Exploring the Experiences of Young People Described as Having Special Educational Needs Engaging in the Tree of Life: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

BPS	British Psychological Society
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
CYP	Children and Young People/Person
DfE	Department for Education
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
GET	Group Experiential Theme
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
NT	Narrative Therapy
PET	Personal Experiential Theme
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
UK	United Kingdom
WHO	World Health Organisation
YP	Young People/Person

Abstract

There is widespread concern for the wellbeing of children and young people (CYP) described as having special educational needs (SEN). This group experience a significant disparity in wellbeing outcomes, attributable to a range of social and emotional influences. There is a need for schools and educational psychologists (EPs) to promote the wellbeing of this group beyond clinical treatment, using proactive therapeutic approaches. One such approach is the Tree of Life, which encourages participants to collectively reauthor their life stories to illuminate preferred narratives of strength and richness. A systematic literature review explored participants' experiences of the Tree of Life in existing papers and found it to be a positive and psychologically supportive experience. However, there is limited research which explores the experience of the Tree of Life for CYP described as having SEN. The current research aims to address this gap.

The Tree of Life was conducted with a group of 13–14-year-old young people (YP) described as having SEN in a mainstream secondary school. Four participants shared their experiences of engaging in the Tree of Life in semi-structured interviews, and their accounts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This resulted in the interpretation of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for each participant and six Group Experiential Themes (GETs) to represent the converging and diverging experiences of participants. These were: Nurturing Positive Emotional States, Navigating Discomfort, Fostering Connection and Togetherness, Expanding Thinking and New Insights, Exploring and Connecting with Identity, and A Space for Self-Expression. These findings offer novel insights into the experiences of YP described as having SEN and highlight variations in how participants experience the Tree of Life depending on their unique positionality. Implications for schools, EPs, and Tree of Life facilitators are discussed, and recommendations for future research utilising the Tree of Life are outlined.

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1. Introduction

This thesis presents a doctoral research study undertaken as part of the Doctorate of Applied Educational Psychology professional training programme at the University of Nottingham. This research aims to illuminate the experiences of young people (YP) described as having special educational needs (SEN) engaging in the Tree of Life, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This chapter outlines the researcher's personal and professional interest in the topic, followed by an overview of the thesis.

1.1. Personal and Professional Interests

The researcher's interest in pursuing this area of practice is grounded in their personal and professional experiences. The researcher is currently a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) studying at the University of Nottingham. Before pursuing the doctorate programme, the researcher held two Assistant Educational Psychologist (AEP) roles: one at a specialist school, and one in a Local Authority Educational Psychology Service (EPS). Whilst in these roles, the researcher gained insight into the lived experiences of children and young people (CYP) described as having SEN and came to understand the significance of therapeutic approaches for promoting wellbeing for this group. The researcher also witnessed the considerable challenges schools and families faced when attempting to access wellbeing support for all CYP, but particularly those described as having SEN. This experience inspired the researcher to explore alternative, accessible methods of promoting wellbeing which could be implemented within schools, supported by educational psychologists (EPs).

From a personal perspective, the researcher has always had a passionate interest in humanistic approaches. This includes person-centred practice which places CYP as experts in their own experience, and strengths-based practice which focuses CYP's resources, skills, and ambitions. The researcher believes that the Tree of Life embodies these values and is an important approach for EPs who wish to practice therapeutically, challenge discriminatory narratives, and prioritise compassionate interactions.

Together, these experiences motivated the researcher to explore how the Tree of Life approach is experienced for young people (YP) described as having SEN. It is hoped that this research will provide support for the use of narrative therapeutic approaches, and specifically

the Tree of Life. It is also hoped that this research will provide insights into YP's social and emotional experiences of the Tree of Life which may support wellbeing, resulting in implications for the practice of schools, EPs, and Tree of Life facilitators.

1.2. Overview of Thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters. Following the current chapter, Chapter Two outlines the theory and literature relevant to this research. A narrative overview provides an outline of key terminology, the national context for wellbeing, and the lived experiences of CYP described as having SEN. It also describes the role of EPs in supporting wellbeing, and an introduction to narrative therapeutic approaches, including the Tree of Life. The systematic literature review (SLR) will then explore what is known about the experiences of participants engaging in the Tree of Life within existing literature. This chapter provides a rationale for the research, outlining the research question and aims.

Chapter Three explores the methodological approach to the research, detailing the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher, the research design, and the research procedure. It also outlines key ethical considerations, interview procedures, and the process of analysing data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al, 2022).

Chapter Four presents the findings of the IPA, briefly presenting Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and detailing Group Experiential Theme (GETs) and subthemes with supporting quotations.

Finally, Chapter Five offers further interpretation of the research findings in relation to existing theory and literature. It will also review the methodological approach of the research, outline the study's distinctive contribution, and present implications for practice and future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview

This chapter explores the theory and literature relevant to the current study. Firstly, key terminology is defined, and the national context of mental health and wellbeing for CYP is outlined. The chapter then describes the context of wellbeing for CYP described as having SEN, and the role of schools and EPs in promoting wellbeing. The chapter introduces narrative therapeutic approaches, and highlights the potential of the Tree of Life to support wellbeing for CYP described as having SEN. A systematic literature review is conducted, which synthesises existing literature exploring the experience of the Tree of Life for participants. Finally, the rationale for the current research is detailed, and the research question presented.

2.2. Language and Terminology

2.2.1. Special Educational Needs

The Department for Education (DfE) defines SEN as "a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made" (DfE, 2015, p. 15). SEN is typically categorised in relation to four broad areas of need: communication and interaction, cognition and learning, social emotional and mental health, and sensory and/or physical needs (DfE, 2015). As such, the term SEN refers to a diverse and heterogeneous population (Dalgaard et al, 2021). Approximately 18.4% of CYP are reported to have SEN, with the prevalence rising year upon year (DfE, 2024a). There is, therefore, a need for all education staff to have a comprehensive understanding of SEN and demonstrate good practice to support CYP described as having SEN.

Historically, SEN policy was entrenched in a medical model, which views SEN as a within-person deficit in need of treatment (Castro & Palikara, 2016; Taberner, 2023). Research has highlighted the potential for CYP to experience stigmatisation and social exclusion as a result of stereotypes perpetuated by the SEN label (Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Taylor et al, 2010). As such, it is recognised that the term 'SEN' may hold negative connotations. However, this research seeks to acknowledge the lived experience of CYP described as having SEN and recognises the social meaning that the SEN label may hold in shaping their life experiences. Therefore, this research will use the phrase 'CYP described as having SEN' in recognition that the SEN label may be pertinent to this group's lived experiences, but with

acknowledgement that it is does not account for the unique positionality and lived experiences of each CYP.

2.2.2. Mental Health and Wellbeing

'Mental health' and 'wellbeing' are often used interchangeably in literature (Dawson & Singh-Dhesi, 2010). The World Health Organization (WHO) overlaps the two concepts, describing mental health as a "state of wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community" (WHO, 2022, p. 8). It has been suggested that mental health exists on a continuum, ranging from mentally healthy to mental illness (Norwich et al, 2022). However, medical models of mental health tend to focus on the latter, promoting pathologisation and overlooking the ecological factors influencing mental health (Deacon, 2013; Engel, 1977; Norwich et al, 2022).

Whilst clearly related to mental health, conceptualisations of wellbeing in literature vary (Norwich et al, 2022). It is broadly agreed that wellbeing constitutes hedonistic wellbeing, which is concerned with subjective happiness, and eudaimonic wellbeing, which emphasises the importance of fulfilment and purposeful engagement (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2018). Based on this, models have emerged which attempt to describe the elements of wellbeing. These often focus on the experiencing of positive emotions, engagement with the world, social satisfaction in relationships, finding purpose and meaning, and experiencing accomplishment (Adler, 2017; Seligman, 2011).

In the current research, the term 'wellbeing' is used to represent elements of hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2018). This research intentionally chooses not to adopt a specific model of wellbeing, since these may not be universally applicable to all populations (Grosvenor et al, 2023; Khaw & Kern, 2014). Instead, 'wellbeing' is used as an inclusive framework to avoid the inadvertent medicalisation of human experiences, and to acknowledge the impact of complex experiences on individuals' quality of life. This term is also used to recognise the importance of supporting positive functioning in all populations, regardless of whether they are considered to have a diagnosable mental health condition. However, the term 'mental health' will be used when referring to existing literature, statistics, and diagnosed mental health conditions.

2.3. Wellbeing for Children and Young People

Nationally and globally, there is escalating concern for the wellbeing of CYP. Data repeatedly demonstrates the rise in mental health conditions for school-aged populations (Newlove-Delgado et al, 2022; Pitchforth et al, 2019), with up to 1 in 5 CYP worldwide estimated to have a mental health condition (Kieling, 2011). Whilst these statistics may reflect an increased rate of reporting, help-seeking behaviour, and growing awareness of mental health and wellbeing amongst CYP (Choi, 2018), they may also reflect the genuine worsening of wellbeing outcomes for CYP.

CYP's wellbeing is thought to be impacted by a multitude of risk factors (Newlove-Delgado et al, 2022), including gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Deighton et al, 2019; Newlove-Delgado et al, 2022; Sadler et al, 2018). Research indicates that age is also a contributing factor, with adolescence thought to be a particularly vulnerable time for CYP's wellbeing (Solmi et al, 2022). National data recently indicated that the highest prevalence of mental health needs was in secondary-aged CYP (Newlove-Delgado et al, 2022), and research suggests that 2 in 5 adolescent CYP may score above "abnormal" thresholds on measures of wellbeing (Deighton et al, 2019, p. 565).

2.4. Wellbeing for Children and Young People Described as Having SEN

CYP described as having SEN are thought to be at significantly increased risk of poor wellbeing outcomes compared to their peers (Barnes & Harrison, 2017). Research shows that CYP described as having SEN consistently report low subjective wellbeing and psychological wellbeing (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Deighton et al, 2019; Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Sin et al, 2010) and are at greater risk of developing emotional and conduct problems (Deighton et al, 2019). This population may experience an intersectionality of vulnerabilities, with their SEN status interacting with other risks to wellbeing, resulting in a cumulative negative impact (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Emerson & Hatton, 2007). This highlights the need to explore factors influencing wellbeing for CYP described as having SEN.

Literature has described the impact of a range of individual differences on the wellbeing of CYP described as having SEN. These include differences in executive functioning to control emotional regulation, and differences in expressive language which result in the

internalisation of negative emotions (Blanken et al, 2017). However, the current research intentionally shifts focus away from explanations which attribute difficulties to the within-person characteristics of CYP described as having SEN. Instead, it will focus on the broader social and emotional factors which research suggests are linked with wellbeing.

It is widely acknowledged that a person's wellbeing is influenced by their experience of inclusion and social equality (WHO, 2022), and this is evident in research for CYP described as having SEN. This population have fewer reciprocal relationships and report consistently worse belonging outcomes compared to their peers (Cullinane, 2020; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019). They have been consistently found to face stigmatisation (Louari, 2013), bullying (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Norwich & Kelly, 2004), and lower peer acceptance (Pinto et al, 2019). Research also indicates that CYP described as having SEN have fewer practical opportunities for social interaction in school, resulting from a high level of adult contact (Webster, 2015), reluctance from their peers to pair with them for collaborative work (Schwab, 2017; Pinto et al, 2019), and being positioned as less central to the ecology of the classroom (Pinto et al, 2019). As a result of threats to their wellbeing, this group may also experience anxiety, withdrawal, or emotional dysregulation, which can further impact their social acceptance in the classroom (Pinto et al, 2019). As a result, they may also be at risk of diminished support networks and less emotional support from peers, which acts as key protective factor for wellbeing (Cuadros & Berger, 2016; Gaspar et al, 2016).

Self-esteem is also thought to significantly influence wellbeing (Orth & Robbins, 2014), with good self-esteem linked to healthy adjustment (Orth & Robbins, 2022) and low self-esteem linked with feelings of depression and anxiety (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Research indicates that CYP described as having SEN are more likely to experience low self-esteem (Bear et al, 2002; Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Taylor et al, 2010), which may represent the cumulative impact of several contributing factors. Firstly, this population may not always have opportunities to experience academic achievement (Bear et al, 2002), resulting in a perceived lack of capability and less confidence to engage with challenges in future (Holding et al, 2023). Loneliness has also been linked to self-esteem for CYP described as having developmental disabilities, resulting in feelings of shame and low self-worth (Tillinger, 2013). Low self-esteem has also been attributed to the stigmatising effect of the SEN label (Taylor et al, 2010), which may overshadow CYP's strengths with narratives of deficit.

2.5. Supporting Wellbeing for Children and Young People Described as Having SEN

There is a governmental emphasis on supporting CYP's wellbeing with early intervention (DfE, 2018; DfE, 2023a). However, despite the high level of concern for CYP described as having SEN, effective and appropriate wellbeing support is often lacking. Although advice and support can be sought from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), there can be significantly lengthy for these services (Young Minds, 2025). Furthermore, CAMHS may not be the most appropriate channel of support for CYP described as having SEN. Literature raises concerns that CAMHS practitioners may not always understand the needs of CYP described as having SEN (Allington-Smith, 2006; Rose et al, 2009; Sin et al, 2010) and are less skilled in accurately identifying mental health conditions for this population (Kupara & Woodward, 2024; Rose et al, 2009; Werner & Stawski, 2012; Vostanis et al, 2011). As a result, CYP may experience diagnostic overshadowing, in which symptoms of diagnosable mental health conditions are falsely believed to be part of an SEN presentation (Kupara & Woodward, 2024).

Practitioners' gaps in knowledge may also result in a lack of tailored services for those who require accessibility adaptations (Adam & Young, 2021). For example, talking therapies and counselling approaches (NHS, 2023) place an emphasis on verbal communication, which may represent a barrier to access for CYP described as having SEN without person-centred adaptations. This could impact how CYP advocate for their needs, safely express their emotions, and engage in therapeutic conversations, leaving them with fewer opportunities to receive professional emotional support. This highlights a need for approaches which support wellbeing with a focus on accessibility and psychological safety.

Although CAMHS serve as an important provision for those with mental health conditions, there is a need to look beyond clinical treatments to support wellbeing (Pathare et al, 2018). It is important to consider how support could be delivered across sectors to actively foster positive wellbeing, rather than reactively responding with referrals for 'treatment' when mental health conditions emerge (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Pathare et al, 2018, p. 464). A broader psychosocial focus on promoting wellbeing could act as an accessible source of support for a greater number of individuals (Pathare et al, 2018), and as a protective factor for

CYP described as having SEN. Considering the significant amount of time CYP spend at school, it is important to explore how education settings can promote wellbeing.

2.5.1. The Role of Schools

Schools hold a statutory duty to promote the welfare of their students (DfE, 2023b), and are identified as key stakeholders in supporting CYP's mental health and wellbeing (Department of Health and Social Care [DHSC] & DfE, 2018). The DfE (2017) highlights the importance of universal provision to support wellbeing, though such approaches are thought to have neutral to small positive effects (Mackenzie & Williams, 2018) which are not always maintained over time (DfE, 2017). Furthermore, research suggests that the majority of school-based approaches are reactive, focusing on CYP who report negative wellbeing, rather than implementing a proactive approach at a group level (Vostanis et al, 2013).

Given what is known about the social factors influencing wellbeing, there is a clear need for schools to promote inclusive practice, grounded in peer acceptance and opportunities for participation. There is also a need to nurture the self-esteem of CYP described as having SEN (Bear et al, 2002; Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Taylor et al, 2010) through the implementation of strengths-based, person-centred interventions (Holding et al, 2023). With significant variation in the knowledge and practice of schools (Thorley, 2016; Vostanis et al, 2013), EPs hold an important systemic role in promoting the wellbeing for all CYP using evidence-based, psychologically-grounded approaches.

2.5.2. The Role of Educational Psychologists

EPs are well-placed to promote wellbeing throughout their wide range of work over individual, group, and systemic levels, including consultation, assessment, intervention, and training (Birch & Gulliford, 2023; Fallon et al, 2010). The EP role has shifted over time from predominantly focusing on statutory work and psychological assessment (DfEE, 2000) to a broader scope for supporting wellbeing (Birch & Gulliford, 2023) and an expanding potential for therapeutic work (Atkinson & Kenneally, 2021; Atkinson et al, 2011; Atkinson et al, 2014). A nation-wide survey of EPs found that 92% use therapeutic approaches in their current practice, with the most common approaches being solution-focused brief therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and personal construct psychology (Atkinson et al, 2011). EPs were found to most frequently use therapeutic interventions with CYP at

secondary schools (Atkinson et al, 2011), highlighting the practical utility of interventions and the perceived need to support the wellbeing of this population.

Despite the relevance to the EP role, there are few existing frameworks to guide the EP approach to therapeutic practice (Atkinson & Kenneally, 2021). The British Psychological Society (BPS) provides guidance for delivering psychological therapies in schools which aims to support EPs to plan and deliver therapeutic services (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016). This includes some therapeutic suggestions, emphasising the need for a warm, empathetic practitioner who promotes engagement by providing fun activities matched to CYP's interests. However, there is generally limited detail on how EPs might deliver therapeutic practice, and the report does not advocate for the use of particular therapeutic approaches. Alternatively, Atkinson and Kenneally (2021) propose a model for therapeutic practice for individual casework, grounded in principles of CBT, motivational interviewing, and human givens therapy. However, the authors acknowledge that this is not yet an evidence-based approach and therefore requires testing and refinement (Atkinson & Kenneally, 2021).

Furthermore, there are well-recognised capacity issues within the profession which may limit the range of work EPs complete. Recent government research found that EPs' workload is dominated by statutory duties which limit their opportunities to engage in direct intervention and leave them feeling less able to utilise their broad skillset (DfE, 2023c). These findings are echoed in research which indicates that there is a demand for EPs to carry out therapeutic work, but that time constraints restrict opportunities in practice (Atkinson et al, 2011; Price, 2017). Evidently, EPs are working in a challenging context which requires them to meet the ever-changing needs of CYP (Newlove-Delgado, 2022) whilst hindering their capacity to practice holistically. As such, there is a need for EPs to find creative and time-effective ways to deliver therapeutic interventions.

2.6. Narrative Therapeutic Approaches

Narrative therapeutic approaches represent a branch of therapeutic practice, grounded in the belief that people make sense of their lives through storytelling (Denborough, 2023). Narrative therapeutic approaches suggest that each person holds multiple narratives about their lives, including their identity, relationships, and the hardships they experience (Morgan, 2000). These impact how people make decisions, understand their abilities, and construct

their self-concept over time. When wellbeing is threatened, these stories can become dominated by themes of problem, deficit, and negativity, characterised by Morgan (2000) as "thin descriptions" (p. 20). Narrative therapeutic approaches utlilise this theory and encourage participants to reauthor more empowering narratives about their lives, promoting awareness of their capabilities, developing their sense of agency, and fostering hopefulness. They support participants to address their past difficulties in a safe way, without becoming retraumatised (Denborough, 2023).

One well-established approach is narrative therapy (NT). NT is a counselling approach grounded in narrative psychology, developed by White and Epston (1990) for use with clients in therapeutic practice. During NT, practitioners use psychotherapy techniques to support individuals to externalise their problems, deconstruct issues into manageable parts, and explore alternative stories about their lives. However, NT has been criticised for consisting of an "inner-circle" of therapists (Doan, 1998, p. 3) who fulfil an expert role, and who neglect to consider the complexity of human experience (Doan, 1998). As such, the term 'narrative therapeutic approaches' is used throughout this thesis to refer to a broader set of approaches which use principles from NT but may not completely align with the structure or techniques used in NT. Such approaches still promote wellbeing by supporting individuals to reauthor their stories (Denborough, 2023), but may utilise more flexible methodologies. Whereas NT typically involves sessions between a therapist and client (Wolter et al, 2006), narrative therapeutic approaches are often delivered in community settings and facilitated by a range of practitioners (Stubbs, 2021).

Carr (1998) describes nine practices in NT which are also relevant to broader narrative therapeutic approaches. Table 2.1 describes these nine practices, adapted to remove the focus on therapists and clients to decentralise the therapist as an expert (Doan, 1998) and show their relevance to non-counselling approaches. In the absence of guidance for EPs delivering therapeutic approaches, Carr's (1998) principles are adopted as a model of therapeutic practice in this research.

Table 2.1

The Nine Practices in Narrative Therapy, A*dapted from Carr (1998)*

Practice	Description
Collaboration	The facilitator adopts a consultative position to support the co-authoring of new stories.
Externalising	Problems are situated away from the individual (Morgan, 2000). This supports participants to reflect on how problems impact their life, how the problem is maintained, and how they can negotiate their relationship with the problem in the context of their strengths and resources.
Unique outcomes	Participants are encouraged to find moments of strength and exception where they were not oppressed by their difficulties.
Thickening the plot	Facilitators support participants to create rich descriptions of alternative narratives through questioning (e.g., "can you tell me your memory of that?" (Carr, 1998, p. 494).
Forming a preferred narrative	By linking the unique outcomes to the past and identifying how similar events might occur in the future, a rich alternative narrative is developed.
Outsider witnesses	Significant people are invited to witness, reflect on, and celebrate newly-developed narratives, supporting participants to connect with their story on a deeper level.
Re-membering practices	Participants connect with internal representations of their support network, qualities, and important life events.
Literary means	New stories are commemorated, sometimes through celebrations and the giving of certificates.
Bringing-it-back practices	Participants connect with others who have similar experiences, offering their new ideas and knowledge in support of each other.

2.6.1. Educational Psychologists and Narrative Therapeutic Approaches

EPs have been known to utilise narrative therapeutic approaches as a form of intervention to support the wellbeing of CYP (Atkinson et al, 2011). Research indicates that EPs tend to conceptualise narrative therapeutic approaches in three ways: as formal therapeutic interventions, techniques to support assessment or consultation, or "an all-encompassing ethos delivered through discourse or language" (Bradbury, 2023, p. 124). Although there is variation in how EPs conceptualise narrative therapeutic approaches, they are generally considered "a good fit" for EP practice (Bradbury, 2023, p. 114).

Existing studies have explored the use of narrative therapeutic approaches in school contexts, including the Bicycle of Life to support CYP with a diagnosis of ADHD (Edwards, 2022), and the Team of Life with secondary school CYP (Eames et al, 2016). However, the majority of research using narrative therapeutic approaches originates from the fields of clinical psychology and psychotherapy (Baum & Shaw, 2015; Fraser et al, 2018; Parham et al, 2019). This may stem from the capacity pressures facing EPs which mean statutory duties dominate EP workload (DfE, 2023c), resulting in fewer opportunities for therapeutic work (Atkinson et al, 2011; Price, 2017). This may also stem from misconceptions around what narrative therapeutic approaches are, with EPs reporting that they are confused by narrative terminology and phenomena (Bradbury, 2023). As such, there is a need for further research to explore how EPs can embed narrative therapeutic approaches which support wellbeing in their practice.

2.6.2. Collective Narrative Approaches

Collective narrative approaches use narrative therapeutic principles to support groups who have experienced trauma or hardship (Denborough, 2023). These approaches act as an alternative to individual therapeutic approaches, which "[run] the risk of individualising what are collective experiences" (Denborough, 2023, p. 72). The group-based nature of collective narrative practice supports participants to identify their shared experiences, act as witnesses to one another's stories, offer support to those who are experiencing similar hardships, and receive emotional strength from the group (Denborough, 2023).

2.6.3. The Tree of Life

One collective narrative approach is the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life uses the metaphor of the tree to visually represent aspects of a person's life, history, and character (Denborough, 2023; Hyde, 2022; Ncube, 2006). It supports participants to retell their stories in a way increases their awareness of their strengths and promotes connection with their background and values (Denborough, 2023). Ncube (2006) first used the Tree of Life to support CYP who had lost their parents to AIDS, though it has since been used to support many populations who have experienced trauma or a "collective vulnerability due to broader social factors" (Denborough, 2023, p. 72). The Tree of Life is a four-part process, as outlined in Table 2.2.

The first step of drawing the tree engages the participant in re-membering practices, promoting their awareness of important people and events in their life. It also supports participants to form alternative narratives about their rich personal histories and dreams for the future. The facilitator encourages the thickening of plots, using questioning to elicit rich information about their stories (Denborough, 2023). The Forest of Life allows participants to witness each other's trees, validating each other's newly-developed stories. The Storms of Life externalises participants' challenges, acknowledging them as valid but highlighting how their strengths support them through difficult times. This stage also allows participants to share their experience of coping and give advice to others. The final stage closes the process with a celebration of participants' stories. Participants are presented with a certificate to document their new story, which gives further credibility to their preferred narrative.

Table 2.2

The Tree of Life Stages as Described by Ncube (2006)

Stage	Description
1. The Tree	Participants draw a tree to represent their story. This includes the below.
1a. Roots	The roots include where a person comes from, including their cultural background, family history, and home.
1b. Ground	The ground represents where the person is now, such as where they live, work or study, and what they do each day.
1c. Trunk	The trunk represents a person's strengths, including hobbies, skills, or personal characteristics.
1d. Branches	The branches represent a person's hopes, dreams, and what they would like to happen in their future.
1e. Leaves	The leaves represent important people in their lives. These can be people in their lives now, people who were important previously, and people who have passed away.
1f. Fruits	The fruits include gifts a person has received from others. This includes non-material gifts, such as care and nurture.
2. The Forest of Life	The group brings their trees together to form the Forest of Life. Participants are invited to share their trees and explain their stories. The group is encouraged to comment on anything they noticed or appreciated about each other's story.
3. The Storms of Life	The group discusses the challenges they face, how they have dealt with challenges, and how they would cope with similar difficulties in future.
4. Certificates and celebration	Certificates are awarded to participants, with personalised details of their story and how they enriched the group.

