positives and how can we nurture and how can we support strengths." (Melanie)	Moving away from deficit-based thinking	Theme 2: Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice
"From a neurodiverse-affirming perspective, I think ABA is not helpful, and I think it's sometimes very damaging... It's one of the best examples of how we're trying to force a child to adapt to neurotypical thinking and behaviour." (Jen)	Critique of behavioural approaches	Theme 2: Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice
"I've seen a real kind of sea change in everybody's understanding of what autism is... I think there's a better understanding that there's as much kind of variety within neurodiversity as there is without neurodiversity. So that's been quite a big change." (Molly)	Growing awareness and understanding of neurodiversity	Theme 3: Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice *Subtheme 3.1: Growing awareness and advocacy*
"I think the biggest change from the kind of explosion in social media is the kind of finding your tribe. So I think there are an awful lot of neurodivergent people who possibly didn't have that sense of community before, who are finding their community online." (Molly)	The dual role of social media	Theme 3: Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice

		Subtheme 3.1: Growing awareness and advocacy
"This is where I guess the conflict also comes in with neuro-affirming practices, because when we talk about what types of skills should we be teaching children, I completely agree that we shouldn't be like kind of dictating to them that they have to make eye contact or that they have to learn to take turns. But actually, there's an element of what does this child need in order to be successful in this society today?" (Ruby)	Helping ND children navigate an NT world	Theme 3: Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice *Subtheme 3.2: Balancing affirmation with navigating a neurotypical world*
"I do worry that a child could be too sheltered and then find adult life or find being a teenager incredibly overwhelming because they have just had their small world adapted to them." (Jen)	The balance between affirmation and navigating the real world	Theme 3: Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice *Subtheme 3.2: Balancing affirmation with navigating a neurotypical world*
"I think that the only thing that I would say that I recommend all the time is talking to the children because it staggers me after 27 years that schools still don't talk to the children about what they want." (Molly)	Prioritising the voice of ND children and young people	Theme 4: Prioritising neurodivergent voices
"I think making sure that you've captured the child's voice at the heart of it, so if you're going to be using an assessment tool that you're listening to what the child thinks and feels first, and I think for children who are particularly anxious that I'm doing a psych advice for instance, I always go in thinking my priority is to get the child's voice and anything else is like a bonus." (Lara)	Prioritising the voice of ND children and young people	Theme 4: Prioritising neurodivergent voices
"For a lot of a lot of young people, one of the massive things about being neurodivergent is just that narrative around their identity and their biography. And what does this mean for who I am and who I could be? Where I fit in with the world." (Holly)	Identity and belonging	Theme 4: Prioritising neurodivergent voices
"We aren't the ones that know them the best, but it's the teaching team and the parents. But at least being able to see them a couple of times and having a few more eyes on the child and being able to get a bit more information is useful in those situations." (Jen)	It's a collaborative effort	Theme 5: The importance of collaboration

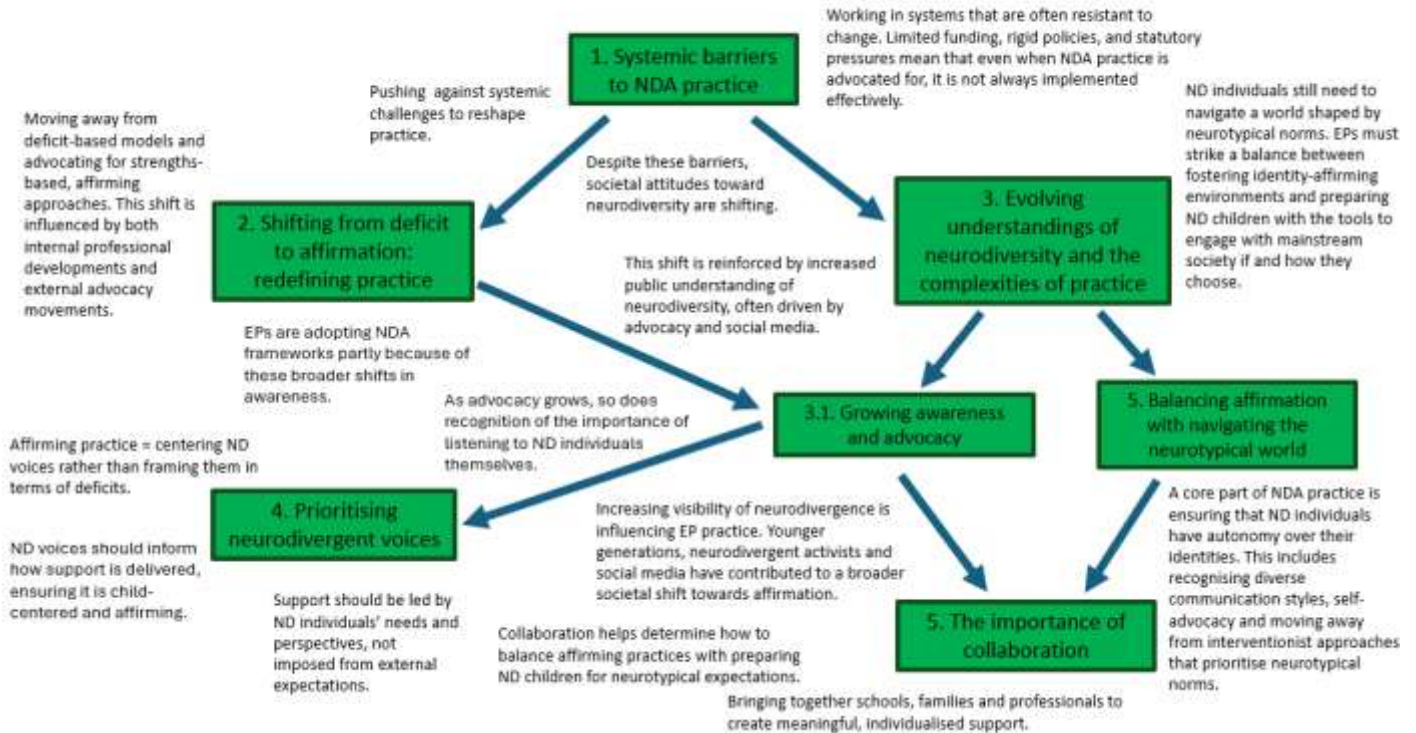|		
"It's got to be a partnership. Otherwise, it just doesn't work." (Ruby)	It's a collaborative effort	Theme 5: The importance of collaboration
"The sensory audit that I talked about, the sensory profile and the sensory toolkit, thinking about classroom settings, where children are sitting in a classroom, how they get in and out. What's happening at playtime, lunchtime, unstructured times, transition times. I'd always recommend having a really close look at that." (Molly)	Adapting the environment	Theme 5: The importance of collaboration