2.6.4. The Tree of Life in Research

Research indicates that the Tree of Life is a widely used approach around the world, often facilitated by therapists, community workers, and experts by experience (Stubbs, 2021). It has been delivered in a variety of contexts, though most often to groups who have experienced collective hardship, such as AIDS-orphaned adolescents (Hirschson et al, 2018), unaccompanied refugees (Jacobs, 2018), and inpatients (Wellman et al, 2016). The Tree of Life is an adaptable format which has been modified to a range of contexts, such as supporting primary school classes (German, 2013), connecting colleagues virtually during lockdown (Mustafa et al, 2021), and supporting individual participants for more person-centred discussions (Kubicka & Terry, 2019; Laszczynska & Robbins, 2017; Lau-Zhu & Mann, 2023). The Tree of Life has even been adopted as part of a psychological model of care within mental health settings, recognised for promoting engagement and recovery (Fraser et al, 2018).

The Tree of Life is a culturally sensitive approach which has been used with groups around the world, including Latino families (Méndez & Cole, 2014), Muslim women in Australia (Elhassan & Yassine, 2017), and women in Hong Kong (Hung, 2011). Studies demonstrate the flexibility of the Tree of Life in shifting to suit the needs of groups whilst remaining true to the narrative therapeutic principles. For example, Ken (2022) used the Tree of Life with a group of Anangu women, for whom storms held positive connotations and represented welcome rain and new life in their desert climate. The Storms of Life were not appropriate for representing hardship and, upon consultation with this group, this part of the process was renamed the Bushfires of Life, which do threaten their local community.

It should be noted that there is limited direct critique of the Tree of Life in existing research. The majority of papers either focus on the wide-ranging applications of the Tree of Life, such as with medical patients (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Wellman et al, 2016), or are descriptive commentaries from practitioners detailing their engagement in the Tree of Life process. This could mean that negative or unfavourable outcomes are overlooked or underreported, resulting in a thin description of the Tree of Life. This, combined with little quantitative evidence to demonstrate that the Tree of Life is an impactful intervention, may limit its acceptance within clinical settings or as an approach to supporting mental health on a large scale. It is therefore important to acknowledge some of the limitations of the approach.

For example, there may be potential for the Tree of Life to retraumatise participants if they are not supported to retell their story in a psychologically safe, therapeutic manner (Denborough, 2023). This highlights the importance of skilled and sensitive facilitation, and the need for further research which explores the Tree of Life process and the experiences of participants in detail.

2.6.5. The Tree of Life and Children and Young People Described as Having SEN

The Tree of Life could be a relevant therapeutic approach for promoting the wellbeing of CYP described as having SEN. As previously discussed, CYP described as having SEN experience a range of threats to their wellbeing, which could represent a "collective vulnerability" (Denborough, 2023, p. 72). The Tree of Life could offer a safe space for this group to reauthor their stories, moving away from thin narratives towards a focus on strength, identity, and belonging (Kasmani, 2021). The Tree of Life is often used in contexts where other therapies may not be resonant (Denborough, 2012), which may be the case for CYP described as having SEN who do not meet thresholds for mental health support. Furthermore, the Tree of Life has been praised for being flexible, inclusive, and adaptable to suit the needs of different groups (Fraser et al, 2018; Kasmani, 2021; Kubicka & Terry, 2019; Lau-Zhu & Mann, 2023; Parham et al, 2019; Stiles et al, 2021). It could therefore be assumed that it would adapt well to being delivered in a school. Finally, the creative and expressive nature of the approach is accessible, without significant reliance on written or verbal language (Jacobs, 2018), whilst still positioning participants as experts in their own lives (Kasmani, 2021).

For several reasons, schools seem well-placed to support the delivery of the Tree of Life for CYP described as having SEN. Firstly, schools hold knowledge about SEN and likely understand how to adapt resources for participants' understanding, ensuring the process is accessible. This sits in contrast to mental health services, who do not always understand SEN and may not adapt their processes to suit diverse populations (Adam & Young, 2021; Rose et al, 2009). Furthermore, school staff often act as key emotional supports for CYP (Vostanis et al, 2013), fostering close relationships over time. These relationships support the development of a safe therapeutic environment, which is important when engaging in processes of reauthoring and self-reflection (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016). Finally, school-based interventions may be less likely to be stigmatised and rejected than those offered by mental health services (DHSC & DfE, 2018; Kasmani, 2021). This seems particularly true of the

Tree of Life as an art-based, collective activity, which is viewed as less formal compared to other therapeutic interventions (Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018).

2.6.6. Existing Literature

The BPS highlights the importance of qualitative feedback in evaluating therapeutic interventions (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016). As such, an initial review of existing literature sought to gather the subjective experiences of CYP described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life, attempting to understand whether the Tree of Life is a supportive and preferred approach. Two papers were found (Fleming et al, 2023; German, 2013).

Firstly, Fleming et al (2023) explored the views of autistic CYP who attended a specialist SEMH setting engaging in the Tree of Life. The participants, positioned as co-researchers, reported that the group was fun, nurtured their friendships, and allowed them to express their feelings. The co-researchers also reported thinking the Tree of Life was boring, though recognised that they would typically not like any school-based activity. However, this research has several limitations (Fleming et al, 2023). The co-researchers decided to collect their views via a Padlet, collating images and words to represent their experiences. This data lacked the richness required to understand the lived experience of the Tree of Life in depth. Furthermore, this research took place in a specialist secondary school with autistic CYP who had experienced exclusion. Whilst it is valuable to understand the views of this specific population, it would be interesting to explore the experiences of CYP described as having SEN in other settings, such as mainstream schools.

Secondly, German (2013) evaluated the use of the Tree of Life with a class of 29 primary-aged CYP. This study utilised quantitative measures to examine the impact of the Tree of Life on self-concept. The results show significant increases in participants' self-ratings on standardised measures of self-esteem, including for the seven participants described as having SEN. Although this study did collect participants' views via semi-structured interviews, these are not reported in depth and relate to the views of the overall participant group, rather than those described as having SEN.

With only two papers exploring the perceptions of CYP described as having SEN, the following SLR will explore the experiences of broader participant groups engaging in the

Tree of Life. This will allow for key aspects and possible benefits of the experience to be identified (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016), and any findings of the current research to be contextualised within the wider research field.

2.7. Systematic Literature Review

2.7.1. Overview

This section will provide a synthesis of the available literature on participants' experiences of the Tree of Life. It will detail the rationale for using an SLR, the search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and an overview of the included studies. Finally, a thematic synthesis is presented to highlight the experiences of participants engaging in the Tree of Life.

2.7.2. Rationale for Using an SLR

SLRs use a structured approach to locate and synthesise existing information in a specific research area to answer a research question (Burgers et al, 2019). In this section, an SLR will draw together an understanding of how the Tree of Life is experienced by participants in an attempt to understand whether it is a valuable and useful therapeutic approach (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016). The SLR aims to answer the following question:

What is the experience of participants engaging in the Tree of Life in existing literature?

2.8. Method

2.8.1. Search Strategy

An SLR was conducted between July 2024 and April 2025 across five databases which related to psychology, science, and education. The search term "Tree of Life" was selected to capture the broadest range of research possible. See Table 2.3 for the databases searched and search terms and Appendix 1 for all collections searched using each database.

Table 2.3

The Databases Searched and the Search Terms Used

Database	Search terms
EBSCO, Scopus, APA PsycNet, Informit, Wiley Online Library	"Tree of Life"

The SLR follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al, 2021). The literature search strategy is represented in a PRISMA flowchart in Figure 2.1. An initial search of databases resulted in 6436 studies. Limiters, including for language and date, were applied to ensure only relevant studies were displayed, resulting in 681 papers. See Table 2.4 for the rationale for each limiter. Literature suggests that systematic reviews should not rely only on database searches (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). As such, this SLR also used reference tracking, reviewing the reference lists of relevant papers. Four papers were identified using this method (Casdagli et al, 2017; Ibrahim & Allen, 2018; Parham et al, 2019; Tobin, 2023). All studies were reviewed by title and abstract, with irrelevant studies, duplications, and inaccessible papers removed. 45 studies were reviewed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria presented in Table 2.4. 34 studies were excluded on this basis. 11 papers remained.

This SLR did not include inclusion or exclusion criteria for geographical location. This is because the Tree of Life was originally designed in Africa (Ncube, 2006) and is a culturally adaptable approach used around the world (Stubbs, 2021). As such, there are likely to be studies originating from countries other than the UK, and the experiences of these groups are relevant to developing an understanding of the experience of the Tree of Life.

This SLR did not include descriptive commentary papers which described the Tree of Life without a defined aim, methodology, or research findings. This decision was grounded in a desire to meet the standards for methodological rigour as described by quality appraisal tools (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme [CASP], 2018) and to meet the standards of evidence-based practice upheld by research communities (Parham et al, 2019; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Furthermore, research papers present clear analytical findings which often acknowledge the impact of researcher reflexivity and take steps to ensure that participants' views are presented accurately. Contrastingly, descriptive commentary papers may not clearly represent the views of participants and may be at greater risk of bias.

Figure 2.1

PRISMA Flowchart to show the SLR Search Strategy

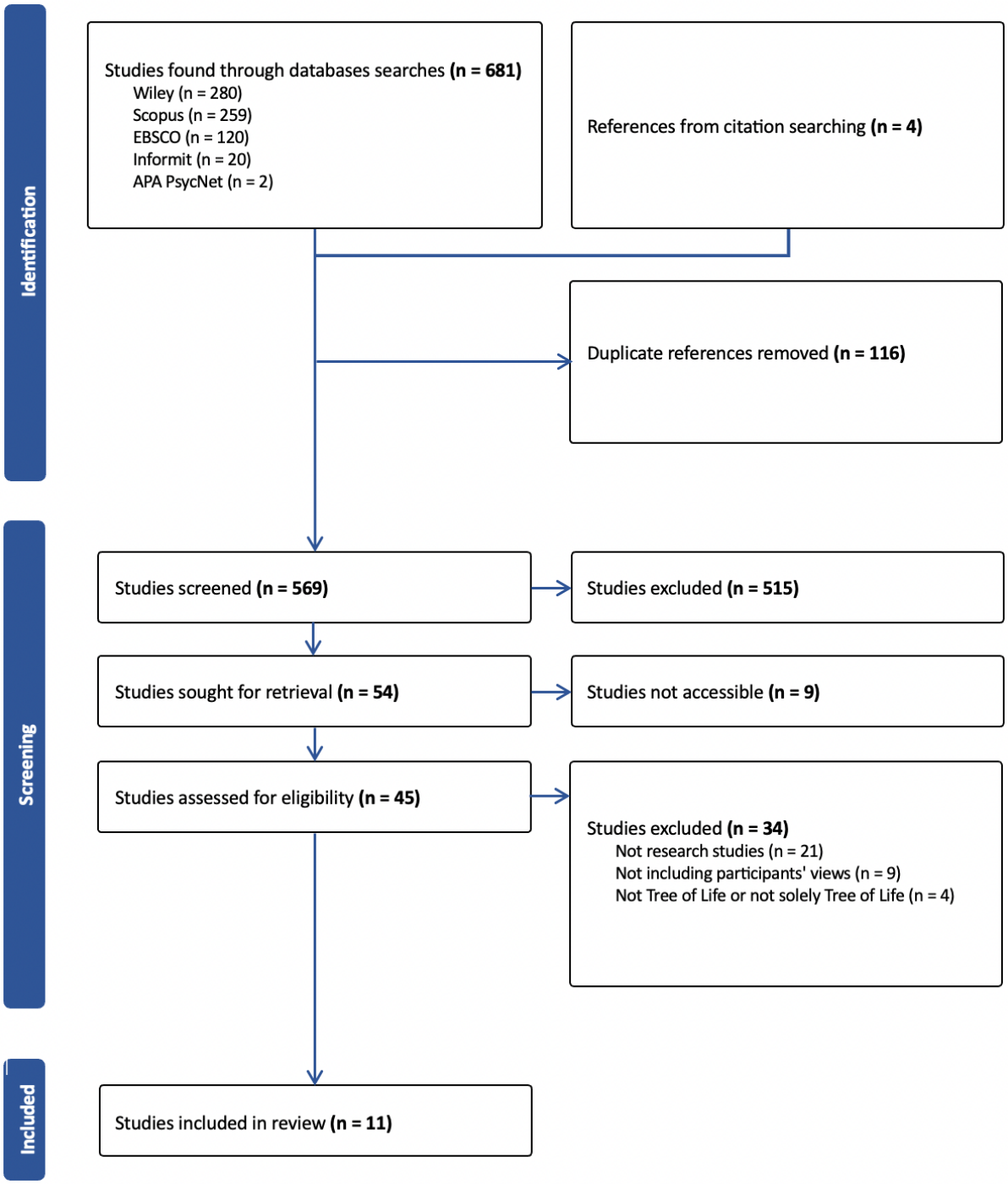


Table 2.4

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria with Rationale for their Use

Type	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
1. Language	Papers written in English.	Papers not written in English.	Ensuring papers could be reliably interpreted by the researcher, avoiding errors in translation.
2. Publication type	Research study published in a peer-reviewed journal.	Not a research study and not published in a peer-reviewed journal (e.g., descriptive commentary)	Ensuring high-quality literature that has undergone scrutiny by professionals.
3. Publication date	Published since 2006.	Published before 2006.	Capturing all available research since Ncube's (2006) publication.
4. Approach	The Tree of Life with individuals and groups.	Not using the Tree of Life (including other narrative therapeutic approaches)	Maintaining focus on how the Tree of Life is experienced, focusing on both groups and individuals, to capture the broadest amount of information.
5. Focus	Participants' views on the experience of the Tree of Life using qualitative measures.	No views from the perspective of participants, including views of professionals or quantitative scoring measures.	This review intends to explore the rich experiences of the Tree of Life from the perspective of those taking part.

2.8.2. Quality Appraisal

The 11 papers included in the review were quality appraised. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist (CASP, 2018) was selected to assure the quality of studies found during the search (see Appendix 2 for an appraisal of each study). The CASP allows for a systematic examination of the validity, results, and impact of qualitative research, with prompts to encourage an in-depth appraisal of each paper. Based on the CASP quality appraisal, all 11 studies were included.

2.9. Overview of Included Studies

All included studies were peer-reviewed journal articles, published between 2016-2024. 10 studies were based in the UK (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Phillips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016) and one was conducted in Australia (Khawaja et al, 2022). A range of populations took part, with participants' ages ranging from 5 (Bolt et al, 2024) to 80 (Khawaja et al, 2022). There was variation in how the Tree of Life was delivered, with facilitators ranging from clinical staff (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018) to peer trainers (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017). In all studies, participants' experiences were gathered via either interviews, focus groups, or qualitative questionnaires. Further details of these studies are presented in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5

Summaries of Included Studies

Author(s)	Context and Aims	Participants	Methodology	Key Findings
Bolt et al (2024).	Evaluation of a pilot Tree of Life group for children with epilepsy and their families. UK.	Five CYP with epilepsy, nine parents. All siblings invited to share qualitative feedback.	Qualitative feedback via questionnaire.	Findings included: connecting with people with similar experiences, freedom to share feelings, learning from the group
Casdagli et al (2017).	Evaluating the Tree of Life with CYP with type 1 diabetes. University College London Hospital, UK.	93 CYP attending 17 groups between July 2010 and September 2016 (not clear how many shared their views).	Initial feedback interviews and telephone interviews 2-4 weeks after, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).	Initial feedback interview themes: Connecting with Others, Building a Positive View of the Self. Telephone interview themes: Responding to Negative Attitudes about Diabetes, Improved Diabetes Management
Fleming et al (2023).	Exploring young people's experiences of the Tree of Life through participatory research. Specialist secondary	Five year 9 (aged 14-15) boys positioned as co-researchers.	Co-researchers collected data via Padlet. Adaptation of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun &	Six themes: Friendship, Fun, Knowledge, Boredom, Cast Away – We Don't Like Anything, and Expression

Author(s)	Context and Aims	Participants	Methodology	Key Findings
	school for autistic CYP described as having SEMH needs. UK.		Clarke, 2006) carried out by two co-researchers, facilitated by author.	
Haselhurst et al (2021).	A narrative-informed evaluation of the Tree of Life for parents of children with physical health conditions. Paediatric Psychology Service. Manchester, UK.	Seven adults (six mothers, one father) who were a parent or guardian of CYP aged 9-13 with health conditions	Narrative-informed group interview following the intervention, analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).	Five themes: Finding a Safe Place to Stand, A Different View, Connecting with Confidence and Skills, Giving the Gift of Independence, Togetherness in Storms
Ibrahim & Tchanturia (2018).	Evaluating a Tree of Life pilot group for individuals with anorexia nervosa. Specialist eating disorder service, UK.	Five female day-patient participants aged 18-30 with diagnosis of anorexia nervosa.	Four participants shared views in a focus group. Data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).	Four themes: An Image to Share, Remember, and Bring Change, Constructing an Alternative Perspective, Hope, Creating a Sense of Community
Khawaja et al (2022).	Exploring the benefits, feasibility, and acceptability of the Tree of Life with Older Culturally and	Nine English-speaking, culturally diverse, Muslim	Qualitative case study approach. Weekly session feedback on forms with	Participants reported positive emotional responses, confident to share, recognising skills, forming

Author(s)	Context and Aims	Participants	Methodology	Key Findings
	Linguistically Diverse Muslim Women in the Community Setting (Islamic Women's Association of Australia). Australia.	women between 59-80.	open-response and focus groups.	connections with the group based on compassion
Németh et al (2024)	Adapting the Tree of Life for adults with intellectual disabilities. Facilitated by community intellectual disabilities service. UK.	Five service users (2 female, 3 male), and four staff members.	Semi-structured interviews analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Quantitative measures not included in this review.	Six service user themes: Overall Positive Experience, Sharing my Story with Others, Feeling Supported by Staff, Meeting New People, Relating to the Tree as a Metaphor, Feeling Acknowledged by Receiving a Certificate Four staff themes: Appreciating a Helpful Group, Connecting via New Stories, Treasuring the Experience Beyond the Group, Accessible with Room for Improvement

Author(s)	Context and Aims	Participants	Methodology	Key Findings
Randle-Phillips et al (2016).	Adapting and evaluating the Tree of Life group for women with learning disabilities. UK.	Four adult women with learning disabilities, identified by local Community Learning Disabilities Team.	Semi-structured interviews. Data analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Quantitative measures not included in this review.	Two themes: Positive Emotional Response, Social Interaction (Meeting Others/Peer Support)
Rowley et al (2020).	Supporting parents using the Tree of Life in a multi-ethnic mainstream primary school. UK.	One father and five mothers. All parent of CYP described as having SEN. One parent acting as a co-researcher.	Research question: what do parents think about the Tree of Life? Focus group and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based on graphic recording from focus group.	Three themes: Sharing, Self-awareness, Change

Author(s)	Context and Aims	Participants	Methodology	Key Findings
Vitale et al (2019).	Exploring the experience and benefits of the Tree of Life in promoting the therapeutic growth of refugee women living with HIV. UK.	Five African women with refugee experiences, aged 30-55.	Qualitative Multiple Case Design. Individual interviews and end of session feedback forms.	Findings reported for each participant, including: finding new ways to manage issues, empowered to examine past, awareness of strengths, connection, hope, growth in self-esteem, goals for the future
Wellman et al (2016).	Exploring the utility of a pilot Tree of Life group in an inpatient setting. UK.	Purposive sample of eight participants from a focus group.	One joint interview, two qualitative questionnaires, one 15-minute interview. Analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	Three themes: A Sense of Community, Rediscovering Identity, Usefulness of the [Tree of Life] Metaphor

2.9.1. Excluded Literature

Studies were excluded because they were not research studies (21 papers), did not explore participants' views of the Tree of Life (9 papers), or they did not only use the Tree of Life (4 papers) (see Appendix 3).

2.10. Synthesis of Data

The SLR sought to explore the subjective experiences of participants engaging in the Tree of Life. In line with these aims, thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was selected as a method of synthesising data and drawing out shared themes between studies. Other methodologies, including framework analysis (Dixon-Woods, 2011) and narrative synthesis (Popay et al, 2006), were rejected in favour of the more systematic, inductive approach adopted by thematic synthesis. The thematic synthesis was conducted according to Thomas and Harden's (2008) recommended stages.

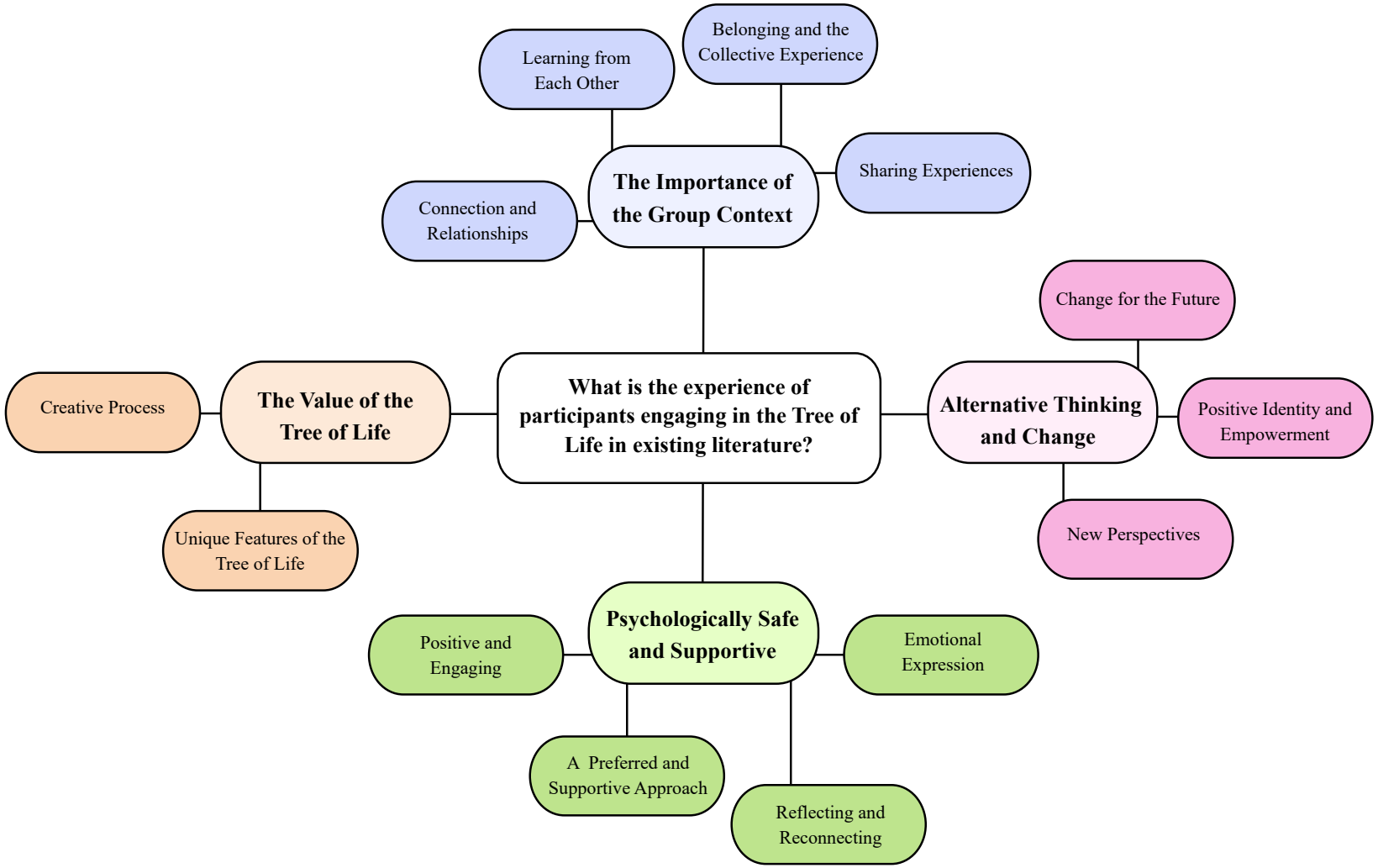
During stages one and two, each study was read and re-read to facilitate immersion within the data. The results or findings section of each paper was then extracted and coded line-by-line (see Appendix 4). Codes were compared to highlight any similarities and differences and were then grouped to form descriptive themes During stage three, findings were analysed with an interpretative lens to answer the review question and capture the experiences of participants. This resulted in four analytical themes (see Appendix 5). Figure 2.2 visually demonstrates these themes with a thematic map.

The following section details the findings of the thematic synthesis, answering the SLR question:

What is the experience of participants engaging in the Tree of Life in existing literature?

Figure 2.2

*Thematic Map of Analytical (**Bold Title Case**) and Descriptive Themes (Title Case)*



2.11. Thematic Synthesis Findings and Discussion

2.11.1. Theme One: The Importance of the Group Context

The first analytical theme, evident in all 11 studies, highlights the importance of the group context for participants (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). This comprises the following descriptive themes: Belonging and the Collective Experience, Connection and Relationships, Sharing Experiences, and Learning From Each Other. These themes are intricately linked but represent distinctive relational elements of the Tree of Life experience.

Belonging and the Collective Experience. 10 studies highlighted the Tree of Life as promoting a sense of belonging and collective identity for participants (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). Participants seemed to value feeling included and developed a sense of community (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). This newfound collective identity seemed to nurture an atmosphere of psychological safety for participants, who appeared more comfortable to share their emotions with people who had similar experiences (Haselhurst et al, 2021; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019).

Furthermore, participants seemed to experience a shift from feeling "like the only one" experiencing vulnerability (Casdagli et al, 2017, p. 12) to being aware of their group's collective experiences:

> I'm not the only one with diabetes... you're not alone, if they can do it so can you (Casdagli et al, 2017, p. 12)

This highlights the value of the Tree of Life as a collective narrative approach. Prior to the Tree of Life, participants' stories may have been dominated by narratives of deficit, leaving them feeling isolated in their experiences. Through collective narrative practice, participants engaged with others who had similar histories, supporting them to destigmatise their own

experiences and externalise their problems within the wider context of their lives (Denborough, 2023; Carr, 1998).

Connection and Relationships. All 11 studies describe how the Tree of Life supported relationships and nurtured connections amongst group members (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). Participants' experiences differed slightly between studies, since some delivered the Tree of Life to participants who were already acquainted with one another (Fleming et al, 2023; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018) whereas others recruited previously unacquainted groups (Bolt et al, 2024; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Vitale et al, 2019). For those who did not previously know each other, participants seemed to value meeting similar people (Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Bolt et al, 2024) and making valued friendships to carry forwards outside of the group (Vitale et al, 2019). The Tree of Life also seemed to strengthen existing connections for groups who already knew each other (Fleming et al, 2023; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018), facilitating greater connection and a more supportive environment. These relationships seem to result from the collaborative collective nature of the Tree of Life, which requires participants to share, empathise with one another, and celebrate each other's strengths. These connections appear to act as a support network, fostering an environment of safety in which participants feel safe to reflect on their personal histories where alternative narratives can develop and thrive.

Sharing Experiences. The importance of sharing experiences during the Tree of Life was highlighted in 11 studies (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). Participants seemed to bond over their shared experiences, learn about each other, and discuss themes that they may not have touched upon before. In Fleming et al (2023), there was a sense that the Tree of Life encouraged discussion about collective experiences, helping participants to relate to one another over similarities that had been hidden until the Tree of Life.

This sharing of experiences fulfils multiple therapeutic purposes. Participants thicken their own narratives by sharing them with others, giving them credibility. Participants also witness

the narratives of others, drawing out opportunities for connection, and encouraging them to further externalise their problems as they hear about similar experiences embedded in the richness of other people's stories (Carr, 1998).

Learning from Each Other. In seven studies, participants reported learning from each other as a key experience of the Tree of Life (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagi et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Khawaja et al, 2022; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). Through joint reflection on their experiences, participants were upskilled with new ideas for how to cope with difficulty (Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021), manage their relationships (Haselhurst et al, 2021), and handle their medical needs (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017). This highlights the Tree of Life as a safe space for the sharing of knowledge and resourcefulness. As part of participants' alternative narratives, they seemed to consider how to apply their newly-acquired knowledge within the context of their strengths and resources. Participants also seem to engage in bringing-it-back practices, offering new ideas to others and thereby supporting their position as a knowledgeable, capable individual.

2.11.2. Theme Two: The Value of the Tree of Life

This analytical theme, evident across eight studies, highlights the value participants placed in the Tree of Life as a therapeutic approach (Bolt et al, 2024; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). This included the following descriptive themes: Unique Features of the Tree of Life, and A Creative Process.

Unique Features of the Tree of Life. Participants in seven papers described their appreciation for the unique features of the Tree of Life (Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). Participants highlighted the usefulness of the Tree of Life as a metaphor (Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019), explaining that this was memorable and helpful for mapping their personal stories (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019). Several participants reported the physical tree image to be a valued possession which they would keep safe and reflect on (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Vitale et al, 2019), with some suggesting that they would continue to add to the tree over time (Vitale et al, 2019). One participant explored the benefits of the Tree of Life compared to CBT, explaining that it supported them to challenge

their thinking whilst also building the confidence to enact change (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018). This exemplifies the power of not only externalising problems, but also thickening new plots with stories of strength to support the maintenance of preferred narratives (Carr, 1998).

Creative Process. The creative process of visually constructing the Tree was valued by participants in four studies (Fleming et al, 2023; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Németh et al, 2024; Vitale et al, 2019). For some participants, the artistic approach seemed to support them to express their feelings without relying on verbal language (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018). For others, the creative approach represented a fun and enjoyable aspect of the Tree of Life (Fleming et al, 2023; Vitale et al, 2019). BPS guidance emphasises the importance of therapeutic approaches which promote enjoyment for engaging participants (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016). As such, the artistic elements of the Tree of Life can be considered important for capturing participants' interest and developing a psychologically safe space. This is exemplified by a participant in Vitale et al (2019):

> I think I'm most comfortable talking about myself when I feel safe, yes. Yes, like I said, to me, it ended up bringing out the big child which is in me (p. 7).

2.11.3. Theme Three: Alternative Thinking and Change

This analytical theme represents changes to participants' thinking and behaviours and consists of the following descriptive themes: New Perspectives, Positive Identity and Empowerment, and Change for the Future.

New Perspectives. Seven included studies indicated that participants encountered and adopted new perspectives as part of the Tree of Life, supporting them to think about their situations with a new lens (Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). This different view allowed participants to examine their relationships, problems, and important aspects of their life in new ways (Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Wellman et al, 2016). This is illustrated by a participant in Casdagli et al (2017), who reported that the Tree of Life's holistic focus encouraged them to "step back and [...] realise diabetes is not everything" (p. 13).

From a narrative therapeutic perspective, this subtheme represents the impact of participants being encouraged to seek unique outcomes, characterised by moments of strength and exception. Participants form alternative narratives, enriching their stories with multidimensional life experiences and providing them with a new outlook on the past, present, and future. This highlights the usefulness of the Tree of Life in guiding participants away from fixed mindsets and holding thin narratives of their lives to thinking differently and developing rich new stories.

Positive Identity and Empowerment. Participants seemed to experience positive changes to their identity and a sense of empowerment in 10 papers (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). The Tree of Life was credited with raising participants' awareness of their skills, strengths, and positive qualities, moving them away from a single identity or label (Casdagli et al, 2017; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Vitale et al, 2019). Consequently, participants reported feelings of heightened confidence, with a newfound awareness of their abilities (Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Wellman et al, 2016).

From a narrative therapeutic perspective, participants seem to externalise their problems, making room to enrich their stories with thick descriptions of strengths. This emphasises the usefulness of the Tree of Life for supporting the wellbeing and self-esteem of groups who are vulnerable, experiencing challenges, or marginalised by society (Denborough, 2023). Furthermore, several papers reported that participants valued the opportunity for others to comment on their strengths and qualities, with this positively impacting their self-image (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019). This reflects the empowering process of participants witnessing each other's newly-developed stories, affirming these as dominant narratives in their lives (Carr, 1998).

Change for the Future. Interlinked with the two other descriptive themes, participants in eight studies reported that the Tree of Life gave them hope for the future and inspiration to make meaningful change (Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019). Participants explained that the group helped them to reframe the challenges they faced and to

consider how they would deal with them differently in the future. This often linked to participants' increased confidence, following reconnection with their personal strengths:

> This has kept me going and it's made me look at what I'm good at, what I can do when I get out of hospital (Wellman et al, 2016, p. 177).

The positive nature of the group also seemed to inspire optimism and hope in participants. In Khawaja et al (2022), participants reported that reflecting on their lives and the storms they faced inspired them to be hopeful when thinking about future challenges and remember that "good will come" (p. 36). Similarly, participants with a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa explained that the Tree of Life encouraged them to use their new perspectives in their ongoing recovery (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018). This descriptive theme highlights the power of supporting participants to form preferred narratives. Through these shifts in thinking, participants feel more equipped to grow, flourish, and make meaningful change to their lives in pursuit of their goals. However, no papers reported gathering participants' views beyond 2-4 weeks after the Tree of Life, and so it is not yet known whether participants were able to make long-lasting changes to their lives.

2.11.4. Theme Four: Psychologically Safe and Supportive

The final analytical theme represents participants' experiences of the Tree of Life as psychologically safe and supportive. This theme was evident in all 11 studies (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016), and encompassed the following descriptive themes: A Preferred and Supportive Approach, Emotional Expression, Reflecting and Reconnecting, and Positive and Engaging.

A Preferred and Supportive Approach. In eight studies, participants seemed to experience the Tree of Life as a preferred and therapeutic space which supported their emotions, growth, and sense of safety (Bolt et al, 2024; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). They also seemed to appreciate the positive focus of the group (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Rowley et al, 2020), highlighting a contrast between this and other psychological approaches (Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Rowley

et al, 2020), and noting that the Tree of Life felt like a safer way to access psychological support (Haselhurst et al, 2021). Participants in several studies reported that the Tree of Life would be useful for other people to engage with (Bolt et al, 2024; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Wellman et al, 2016). For example, facilitators in Wellman et al (2016) suggested that the Tree of Life might support ward staff to know that inpatients have "much richer [stories] to them than just medication and diagnosis" (p. 177). Participants clearly viewed the Tree of Life as beneficial, with therapeutic power to promote change.

Emotional Expression. Participants in six studies described how the Tree of Life group supported them to express their feelings in a safe space (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Khawaja et al, 2022; Vitale et al, 2019). For some participants, this seemed to be a rare opportunity for emotional expression, conveyed by phrases such as "let out" (Casdagli et al, 2017, p. 12; Khawaja et al, 2022, p. 35) and "confess" (Fleming et al, 2023, p. 145). Participants acknowledged that there was often a lot of emotion in the group, but this was therapeutic in nature, with group members leaving feeling lighter after expressing their feelings (Vitale et al, 2019). This highlights the value of the Tree of Life in facilitating emotional release and providing a safe, non-judgemental space for the sharing of feelings. The process of reflecting on their personal histories and externalising their problems appears to be a cathartic exercise for participants, resulting in feelings of liberation. Acting as a witness to other's histories may also be an emotionally charged experience, with participants feeling overwhelming empathy for one another.

Reflecting and Reconnecting. In seven studies, participants seemed to reflect on their lives (Casdagli et al, 2017; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016) and reconnect with important events in their history (Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). Some participants found this to be an affirming experience which connected them with the positive, valued aspects of their life (Németh et al, 2024; Vitale et al, 2019). For others, reflection was an eye-opening process of becoming more self-aware (Rowley et al, 2020), as reflection prompted reconnection with forgotten events:

> My past, who was important in my life, which I didn't know very well, I had forgotten about it (Wellman et al, 2016, p. 177)

From a narrative therapeutic perspective, participants are engaging with re-membering practices (Carr, 1998), reconnecting with what is important to them by visually representing key aspects of their lives. This encourages participants to engage with their strengths, resources, and positive times in their life, thickening their preferred narratives and supporting them to generate a deeper understanding of themselves (Carr, 1998). Although this reflection is largely positive, it may be novel and unusual if participants' stories have been dominated by problem-saturated narratives (Morgan, 2000).

Positive and Engaging. More broadly, participants report the group to be a fun, interesting, and overall enjoyable experience (Fleming et al, 2023; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). A range of benefits were reported by participants, including feeling relaxed (Khawaja et al, 2022) and having fun (Fleming et al, 2023). This often related to the celebration, giving of certificates, or the art-based nature of the Tree of Life, linking with the Creative Process descriptive theme. As previously discussed, the enjoyable and fun nature of the Tree of Life likely supported the therapeutic process, promoting participant engagement and the development of a psychologically safe space (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016).

Some studies also recognised the less-positive experiences of the Tree of Life. For example, participants in Fleming et al (2023) described the approach as boring, though recognised that this would be the case for any school-based approach. Other studies referred to certain aspects of the process as "awkward" (Khawaja et al, 2022, p. 38), and emphasised the importance of managing group dynamics to ensure all participants had a positive experience (Randle-Philips et al, 2016). This highlights the need to carefully plan adaptations to the Tree of Life depending on the participant group, considering the appropriateness of activities, the pace of delivery, and the chemistry of participants.

2.12. Conclusions of the SLR

The findings of the thematic synthesis indicate that the Tree of Life is a broadly positive experience for participants, with therapeutic benefits and supportive outcomes. The collective nature of the Tree of Life nurtures connections between group members, which provides a psychologically safe environment and a sense of relatedness to people who have had similar life experiences. The Tree of Life appears to facilitate participants internalising new perspectives and enriching existing stories about their lives, resulting in increased awareness

of strengths, as well as hope and motivation for the future. Whilst they sometimes experienced discomfort, participants valued the overall experience of the group and the opportunity to express their feelings using a creative and sensitive method. Finally, participants appeared to value the reflective process and the freedom to express their emotions in a psychologically safe, therapeutic context.

2.13. Limitations of the SLR

This SLR holds several limitations which must be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. Firstly, due to the small-scale of this research, the review was conducted across just four databases. It is therefore acknowledged that the papers reviewed may not represent the entire range of available research on the Tree of Life. Additionally, some research was not accessible due to the researcher not being a member of organisations or a subscriber to particular journals, meaning further existing research may not have been included.

Additionally, given the qualitative nature of the thematic synthesis, it is possible that the findings may be impacted by the researcher's subjective positionality, resulting in bias. Although effort was made to remain reflexive and unbiased, eight studies reported their findings thematically, and this knowledge may have influenced the researcher in forming the themes reported in the current review.

As part of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the researcher chose not to include descriptive commentary papers to uphold standards of methodological rigour (CASP, 2018; Thomas & Harden, 2008). However, in doing so, the review may have upheld thin narratives about the Tree of Life, privileging dominant stories and neglecting those in other publications (Parham et al, 2019). It is also recognised that the majority of papers included in the review originated from the UK, and that descriptive papers often originated from countries such as Australia (Butera-Prinzi et al, 2014; Elhassan & Yassine, 2017) and South Africa (Meyer, 2014). This may indicate that the inclusion criteria is biased towards Western standards for research. Ultimately, decisions about the inclusion criteria were made so that the SLR could provide a rationale for future research that was grounded in quality-appraised findings and would likely be deemed acceptable by the wider scientific community (Parham et al, 2019). However, it is acknowledged that more narrative literature has a valuable contribution in supporting our understanding of the Tree of Life.

2.14. Implications for EP Practice

This review provides support for the use of the Tree of Life with diverse populations, highlighting its potential as a therapeutic intervention to promote wellbeing for CYP described as having SEN. The thematic synthesis found the Tree of Life to be a psychologically safe tool which promoted therapeutic outcomes (Bolt et al, 2024; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016), suggesting that it could serve as an impactful school-based intervention to support wellbeing.

The findings also highlighted the potential for EPs to use the Tree of Life to promote social connections and the development of belonging for CYP described as having SEN, who are at risk of having fewer reciprocal relationships, smaller support networks (Cullinane, 2020; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Gaspar et al, 2016), and fewer opportunities for collaborative working in school (Pinto et al, 2019; Schwab, 2017). The thematic synthesis also found the Tree of Life to promote positive self-image, emphasising its usefulness for EPs wishing to support the wellbeing and self-esteem of groups who are vulnerable (Denborough, 2023), and further highlighting its relevance for CYP described as having SEN. Additionally, the findings highlight the power of reflection in forming preferred narratives and developing goals for the future. This would be a particularly useful approach for EPs adopt when supporting CYP described as having SEN, whose experiences of low self-esteem may result in less self-belief and therefore lower confidence to follow their ambitions (Holding et al, 2023). However, the thematic synthesis also highlighted the potential for reflection to be emotional and unusual for participants, emphasising the importance of EPs applying narrative therapeutic principles with care and consideration for the participant group (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016).

2.15. Rationale for the Current Research

As outlined in the narrative overview of literature, CYP described as having SEN are at risk of experiencing a range of challenges to their wellbeing (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Deighton et al, 2019; Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Sin et al, 2010). This is influenced by a range of factors, including their social experiences (Cullinane, 2020; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Gaspar et al, 2016; Pinto et al, 2019; Schwab, 2017), self-esteem (Bear et al, 2002; Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Taylor et al, 2010), and perceived ability to cope with challenge (Holding et al, 2023). The SLR indicates that the Tree of Life has a range of social and emotional benefits

that could support this group and address some of the aforementioned challenges. However, with only 11 studies meeting the inclusion criteria for this SLR, there is a need for further research to explore the experience of the Tree of Life from the perspective of participants. Furthermore, only one study qualitatively explored the experience of CYP described as having SEN, producing limited findings (Fleming et al, 2016). This represents a gap in existing knowledge about the Tree of Life which requires enriching through further in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences.

The current research seeks to enrich the existing evidence base by exploring the experiences of participants described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life. This research does not intend to draw generalisable conclusions about the impact of the Tree of Life on participants' wellbeing, but rather provide an original contribution to the evidence base about the experience of the Tree of Life as a narrative therapeutic approach. This research aims to provide insights into the social and emotional aspects of the Tree of Life that may support wellbeing, and subsequently the approaches that could support wellbeing as part of broader school and EP practice.

This research focuses on the experiences of secondary-aged participants described as having SEN in recognition that adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time for wellbeing, and that research is required to understand the experience of therapeutic approaches for this group (Deighton et al, 2019; Newlove-Delgado et al, 2022; Solmi et al, 2022). Until now, the term CYP has been used to represent the relevance of this topic to all CYP and to explore a wide range of existing research in relation wellbeing, SEN, and the Tree of Life. From this point onward, the term YP is used to describe the research population for the sake of clarity and in recognition of their age. However, CYP may still be used in reference to the research presented during this chapter.

The research aims to answer the following research question:

What is the experience of YP described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life?

3. Methodology

This chapter details the methodological approach adopted to address the research question: *what is the experience of YP described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life?* It begins by outlining the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this research, along with an explanation of how these influenced the research design. Following this, the chapter explores qualitative research approaches and provides a justification for why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected. The chapter will discuss the research procedure, including the delivery of the Tree of Life sessions, recruitment of participants, ethical considerations, and interview procedures. The chapter closes by describing the criteria for evaluating research quality and the data analysis process.

3.1. Philosophical Underpinnings of Research

3.1.1. Research Paradigms

Research paradigms are a set of philosophical beliefs which influence a researcher's worldview (Mertens, 2019). They consist of ontological beliefs about the nature of reality, and epistemological beliefs about the nature and acquisition of knowledge (Mertens, 2019). A researcher's paradigmatic stance guides decision-making throughout the research process, shaping their approach to inquiry (Cohen et al, 2018). To support transparency, the below section will explore three major paradigms (Mertens, 2019; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016), presenting a rationale for why they were deemed appropriate or inappropriate for use in the current research.

Positivism. The positivist paradigm adheres to a realist ontological belief that there is an objective, knowable reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Positivist methodology is grounded in scientific inquiry and attempts to measure an objective reality using quantitative approaches (Cohen et al, 2018; Fox, 2008). Despite its popularity in scientific research, the positivist paradigm is widely considered reductionist, and has been criticised as an overly-simplistic tool for studying social phenomena (Fox, 2008; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). As the researcher does not deem there to be a quantifiable phenomenon that could be measured to adequately understand participants' individual experience of the Tree of Life in sufficient depth, the positivist paradigm is deemed unsuitable for the current research.

Pragmatism. The pragmatic paradigm adopts the ontological belief that there is only one reality but that individuals all hold unique interpretations of this reality (Cohen et al, 2018). Pragmatism is concerned with practical problem solving, and so encourages researchers to select the most appropriate methodological approaches for addressing their research question (Maarouf, 2019). As a result, pragmatic researchers often utilise mixed-methods designs, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches in line with the goals of their inquiry (Maarouf, 2019). Whilst this approach can be useful for producing practical research outcomes, the current research is interested in exploring the subjective experiences of participants, rather than generating generalisable conclusions about "what works" (Maarouf, 2019, p. 5). Therefore, pragmatism was ruled out as a research paradigm.

Interpretivism. Interpretivism sits at the opposite end of the paradigmatic continuum to positivism (Mertens, 2019). The interpretivist paradigm holds the relativist ontological belief that there are multiple realities which are constructed by individuals (Moore, 2005; Cohen et al, 2018). The interpretivist epistemology argues that individuals engage with interpretative meaning-making which is dependent on their individual constructs, cultural backgrounds, and subjective biases (Sol & Heng, 2022). Researchers adopting the interpretivist paradigm seek to understand the lived experiences of individuals, drawing on qualitative methodologies to immerse themselves in the subjective worlds of others (Cohen et al, 2018; Mertens, 2019). Though the interpretivist paradigm has been critiqued for not producing widely generalisable results (Cohen et al, 2018), a researcher adopting this paradigm would rather seek to generate findings which illuminate participants' lived experiences (Yardley, 2017).

The current research aligns with the interpretivist paradigm. A relativist ontology is assumed to acknowledge that each participant will have different experiences and interpretations of the Tree of Life depending on their prior experiences. The research also adopts an interpretivist epistemology, recognising that participants' experiences of the Tree of Life can only be understood through interactions between the inquirer and the inquired-into.

3.2. Qualitative Research Approaches

The methodological approach of this research is guided by the relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. Fixed research designs using objective measures were rejected as inadequate for understanding the subjective realities of participants. Instead, a qualitative research approach is required to explore the rich experiences of participants engaging in the

Tree of Life. Several qualitative approaches were considered for use in this research, as outlined in the following section.

3.2.1. Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory (GT) uses qualitative data to develop explanatory theoretical accounts of systems or phenomena (Cutcliffe, 2000). GT aims to discover patterns and processes to generate "conceptually dense" theories which explain how people experience reality (Cutcliffe, 2000, p. 1477). This approach aligns with interpretivism by assuming that meaningful findings can be discovered through discourse between a researcher and participant (Sebastian, 2019). However, GT drives the development of theory, rather than supporting an understanding of the subjective experiences of YP. Consequently, GT was deemed unsuitable for this research.

3.2.2. Narrative Analysis.

Narrative Analysis (NA) is a qualitative methodology used to capture the stories participants tell about their lives and experiences. NA aligns with the interpretivist positioning of this research and supports researchers to understand participants' individual realities by analysing the plot, themes, and structure of their accounts (Smith, 2016; McAllum et al, 2019). However, the current study aims to explore participants' lived experiences of a specific event in depth, meaning a method which focuses on how stories are constructed is not aligned with the research question. As such, NA was not selected as an analysis method for this research.

3.2.3. Reflective Thematic Analysis.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) seeks to understand participants' views by identifying patterns and generating themes to represent the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). In line with interpretivism, RTA does not strive for researcher neutrality, and emphasises the importance of researcher reflexivity in the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). It is noted that RTA aligns with the paradigmatic stance of this research, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. However, this current study's relativist ontology is more suited to a methodology that allows for a nuanced interpretation of individual lived experience through both an idiographic and whole-group focus. As such, RTA was not chosen as an analysis method for this research.

3.2.4. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative methodology which aims to explore how individuals understand their lived experiences (Smith et al, 2022). It does so by analysing participants' experiential accounts on descriptive, linguistic, and interpretative levels, closely examining each transcript sequentially (Smith et al, 2022). IPA generates both Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), which represent each individual participants' experiences, and Group Experiential Themes (GETs), which highlight the converging and diverging experiences of the group (Smith et al, 2022). Like RTA, IPA acknowledges the influence of the researcher's subjectivity, positioning them as a "fundamental resource" in interpreting participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, p. 41).

3.3. Rationale for Selecting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA was selected as the most suitable methodological approach for this research. In line with the interpretivist paradigm, IPA allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, seeking to illuminate the unique and shared features of their experiential accounts. Compared to thematic analysis, IPA facilitates a deeper exploration of datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2021a), with researchers able to engage "more critically with the existential aspects of participants' experiences" (Spiers & Riley, 2019, p. 283).

IPA was also selected based on its dual analytic focus, which seeks to illuminate the individual and shared features of participants' experiential accounts. This is well-aligned with the interpretivist nature of the approach, since each participant will experience the Tree of Life differently based on their unique positionality. This is particularly important given the roots of this research in collective narrative approaches which place value in both individual and shared stories.

Moreover, IPA is thought to be a useful methodology for understanding participants' experiences of therapeutic approaches. IPA has been recognised as suitable for research exploring dynamic processes, times of change, and emotionally complex reactions (Spiers & Smith, 2019). This is evident in existing literature, with studies using IPA to explore participants' experiences of various interventions (Dawood & Done, 2021; Dhanak et al, 2020; Volpato et al, 2018). This highlights the potential for IPA to produce important, impactful recommendations to guide for future applications of the Tree of Life.

3.4. Philosophical Underpinnings of IPA

IPA is underpinned by three guiding philosophical principles: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. These, and their relevance to IPA, are detailed below.

3.4.1. Phenomenology

Phenomenology relates to the study of human conscious experience and explores how phenomena are "understood from within" (Moran, 2002, p. 4). Phenomenological inquiry is a central goal of IPA, with researchers seeking to understand the meaning of experiences for participants (Smith et al, 2022). The renowned philosopher Husserl (2013), who is credited with conceptualising phenomenology (Moran, 2002), emphasised the need for phenomenology to be a "presuppositionless science" which truly examines conscious experience (Moran, 2002, p. 126). To achieve this, Husserl proposed that researchers must engage in a process of bracketing, in which they isolate preconceptions and biases to focus entirely on the phenomena under investigation (Moran, 2002; Smith et al, 2022). As such, bracketing and researcher reflexivity are prioritised as important features of IPA (Smith et al, 2022).

3.4.2. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of how individuals interpret information (Smith et al, 2022). Since humans cannot fully enter the world of another person, researchers are required to interpret participants' accounts as part of phenomenological study (Smith et al, 2022). Given the complexity of phenomenology, researchers must explore participants' experiences beyond their words through multiple layers of interpretation (Moran, 2002). IPA is rooted in hermeneutic inquiry and provides a methodological approach for researchers to understand the lived experience of participants by examining descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual features of their accounts (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Guiding a researcher's commitment to interpretation are two principles: the hermeneutic circle and double hermeneutics. Firstly, the hermeneutic circle represents a process by which researchers strive to interpret experiences by understanding both the parts and the whole of a text. For example, when analysing an interview transcript, participants' single quotations must be understood in the context of the whole interview, and the whole interview can support researchers to better understand participants' meaning in single quotations. As the

name suggests, this is a cyclical, iterative process, with the researcher's interpretations developing as they discover further insights into participants' experiences. Throughout the IPA process (detailed in Section 3.6.8), researchers are encouraged to move between a detailed examination of individual parts and the whole-dataset to refine their understanding of the overall experiential account.

Secondly, double hermeneutics is a concept representing how researchers engage in two layers of interpretation when making sense of participants' lived experiences (Smith et al, 2022). Initially, the participant offers their interpretation of their own experience to the researcher, based on their perspectives and understanding. Subsequently, the researcher analyses their experiential account and presents their own interpretation, informed by their constructions, biases, and experiences. In becoming aware of this, researchers can display interpretive sensitivity and acknowledge their part in the meaning-making process (Smith et al, 2022).

3.4.3. Idiography

IPA is also concerned with idiography, which is a focus on the particular and specific (Smith et al, 2022). IPA adopts an idiographic lens by analysing the experiences of each participant before adopting a thematic lens and finding convergences and divergences between participants (Smith et al, 2022). This allows researchers to focus on each participant individually, facilitating an in-depth exploration of their experiences, before searching for shared patterns across the broader dataset.