Appendix 16 – Refining themes

Final themes

Working in systems that are often resistant to change. Limited funding, rigid policies, and statutory pressures mean that even when NDA practice is advocated for, it is not always implemented effectively.

1. Systemic barriers to NDA practice

Pushing against systemic challenges to reshape practice.

Moving away from deficit-based models and advocating for strengths-based, affirming approaches. This shift is influenced by both internal professional developments and external advocacy movements.

ND individuals still need to navigate a world shaped by neurotypical norms. EPs must strike a balance between fostering identity-affirming environments and preparing ND children with the tools to engage with mainstream society if and how they choose.

Despite these barriers, societal attitudes toward neurodiversity are shifting.

2. Shifting from deficit to affirmation: redefining practice

3. Evolving understandings of neurodiversity and the complexities of practice

This shift is reinforced by increased public understanding of neurodiversity, often driven by advocacy and social media.

EPs are adopting NDA frameworks partly because of these broader shifts in awareness.

Affirming practice = centering ND voices rather than framing them in terms of deficits.

As advocacy grows, so does recognition of the importance of listening to ND individuals themselves.

3.1. Growing awareness and advocacy

5. Balancing affirmation with navigating the neurotypical world

ND voices should inform how support is delivered, ensuring it is child-centered and affirming.

4. Prioritising neurodivergent voices

Increasing visibility of neurodivergence is influencing EP practice. Younger generations, neurodivergent activists and social media have contributed to a broader societal shift towards affirmation.

A core part of NDA practice is ensuring that ND individuals have autonomy over their identities. This includes recognising diverse communication styles, self-advocacy and moving away from interventionist approaches that prioritise neurotypical norms.

Support should be led by ND individuals' needs and perspectives, not imposed from external expectations.

Collaboration helps determine how to balance affirming practices with preparing ND children for neurotypical expectations.

5. The importance of collaboration

Bringing together schools, families and professionals to create meaningful, individualised support.

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Appendix 17 – Reflexive journal examples

23rd Sept 2024

First interview went well – the nerves seemed to evaporate once the participant started talking. She seemed genuinely keen to share her views which made the whole process quite motivating. Found myself making notes as she spoke but not sure if that was a good idea as could have missed things. Agreed with a lot of what she was saying so it was an effort to keep that in check – need to be mindful of my language. Wondering whether to have a few neutral phrases to use (although that seems too fake – I'm part of the process!). Weirdly looking forward to the next one now (nervous but in a good way) – feel like these are worthwhile conversations!

October 2024

Another interview done. Enjoyed it again – felt like the participant enjoyed it too. Maybe it's having the opportunity to just sit and talk about something for an hour! I caught myself almost interrupting when she was talking about how statutory processes force deficit language. I *so* relate to this but need to be careful I'm not leading participants toward answers that validate my own experiences. Made a mental note to stick to neutral prompts.

February 2025

Feel like I'm drowning in codes! Some of them are basically saying the same thing with sightly different words – system barriers, institutional constraints, structural limitations. Coding Molly's interview and I'm coding almost every other sentence – this can't be right. Need to step back and think about my purpose.

Also caught myself creating codes that sound more academic than what the participant actually said. Ruby talked about things being 'messy' but I coded it as 'complex professional navigation' – why am I sanitising their words?!

19th Feb 2025

Had a meltdown today. Looking at all these codes and they just seem like a random collection of observations. How is this supposed to become coherent themes? B&C say this is normal but it doesn't feel normal. I feel like I'm missing something obvious with this process.

Made myself go back to the research question. What am I actually trying to find out? Sometimes I think I've been so focused on the mechanics of coding I've lost sight of the actual purpose.

March 2025

Thinking about title for themes, much harder than I thought it'd be:

- Systemic barriers (still feels a bit obvious but it's a real theme)
- Something about professional identity shifting??
- Neurodivergent voices - this is everywhere in the data
- Collaboration/partnerships

Theme 2 is the one I'm struggling with. It's about how they're changing their practice but also how they see themselves differently. Is this about redefining practice or professional identity? Maybe both? The line between what you do and who you are isn't that clear. Also realising I have a lot about the complexity of implementing NDA - all the contradictions and tensions. Should this be its own theme or woven through others? Themes are messy! Maybe I just have to accept the overlap.