3.4.4. Critique of IPA

To determine whether IPA was appropriate for use in this study, its methodological limitations were considered. Firstly, due to the labour-intensive nature of analysis, IPA relies on small sample sizes (Tuffour, 2017). IPA researchers must immerse themselves in the data to engage with an in-depth interpretative process, which is not usually possible with a more substantial number of participants. Consequently, critics would argue that IPA findings are not generalisable, limiting their usefulness. However, IPA does not strive for generalisability, but rather aims to highlight the specific experiences of individuals and generate transferable findings to inform future practice (Smith et al, 2022). Moreover, a smaller sample size allows for researchers to generate in-depth qualitative analyses that may not be possible with a larger sample. Therefore, IPA remains an appropriate method for the current research.

Additionally, IPA has been criticised for assuming that language can adequately capture the complex lived experiences of participants (Tuffour, 2017). This relates to the inherent limitations of language and the difficulties faced when trying to capture the human experience in words. This critique was particularly relevant to the current research, since YP described as having SEN may have differences in how they verbally communicate. However, IPA encourages researchers to analyse meaning beyond language and the "immediately apparent content" (Pringle et al, 2011, p. 21). It is therefore argued that language will rarely capture the complexity of human experience in any case, and researchers will always need to pursue meaning on a deeper level, subsequently lessening the need for participants to eloquently articulate their lived experiences. Furthermore, this research seeks to amplify participants' voices, and will not reject language-based interpretative methods based on assumptions about how participants may communicate. To mitigate the potential impact of any communicate differences, the inclusion criteria specified the need for participants to verbally communicate in English, and accessibility was prioritised throughout the interviews (see Section 3.6.6 for further detail).

Although guidance for how to conduct IPA is widely available, IPA could be critiqued for not having a rigid, standardised procedure for data analysis (Tuffour, 2017). A positivist researcher might argue that IPA does not represent a sufficiently scientific approach to data analysis and therefore does not produce credible or reliable results (Pringle et al, 2011). However, as previously acknowledged, IPA requires researchers to revisit data over time as part of the iterative hermeneutic process. The nature of this analysis demands a flexible approach, with researchers responding to information in the data and adapting their analysis as new meaning emerges. A prescriptive and rigid approach would limit researchers and hinder the interpretation of participants' experiences. As such, IPA remains an appropriate methodology to meet the aims of this research.

3.5. Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity is the process of a researcher evaluating and becoming aware of their positionality (Clancy, 2013). Reflexivity positions the researcher as an active participant in the analytic process whose experiences, biases, and reactions impact their decision-making and interpretation (Patnaik, 2013). This is particularly relevant in IPA, in which researchers must consider the impact of double hermeneutics and strive to bracket their preconceptions

during the analytic process. It is therefore important for researchers to engage in reflexive practice to ensure they are producing sensitive and credible qualitative research (Barrett et al, 2020).

To support the researcher to remain reflexive and document the process of reflexivity, a research journal was used to record the researcher's observations and reflections throughout the research process. The researcher sought to examine their own thoughts and biases using this tool, which also supported the process of bracketing during data analysis (Smith et al, 2022). To demonstrate the researcher's reflexivity, extracts from the reflexive diary can be found in Appendices 6, 10, and 20. In addition, a statement of social positionality is presented below to acknowledge how the researcher's personal experiences may have interacted to influence interpretation. The researcher's motivation to complete this research is also detailed in Chapter One.

3.5.1. Social Positionality

The researcher is a white female who is currently training to become an EP. The researcher does not consider themselves to be part of the research population, existing in a different age group to the participants and not having been described as having SEN at any point throughout their education. The researcher is therefore considered to be an 'outsider' to the population (Greene, 2014). However, the researcher also holds an 'insider' position, having previously taken part in narrative therapeutic approaches and with insight into the experience of the Tree of Life (see Appendix 6). The researcher is aware of the potential for bias and is committed to reflexivity, self-reflection, and bracketing during analysis to ensure the IPA reflects participants' lived experiences.

3.6. Method

The following section details the methodological approach of this research, including the recruitment process, research procedure, data collection, and ethical considerations.

3.6.1. Research Setting

Stakeholder Involvement. The research takes place in a Metropolitan Borough Local Authority mainstream secondary school, attended by approximately 1600 students aged 11-18. The school was approached via the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) using a stakeholder engagement letter (Appendix 7). A stakeholder agreement was created

which detailed the nature of the research and the expectations for the school's involvement (Appendix 8), including supporting the researcher to recruit participants, giving views on the accessibility of resources during piloting, and co-facilitating the Tree of Life group. The school consented to support the research in line with the terms specified in this agreement. There are no implications related to the researcher's professional role as a TEP since the Tree of Life was delivered outside of any service-level agreement.

Tree of Life Group Selection. Whilst recruiting a group to take part in the Tree of Life, the researcher considered whether to select an existing class group of YP from the school's SEN provision, or a smaller number of participants for a discrete intervention outside of the classroom. After consideration, the decision was made to deliver the Tree of Life to an existing class group as part of curriculum delivery. This decision was influenced by both practical and theoretical considerations, which are detailed below.

Firstly, the researcher aimed to deliver the Tree of Life in a way that would be feasible for EPs and schools to replicate in future. Due to issues of capacity, space, and time, EPs and schools may not always be able to facilitate interventions with small groups away from classrooms. In contrast, embedding the Tree of Life in daily curriculum delivery does not demand any additional resources beyond planning and co-facilitator training. By delivering the Tree of Life in this way, the researcher hopes to generate findings about the experience of YP in a context that closely resembles how the Tree of Life could be implemented in practice.

Secondly, the Tree of Life has roots in collective narrative practice, which aims to promote group engagement, draw communities together, and nurture relationships (Denborough, 2012). The shared experiences of the class, along with their shared future within the SEN provision, meant that the Tree of Life was a relevant approach for them to receive as one group.

Finally, the researcher considered the psychological impact of conducting the Tree of Life as a small group versus an existing whole class group. As identified in Chapter Two, participants valued the Tree of Life because it provided a safe way to access psychological support. Based on this, the researcher decided that an environment of emotional safety was required for the Tree of Life to be most impactful. Participants may be uncomfortable

working alongside peers who they do not usually see as part of their school timetable and routine. Whilst previous research found that participants were pleased to engage with the Tree of Life alongside strangers, this was because they felt able to share with the knowledge that they would not need to see them again (Haselhurst et al, 2021). It is not possible to provide such assurance in a secondary school setting. Furthermore, whilst a discrete, small-group intervention could facilitate deeper interaction between participants and facilitators, it may also feel formal and intensive as opposed to enjoyable.

In negotiation with the school, a class of 14 Year 9 students described as having SEN (aged 13-14) was selected. Although YP described as having SEN are a diverse group (Dalgaard et al, 2021), the similarities in age, context, and described SEN status mean this group was relatively homogenous.

3.6.2. Tree of Life Procedure

The Tree of Life group was co-facilitated by the researcher and the assistant SENCo and supported by a teaching assistant. Given the nature of the assistant SENCo role, the co-facilitator had a strong understanding of how to adapt approaches for accessibility and manage classroom dynamics. Prior to the Tree of Life, the researcher delivered training to the co-facilitator on how to deliver the Tree of Life group. The researcher and co-facilitator explored the principles of narrative therapeutic approaches and discussed the group members to aid the researcher's understanding of the group dynamics.

There are variations in how existing research has delivered the Tree of Life to groups. Several studies utilised one-day workshops (Bolt et al, 2023; Casdagli et al, 2017; Tobin, 2023), whilst others delivered the Tree of Life over multiple sessions (Fleming et al, 2023; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018). In the current research, the decision to deliver the Tree of Life over multiple sessions was based on several factors. Firstly, existing research suggested that the Tree of Life should be a minimum length of 7-8 sessions for individuals who are described as having learning disabilities (Randle-Philips et al, 2016), highlighting the importance of accessibility during delivery. Consequently, a one-day workshop was ruled out on the basis that it may place unnecessary cognitive and emotional demands on participants. Longer delivery timelines were also recommended by Baum and Shaw (2015), who describe how an increased number of sessions would support service users to connect with the Tree of Life in greater depth over time. Tree of Life participants have also expressed their preference for

longer-running interventions, highlighting the importance of engagement over time (Bolt et al, 2024). For these reasons, the Tree of Life was delivered over seven 50-minute sessions, running between September and October 2024.

The Tree of Life was delivered as described in Table 2.2. Table 3.1 shows the content of each session. The first session focused primarily on co-producing ground rules and playing games to support relationship building. These aspects were prioritised to promote a psychologically safe atmosphere, given the potentially sensitive nature of the Tree of Life. All sessions were supported by visual prompts, including a PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix 9). See Appendix 10 for the researcher's reflections on the Tree of Life process.

Table 3.1

A *Summary of The Tree of Life Sessions*

Session	Focus and activities
1.	'Getting to know you' games Developing ground rules Starting to draw the roots
2.	Finishing drawing the roots Drawing the ground
3.	Commenting on each other's strengths Drawing the trunk
4.	Drawing the branches
5.	Drawing the leaves Drawing the fruits
6.	Forest of Life
7.	Storms of Life Celebration and certificates

3.6.3. Participant Recruitment

A combination of purposive and volunteer sampling was used to recruit participants who had taken part in the Tree of Life group. Smith et al (2022) advise recruiting between four and ten participants for doctoral research. To ensure the analytic process would be both manageable and sufficiently in-depth, the researcher aimed to recruit between four and eight participants. All 14 group members were invited to join the research based on the following inclusion criteria:

- To have engaged in the Tree of Life group, not having missed more than one session
- To have the communication skills to verbally express their views in English and participate in a semi-structured interview (with visual supports supplementing this communication)

Both participants and their parents or carers received an information letter containing the background, purpose, and requirements of the study, as well as the researcher's contact details (see Appendix 11 and Appendix 12). Participants and their parents or carers were asked to give informed consent via a consent form (see Appendix 13 and Appendix 14). Further information regarding consent practices is offered in Section 3.6.6.

3.6.4. Participants

Four participants and their parents or carers consented to them taking part in the semi-structured interviews. Pseudonyms have been allocated to support readers to understand the narratives of each participant. Table 3.2 shows demographic details for each participant, as collected from the host school. This includes a pseudonym, age, ethnicity, and SEN as described by school for each participant.

Table 3.2

Participant Demographic Details

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	How school describe their SEN
Elena	13	White Gypsy/Roma	Differences with cognition and learning
Zara	14	Pakistani	Differences with cognition and learning
Priya	14	Indian	Differences with cognition and learning and communication and interaction
Kayleigh	13	White British	Differences with cognition and learning

In line with the interpretivist epistemology of this research, it is assumed that participants will each experience the Tree of Life differently depending on their unique positionality. As such, anonymised copies of participants' trees are included in Figures 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 to visually represent their life stories and to demonstrate their engagement in the Tree of Life process.

Figure 3.1

Elena's Tree of Life

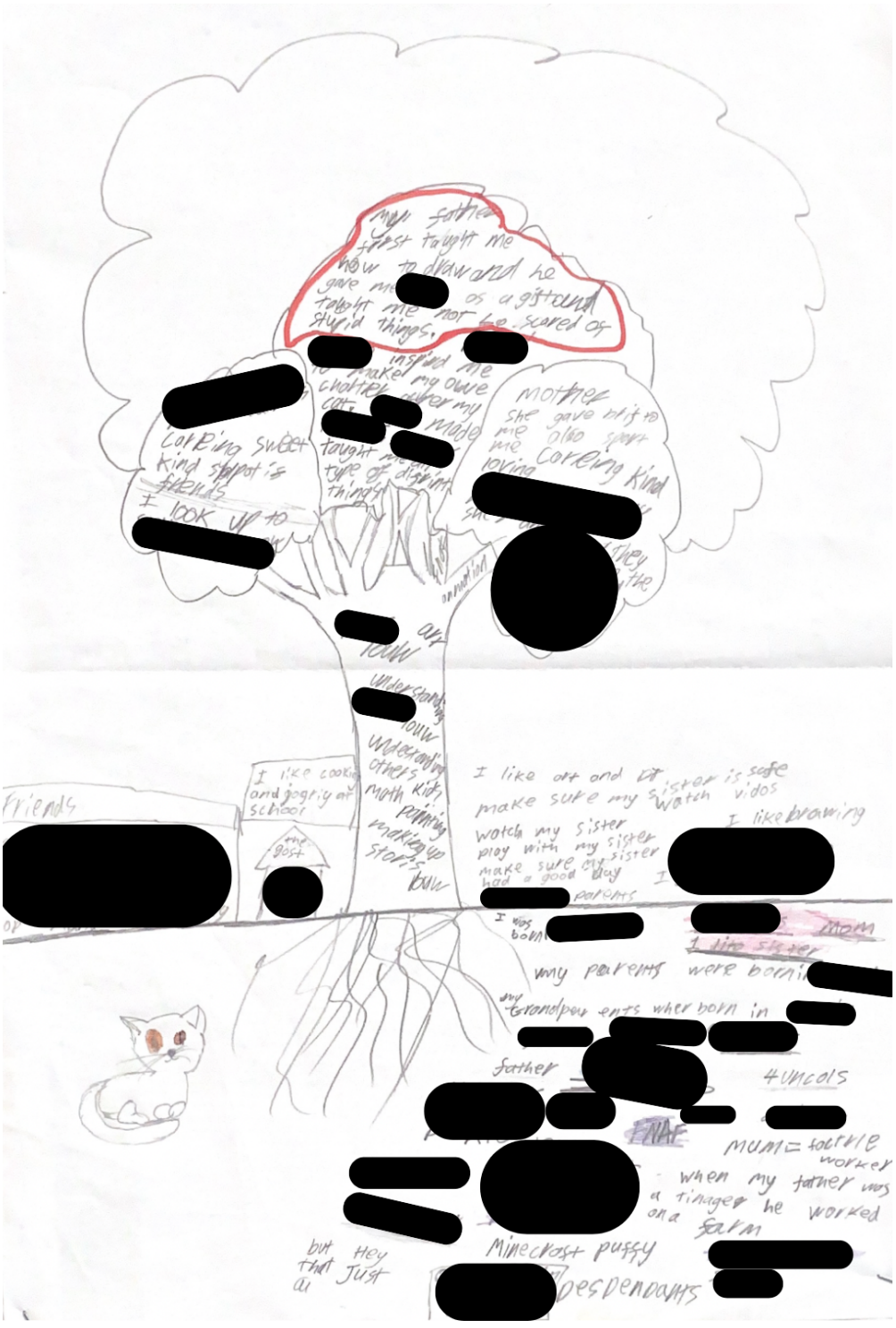


Figure 3.2

Zara's Tree of Life

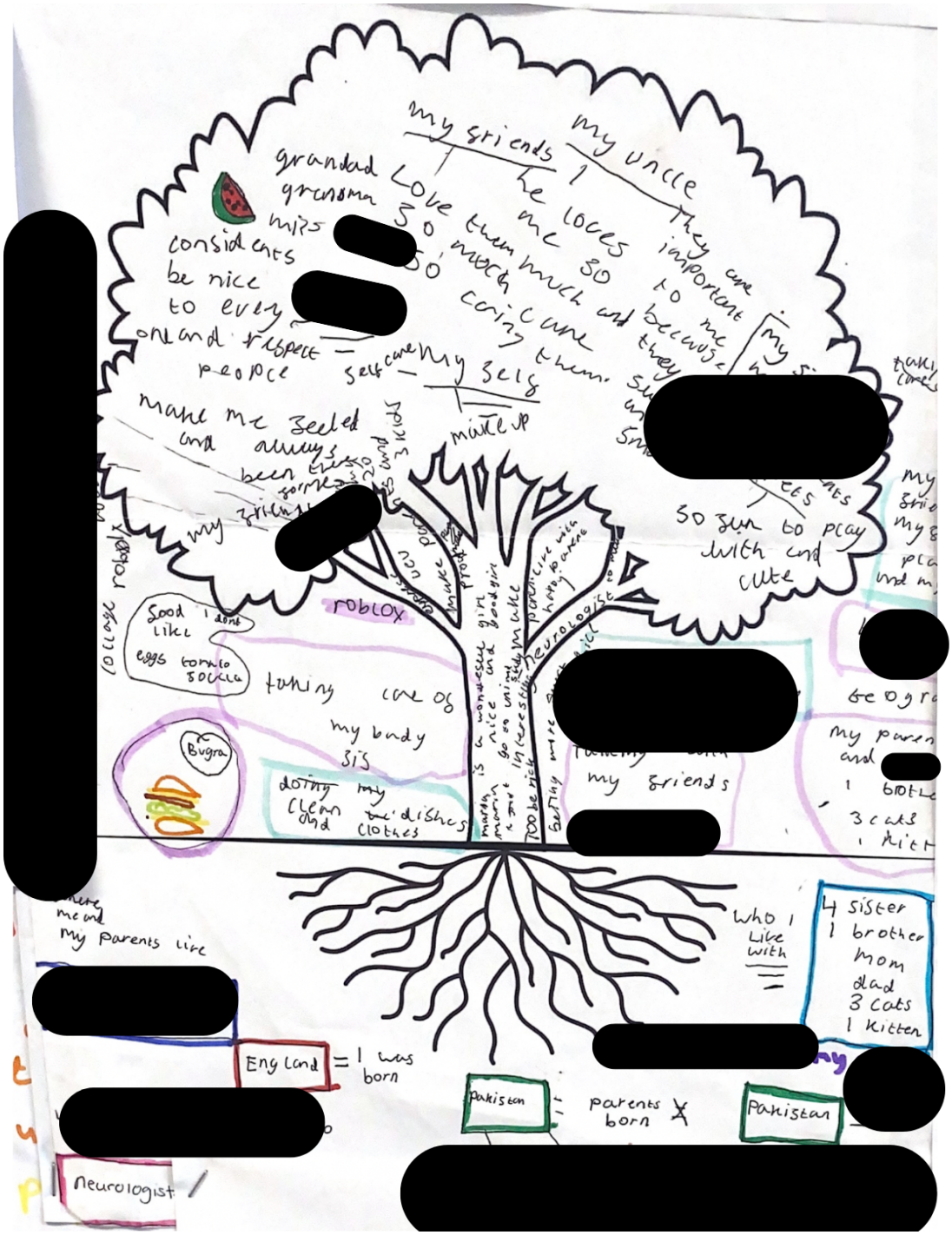


Figure 3.3

Priya's Tree of Life

Figure 3.4

Kayleigh's Tree of Life

3.6.5. Data Collection Method

IPA requires a data collection method that supports researchers to gain insight into participants' worlds through rich, first-hand narratives of their experiences (Smith et al, 2022). The below section will outline three potential data collection methods which are compatible with IPA, providing a rationale for why they were selected or rejected for use in the current research.

Focus Groups. Focus groups were considered as a method for data collection. Focus groups would support participants to share their views and build a collective story about the experience of the Tree of Life, aligning with the collective narrative element of the research. However, there is the potential for group dynamics to discourage participants from sharing their views openly, resulting in some participants' experiences being heard more than others (Reed & Payton, 1997). Furthermore, the Tree of Life prompts participants to think about their personal histories, and a group discussion may not feel like a psychologically safe space to reflect on this process. Additionally, IPA requires researchers to conduct experiential analyses of each participants' individual experiences, which may not be achievable when observing a group discussion (Smith et al, 2022). Consequently, focus groups were ruled out as a data collection method.

Written Methods. IPA has also been used to analyse data gathered through written means such as questionnaires (Coyle & Rafalin, 2001) and diaries (Cudjoe, 2022). Such methods could support participants to share their thoughts with less concern about how they may be received by the researcher, reducing the potential for social desirability bias. However, written methods may be less appropriate for use with the current participant group, whose differences in cognition and learning may mean they find writing to be less accessible than verbal communication (DfE, 2024b; DfE, 2024c). Written methods of data collection were therefore deemed unsuitable for this research.

Semi-structured Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were eventually selected as the most appropriate method for exploring participants' first-hand accounts of their experiences (Smith et al, 2022). The one-to-one nature of interviews facilitates rapport-building between the researcher and participants, creating a safe space for the sharing of ideas and personal experiences (Smith et al, 2022). Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews facilitate greater flexibility than more rigid, structured interviews, providing participants with space to develop

their ideas and researchers with opportunities to further elicit participants' thoughts and feelings.

3.6.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Nottingham Ethics Committee in June 2024 (see Appendix 15). All procedures adhered to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021a) and the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2021b). Ethical considerations, including informed consent, accessibility, anonymity, right to withdraw, and reducing harm are discussed below.

Informed Consent. Consent procedures adhered to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021a), BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021b), and Best Practice for Educational Psychologists in Gaining Consent (Association of Educational Psychologists [AEP], 2022). As part of an informed consent procedure, information sheets for both participants and their parent or carers outlined the possible risks and benefits of involvement. They also detailed the interview process, audio recording, and data analysis. The letters contained information on the right to withdraw, how participants would be supported, and the researcher's contact details should they wish to ask further questions.

Informed consent was sought from participants in addition to their parents or carers to position them as individuals with autonomy (Ford et al, 2007). Research suggests that CYP as young as five can understand study procedures when supported by developmentally appropriate language (Meaux & Bell, 2001), and so measures were taken to ensure consent forms were accessible for participants. Participants were given additional time and information to help them give informed consent, supported by a member of school staff. A glossary of 'research words' was provided to help participants to understand any academic language related to the process of research (Appendix 16). This explained words such as consent, anonymity, and data using straightforward, accessible language and visuals.

To avoid consent being a singular practice, the researcher strove to be sensitive and attuned to participants' emotional states throughout the interviews (Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2022). When one participant appeared to be uncomfortable, the researcher paused the recording to perform a welfare check and sought verbal consent for the interview to continue.

Reducing the Risk of Harm. The Tree of Life involves participants exploring their personal histories and the challenges they have faced throughout their lives. As such, protecting participants' wellbeing was a key consideration throughout the research. Throughout the Tree of Life delivery, care was taken to reduce the risk of harm to participants. During the first Tree of Life session, the group worked together to generate ground rules, which included confidentiality, respect, kindness, and listening. In each Tree of Life session, the researcher, co-facilitator, and supporting staff member regularly checked in with participants and remained vigilant for signs of distress. The ground rules were referred to throughout and, if conflict occurred between YP, this was addressed by the co-facilitator.

The researcher held a triadic role in the researcher, acting as the Tree of Life facilitator, interviewer, and data analyst. This allowed the researcher to develop relationships with participants, supporting their feelings of safety and confidence to share their views. This also allowed the researcher to be attuned with participants' emotional states, with an existing awareness of their stories and any areas of the Tree of Life which evoked emotion for them.

However, it is acknowledged that this triadic role may have resulted in power dynamics which influenced the course of the interviews. For example, participants may have felt less able to share their honest views around negative aspects of the Tree of Life experience, since they had already built a relationship with the interviewer and likely understood the interviewer to be a stakeholder in the research process. Similarly, participants may have felt less able to steer discussion about the Tree of Life in the semi-structured interview context, since the researcher was an adult delivering lesson content in school. The researcher attempted to mitigate the impact of power dynamics by repeatedly reassuring participants about the aims of the research and being clear that all feedback about the Tree of Life experience was valuable.

Following the interviews, the researcher checked in with participants to ensure they felt emotionally safe, and to see if they required any further support. The researcher committed to working with any participant who needed support, helping them to identify who they could speak to in school and at home, and signposting to appropriate services that offer psychological support.

Anonymity. Participants were allocated a pseudonym to protect their anonymity, and any identifiers such as family names or places were redacted from the data. The images of trees included above have been anonymised and any identifying details have been removed. However, due to a small sample size and the nature of Tree of Life involving sharing personal stories, some participants may be recognisable to a person who is aware that they are taking part in this research. This was explained within the information sheets.

Right to Withdraw. The participant and parent and carer information sheets detailed participants' right to withdraw. They stated that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any point before or during the interviews. At the start of each interview, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw without reason or question at any time. Following the interviews, participants received a verbal debrief, and participants (Appendix 17) and parents or carers (Appendix 18) each received a written debrief letter. This letter stated that participants could request that their data was withdrawn until six weeks after the interviews.

Accessibility. Accessibility was a key ethical consideration in the current research. All resources were developed using guidance on how to create accessible, child-centred documents (Ford et al, 2007). The participant information sheets were developed to include a simple summary of the content, presented in easy-to-understand language accompanied by visuals (Sharpe et al, 2022). Additionally, previous research highlights the importance of ensuring the Tree of Life sessions and the associated resources are accessible (Németh et al, 2024). As such, Tree of Life resources were piloted alongside the research materials, and evolved in accessibility based on feedback from piloting, as detailed below.

Piloting. In line with British Psychological Society guidance (BPS, 2021), procedures were piloted for suitability. In collaboration with the host school's SENCo, a sample of four students were recruited who were determined to have similar reading comprehension levels as the participant group. The pilot group were asked to give their views on the readability, language, and structure of resources. This included the 'research words' document, information sheets, consent forms, Tree of Life activities, and interview questions. The SENCo was also asked to comment on the accessibility of resources.

The pilot group reported that some language was hard to understand and that they preferred resources with visuals to aid their understanding. As such, the researcher updated resources to include further simplified language and additional visual aids. Furthermore, the pilot group identified that it was helpful to have an adult explain resources to them. In response to this, the researcher requested that a staff member in school support participants to read and understand information sheets and consent forms. The researcher directly supported participants to read and understand debrief sheets. The pilot group did not identify any issues with the interview schedule.

3.6.7. Data Collection

Developing the Interview Schedule. The researcher created a semi-structured interview schedule to guide discussion about participants' experiences of the Tree of Life (Appendix 19). The interviews were informed by Smith et al's (2022) guidance on conducting interviews for IPA. The schedule began with a broad open question about the Tree of Life so that participants could share their conceptualisation of the experience without influence from the researcher. The schedule then included questions about specific aspects of the Tree of Life to ensure a comprehensive overview of their experience was captured. The schedule also included questions to elicit the meaning participants made of their experiences, such as what they remembered most about the Tree of Life. In line with Smith et al's (2022) guidance for designing interview schedules, questions about the more emotive aspects of the group, such as sharing of trees and discussion about storms, were placed in the middle of the interview. This aimed to ensure the participant was comfortable in the interview setting before discussing topics which could evoke discomfort.

To support the flow of the schedule, the researcher noted possible prompts and probes to encourage the participants to share in more depth. These included questions to explore their emotional responses and the meaning they made of events, such as "how did that feel?" and "what did you think about that?". The interview schedule generally remained open so discussion could be directed by the participant, and conversational to allow the participant to share their views in a way that felt safe.

Conducting Interviews. The interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted no more than 25 minutes. The interviews were supported by the researcher's skills as a TEP,

including empathy, questioning, refocusing, and summarising (Nolan & Moreland, 2014). Participants were provided with symbols which they could use to indicate if they wished to skip a question, hear the question again, pause for a break, or stop the interview. Participants were also presented with a visual checklist corresponding to the prompt questions and were told they could choose the order in which questions and topics were explored. A box of sensory toys, such as fidget spinners and stress balls, was kept on the table for participants to use at any time. Participants were given the opportunity to have a member of school staff present during their interview. If they did not choose this option, a member of staff was asked to make visual checks through a window during the interviews.

Initially, interviews were planned for one day after the end of the Tree of Life group to support participants' recall about the activity and their experience. A contingency date was also offered in case of illness. Due to the school holidays falling after the first set of interviews, the contingency date was 10 days after the end of the Tree of Life group. Three participants were interviewed on the first date, and one participant on the second date.

Transcription. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher before analysis commenced. The transcripts also noted any significant non-verbal communication, including pauses, hesitations, and laughter (Smith et al, 2022). In adherence to the Data Protection Act (2018), recordings and transcripts were stored securely on a password protected computer. Interview recordings were destroyed once analysed.

3.6.8. Data Analysis

IPA is iterative and dynamic in nature, with researchers moving back and forth between the steps throughout analysis (Smith et al, 2022). Although Smith et al (2022) recognise that each researcher may engage with analysis differently, they present a heuristic framework to guide researchers through the process of IPA. The current research adopted Smith et al's (2022) framework, following the steps below (see Appendix 20 for reflexive journal extracts describing the analysis process).

Step 1: Reading and Re-reading. The researcher became immersed in the data of the first participant, initially through transcription, and subsequently through reading and re-reading the transcript. As recommended by Smith et al (2022), the researcher listened to the audio-recordings once whilst reading the transcript to establish a connection between the text and

the voice of the participant. This step ensured the researcher was familiar with the data and understood how the narrative progressed throughout the interview.

Step 2: Exploratory Noting. The researcher then engaged in exploratory noting, identifying points of interest within the transcript. Smith et al (2022) describe three types of noting: exploratory, linguistic, and conceptual notes. Exploratory notes are used to describe what the participant has said, usually capturing explicit meaning. Linguistic noting focuses on the language used by the participant, as well as the pattern of their speech, such as repetition and hesitation. Finally, conceptual noting requires the researcher to move beyond description and interrogate participants' meaning. A different font colour was used to add each type of exploratory note to the transcripts to distinguish between their types (see Appendix 21).

As detailed and comprehensive exploratory notes are required to inform analysis, this step was repeated several times. Through this process, the researcher became more familiar with the parts and whole of the hermeneutic circle, which supported them to generate more interpretative comments as their understanding of the participants' experiences grew.

Step 3: Constructing Experiential Statements. The researcher sought to draw together the exploratory notes into concise summaries in the form of experiential statements (see Appendix 21). These statements aim to capture the essence of participants' meaning relating to their experience of the Tree of Life. At this stage, the researcher's interpretations of participants' experiences become more dominant in the analytic process (Smith et al, 2022). Smith et al (2022) describe this step as an analytic shift to examining the exploratory notes rather than the transcript, though note that experiential statements will remain closely aligned with the data if exploratory noting has been done well.

Step 4: Searching for Connections Across Experiential Statements. The next step involved the researcher considering how each of the experiential statements fit together, clustering them to form case-level summaries (see Appendix 22). In line with guidance from Smith et al (2022), the researcher took care to be open-minded and explore different ways of organising experiential statements. At this stage, some experiential statements that did not align with the research question were discarded (Smith et al, 2022).

Step 5: Naming and Organising the Personal Experiential Themes. The grouped experiential statements were then named according to their features and became Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) (see Appendix 23 for an example PET table). During this stage, the researcher took care to refer to the original transcripts to ensure PETs were grounded in participants' interpretation of their experiences.

Step 6: Continuing Individual Analysis of Other Cases. Steps 1-5 were then repeated for other individual cases, with PETs created for each participant. At this stage, the researcher strove to bracket any biases from having analysed previous data by listening to each participants' interview again. This aimed to ensure that analyses were idiographic, with each participant recognised as an individual with unique experiences (Smith et al, 2022).

Step 7: Developing Group Experiential Themes Across Cases. Once each transcript had been analysed, the researcher compared and contrasted PETs from each participant to generate a Group Experiential Themes (GETs) (see Appendix 24). The researcher initially compared participants' PETs to identify convergences and divergences amongst datasets, but also examined subthemes and experiential statements to explore the patterns occurring at different levels (Smith et al, 2022). GETs were then given a title to characterise the experience they represented. A GET table was created to include GETs, subthemes, and quotations from each participant to exemplify how the GET appeared in the transcripts (see Appendix 25).

3.7. Evaluating Validity and Quality

In line with guidance for conducting IPA research (Smith et al, 2022), Yardley's (2017) guidelines for producing high quality qualitative research were followed. Yardley (2017) described four criteria for demonstrating validity of qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Table 3.3 describes each of these and how they are demonstrated in the current research.

Table 3.3

Actions Taken to Uphold Yardley's (2017) Quality Measures for Qualitative Research

Yardley's (2017) Quality Measures	Actions in the Current Research
Sensitivity to Context	• An SLR of previous studies was undertaken to develop sensitivity to the research context. • The emotional and accessibility needs of participants were considered throughout the research, as demonstrated throughout Section 3.6.6. • Sensitivity to participants' perspectives was demonstrated throughout the IPA process. The researcher bracketed any preconceptions and attuned to the lived experience of participants to ensure interpretations were grounded in the original data. However, the impact of double hermeneutics is recognised, and the reported findings ultimately represent the interpretations of both participants and the researcher.
Commitment and Rigour	• The researcher committed to delivering the Tree of Life to ensure the experience was underpinned by principles of narrative therapeutic approaches (Carr, 1998). • The methodological approach demonstrated a commitment to capturing the voices of participants, including recruiting an appropriate sample size, developing a well-considered interview schedule, and carrying out a thorough assessment of ethical issues to ensure the safety of all. • An in-depth analysis, following IPA guidelines (Smith et al, 2022), was undertaken to explore participants' experiences (as demonstrated by the example transcript in Appendix 21). • Reflexivity was prioritised throughout the IPA process to enhance the researcher's focus on participants'

	experiences and acknowledge the impact of the researcher's own preconceptions on interpretations (see Appendix 20).
Transparency and Coherence	• The philosophical underpinnings of this research are detailed to show how the ontology and epistemology informed decisions. • The researcher shared their positionality and motivation for conducting this research in acknowledgement of how this may influence their interpretations. • Throughout this chapter, rationales are provided for the research design, data collection method, and the use of IPA. • The data analysis process is made transparent through the sharing of example transcripts and theme development processes (Appendices 21-25).
Impact and Importance	• This research aims to be impactful and important by addressing a gap in existing literature, highlighting the experience of the Tree of Life for YP described as having SEN. • This research aims to produce transferable findings, meaning practitioners can use their judgement to determine whether the findings could sensitively inform their own practice with YP (Smith et al, 2022). It is the aim of this research to be sensitive, rigorous, and transparent enough that practitioners can evaluate whether the research could be impactful and important in the context of their work. • Findings will be shared with the research host school and Educational Psychology Service (EPS) in the form of a research summary, including implications for schools and EP practice.

3.7.1. Evaluating the Quality of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

In addition to Yardley's (2017) criteria, Nizza et al's (2021) guidance for producing a good IPA study was followed. These quality indicators informed the IPA process and are evidenced throughout the findings and discussion sections of this thesis. Table 3.4 outlines the quality indicators and how they are demonstrated in the current research.

Table 3.4

Demonstration of Nizza et al's (2021) Quality Indicators for IPA Research

Nizza et al's (2021) Quality Indicators	Demonstration in the Current Research
Constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative	• Chapter Four includes a coherent account of the analysis, using quotations to evidence interpretations of participants' accounts.
Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account	• The analysis emphasises the experiential meaning of participants accounts, evidenced by the interpretations offered in Chapter Four and the rigorous exploratory noting process (see Appendix 21).
Close analytic reading of participants' words	• The analysis included a hermeneutic focus to understand the phenomenological account of participants, demonstrated by the sharing of quotations and example experiential statements (Appendix 21)
Attention given to convergence and divergence	• The analysis was committed to highlighting similarities and differences across idiographic accounts. Convergence and divergence between GETs is noted throughout Chapter Four, and example analyses are appended to demonstrate how accounts were compared (Appendix 24).

3.8. Summary

This chapter detailed the methodological approach to the research, which aims to understand the experience of YP described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life. It explored the philosophical underpinnings of the research, provided a rationale for the research design, and detailed the methodological approach to data collection and analysis. The chapter also detailed the research procedure, including the facilitation of the Tree of Life, the recruitment of participants to share their experiences via semi-structured interviews, and ethical considerations. Finally, it described how IPA was used to generate PETs and GETs to understand participants' experiences, the findings of which are discussed in the following chapter.

4. Findings

4.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the findings of the IPA to illuminate the experiences of participants engaging in the Tree of Life. In line with IPA's idiographic commitment, this chapter will first share participants' PETs. It will then provide an overview of the GETs to show convergences and divergences between participants (Smith et al, 2022). The chapter will explore each GET and its subthemes in detail, providing participants' quotations to illustrate how the GET presents in the context of the raw data.

4.2. Personal Experiential Themes

Participants' PETs represent their unique experiences of engaging in the Tree of Life and are presented in Table 4.1. These PETs draw on the individual accounts of Elena, Zara, Priya, and Kayleigh, highlighting the idiographic richness of their unique experiences. Each set of PETs explores how participants engaged in the Tree of Life, experienced emotion, explored their own beliefs, and interacted with others.

These PETs provided a foundational understanding of participants' experiences which then supported the researcher to identify patterns amongst experiential accounts, informing the development of GETs. For example, three participants had PETs which were interpreted to represent their emotional responses during the Tree of Life. These included Elena's PET The Spectrum of Emotional States, Zara's PET Emotional Intensity and Emotional Processing, and Kayleigh's PETs The Need for Support and A Positive and Enjoyable Process. Each of these PETs contributed to the development of the GETs Nurturing Positive Emotional States and Navigating Discomfort, highlighting both convergence and divergence in participants' experiences. Although this thesis does not have the scope to comprehensively elaborate on the PETs for each participant, the below table aims to highlight participants' unique experiences and support the reader's understanding of how individual accounts informed the development of GETs.

Table 4.1

Each Participant's Personal Experiential Themes and Subthemes

Participant	Personal Experiential Themes	Subthemes
Elena	The Spectrum of Emotional States	A Positive and Supportive Process
		Complexity of the Emotional Experience
	Reframing Experiences and Developing New Ideas	Existing Relationships
		Identity
		Change for the Future
	Supportive Social Connections	Learning as Transforming Relationships
		The Power of Sharing Experiences
		Coming Together as a Community
Zara	Exploring Identity	Connecting with Culture
		Awareness of Strengths
		Thinking About the Future
	Emotional Intensity and Emotional Processing	Discomfort and Complex Feelings
		A Therapeutic Space
		Positive Emotions
	The Value of Self-Expression	
	Nurturing Social Connection	Strengthened Relationships
		Learning and New Appreciation for Peers
Priya	A Space to Explore Identity	
	Connection	… With Background, Culture, and Family … With Peers
Kayleigh	Navigating Identity	Understanding Herself
		Expressing Herself
	Developing Social Connection	Strengthened Relationships
		Belonging and Group Identity
		Learning to Support Connection
	The Need for Support	Reflection as Uncomfortable
		The Importance of Emotional Safety
	A Positive and Enjoyable Process	
	Looking to the Future	

4.3. Group Experiential Themes

GETs were developed by cross-analysing participants' accounts to explore convergences and divergences in their experiences of the Tree of Life. It is important to note that GETs do not seek to generalise experiences but highlight the collective features of participants' accounts. Based on the IPA, six GETs were created: Nurturing Positive Emotional States, Navigating Discomfort, Fostering Connection and Togetherness, Expanding Thinking and New Insight, Exploring and Connecting with Identity, and A Space for Self-Expression. GETs and their subthemes are visually represented in Figure 4.1. GETs, subthemes, and their prevalence across participants' accounts are represented in Table 4.2.

As part of a dynamic and iterative analytic process, the researcher considered the overlap between GETs and how best to represent the convergences and divergences between participants' accounts. Specifically, it was deliberated whether Nurturing Positive Emotional States and Navigating Discomfort should be retained as distinctive GETs, since emotional responses underpin many of the other established GETs. For example, as part of A Space for Self-Expression, some participants found sharing with their peers to be cathartic and positive, whereas others experienced feelings of uncertainty and discomfort. However, the prevalence of these experiences throughout participants' accounts means that they are recognised separately as distinctive experiences. This aligns with the researcher's interpretivist epistemology, acknowledging that each participant experiences the Tree of Life differently and may encounter differing emotional responses depending on their unique positionality. Figure 4.1 visually represents this, using a dotted line to show the interconnected nature of GETs.

Figure 4.1

*Group Experiential Themes (**Bold Title Case**) and Associated Subthemes (Title Case)*

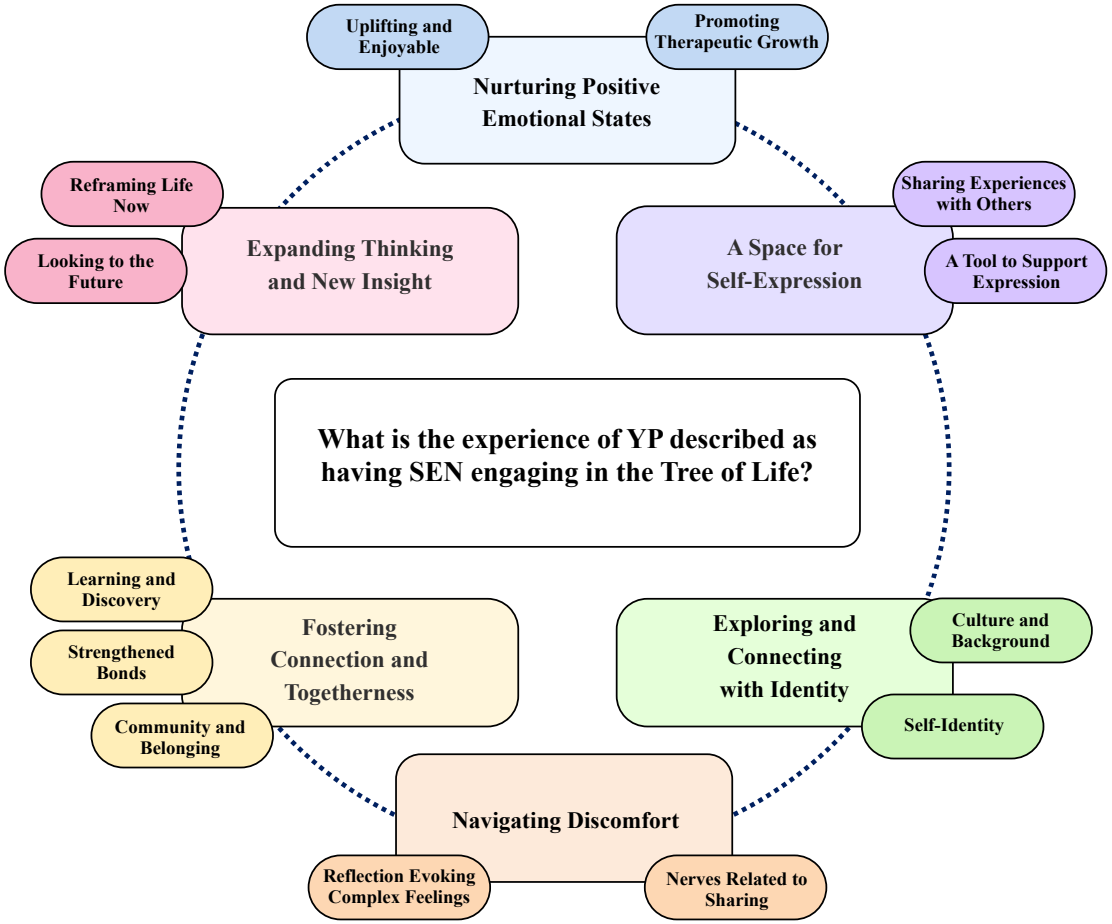


Table 4.2

Group Experiential Themes, Subthemes, and Prevalence Across Participants' Accounts

Group Experiential Theme	Subthemes	Participants
Nurturing Positive Emotional States	Uplifting and Enjoyable	Elena, Zara, Priya, Kayleigh
	Promoting Therapeutic Growth	Elena, Zara, Kayleigh
Navigating Discomfort	Reflection Evoking Complex Feelings	Elena, Zara, Priya, Kayleigh
	Nerves Related to Sharing	Elena, Zara, Kayleigh
Fostering Connection and Togetherness	Learning and Discovery	Elena, Zara, Priya, Kayleigh
	Strengthened Bonds	Elena, Zara, Priya, Kayleigh
	Community and Belonging	Elena, Zara, Kayleigh
Expanding Thinking and New Insight	Reframing Life Now	Elena, Zara, Kayleigh
	Looking to the Future	Elena, Zara, Priya
Exploring and Connecting with Identity	Self-Identity	Elena, Zara, Priya, Kayleigh
	Culture and Background	Zara, Priya, Kayleigh
A Space for Self-Expression	A Tool to Support Expression	Zara, Priya, Kayleigh
	Sharing Experiences with Others	Elena, Zara, Kayleigh

4.3.1. Nurturing Positive Emotional States

For all participants, the Tree of Life was interpreted to nurture positive emotional states. This is a distinctive, standalone GET, despite being interconnected with other themes. Whilst participants were interpreted to encounter positive emotional states as a result of their experiences, such as when connecting with peers, these occurrences were context-specific and varied depending on participants' positionality and engagement. As such, this GET presents the experiencing positive emotional states as a distinctive feature of participants' accounts which is experienced differently by each individual.

This GET is named to represent the journey of participants moving from neutrality or even negativity towards positive emotion. This GET encompasses two subthemes, demonstrating the different ways in which this was experienced by participants: Uplifting and Enjoyable and Promoting Therapeutic Growth.

Uplifting and Enjoyable. The Tree of Life was interpreted to be an uplifting and enjoyable experience across all participants' datasets. This subtheme is named to capture participants' converging experience of the Tree of Life as a source of fun, happiness, and pride. Elena and Zara openly shared their enjoyment and appreciation for the experience:

> It was really fun. I enjoyed it and I feel like I got to know more about my classmates that I wouldn't have known if we hadn't done this. I really enjoyed it. (Elena, p. 1)

> … it was actually so much fun, I actually loved it. (Zara, p. 36)

Here, both participants appear to perceive the Tree of Life as an overwhelmingly positive experience, using the intensifiers "really" and "so" to emphasise their enjoyment. Specifically, Elena seems to value the social element of the group and learning about her peers, suggesting that her enjoyment was marked by connection with others.

For Kayleigh, the experience being fun and enjoyable seemed to support her engagement in the process:

> … just being able to share my stuff, and just sit there and have a laugh. (Kayleigh, p. 31)

Kayleigh's use of "have a laugh" suggests that the atmosphere was comfortable enough to participate in light-hearted interactions with her peers, creating a safe space and facilitating her engagement in the process. Kayleigh's description of being able to "just sit there" was interpreted as further representing the relaxed, low-demand group atmosphere, sitting in contrast to typical classroom-based activities which may be characterised by formality and sitting quietly.

Across accounts, it was interpreted that participants experienced feelings of achievement and pride related to the Tree of Life:

> I was happy. I went straight home and showed my mum [the certificate] … I didn't stop talking about it ever since we started it. (Kayleigh, p. 19)

Kayleigh's quote is interpreted as demonstrating a sense of enjoyment and accomplishment. She appears enthusiastic and excited about participating and receiving her certificate, wanting to share it with her family. There is a sense that she has achieved something by engaging in this process and gets a feeling of satisfaction from sharing her certificate with important people.

Zara was also interpreted as experiencing pride whilst receiving positive feedback from her peers:

> Oh my gosh, I actually felt so happy because someone said I'm amazing and I'm so smart, and I got so happy. (Zara, p. 34)

> I literally was like oh that is actually, like, so sweet of them. I was like wanting to jump for joy in the middle of the class. (Zara, p. 35)

Here, Zara's enjoyment appeared to derive from the affirming comments of her peers, and her repeated use of "so happy" is interpreted as communicating the intensity of her positive feeling. Zara uses the exclamatory phrase "oh my gosh" and the figurative phrase "jump for joy", creating a sense that these positive experiences are unexpected or unusual in the context of the group.

Similarly, Priya described experiencing pride when reflecting on her hopes and dreams:

> Priya: Proud… because I imagine, was my grandpa and my grandfather, and he was wish I would be, like, a doctor… (Priya, p. 6)

Priya's use of the word "imagine" suggests that she is engaging in a reflective process and visualising the impact of her hopes and dreams on important people. Priya is interpreted as wanting to honour the wishes of her family and deriving satisfaction from thinking about the possibilities for her future.

It was interpreted that participants highly valued the enjoyable nature of the experience, with Kayleigh expressing a preference for the Tree of Life to continue:

> I want to do it again [laughs]. I want, like, double trees. (Kayleigh, p. 33)

Promoting Therapeutic Growth. Three participants were interpreted as experiencing therapeutic growth as part of the Tree of Life, characterised by cathartic release, calmness, and emotional support. For Elena, the experience promoted therapeutic growth directly and noticeably:

> This honestly really helped my mental health, and I really liked it. (Elena, p. 27)

Here, Elena explicitly identifies the Tree of Life as having had a supportive and therapeutic impact. The term "mental health" is interpreted to represent Elena's conceptualisation of wellbeing, demonstrating her awareness of her internal experiences and emotional state. Furthermore, Elena's use of the word "helped" emphasises the beneficial, transformative nature of the Tree of Life, which encouraged her to think "about how [she] can do things" (Elena, p. 28). There is a sense that the Tree of Life raised Elena's awareness of her strengths, promoting resilience, capability, and self-esteem.

Zara seemed to similarly experience this therapeutic growth, describing a shift in her coping mechanisms and emotional expression:

> It helped me with my emotions because, like, when I get like sad, I can just put it on there. That was nice. (Zara, p. 21)

Zara appears to attribute positive change in her emotional state to her engagement in the Tree of Life. It is interpreted that the Tree of Life visual acted as an outlet for her emotions, providing her with a space to "put it on" and unload complex feelings. Throughout her interview, Zara continues to describe the activity as a space for sharing previously unexpressed emotions:

> If I write something it made me like calm and not, like, on my chest if like I just had, like, all the things coming up and it like piles up. (Zara, p. 7)

Here, Zara appears to experience a cathartic process of emotional expression. She uses imagery of problems being removed from her chest, suggesting that her feelings had built up over time, leaving her feeling oppressed and suffocated. There is a sense that this emotional release helped Zara to feel lighter, happier, and less overwhelmed. This emotional release seemed to be an important aspect of Zara's experience, with her repeating that she felt "relief" at multiple points in her interview (Zara, p. 25, p. 28). It is interpreted that the Tree of Life provided Zara with a safe space to share emotions that she had previously felt unable to discuss, emphasising her sense of emotional security within the group.

Kayleigh seemed to notice therapeutic growth in the whole group context, with the Tree of Life positively affecting her peers and classroom dynamics:

> I feel like everyone was just there, like happy, like nobody, like everyone… Obviously we always have a laugh and that, but I feel like everyone was just themselves. I don't know how to explain it. (Kayleigh, p. 23)

Here, Kayleigh's description seems to represent an intangible shift from "[having] a laugh" (Kayleigh, p. 31) to engaging with the Tree of Life on a deeper level. The phrase "everyone was just themselves" is interpreted as demonstrating therapeutic growth, with group members engaging in the process authentically, contrasting their usual more humorous interactions. This is interpreted to represent the development of a psychologically safe group environment, with members feeling able to connect with each other more intimately.

Although the therapeutic process was largely interpreted to be positive, it is recognised that participants experienced a complex interplay of emotions. For Elena, the experience seemed to be characterised by mixed feelings:

> Um, I felt a little sad because I have lost some of the things. But I also felt, uh, really, uh, happy and connected with my inner self. (Elena, p. 6)

Here, Elena seems to reflect on the cathartic nature of the experience. Elena states "I have lost", creating a sense that she continues to be emotionally affected by the absences in her life and feels as though she is without something important to her. It is interpreted that the Tree of Life has provided Elena with space to reflect on what matters to her, even if those things exist only in her past. Despite her processing feelings of grief, there is a sense that Elena has navigated this growth to develop a greater understanding of who she is at her core.

4.3.2. Navigating Discomfort

All participants were interpreted to experience discomfort during the Tree of Life. This theme is named to reflect the journey of participants in understanding, coping with, and moving through their discomfort. This GET was divided into two subthemes: Reflection Evoking Complex Feelings and Nerves Related to Sharing. Each participant experienced discomfort related to different aspects of the Tree of Life, influenced by their unique understanding, prior experiences, and positionality. As such, the theme of navigating discomfort recurs throughout this chapter related to other GETs.

Reflection Evoking Complex Feelings. Across all participants' datasets, it was interpreted that the process of reflecting on their past evoked complex feelings. The term 'complex feelings' serves as a broad descriptor to capture the breadth of participants' emotional experiences, including anxiety, sadness, and confusion. Such feelings arose for Priya whilst reflecting on challenging times during the Storms of Life:

> Interviewer: How did it feel to think about the difficult times in your life?
> Priya: Scared. (Priya, p. 8)

In her quotation, Priya seems to be recalling the raw and powerful emotions associated with the challenging times in her life. Priya's one-word answer creates a sense that she does not wish to share more about this, further eliciting a sense that the reflective process is uncomfortable.

Elena was also interpreted as recalling difficult memories:

> Interviewer: how did it make you feel thinking about those things during the storms?
> Elena: Really sad. Like [YouTuber] released a video when he said he was going to quit and I did find that and I'm not the kind of person that would, um, usually cry over anything really. I felt really sad when it happened. (Elena, p. 18)

There is a sense that recalling her storms had a significant emotional impact for Elena. It is interpreted that the Tree of Life evoked profoundly challenging memories for Elena, with her simple phrase "really sad" emphasising her grief at having lost something precious to her. Her suggestion that she would not "usually cry over anything" implies that this particular experience has impacted her deeply. There is also a sense that experiencing such intensity of feeling is uncomfortable for Elena, as it sits in contrast to the beliefs she holds about "the kind of person" she is and how she typically expresses emotion.

Similarly, for Zara, the Tree of Life process prompted her to reflect on painful memories:

> … my storms are, like, really deep and they're like really sad and stuff, because, like, a lot of people passed away and all that. (Zara, p. 10)

> I felt bad for myself because I went through it. (Zara, p. 28).

Here, Zara acknowledges the personal losses she has suffered in the past, with the phrase "really deep" highlighting how profoundly these experiences have impacted her. There is a sense that the Tree of Life process has brought her to revisit difficult memories and re-experience the associated negative emotions. Furthermore, Zara acknowledges that she "felt bad" for herself because she "went through it". It is interpreted that the Tree of Life provided a safe space for Zara to reflect on and validate her emotions, developing a compassionate response towards her past self.

Contrastingly, Kayleigh appeared to feel detached from her past experiences and background:

> Because I don't really talk about my background that much. So, it's like… to sit there and then, like, think of it, because you don't really remember anything from your childhood. Which is really weird. Because you're just a busy little kid and then you grow up and then, you remember when you look at pictures but it's like, its gone. Just vanished. (Kayleigh, p. 2)

Here, Kayleigh reflects on what it was like "to sit there and then, like, think of it", suggesting that thinking about her past was an unnatural or unusual process. There is a sense that Kayleigh felt the reflective nature of the process was uncomfortable and almost imposed upon her as part of the activity. This appeared to have implications for how safe Kayleigh felt to engage with the process, as she later reflected that she would "probably add a bit more to my roots because I feel like I didn't really put everything there" (Kayleigh, p. 11).

Furthermore, Kayleigh is interpreted as feeling disconnected from her past. She describes the realisation that she cannot recall her childhood as "really weird", highlighting this as an unsettling and strange moment. Her short phrases "gone. Just vanished" emphasise her dismay at the loss of memory and the resulting sense of unease. Kayleigh is also interpreted as feeling a sense of loss; she recognises that her childhood memories exist in pictures, but she cannot access her past without the use of visual prompts.

Nerves Related to Sharing. As part of the Tree of Life, participants were encouraged to talk about their lives with peers. Three participants were interpreted as experiencing discomfort associated with this interpersonal sharing. For Kayleigh, it was interpreted that the experience of sharing was marked by a fear of judgement from her peers:

> It was a bit more like, scarier, because like, obviously, you don't know if they are going to judge you or not. (Kayleigh, p. 14)

Here, Kayleigh's concern that she may be judged alludes to the presence of a social pressure within the group. This is reinforced by her use of the word "obviously", which suggests that judgement from peers is normal and expected. Kayleigh appears to find the pressure of

sharing to be intimidating and is concerned about the unpredictable impact of sharing on her reputation. It is interpreted that Kayleigh experienced feelings of vulnerability when sharing her tree and had to overcome her fear to do so.

Elena also appeared to experience concerns around her peers' reactions to her sharing:

> It's hard to find the right words. Yeah. But I don't really talk about it because I feel like, cause like some people might not want to listen and I don't want… If they are not going to listen, then I don't see the point in telling them. (Elena, p. 19)

Within this excerpt, Elena seems to experience nerves related to sharing. Elena's view that it is "hard to find the right words" suggests that verbalising her emotions is unusual and that sharing her experiences is out of the ordinary. Elena is interpreted as experiencing a sense of vulnerability, marked by her concern that other people might reject her efforts to share. Elena seems to worry that her peers would not validate her feelings or care about her, and therefore does not tend to share as a form of protective mechanism.

Zara similarly appeared to step outside of her comfort zone whilst sharing her tree:

> I believed in myself I could do it because like, I knew, like, I could do this because I usually spoke about stuff with my friends, and they are no different from my classmates. (Zara, p. 23)

Here, Zara seems to suggest that self-belief was a key factor supporting her to discuss her feelings with the group. As such, it is interpreted that, for Zara, sharing is something that needs to be overcome because it is nerve-wracking or intimidating. Furthermore, Zara notes that she typically speaks about personal matters with her friends. There is a sense that sharing is typically an activity reserved for those closest to her, and she is rationalising her fears about sharing by reasoning that her classmates are "no different".

4.3.3. Fostering Connection and Togetherness

Across all four participants' accounts, it was interpreted that a sense of connection and togetherness developed between group members during the Tree of Life. Each participant seemed to have developed stronger social connections and a greater understanding of their

peers. This was characterised by the following subthemes: Learning and Discovery, Strengthened Bonds, and Community and Belonging.

Learning and Discovery. For all participants, there was a strong sense that they had developed knowledge and understanding of their peers as part of the Tree of Life experience. This subtheme is named to highlight the often-surprising and transformative nature of learning for nurturing participants' relationships. For Zara, the Tree of Life seemed to present a novel opportunity to learn about her classmates:

> The group was, like, very like, talkative and all that, but they have like, never really spoken about their backgrounds before. But when it came to the tree, like, they spoke about it, they be so honest about it and what they did. And I felt, I actually felt, like, happy because they're not lying about it… I was like, wow, I didn't really know anything like that, and I am so proud of them. (Zara, p. 31)

Whilst Zara describes her class as "talkative", she notes they have "never really spoken about their backgrounds before". It is interpreted that the Tree of Life helped the group to share about themselves on a deeper level, moving from social chat to learning about each other's personal histories. Furthermore, Zara's use of "wow" and "I am so proud of them" highlights the unexpectedness of the experience, suggesting that sharing is out of the ordinary and took courage. There is a sense that the Tree of Life supported group members to share their authentic selves by creating a space where sharing is expected and encouraged.

This experience was echoed by Kayleigh, who seemed similarly taken aback to learn more about her classmates:

> I felt happy. Because like, obviously, you see everybody's and when everyone shared them, they show things that you probably, that you would never hear a day in your life. So, yeah, got to know my class more. (Kayleigh, p. 15)

Kayleigh's quotation seems to convey her pleasant surprise at the unexpected information shared by group members. Kayleigh notes her disbelief at the depth of sharing, noting that she would "never hear" such personal information typically. Kayleigh's use of the word "show" creates a sense that her peers have revealed something to her, suggesting that the

experience fostered a kind of intimacy, and highlighting the significance of personal disclosures. Kayleigh credits this with helping her to get to know her peers, suggesting that learning about each other drew the group together.

Likewise, Elena also appeared to value the opportunity to expand her understanding of her peers:

> Before, I only knew that they were in the same set as me and they have similar learning knowledge as me, but, um, now I know a lot more about their background and it's not too different to mine. (Elena, p. 4)

Here, there is a sense that Elena's understanding of the group has evolved, with time markers "before" and "now" highlighting the transformative nature of the process. Prior to the experience, it seems as though Elena's only knowledge of her peers was that they also received an adapted curriculum. Elena's new understanding appears to represent a revised group identity that is characterised by peers who have rich pasts and experiences in common.

In Priya's interview, there was a sense that she had valued learning new information about her peers:

> India is my culture. Here like some Christians they just have, like, culture. Kayleigh is like Christian, she said doesn't have culture because we are like English people. (Priya, p. 2)

In this excerpt, Priya seems to reflect on her own culture, linking this with her new learning about Kayleigh's background. It was interpreted that learning more about Kayleigh has broadened Priya's understanding of what culture might mean for others. There is also a sense that Priya and Kayleigh have bonded over comparing and contrasting their cultural experiences, creating a deeper understanding of each other.

Strengthened Bonds. Another significant subtheme was the experience of developing strengthened bonds, which was evident across all participants' interviews. This included deeper levels of empathy, shifts in social dynamics, and more positive perceptions of peers. Elena's relationships within the group seemed to be strengthened by the Tree of Life:

> We used to only see each other as, um, classmates. Now, I feel like most of us see each other as, um, much closer friends. (Elena, p. 15).

Elena's shift in language from "classmates" to "much closer friends" appears to reflect a shift from previously connecting on a superficial level, with their connection being solely based on mutual group membership. In particular, "much closer friends" creates a sense that their relationships are now characterised by warmth, supportiveness, and understanding.

In Priya's account, there is a sense that she has developed respect towards her peers:

> I think proud. I think, um, could be a little bit, um, cause of their trees. Some people just want to tell those like secret things. (Priya, p. 7)

Here, Priya describes her feelings of pride whilst watching her peers share their trees, with her use of "secret" suggesting that she views this experience as highly personal. This is interpreted as Priya feeling that trust has developed between her and her peers, and that the group is now a safer space for connecting with each other.

Similarly, it was interpreted that Zara also perceived trust building within the group:

> Yeah, because some of the people, yeah, have like been nicer and like very respectful and that. Because, um, usually they spread things around, but they don't really now. (Zara, p. 20)

Zara's quotation appears to represent a considerable shift in group dynamics. There is a sense that open discussions and the sharing of experiences has developed relationships within the group. It is interpreted that the group has developed mutual respect, empathy, and a newfound consideration for the privacy of group members. Zara seems to feel that the group is now a safe space for sharing personal information, suggesting that these relationships are now characterised by trust.

Kayleigh was interpreted as experiencing this subtheme slightly differently, exemplifying the broader impact of strengthening relationships.

> And like, I got to know you better and, like, [teacher] and got to know my whole class better. (Kayleigh, p. 30)

For Kayleigh, there seems to be value in growing closer with adults in school as well as peers. It is interpreted that Kayleigh views adults as important to her support network and finds a sense of security in building social capital with those in proximity to her.

Elena is interpreted as experiencing an unexpected shift in her perception of relationships:

> I love how much, how understanding the group was and how keen they were to learn more about me. I wasn't honestly expecting that. Normally, I am more of a quiet person and if I wish to talk with anyone or do anything with anyone, I'll let them usually talk more about themselves because um, I don't normally talk about myself that much. And, um, realising that people do want to listen has really changed my mind about my class. (Elena, p. 24)

Within this excerpt, Elena appears to describe a transformation in her thinking about relationships with her peers. Elena's use of phrases such as "I wasn't honestly expecting that" and "changed my mind" evoke a sense that the group challenged and transformed Elena's view of her peers and her expectations of how other people relate to her. Moreover, Elena uses positive language such as "love", conveying her positive affect towards the group, and "how keen they were", suggesting that she was surprised about her classmates' enthusiasm for supporting her. Elena is interpreted as having new, more positive views on her relationships with peers, linking to the Expanding Thinking and New Insight GET.

Community and Belonging. The final subtheme for this GET highlights the development of community and belonging for the group, which was interpreted to be experienced by Elena, Zara, and Kayleigh. This was characterised by a sense of group membership, peer acceptance, and affinity with others. For Elena, it seemed as though connecting with her peers had strengthened her sense of group membership.

> It felt like, um, I'm part of a, it, like before I did feel like I was part of a community, but I feel much, um, closer to it than I did before. (Elena, p. 3)

Here, Elena appears to reflect on the evolving group dynamics since the Tree of Life. Initially, there is a sense that she recognises her role within the community, but her description of being merely "part of" the group seems to imply detachment and distance rather than inclusion. Contrastingly, after the Tree of Life, Elena described being "much closer" to the community, appearing to feel a more intimate connection with her peers. Based on this, it is interpreted that the Tree of Life is a transformative process which has fostered stronger bonds between Elena and her classmates. There is a sense that this community has transitioned from being defined by proximity and a shared classroom space to a sense of belonging and more meaningful relationships.

For Kayleigh, a sense of belonging and group identity seemed to develop through the sharing of personal histories:

> I feel like it just brought everyone together and we saw how similar some people actually are. And, like, because obviously we don't have conversations about just us and it showed that everyone has similarities. (Kayleigh, p. 25)

> … to me it feels like we are actually similar and like we actually are a community. Because we are going to be in the same group for two years and a half now. (Kayleigh, p. 27)

In these excerpts, Kayleigh credits learning more about her peers with creating a sense of group cohesion. It is interpreted that the group bonded over their shared traits for the first time, exploring previously unseen similarities. Kayleigh's use of "obviously" creates a sense that person-centred conversations do not arise naturally and are not part of the group's normal social interactions. It seems that the Tree of Life gave permission for the class to share their interests and histories, unaffected by the usual social conventions.

In the second quotation, Kayleigh's repetition of the word "actually" creates a sense that the developed feeling of community is unexpected. It is interpreted that she has transitioned from passively acknowledging their community status to now believing and embracing it. Furthermore, Kayleigh appearing to consider what lies ahead for the group in the coming years of GCSEs and leaving school. It seems that her newly-realised belonging within the

community has fostered a sense of emotional security, with her feeling safe to think about the future and consider what challenges lie ahead.

Zara also appears to value the safety offered by a developed sense of community and belonging:

> Like, it just feels nice when you feel like a part of a community that can literally talk to you and speak to you all the time if you want them to speak to you. (Zara, p. 18)

Zara appears to view acceptance, caring for one another, and reciprocal relationships as key elements of community. It is interpreted that the Tree of Life has nurtured her sense of belonging within the group, leading to greater awareness of her support network and subsequent feelings of security and ease.

4.3.4. Expanding Thinking and New Insight

It was interpreted that all participants experienced broadened perspectives and new awareness during the Tree of Life. This was characterised by participants developing their perspectives, experiencing new empathy for others, and changing their views on situations throughout their lives. Initially, this was not considered to be a distinctive GET, since participants may have experienced reframed perspectives as part of other GETs. For example, Elena reported that learning about her peers had "changed [her] mind" (Elena, p. 24) about her class, which was captured as part of the Fostering Connection and Togetherness GET. However, this GET was retained as separate to represent divergences in how participants experienced changed thinking.

This GET featured two subthemes: Reframing Life Now and Looking to the Future.

Reframing Life Now. The Tree of Life appeared to encourage shifted thinking around the present for three participants. For Elena, it seemed that reflection during her fruits resulted in reframed perspectives about her family:

> I never really thought my dad actually did… did anything. Like, he's my dad and, I, I know, he did give me some things, but I never realised that he had, um, he has learned me

> to, he has taught me to draw, um, until I actually did that, I, that's when I realised. (Elena, p. 9)

For Elena, reflecting on what her dad had given to her seemed to result in a greater appreciation for his role in her life. Initially, she reveals her previous thinking that he never "actually did anything". This phrase suggests that Elena views her dad's contribution as passive, implying that he was not seen to actively support her through life. Elena is interpreted as experiencing an increased appreciation for her dad's role, acknowledging that he nurtured her creative skills and passion for art. Elena appears to pinpoint the Tree of Life activity as a catalyst for this new perspective, commenting "that's when I realised". Furthermore, throughout this quotation, Elena's sentence structure creates a sense that she is hesitant and unsure whether to share. This is interpreted as demonstrating the emotional significance of the process for Elena, illuminating unexpected insights into her relationships that she will now need to navigate.

Kayleigh was similarly interpreted as having changed perspectives on her relationships:

> Interviewer: Is there anything about your tree that surprised you?
> Kayleigh: Probably how much, how like half the people moved throughout the whole tree. Because obviously my mum and dad and sisters are at the roots and then they are at the leaves and fruits as well, in different ways. (Kayleigh, p. 13)

Here, there is a sense that visually mapping her important people helped Kayleigh to reflect on her relationships in novel ways. It is interpreted that the Tree of Life process provided her with a new lens to consider who is important to her and what they contribute to her life. This alternative perspective seems to have surprised her, creating a newfound appreciation for the levels of support she receives from her family.

For Zara, there is a sense that connecting with her peers has shifted her understanding of how to seek support:

> They were all so different. It was interesting. They were like, um, I just talk to my friends and see like what they can help me with…. So, I feel like that's maybe a good way to cope

> with your stuff and or like, ask your therapist and all that. And I thought, like, I will talk more now. (Zara, p. 29)

Zara's description of her peers' experiences as "interesting" and "all so different" creates a sense that she is fascinated by the diversity of perspectives and is encountering novel ideas. Zara appears to contemplate her newly-acquired perspectives aloud, reflecting "I feel like that's maybe a good way to cope". It is interpreted that Zara is exploring a new idea here, with language such as "I feel like" and "maybe" illustrating her reflective thought process. Zara eventually seems to demonstrate commitment to change and the internalisation of her new perspective, stating her intent to "talk more now".

Similarly, it was interpreted that Elena was more open to the idea of sharing with others following the group:

> Honestly, before this, I didn't want to open up because I thought people, I like drawing and um I kind, I also do like anime and stuff like that. People might call me weird and stuff like that. And then, after this, I realised that that was just something that, that just happens in movies. It's not real, right? (Elena, p. 27)

There is a sense that Elena was previously too afraid to be vulnerable with her peers for fear that she might be deemed "weird" – a word carrying social weight and an implication of judgement. However, it is interpreted that the group provided an inclusive space in which her peers were accepting and openly discussed their own interests. Elena seems to have developed a new confidence, supporting her feelings of safety within the group, and a reduced concern for how others will react to her interests.

Looking to the Future. Elena, Zara, and Priya were all interpreted to experience different thinking around their future, including their hopes and dreams. For Elena, there was a sense that this was confusing and overwhelming:

> Um, I realised I have a bunch of backup plans… And I, and I do not want to, I do not know what I want to be anymore… I just realised how many things I want to do and now I'm just lost. (Elena, p. 14)

Within this quotation, Elena is interpreted as feeling overwhelmed and confused about the possibilities ahead of her. Her use of "realised" seems to describe a process of discovery and change, resulting in an overwhelming epiphany about "how many things" she could do in the future. Elena describes feeling "lost", implying that she has experienced a shift from confidence to uncertainty, lacking direction, and feeling the pressure of decision-making. Whilst the process has enabled her to reflect on potential opportunities, she appears to feel overwhelmed at the thought of navigating her future.

This experienced seemed to be shared by Priya who similarly expressed feeling confused:

> I have like so many choices, like the thing one should be, and I am getting a little confused up here. (Priya, p. 1)

This appears to be a converging experience for Elena and Priya, who both seem to feel under pressure to decide "the thing one should be". Priya's quotation reflects a sense of overwhelm when considering her options and feeling pressure to select one path.

Contrastingly, for Zara, producing a visual tree seemed to provide focus for her hopes and dreams:

> I felt amazing because I felt like, because I love being like, learning about, I love learning about the brain and how people take care of the brain and take care of people. It just feels like calming to me, and I just love it. Like one day I wish I can just like look at it all and be like oh that's me now. (Zara, p. 12)

Although Zara had previously known that she would like to be a neurologist, the Tree of Life seemingly helped her to understand the values of caring and service associated with her goal. It is interpreted that Zara gained new understanding of herself, including a deeper insight into her ambitions and beliefs. Furthermore, there was a sense that visually representing information on her Tree of Life helped Zara to become more focused on her hopes and dreams. She shares that she would like to look at her Tree of Life "one day", appearing to value it as an important marker of her future success.

4.3.5. Exploring and Connecting with Identity

Exploring and connecting with identity was interpreted as a converging experience in all four participants' interviews. This exploration of identity seemed to be deeply existential, and related to participants' self-perception, personal qualities, and group membership. This GET was divided two subthemes: Self-Identity and Culture and Background.

Self-Identity. All four participants were interpreted as experiencing a deeper connection with themselves during the Tree of Life. There was a sense that self-reflection was out of the ordinary for participants, and many of their quotations reflected the novelty of this experience. For example, Elena shared:

> I enjoyed it and somehow, I got to know more about myself too. I've never really thought that deep about myself. I barely just realised all of it now… so I enjoyed that too. (Elena, p. 5)

Here, Elena is interpreted as surprised that she has learnt more about herself, with "somehow" indicating that this was an unexpected consequence of engaging in the Tree of Life. Elena shares that the process encouraged her to think about herself in greater depth than ever before, and there is a sense that this was a profound experience for her. Elena seems to view self-reflection positively, and it appears that the process has helped her to appreciate the depth of her character and nurtured her self-esteem. It seems that Elena has only scratched the surface of self-exploration, with her suggestion that she has "barely just realised all of it" suggesting that self-learning and growth will be an ongoing process.

It appears that self-reflection also supported Zara to connect with her strengths on a deeper level:

> It actually felt nice because I had like, some talents in me that, and some skills, that I didn't really think I would have. Like I can literally dance, I can literally, like, sing. Not as good at singing but, like, I'm, like, I'm really good at, like, English. (Zara, p. 8)

For Zara, the power of connecting with previously unexplored strengths is apparent. Her repetition of "actually" and "literally" mark her enthusiasm at having discovered new strengths, creating a sense that this is an affirming and positive experience for her. Zara

appears to have moved from not recognising her strengths to feeling strongly that these qualities are assets for her. It is interpreted that a greater connection with her personal strengths has been empowering for Zara, and it appears as though her self-esteem has been enhanced.

The strengths-based focus of the Tree of Life was also interpreted as a notable experience for Priya and Kayleigh. Both participants focused on what it was like for classmates to comment on their strengths:

> Um, they say I always be kind with my friends and my family and my teacher too. And, uh, sharing with my friends the things, uh and like, what it should be like that, and sharing with my friends everything. And, uh, they say you are nice and something. (Priya, p. 2)

> I think it helped when we got people to write them down because obviously it's hard to think about what are you good at… and because its, obviously, your point of view of yourself is different than other people's. So, it was a bit easier when some people say it about you. (Kayleigh, p. 6)

For Priya, there is a sense that hearing the groups' feedback has been a positive and validating experience. She seems to repeat her peers' comments, creating a sense that she has internalised their views and considers kindness and generosity as her personal strengths.

Similarly, Kayleigh's connection with herself seems to have been supported by her social network. She appears to recognise that her sense of self is biased, and there is a sense that she typically experiences negative thoughts about her abilities. It is interpreted that the group-based process is affirming, helping her to overcome her preconceptions and generate a more accurate image of herself.

For Zara, reflecting on her individuality seemed to be an overwhelmingly positive experience:

> I actually felt lucky because I feel like I'm special and unique. Like other people can't have the stuff I do. And I feel, when I'm like, I feel so much happier when I'm unique. (Zara, p. 16)

Here, Zara appears to value her personal characteristics, feeling as though they set her apart from others. Zara seems to perceive a social value in being "unique" and not comparable to others, suggesting that she is proud of herself and what makes her special. There is a sense that the Tree of Life visual helped Zara to map her unique qualities and showcase her individuality. This seems to help her appreciate what she has and positively connect with her identity.

Culture and Background. All four participants shared their experiences of connecting with their culture and background during the Tree of Life. It was interpreted that reflecting on their roots resulted in a greater understanding of and appreciation for their personal histories. For example, Zara shared:

> Okay, so like, being, like, part of, like, Pakistan and all that. I just love the culture and all that. I like how the weddings are, and like I felt like peaceful drawing it. I don't know how to explain it, but it was very calming to talk about my background and where I came from. (Zara, p. 4)

In this quotation, it is interpreted that the Tree of Life gave Zara the space to connect with her cultural identity. She seems to experience pride when reflecting on positive memories associated with her culture, such as celebrations and visiting family. It is interpreted that Zara values the expressive nature of the Tree of Life, sharing her enthusiasm for drawing and visually representing her background. She also highlights the "calming" and "peaceful" nature of the process, suggesting that it helped her to connect with her valued memories in a safe and comforting way. It seems that talking about her background is a novel experience for Zara, with a sense that she may not have opportunities to positively explore her background often.

Similarly, Elena appeared to express her appreciation for the roots, noting the opportunity for self-reflection as enjoyable:

> The roots, um, really helped me reflect on my past, and I enjoyed it. (Elena, p. 22)

Here, it is interpreted that the structured Tree of Life activity facilitated Elena's thinking around different aspects of her background. Her use of "reflect" creates the sense that the roots have supported her to contemplate her personal experiences in depth.

For Priya and Zara, there was a sense that the Tree of Life supported them to reflect on their multicultural backgrounds:

> I respect my culture and like things, where I born, I have two. One is, I have Italian and one is Indian. And like Italy and India. Because my parents are born in India, my brother born in India, and my grandparents born in India too. But to me and my little sisters, my sister is three years old, she born in here in England. I was born in Italy. (Priya, p. 3)

> Yeah, so like, when I was, like, I was born in the UK though, but, like, when I was drawing it, I felt like I was part of something, included in something. It felt really nice to be. (Zara, p. 5)

Here, Priya discusses how important it is to appreciate and observe her culture. Priya seems to be reflecting on her multifaceted identity and exploring her family's backgrounds as well as her own. It appears that the Tree of Life helped her to honour her culture, providing her with visual means of mapping her rich background and identity.

Similarly, throughout her interview, Zara was interpreted as being proud of her Pakistani heritage. Here, her use of "though" highlights a possible tension in her self-identity, and there is a sense that she feels disconnected from her heritage because of where she was born. It is interpreted that the Tree of Life illustration supported Zara to visually represent her multicultural identity, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion in her culture.

For Kayleigh, the Tree of Life appeared to connect her with aspects of her background for the first time:

> Yeah. I feel like I didn't know half of that stuff about me. Like, when, I only, I didn't know I was, like, I think my mum said a quarter Welsh. (Kayleigh, p. 29)

It is interpreted that the Tree of Life process has encouraged Kayleigh to learn more about her background by prompting thinking around her heritage. It seems as though Kayleigh has left the Tree of Life sessions with a desire to learn more about herself and has discovered new personal information as a result. Kayleigh reveals that she "didn't know half of that stuff", and there is a sense that she is surprised by the scale of new discoveries about herself. It appears that Kayleigh is still unsure about her identity, suggesting that she is still processing and coming to understand her background.

4.3.6. A Space for Self-Expression

A significant theme across all participants accounts was the experience of self-expression. It was interpreted that the Tree of Life supported participants to visually capture their personal histories, express themselves to their peers, and authentically represent their identities. This is captured in two subthemes: A Tool to Support Expression and Sharing Experiences with Others.

A Tool to Support Expression. Zara, Priya, and Kayleigh were all interpreted as valuing the Tree of Life as a tool for self-expression. For Zara, there was a sense that the Tree of Life was a rewarding way to express her personal history:

> It was, like, really nice. I loved it so much, man. Like, it was so much fun talking about it and writing stuff on there and watching it grow. It felt so nice. (Zara, p. 25)

Here, it seems that Zara's enjoyment relates to creating the tree visual and witnessing it develop over the course of the sessions. There is a sense that she values the process of externalising her ideas, creatively expressing herself and watching as her story unfolds in front of her. This is interpreted as a rewarding experience for Zara, resulting in a sense of achievement and pride for what she has produced.

Furthermore, there is a sense that the Tree of Life visual supports Zara to express herself authentically:

> I put the truth on there and it felt nice. I'm not lying about my feelings because if I put, like, lies on there, it would not be me, it'd be someone else, so it felt really, because you have to talk about yourself, not somebody else. (Zara, p. 22)

Here, Zara seems to consider the Tree of Life an important tool for representing who she is. It is interpreted that Zara is personally invested in expressing herself through this visual, wanting to convey her identity accurately and truthfully. There is a sense that Zara values the chance to shine a light on her authentic self, possibly because opportunities to express her identity do not arise often.

Similarly, Priya seems to positively relate to the expressive and creative process:

> Interviewer: So how did it make you feel when you were drawing and writing about [your culture] on your tree?
> Priya: It make me feel happy. Yeah, happy. (Priya, p. 3)

Throughout her interview, Priya discusses her respect for her culture. In this quotation, there is a sense that illustrating her tree to express her identity has been a positive and validating experience for her. It is also interpreted that the visual, artistic nature of the process is enjoyable, as suggested by her repetition of "happy".

For Kayleigh, it was interpreted that the Tree of Life was a preferred and comfortable method of self-expression:

> Interviewer: What was it like to write things down?
> Kayleigh: Better than to talk about them… Um, cause I'm like, it's easier to write things down than to say it out loud. (Kayleigh, p. 4-5)

Kayleigh's use of "better" and "easier" creates a sense that she has previously had negative experiences of sharing her feelings aloud. It seems that the visual and written nature of the process is perceived as a safer method of self-expression than speaking to others. Furthermore, Kayleigh's language of "say it out loud" creates a sense of vulnerability, suggesting that talking is exposing and anxiety-provoking. It is interpreted that the Tree of Life provides a space and time to gather her thoughts, sharing in a more considered way with reduced social pressures.

Sharing Experiences with Others. Elena, Zara, and Kayleigh were each interpreted as experiencing the Tree of Life as a space to share with others. It seems that the Tree of Life supported participants to safely discuss their personal histories with the group. For Zara, there was initially a sense that sharing her storms placed her outside of her comfort zone:

> I didn't really tell anyone until I put it on there. Like, yeah, it felt like a relief to me. (Zara, p. 27)

In this quotation, there is a sense that sharing is not a typical experience for Zara. She highlights that she "didn't really tell anyone until" the Tree of Life, suggesting that she would not usually confide in those around her. There is a sense that Zara is more aware of the benefits of sharing now, with the cathartic process having supported her to offload emotional burdens.

Zara also reflects on the positive social impact of sharing with the group:

> It actually felt nice because like I can speak about some of what I went through and they could understand me and what I did to, like, do that and what happened to me when I did it. How I felt. (Zara, p. 3)

There is a sense that sharing has helped Zara to feel seen by her peers. She highlights that it "actually felt nice", suggesting that there was an emotional release associated with sharing "what [she] went through". It is interpreted that being vulnerable with her peers has supported Zara to feel understood, accepted, and empathised with.

Furthermore, the experience of sharing with others seemed to have a lasting impact for Elena:

> It helps me to be more open with people because usually if someone says, "how are you?" even though like I might be like a bit angry because, um, I just argue with [name] or [YouTuber] sent something out and I can't figure it out. Um, I would say oh yeah, I'm fine, there's nothing wrong… but next time I might say, um, no, I'm not fine. I'm mad because I just argued with my [name] or [YouTuber] released a random picture with, um, things, and no one gets what he is on about. I might open up to people instead of just keeping everything to myself. (Elena, p. 26)

Here, it is interpreted that the experience of sharing has helped Elena to see the value in speaking about her problems. There appears to be a tentative shift in Elena's communication style, with her use of "might" indicating that she feels hesitant about changing but sees the benefit of doing so. Her statement "I might open up to people" creates a sense that she is increasingly confident to share, embracing the vulnerability of being transparent with others and recognising the impact this could have on her emotional wellbeing. This contrasts her phrase "keeping everything to myself", which suggests that not sharing is burdensome. Whilst this experience could also fall under the Expanding Thinking and New Insights GET, it is included here to represent the long-lasting impact of sharing experiences with others.

For Kayleigh, it was interpreted that a safe space was needed to support her to share with others:

> [It helped] when we were in, like the separate groups instead of doing it as a whole class. So then, like, there's less interruptions and its, yeah, it is one teacher and just like five of us. Its way easier to talk like that than to be in a whole class. (Kayleigh, p. 16)

Kayleigh highlights how a smaller group supported her and others to share their Trees of Life. It is interpreted that "interruptions" disrupt the atmosphere of psychological safety required for self-expression and make it seem that the group is not emotionally-invested in the process. Kayleigh describes it being "way easier to talk" in a smaller group, highlighting her preferred dynamic for sharing. She compares this to the "whole class", creating a sense that speaking to a bigger group is intimidating. This highlights the importance of carefully managed group dynamics in enabling self-expression and sharing with others.

4.4. Summary of Findings

This chapter presented six interrelated GETs that characterised how participants experienced the Tree of Life: Nurturing Positive Emotional States, Navigating Discomfort, Fostering Connection and Togetherness, Expanding Thinking and New Insight, Exploring and Connecting with Identity, and A Space for Self-Expression. The findings highlighted similarities in how participants experienced the Tree of Life, such as creating deeper relationships with peers and expressing their identity. The analysis also revealed the

divergences in experiences of the Tree of Life, with each participant interpreted to feel different emotions throughout the process. In the following chapter, the findings are discussed in relation to psychological theory and existing research on the Tree of Life.

5. Discussion

5.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter will begin by summarising the findings of the research, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature and theory. It will compare the GETs in the current research to the thematic synthesis in Chapter Two, highlighting the ways in which the findings support and build upon the existing understanding of the experience of the Tree of Life. A methodological review will be conducted, assessing the strengths and limitations of the current study. The chapter considers the distinctive contribution of the research, as well as implications for practice and suggestions for future research. Finally, the chapter will present conclusions of the research.

5.2. Summary of Research

This research sought to answer the following research question: *what is the experience of YP described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life?* Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and IPA was used to explore participants' experiences of the Tree of Life. Individual PETs were produced for each participant, and cross-case analysis was completed, resulting in six GETs: Nurturing Positive Emotional States, Navigating Discomfort, Fostering Connection and Togetherness, Expanding Thinking and New Insight, Exploring and Connecting with Identity, and A Space for Self-Expression. In keeping with IPA's idiographic underpinnings, these GETs highlight the shared, converging experiences of participants engaging in the Tree of Life whilst also capturing the unique, diverging experiences in their experiential accounts (Smith et al, 2022).

5.3. Discussion of Findings

The following section will discuss the IPA findings in relation to existing literature and theory. Each GET and subtheme will be explored below to further support interpretation of participants' experiences in the Tree of Life. In line with the philosophical underpinnings of IPA and epistemological stance of the research, these findings are considered to represent participants' experiences through a double hermeneutic lens (Smith et al, 2022). Although the researcher strove to be reflexive and ensure interpretations were grounded in the data, the nature of IPA means findings will also reflect the researcher's own constructs and biases (Smith et al, 2022).

5.3.1. Nurturing Positive Emotional States

The Tree of Life was interpreted to nurture positive emotional states across all participants' experiential accounts. In line with existing research, participants were interpreted to experience immediate boosts to their emotional states, such as feelings of happiness, in addition to therapeutic outcomes, such as personal growth and healing (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Vitale et al, 2019). This GET was characterised by the subthemes Uplifting and Enjoyable and Promoting Therapeutic Growth.

In light of this GET, it could be interpreted that the Tree of Life supported participants' wellbeing. However, this research avoids drawing such broad conclusions in recognition that wellbeing is deeply personal and dependent on each participants' unique positionality and inner states. Instead, the findings highlight the Tree of Life as fostering positive emotion and moving participants towards more positive states, which may contribute to improved wellbeing.

Uplifting and Enjoyable. In line with existing literature, all participants were interpreted to find the Tree of Life uplifting and enjoyable, experiencing fun, joy, and a positive impact on their mood (Fleming et al, 2023; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Vitale et al, 2019). Participants were interpreted to enjoy the fun, laid-back nature of the Tree of Life, which allowed them to engage in a creative process in a relaxed social context. There is a sense that this experience sits in contrast to the activities they would usually complete in lessons, with a unique feature of the Tree of Life being the ability to "have a laugh" (Kayleigh, p. 31). This echoes previous research in which participants found the creative drawing process and celebration to be fun (Fleming et al, 2023; Vitale et al, 2019), and preferred the Tree of Life over more formal therapeutic approaches, such as CBT (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018). This provides insight into how enjoyment can foster engagement, motivation, and openness in the therapeutic context, as described by the BPS (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016).

Furthermore, participants seemed to enjoy receiving the certificate to celebrate their Tree of Life. Similar findings were evident in the literature review, with participants responding positively to the opportunity to celebrate their new stories (Fleming et al, 2023; Németh et al,

2024). From a narrative therapeutic perspective, this may represent the processes of outsider witnessing and literary means, in which stories are recognised by others and commemorated through celebration. As part of this, participants seem to experience a sense of appreciation and satisfaction at having their story and positive qualities recognised by important others. This may be a particularly significant experience for YP described as having SEN, who are more likely to experience low self-esteem (Bear et al, 2002; Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Taylor et al, 2010) and have fewer opportunities to experience academic successes (Bear et al, 2002). As such, the experience of being celebrated and feeling capable may be novel for this group, and it is interpreted that this further nurtured a sense of enjoyment. This highlights the importance of activities which allow YP described as having SEN to feel successful and capable in promoting feelings of happiness and confidence (Holding et al, 2023).

Promoting Therapeutic Growth. Consistent with past research, the Tree of Life was interpreted to be a therapeutic experience which nurtured growth, emotional expression and a sense of safety (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Phillips et al, 2016; Vitale et al, 2019). Participants identified specific improvements to their "mental health" (Elena, p. 27) and anxiety levels, suggesting that the Tree of Life is a psychologically safe environment for participants to engage in reflection and healing.

Aligned with a narrative therapeutic approach, participants can be understood as experiencing a therapeutic shift as they reauthor their stories and develop thicker narratives about their lives (Carr, 1998; Denborough 2023). This cathartic experience involves externalising their problems and redefining their past, moving towards appreciation for their strength. For the current research population, this process may act as a particularly therapeutic experience. A range of factors may encourage the development of thin narratives of deficit for YP described as having SEN (Hodkinson, 2020; Morgan, 2000), including the impact of stigmatisation (Louari, 2013), peer relationships (Cullinane, 2020; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019), and academic success (Bear et al, 2002) on self-esteem (Taylor et al, 2010). As such, the person-centred nature of the Tree of Life may be particularly transformative, adding richness to alternative narratives which YP described as having SEN may not usually consider to be part of their story.

5.3.2. Navigating Discomfort

This GET demonstrates the range of experiences in which participants may feel discomfort during the Tree of Life, characterised by the subthemes Reflection Evoking Complex Feelings and Nerves Related to Sharing. Within existing literature, it is documented that the Tree of Life can generate feelings of uncertainty or negativity (Bolt et al, 2024; Fleming et al, 2023; Khawaja et al, 2022; Tobin, 2023; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Vitale et al, 2019). However, each study presents a different account for why this is. Among the stated reasons are the Tree of Life being uninteresting (Fleming et al, 2023), group dynamics causing frustration (Randle-Philips et al, 2016), and the novelty of self-reflection causing uncertainty (Tobin, 2023).

Reflection Evoking Complex Feelings. For all participants, it was interpreted that the Tree of Life resulted in complex feelings, such as sadness, fear, and unease. Unsurprisingly, this often seemed to occur as participants discussed their storms and reflected on the difficult times in their life. However, complex feelings also emerged for Kayleigh as she examined her roots, and it was interpreted that she felt detached from her personal history. This highlights the variations in how participants experience the Tree of Life depending on their unique positionalities and emphasises the need for facilitators to be responsive to the needs of individuals throughout the delivery.

From a narrative therapeutic perspective (Carr, 1998; Denborough, 2023), participants may be revisiting stories about their past which are challenging or traumatic, evoking a range of emotions. This is particularly relevant for YP described as having SEN, who may hold a range of vulnerabilities and lived experiences which evoke complex emotions during reflection (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Louari, 2013; Norwich & Kelly, 2004). This theme reflects the power of the Tree of Life in supporting participants to address their difficult personal histories, navigating their emotions in a safe space to protect against the potential for retraumatisation (Denborough, 2023). However, although the Tree of Life helps participants to ultimately move away from problem-saturated narratives and externalise their problems, the process of reauthoring still requires participants to closely examine their past. The current study's findings suggest this is a supportive and transformative process, but one marked by challenge and discomfort.

This subtheme occurs similarly in past research, with participants' reflection on their personal histories found to be difficult and painful in three studies (Khawaja et al, 2022; Tobin, 2023; Vitale et al, 2019). Furthermore, Bolt et al (2024) found that half of their participants felt more negative about their epilepsy following the Tree of Life. The authors consider whether this may be due to participants becoming increasingly aware of the challenges they face through reflection on their situation.

Nerves Related to Sharing. Whilst participants seemed to value connecting with their peers during the Tree of Life, they also expressed nerves related to sharing. This included concern for how their peers would react to their disclosures, discomfort evoked by the novelty of emotional sharing, and feelings of vulnerability. Based on participants' accounts, it was interpreted that openness was uncommon within the group, and so being vulnerable with one another was anxiety-provoking. Although this was not a prominent theme in existing research, several studies note participants' hesitance to share (Tobin, 2023; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al; 2016).

In the current research, nerves around sharing may have been exacerbated by the participants being part of an existing group that would remain together after the Tree of Life. Participants expressed concerns around group members judging them, suggesting that they felt a form of peer pressure and a fear that sharing may have social implications. From a narrative therapeutic perspective (Carr, 1998; Denborough, 2023), participants may have been afraid to present their reauthored stories to one another. Since group members already held pre-conceived narratives about each other, this could have resulted in other group members resisting or challenging participants' newly-presented stories and favouring their previously held, problem-focused narratives. This may have been a particular concern for the participant group, since YP described as having SEN are known to face misconceptions (Louari, 2013) and lower peer acceptance (Pinto et al, 2019). These findings highlight the complexities of sharing personal stories within a social system such as a school or class group, particularly for YP described as having SEN.

5.3.3. Fostering Connection and Togetherness

An increased sense of connection and togetherness was interpreted as a theme across all participants' accounts. This significantly links with the Nurturing Positive Emotional States GET, with participants reporting feelings of happiness and enjoyment at getting to know their

peers. Participants seemed to have an increased appreciation for their peers, improved relationships, and a developed sense of belonging within the group. This finding is particularly important given the participants' context, with research indicating that CYP described as having SEN typically experience fewer reciprocal social relationships and low levels of peer acceptance (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Humphrey et al, 2013; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Williams & Heslop, 2005). Similar findings are evident throughout existing studies (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016), highlighting the power of connection and collaboration in collective narrative practices (Denborough, 2023). The findings for this GET were represented by the subthemes Learning and Discovery, Strengthened Bonds, and Community and Belonging.

Learning and Discovery. Participants appeared to value the opportunity to learn and discover new things about each other. Despite having been in a class with their peers for several years, it seems as though the Tree of Life was the first time many of them had shared their personal histories, interests, and experiences. It was interpreted that sharing personal experiences was out of the ordinary for this group, and the shift towards openness and transparency appeared to be surprising for participants. Participants identified that they gained a wealth of new knowledge about their peers, including their similarities, backgrounds, and cultures. This is consistent with existing literature in which participants felt that sharing their experiences and learning about each other supported the development of relationships (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Németh et al, 2024; Vitale et al, 2019).

Until the Tree of Life, the group seemed to define themselves by their "learning knowledge" (Elena, p. 4), suggesting that thin narratives about one element of their story have dominated the group identity. This may have impacted how participants viewed each other prior to the group, as they believed their primary similarity to be their described SEN status. Through the Tree of Life, participants witness each other's reauthored stories, discovering commonalities and realising their shared experiences. This appears to have been transformative for participants' relationships and the narratives they hold about the group.

Strengthened Bonds. In line with previous research, participants seemed to develop stronger bonds with peers in the Tree of Life group (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019). Participants were interpreted to experience improved social dynamics, greater peer support, and positive regard for other group members. From a narrative therapeutic perspective, these connections seemed important in facilitating a safe therapeutic space, with the trust growing between group members supporting them to safely engage with the therapeutic process. The subsequent sharing and witnessing of rich stories seemed to elicit empathy between participants, further fostering feelings of warmth and interpersonal connections.

This is a significant finding for the research population, given the social vulnerabilities often faced by YP described as having SEN (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Cullinane, 2020; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Pinto et al, 2019). By developing stronger bonds with their peers, participants add to their friendship circle and emotional support network, which could act as an important protective factor for wellbeing (Cuadros & Berger, 2016; Gaspar et al, 2016).

Community and Belonging. Participants were also interpreted to develop a sense of community and belonging. There was a sense that the group shifted to become more cohesive, characterised by more intimate connections, peer acceptance, and a feeling of security. These findings are echoed in past research, with the Tree of Life supporting participants to feel included within a collective (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016).

In the current research, the Tree of Life seemed to be transformative for the group's identity, with participants moving from having superficial interactions to feeling part of a community. This is particularly interesting given that participants had already established relationships, having been in a class together for some time. From a narrative therapeutic perspective (Carr, 1998; Denborough, 2023), participants may have been embedded in a single, deficit-focused narrative, meaning they found fewer opportunities to positively connect with those around them. It is therefore interpreted that participants may have previously lacked a sense of belonging, which is known to occur for YP described as having SEN (Cullinane, 2020;

Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019). Through collective narrative practice, the Tree of Life seems to support participants to develop a shared identity and affinity through the sharing of rich stories.

5.3.4. Expanding Thinking and New Insight

Expanding thinking and new insight was interpreted as a prominent theme for all participants. Consistent with past research, it was interpreted that participants gained changed perspectives on existing situations, challenged their assumptions, and learnt from others (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Rowley et al, 2020; Wellman et al, 2016). Participants all experienced this in unique ways. For example, whilst some developed new perspectives about their family circumstances, others thought differently about their life goals. Despite divergence and overlap with other GETs, the consistent presence of expanding thinking and new insight throughout participants' accounts meant it was conceptualised as a standalone theme.

From a narrative therapeutic perspective, participants are interpreted to reflect on their lives and experience shifts in perspective as part of several narrative therapeutic practices (Carr, 1998). For example, the storms seek to change participants' perspectives by externalising their problems and redefining aspects of their stories (Carr, 1998; Denborough, 2023). Participants are also encouraged to seek unique outcomes and thicken their plot using the metaphor of the tree to explore important aspects of their life and during narrative questioning from the facilitator. Participants also form preferred, alternative narratives which may change their perspectives on their journey through life and their hopes for the future (Carr, 1998). Finally, the collective nature of the approach exposes participants to peers' viewpoints, which can result in changed thinking and the internalisation of new ideas (Carr, 1998).

This GET was captured within the subthemes Reframing Life Now and Looking to the Future.

Reframing Life Now. Participants were interpreted to think differently about their day-to-day lives, relationships, and actions. For all three participants in this subtheme, their reframed thinking was characterised by positive changes, hopefulness, and awareness of their strengths. From a narrative perspective, it is interpreted that participants reauthored their

stories to include preferred narratives in a way that illuminated the richness of their lives (Carr, 1998; Denborough, 2023). This supported the development of new perspectives, moving from thin narratives to a deeper and broader understanding of themselves.

This finding is echoed in existing literature. For example, research suggests that the Tree of Life helped participants to develop alternative ideas for managing their day-to-day medical needs (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017). This mirrors the current research, in which participants generated new strategies for coping in the face of difficulty. Throughout the past and current research, these changes seem to be driven by a sense of empowerment and awareness of capability. Much like the present study, existing research attributes this to participants' increased awareness of their strengths (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019) and participants drawing inspiration from other group members (Casdagli et al, 2017; Rowley et al, 2020).

Looking to the Future. Participants were also interpreted to think differently about their hopes, dreams, and priorities. By reauthoring their stories to include narratives of strength (Carr, 1998), participants seemed empowered to pursue their ambitions and more aware of the options available to them as competent individuals. It seems that the externalisation of their challenges and the internalisation of their strengths resulted in participants feeling more equipped to follow their goals.

There was some divergence in how participants experienced this theme. For example, Zara seemed energised by her newly refreshed focus on her dreams. From a narrative perspective, the Tree of Life was interpreted to connect Zara with her goals, values, and skillset, resulting in a new sense of self-efficacy. Zara also highlights the Tree of Life image as an important reference for following her dreams in the future, reflecting the power of visually-representing a preferred story to thicken the narrative and demonstrate her commitment to maintaining it over time. Several existing studies report similar findings, suggesting that the Tree of Life left participants feeling inspired, hopeful, and empowered to cope with difficulty (Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Khawaja et al, 2022; Németh et al, 2024; Rowley et al, 2022; Vitale et al, 2019).

Contrastingly, Elena and Priya seemed overwhelmed by their new perspectives on the future. Interestingly, this subtheme does not seem to be echoed in existing literature. This may relate to the specific experiences of participants as YP described as having SEN. Literature indicates that CYP described as having SEN experience lower self-esteem than their peers (Taylor et al, 2010), possibly due to stigmatisation (Goldan et al, 2022; Williams & Heslop, 2005), loneliness (Tillinger, 2013) and a perceived lack of capability (Holding et al, 2023), which may contribute to feelings disempowerment. These findings suggest that the Tree of Life illuminated possible alternative narratives for their future which had not been privileged previously, leading to feelings of uncertainty at the scale of possibilities.

5.3.5. Exploring and Connecting with Identity

It was interpreted that the Tree of Life supported all four participants to explore and connect with their identity. Participants appeared to engage in a process of self-reflection, exploring their strengths, social network, and culture. These findings are also evident in existing literature, with several studies suggesting that the Tree of Life supported participants to explore their identity and develop an understanding of themselves (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Rowley et al, 2020; Tobin, 2023; Vitale et al, 2019; Wellman et al, 2016). This GET was characterised by the subthemes Self-Identity and Culture and Background.

There was a degree of overlap between this GET and the Expanding Thinking and New Insights GET, since many participants seemed to re-evaluate aspects of their identity as part of the reflective process. However, these were each retained as distinctive GETs due to the divergence in how participants explored identity. Whilst some participants appeared to develop new perspectives about their identity, for others, the Tree of Life served as an opportunity to explore and showcase what was important to them.

Self-Identity. For all participants, it was interpreted that the Tree of Life promoted connection with their self-identity. This seemed to be a positive and profound experience which raised participants' understanding of their strengths, resources, and depth of character. This finding is also present in existing research, emphasising the power of the Tree of Life to promote self-awareness and connect participants with thicker, developed plots as part of their stories (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Khawaja et al, 2022; Rowley et al, 2020; Wellman et al, 2016).

In participants' accounts, there was a sense that connecting with their identity was a novel experience with unexpected implications for self-esteem. From a narrative therapeutic perspective, the Tree of Life seems to have encouraged participants to explore alternative narratives, highlighting unique outcomes in which their strengths are evident (Carr, 1998). It is possible that participants' stories had become dominated by negativity (Morgan, 2000), resulting from the vulnerabilities they experience as YP described as having SEN. Consequently, the development of these unique outcomes and examples of strengths seemed almost surprising to participants, leaving them feeling more connected with themselves, their resources, and what matters to them.

Additionally, participants seemed to value their peers commenting on and affirming their strengths as part of the collective approach. There was a sense that participants valued their peers' contributions and respected their views, possibly because they were already familiar with each other, and so their opinions carry social weight in the context of the classroom. By recognising one another's experiences, group members seem to engage in the process of witnessing each other's new stories. This process affirms the dominant positions of the newly-developed, strengths-based narratives, supporting participants to further internalise these (Carr, 1998). Several existing studies echoed this finding, suggesting that group feedback helps to validate and affirm participants (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Randle-Philips et al, 2016; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019).

Culture and Background. It was interpreted that all participants experienced a sense of connection with their culture and background. This stemmed largely from participants creating the roots of their Tree of Life, which focused on their background, cultural heritage, and important people in their past. Narrative theory suggests that sociocultural context plays a significant role in shaping people's stories (Morgan, 2000). As such, it is arguably unsurprising that this emerged as a meaningful experience for participants. For some, the Tree of Life served as an opportunity to positively reflect on and honour their culture. This is interpreted to represent the narrative therapeutic practice of re-membering, which supports participants to connect with and honour important aspects of their lives (Carr, 1998; Denborough, 2023). For others, the roots involved an exploration of their personal histories and a process of self-discovery in which they learnt more about themselves, developing richer

descriptions of their lives than had existed previously. Overall, this seemed to be a positive experience, with participants interpreted as experiencing pride, appreciation, and security.

Furthermore, the expressive, creative nature of the Tree of Life supported participants to showcase aspects of their background for the group to see. Though participants already held narratives around their background, these aspects of their story may not be privileged. Specifically, for Zara, there was a sense that living in the UK meant she felt detached from her roots in Pakistan. By illustrating their backgrounds visually, participants affirmed the role of their background in their lives, validating it as important to their story. The Tree of Life is broadly acknowledged to be a culturally sensitive approach (Denborough, 2012; Elhassan & Yassine, 2017; Hung, 2011; Ken, 2022; Méndez & Cole, 2014), and this finding highlights the ability to honour and reflect culture this as a valued aspect of the experience.

This finding is not widely present in existing literature, with few studies briefly noting that the Tree of Life connected participants with their background (German, 2013; Khawaja et al, 2022; Wellman et al, 2016). One possible explanation for this relates to how the Tree of Life is delivered. Since the Tree of Life is an adaptable tool, researchers may deliver it differently depending on the participant group present. In the current study, the Tree of Life group included YP with a range of backgrounds, which resulted in sharing, discussion, and comparison of personal histories and cultures. Therefore, the topics of background and culture may have been more prevalent in the current study than those whose researchers focused topics such as epilepsy (Bolt et al, 2024) or diabetes (Casdagli et al, 2017).

5.3.6. A Space for Self-Expression

The final theme within these findings was a space for self-expression. All participants were interpreted to value the expressive nature of the Tree of Life, and generally considered sharing their stories to be a positive experience. Through a narrative therapeutic viewpoint (Carr, 1998; Denborough, 2023), participants seemed to appreciate the opportunity to share their thickened, reauthored stories, both visually and verbally. It is interpreted that the act of expressing these new narratives empowered participants, supporting them to view their preferred stories with credibility. This theme is characterised by the subthemes A Tool to Support Expression and Sharing Experiences with Others.

A Tool to Support Expression. It was interpreted that participants valued the Tree of Life as a tool for self-expression. Participants seemed to gain satisfaction from watching the Tree of Life grow over time to represent their identity and capture what was important to them. Through the process of visually constructing their Tree of Life, participants are understood to retell their stories in a way that empowers and affirms the position of their preferred narratives. Similar findings emerged in previous studies, with participants reporting that the Tree of Life was a helpful and memorable tool to represent their lives (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019).

There was some variation in how participants experienced this subtheme. Linking with the Nurturing Positive Emotional States GET, Zara and Priya seemed to experience the process of self-expression as enjoyable and positive. This is a finding directly mirrored in Vitale et al (2019), with participants finding the process of developing Tree of Life to be fun, relaxing, and engaging. Here, the reauthoring of stories appears to be a strengths-based and comfortable process, characterised by enjoyment. Contrastingly, Kayleigh seemed to value the written format which allowed her to share without pressure compared to the anxiety of sharing verbally. From a narrative therapeutic perspective (Carr, 1998; Denborough, 2023), the visual nature of the Tree of Life may support participants to carefully consider how to reauthor their stories and present them to outsider witnesses without the pressure of speaking aloud. This is a significant finding in the context of the participant group, since YP described as having SEN may experience withdrawal from social contexts (Pinto et al, 2019), resulting in fewer opportunities to share or receive emotional support from peers (Gaspar et al, 2016). This divergence of experiences highlights the importance of participants being empowered to reauthor their stories in a way that feels safe for them and demonstrates the adaptability of the Tree of Life to suit the communication preferences of participants.

Sharing Experiences with Others. Finally, it was interpreted that participants valued the experience of sharing their histories, thoughts, and feelings with others. Sharing their experiences seemed to be cathartic and impactful for participants, generating feelings of relief and motivation to seek support in future. This aligns with previous research, in which the Tree of Life supported participants to open up, express their emotions, and talk about what they were going through (Bolt et al, 2024; Casdagli et al, 2017; Fleming et al, 2023; Haselhurst et al, 2021; Németh et al, 2024; Rowley et al, 2020; Vitale et al, 2019). Furthermore, Kayleigh seemed to feel most safe to share within the smaller group context and

was interpreted to feel less secure when there were interruptions within the group. This is mirrored in findings from Randle-Philips et al (2016) who noted the potential for one group member to dominate conversations, impacting other participants.

By sharing their experiences with peers, participants were interpreted to feel understood and connected with one another. There are clear links between this subtheme and the Fostering Connection and Togetherness GET, in which discussing shared experiences and learning more about one another fostered empathy between participants. From a narrative therapeutic perspective, participants were interpreted to gain validation as group members act as witnesses for their stories, provide affirmation, feedback, and celebrate their reauthored narratives (Morgan, 2000). More broadly, the Tree of Life acts as a space for the sharing of emotions and concerns, which can act as a protective factor to support wellbeing for YP described as having SEN (Cuadros & Berger, 2016). These findings illustrate the influence of collective narrative practice and highlight the importance of therapeutic activities which facilitate safe sharing.

5.4. Comparison of GETs to Literature Review Thematic Synthesis

A thematic synthesis of literature was presented in Chapter Two, exploring previous research around participants' experiences of the Tree of Life. The following section compares the current study's findings to those of the thematic synthesis, highlighting similarities and differences to demonstrate the original contribution of this research. Both the GETs from this research and the themes from the thematic synthesis are shown in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

A Comparison of Analytical Themes from the Thematic Synthesis of Literature and IPA Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Thematic Synthesis of Literature Analytical Themes	IPA Group Experiential Themes (GETs)
The Importance of the Group Context	Nurturing Positive Emotional States
The Value of the Tree of Life	Navigating Discomfort
Alternative Thinking and Change	Fostering Connection and Togetherness
Psychologically Safe and Supportive	Expanding Thinking and New Insight
	Exploring and Connecting with Identity

5.4.1. Nurturing Positive Emotional States

The Tree of Life was found to be a therapeutic and overall enjoyable experience in both the current study's Nurturing Positive Emotional States GET and in the thematic synthesis Psychologically Safe and Supportive theme. This included participants finding the group to be enjoyable, noticing a shift in their emotional state, and experiencing cathartic emotional release. Both the current study and thematic synthesis found that these positive feelings were interlinked with other themes, such as the Fostering Connection and Togetherness GET and the Alternative Thinking and Change descriptive theme. This highlights the broadly positive influence of the Tree of Life, with many aspects of the experience seeming to support participants' emotional states. The current study adds depth to the existing evidence base, supporting the findings of past research whilst providing further insight into how the Tree of Life could be used to positively support wellbeing.

5.4.2. Navigating Discomfort

Whilst the present research found discomfort to be a standalone GET, this theme was not mirrored in the thematic synthesis of literature, with few studies describing the experience of the Tree of Life negatively. Where negativity was reported, this related to the Tree of Life being initially awkward (Khawaja et al, 2022), boring (Fleming et al, 2023), or raising participants' awareness of their difficulties (Bolt et al, 2024). However, this sparsity of negative feedback may not reflect the true experiences of participants, but rather the methodological approach of existing studies. For example, few studies shared the interview schedules used to gain participants' views, meaning questions could have been biased towards positive aspects of the experience. Additionally, Bolt et al (2024) gained some negative feedback when using questionnaire methods, which may suggest that participants are hesitant to provide feedback verbally due to courtesy bias effects. As this theme was not present in the thematic synthesis, the current research expands the understanding of the experience of the Tree of Life, supporting further insight into participants' complex emotional responses and highlighting the need for person-centred wellbeing support during the Tree of Life process.

5.4.3. Fostering Connection and Togetherness

A sense of group connection and togetherness was interpreted in both the thematic synthesis analytical theme The Importance of the Group Context and the Fostering Connection and Togetherness GET. In the thematic synthesis of literature, this was characterised by a supportive environment and the sharing of similar experiences. Comparably, in the current study, participants were interpreted to build stronger connections, develop an understanding of their peers, and feel a greater sense of community. Furthermore, the current research conducted the Tree of Life with a pre-existing class group, meaning relationships were already established between participants. As such, the current findings add to the small body of literature which explores the experience of the Tree of Life for pre-existing groups of YP (Fleming et al, 2023; Tobin, 2023). These findings provide further insight into the relational experience of the Tree of Life, highlighting these social outcomes as a significant and recurring experience.

5.4.4. Expanding Thinking and New Insight

The Expanding Thinking and New Insight GET was interpreted to represent participants' experiences of developing broader perspectives. Within this GET, participants were interpreted to think differently about their relationships, hopes and dreams, and coping mechanisms. This is mirrored in the Alternative Thinking and Change analytical theme in the thematic synthesis, which was characterised by participants expanding their viewpoints, thinking about the future, and reflecting on their lives. In both the current study and thematic synthesis, participants seemed to achieve new views of themselves and their abilities, leaving them empowered to do things differently in the future. This shared, consistent finding further highlights shifts in thinking as a key outcome of the process.

5.4.5. Exploring and Connecting with Identity

It was interpreted that participants reflected on themselves and their identities in both the Positive Identity and Empowerment descriptive theme and the Exploring and Connecting with Identity GET. In the thematic synthesis of existing literature, the Tree of Life prompted participants to think about their skills, qualities, and important aspects of their lives. This was also reflected in the current research, with participants seeming more in touch with their abilities and empowered to deal with difficulties in future. Additionally, in the current research, participants were interpreted as connecting with their personal histories and cultures, encouraged by the roots. This finding was not reflected in the thematic synthesis,

highlighting the original contribution of the present research to the understanding of participants' experiences during the Tree of Life.

5.4.6. A Space for Self-Expression

The experience of self-expression and sharing with others was captured in the A Space for Self-Expression GET in the current study. This finding is mirrored in the thematic synthesis descriptive subthemes Emotional Expression, Sharing Experiences, and Creative Process. Both this GET and the Creative Process descriptive theme highlighted the expressive value of the Tree of Life, with participants feeling able to share using visual means, without relying on verbal communication. Additionally, this GET and the Sharing Experiences descriptive theme both demonstrate the value of participants being able to express their feelings and discuss their personal histories in a safe space. The findings of the present study both support existing literature and provide further insight into the experiences of participants engaging in the Tree of Life alongside their peers.

5.5. Summary of Findings

This research aimed to answer the research question *what is the experience of YP described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life?* Through the analysis of four semi-structured interviews using IPA, the following GETs were interpreted to represent participants' experiences of the Tree of Life: Nurturing Positive Emotional States, Navigating Discomfort, Fostering Connection and Togetherness, Expanding Thinking and New Insight, Exploring and Connecting with Identity, and A Space for Self-Expression. These GETs were interpreted to show the Tree of Life as a largely positive experience, whilst also illuminating aspects of the process in which participants may encounter discomfort. These GETs also highlighted the similarities and differences in participants' accounts, demonstrating how the Tree of Life may be experienced differently depending on participants' individual histories and positionality. The research findings broadly align with existing literature, as well as providing original insight into how participants experience the Tree of Life.

5.6. Methodological Review

The following section will discuss the methodological strengths and limitations of this research.

5.6.1. Methodological Strengths

As described in Chapter Three, this research strove to uphold the standards of good qualitative research outlined by Yardley (2017). Steps were taken to uphold the following quality measures: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. See Section 3.7 and Table 3.3 for a description of how these were implemented in the current study.

The current study used IPA to understand the experiences of participants in the Tree of Life. This methodology facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' accounts, using exploratory, linguistic, and conceptual noting to critically engage with existential and experiential meaning (Spiers & Riley, 2019). This, combined with a thorough analysis, supported the researcher to directly address the research question and provide an interpretation of how participants experienced the Tree of Life. Furthermore, the idiographic nature of IPA aligns with the interpretivist epistemology of this research, allowing the researcher to interpret each participants' experiences accounting for their unique positionality and individual experiences of reality.

A total of four participants were recruited for this research. This smaller sample size allowed the researcher to engage with the data in depth, maintaining a hermeneutic focus and closely attending to participants' idiographic accounts (Smith et al, 2022). Although a larger sample size may be considered preferable to ensure the transferability of findings, this research prioritised developing a comprehensive, good quality analysis (Nizza et al, 2021). In doing so, it is hoped that the analysis has done justice to participants' experiences.

As the current research is a doctoral study, there was a limited scope for multiple researchers to be involved. For this reason, the Tree of Life sessions were carried out by the researcher. The same researcher also interviewed participants, and subsequently analysed their transcripts using IPA. To some extent, this is considered a strength of the research. The researcher had formed relationships with the participants during the Tree of Life, aiming to ease their anxiety during the interview process, supporting them to share their views freely. This may have also supported the accessibility of the interviews, since the researcher was familiar with the individual differences of the participants and could therefore adapt questioning to align with their understanding and communication styles.

5.6.2. Methodological Limitations

This research is not without methodological limitations. It is necessary to understand these limitations to present a balanced interpretation of the research findings, carefully consider implications for practice, and support future researchers to develop methodologically-robust studies.

For researchers concerned with the generalisability of results, the small sample size of the current research represents a methodological limitation (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Participants were all female, aged 13-14, and each with their own educational journeys and individual differences. It is recognised that their life experiences and positionality likely impacted their experience of the Tree of Life, meaning their experiences of this group cannot be generalised to represent the experiences of all YP described as having SEN. Although IPA does not aim to produce generalisable conclusions (Smith et al, 2022), researchers should take care when attempting to transfer these findings to other contexts.

A further limitation of this research is the use of purposive and volunteer sampling. This research held consent as a key ethical consideration, and wished to recruit participants who were felt safe and willing to share their views on a potentially emotive experience. However, the 14 YP who engaged in the Tree of Life group were all invited to participate in the research, and only four consented to take part. This raises issues of bias, since the participants were likely the most motivated and enthusiastic about taking part in the research and sharing their experiences. Based on the findings, it must be considered whether the participants who consented to take part were those who most enjoyed or valued the Tree of Life experience.

As previously described, the researcher held a triadic role in the research, acting as a facilitator, interviewer, and analyst. This presents a range of limitations. Firstly, having developed an existing relationship with the researcher, participants may have felt less able to share their honest views around any negative aspects of the Tree of Life. This may have also impacted how safe participants felt to lead or steer the discussion since the researcher was an adult delivering lesson content in school, which carries an implicit power dynamic. Attempts were made to address this concern by reassuring participants about the aims of the research and assuring them that all feedback was valuable.

Furthermore, the researcher became familiar with participants and their experiences by delivering the Tree of Life group before analysing their transcripts using IPA. It is acknowledged that the researcher likely carried preconceived ideas about participants' experiences into the analytic process, despite attempts to bracket this (see Appendix 20). However, as a methodological approach, IPA recognises the impact of double hermeneutics and acknowledges that reflexive engagement with one's own positionality is part of the interpretative process. Arguably, this should not necessarily be considered a methodological weakness since subjectivity is a feature of IPA and this approach is in line with the study's epistemological stance. However, it is recognised that readers may wish to make their own judgements about the study's validity and transferability based on this.

Finally, in the current study, the use of IPA could be considered a limitation. IPA places emphasis on participants' choice of language and the meaning this holds. Therefore, it seems important to recognise that three participants were multilingual, and one participant was described as having communication differences. Whilst this research intentionally selected IPA so as not to exclude participants' voices based on speculative concerns about their communicative capabilities, it is recognised that this may impact how participants described their experiences, including their choice of vocabulary and sentence structure.

5.7. Distinctive Contribution

As highlighted in the literature review, there is a need to identify therapeutic interventions which support the wellbeing of YP who are described as having SEN. The Tree of Life was identified as one possible approach, with a range of studies suggesting it is a positive and therapeutic experience. However, there are a limited number of papers which explore the experiences of participants, and only two existing studies which have explored the experience of the Tree of Life for YP described as having SEN (Fleming et al, 2023; German, 2013). There were a number of limitations associated with these studies, including the lack of rich qualitative data and the specific characteristics of the participant group limiting the generalisability of the research. Thus, a gap in the research became apparent, and it was determined that further research was needed to understand the experiences of YP described as having SEN taking part in the Tree of Life.

Using semi-structured interviews and IPA, this study presents interpretations of the experiences of four participants of the Tree of Life. The findings of this study support past

research, strengthening and expanding the existing understanding of how participants experience the Tree of Life. Participants were interpreted to experience the Tree of Life positively, encountering strengthened relationships, improved self-esteem, and newly-developed perspectives on their lives. Additionally, novel findings are presented, highlighting participants' experiences of connecting with their culture and the triggers for participants experiencing discomfort. By interpreting these findings from a narrative therapeutic perspective, participants' experiences of the Tree of Life as a therapeutic approach are understood in greater depth. These findings offer a distinctive contribution by providing support for the Tree of Life as a therapeutic tool for schools and EPs to consider when promoting wellbeing for YP described as having SEN. The implications of these findings are discussed below in relation to schools, EP practice, and future research.

5.8. Implications for Practice

In recognition of Yardley's (2017) criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research, the following section will discuss the impact and importance of the current study in terms of implications for practice. Both the interpretations of the current study and findings from past research are used to propose practical implications for schools, EPs, and future research.

5.8.1. Implications for Schools

Schools may wish to consider their approach to supporting wellbeing based on these findings. It was interpreted that participants highly valued the opportunity to build relationships, share personal experiences, and learn more about their peers. However, throughout participants' accounts, it was suggested that there were few opportunities in school to positively interact with peers. This is mirrored in existing research which suggests that YP described as having SEN have fewer practical opportunities for peer interaction in school (Pinto et al, 2019; Schwab, 2017; Webster, 2015), which may contribute to the worsening of social outcomes (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Cullinane, 2020; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Humphrey et al, 2013; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Williams & Heslop, 2005). Schools could consider the opportunities for developing and extending social networks, in which adults facilitate the safe sharing of personal experiences with the aim of developing closeness, understanding, and empathy between groups. Examples may include support groups, friendship clubs, or further collective narrative practice interventions. Such work would represent an effective use of school time, nurturing belonging and connection between groups of YP, and aiming to proactively promote wellbeing without the need involvement from other services.

These findings also highlight the power of person-centred activities to support participants' emotional states. Schools may benefit from creating explicit opportunities for students to explore their personal histories, supporting them to thicken their plots with stories of strength and showcase their preferred narratives to others (Carr, 1998; Denborough, 2023). Furthermore, using strengths-based approaches, school could actively seek to tackle deficit-driven narratives and stigmatisation (Goldan et al, 2022; Williams & Heslop, 2005), privileging richer, reauthored stories about YP described as having SEN. The current research demonstrates that it is feasible to embed person-centred activities within whole-class lesson delivery, lessening the need for one-to-one therapeutic interventions to be delivered on a large scale.

This research highlights the value of enjoyable approaches as part of therapeutic input for YP described as having SEN. Participants appeared to highly value the ability to connect with their peers, engage in a creative activity, and discuss their interests in a relaxed environment. Similarly, past research indicates that participants valued the Tree of Life because it felt more relaxed and less clinical compared to other interventions (Haselhurst et al, 2021; Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018; Rowley et al, 2020). Schools may wish to consider flexible, relational, and creative therapeutic approaches, both to appeal to YP and to foster a psychologically safe space for emotional growth (Dunsmuir & Hardy, 2016).

5.8.2. Implications for EP Practice

This research suggests that the Tree of Life can act as a therapeutic intervention to support emotional states, self-esteem, and belonging for YP described as having SEN. This is a significant finding given the demand for EPs to carry out therapeutic work (Birch & Gulliford, 2023; Price, 2017), particularly in the current context of rising mental health needs and concern for YP's wellbeing. Furthermore, at a time when there are well-recognised capacity issues within the EP workforce (DfE, 2023; Price, 2017), there is a need to develop timely but effective therapeutic interventions. This research demonstrates how EPs can be well-placed to deliver group-level interventions, supporting a greater number of YP with comparable needs by streamlining the approach to EP input.

The findings of this research may have implications for EPs' casework with YP described as having SEN. Whilst they may not always have the capacity to support formal therapeutic

interventions, EPs can embed techniques such as exploring personal histories and redeveloping thicker narratives in a range of their core activities (Fallon et al, 2010; Bradbury, 2023). For example, EPs engaging in consultation may wish to use narrative therapeutic approaches when working with staff to elicit empathy and understanding about the richness of a CYP's lived experiences beyond their vulnerability or trauma. EPs could also use narrative therapeutic approaches whilst assessing CYP as a form of information gathering and to support their psychological formulation. Moreover, EPs may wish to consider whether narrative techniques have a role in statutory assessment processes. In a system dominated by models of deficit and labelling (Castro & Palikara, 2016; Taberner, 2023), narrative therapeutic approaches could seek to externalise problems and promote humanistic assessment.

The Tree of Life is clearly a sensitive approach, requiring a therapeutic practitioner who is understanding of the personal histories, emotions, and potential trauma of participants. As such, the Tree of Life is regularly delivered by psychologists (Bradbury, 2023; Stubbs, 2021). However, the Tree of Life has been widely used in community contexts around the globe and is often facilitated by community workers, peer tutors, and experts by experience (Stubbs, 2021). By gatekeeping the position of facilitator, it could be argued that EPs are perpetuating a Westernised, biomedical approach that creates a perceived need for professional involvement (Pathare et al, 2018). The WHO (2022) recommends interventions to promote mental health should be delivered across sectors, and this requires communities and schools to utilise their resources to support wellbeing. As such, there may be a role for EPs to provide supervision for Tree of Life facilitators, supporting practitioners in schools and community contexts to deliver their own interventions whilst still ensuring skilled and sensitive facilitation.

5.8.3. Implications for Facilitating the Tree of Life

The findings also hold implications for EPs or other practitioners who are planning to facilitate a Tree of Life intervention in future. Firstly, facilitators may wish to consider the length of the Tree of Life delivery. The current research ran the Tree of Life group over seven sessions. This aligns with recommendations from Randle-Philips et al (2016), who suggested that 7-8 sessions would be most effective for participant groups who are described as having learning disabilities. Based on the research findings, it seems as though this was an appropriate length to support group members to become more familiar with one another,

engage in the activity, and feel safe to address their difficult experiences during the latter sessions. Additionally, the findings indicate that participants wanted the Tree of Life group to continue for longer and still felt they could add more to their trees. As such, it is recommended that future facilitators respond to the needs of the group members and consider adding an additional session for completing their trees. Alternatively, repeating the Tree of Life or holding additional sessions to revisit their trees may support participants to internalise their newly-developed stories and remain in touch with them over time.

Despite the Tree of Life seeming to have a largely positive impact, participants were also interpreted to experience discomfort at times. Mostly, negative emotions seemed to arise for participants when reflecting on their life experiences or when sharing their feelings with others. This impact may be heightened for particular groups who have fewer opportunities to share their experiences with supportive others, including YP described as having SEN (Gaspar et al, 2016). This highlights the need for facilitators to foster a psychologically safe atmosphere to support group members to fully engage in the therapeutic process without experiencing retraumatisation (Denborough, 2023). In future, facilitators may wish to spend more time playing warm-up games, setting ground rules, or monitoring participants' wellbeing through formal check ins.

It is important for future facilitators to carefully consider the interpersonal dynamics of the group when selecting participants for the Tree of Life. In the current research, a pre-existing class group was chosen in the hope that being familiar with one another would facilitate a psychologically safe atmosphere. However, it was interpreted that participants sometimes felt anxious to share for fear of judgement by their peers. As such, facilitators will need to carefully consider the most appropriate participant group to foster a safe therapeutic group environment. Furthermore, the research recruited a class group of YP all of whom were described as having SEN. Depending on the purpose of the Tree of Life, facilitators may seek to reduce stigmatisation, promote collaborative working, and nurture belonging by recruiting participants from the broader school population. Finally, future facilitators may wish to consider the context and circumstances of their Tree of Life group. At times in the current research, the researcher questioned the extent to which a therapeutic environment could be created in a secondary school classroom (see Appendix 10 for reflexive journal entry). As such, future facilitators may wish to consider the most appropriate dynamics for the Tree of Life to ensure at atmosphere of psychological safety.

5.8.4. Implications for Future Research

Future research may wish to investigate the transferability of findings by exploring adaptations to the Tree of Life delivery process. For example, future research may wish to explore the transferability of findings by recruiting participants from different populations, such as primary school-aged CYP, CYP described as having specific categories of SEN (DfE, 2015), or CYP attending specialist settings. Since only female participants volunteered to partake in this research, future research could also intentionally seek to recruit male participants and investigate potential gender differences in how the Tree of Life is experienced. This may require consideration of how to recruit participants, with consent and ethical practice prioritised throughout. Furthermore, existing research has explored the use of the Tree of Life on a one-to-one basis, with only a participant and facilitator (Kubicka & Terry, 2019; Laszczynska & Robbins, 2017; Lau-Zhu & Mann, 2023). It may be interesting for future research to explore the experiences of participants described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life on an individual level. Although this method would not represent collective narrative practice, it may be a useful tool for exploring self-identity and supporting the development of rich, strengths-based stories for YP described as having SEN.

Future research may also seek to make more conclusive statements about whether the Tree of Life can be used to support wellbeing for YP described as having SEN. The current research chose not to adopt a specific model of wellbeing in recognition that these may not considered universally relevant and may not represent the experience of wellbeing for all populations (Grosvenor et al, 2023; Khaw & Kern, 2014). However, future research may wish to seek a model of wellbeing that is sensitive to the differences of YP described as having SEN, using a deductive approach to map participants' experiences onto a theoretical framework. As an alternative approach, researchers who align with a more positivist epistemology may wish to use quantitative methods to explore whether the Tree of Life promotes wellbeing for YP described as having SEN (Cohen et al, 2018; Fox, 2008). For example, a recognised measure of wellbeing, such as the Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (Liddle & Carter, 2015), could be used to assess YP pre-intervention and post-intervention to generate findings about the impact of the Tree of Life on wellbeing.

Furthermore, there is little research exploring the lasting impact of engaging in the Tree of Life, with only one study exploring the views of participants 2-4 weeks after the end of the

group (Casdagli et al, 2017). Future research may wish to explore the experiences of participants via retrospective accounts, with the aim of understanding whether the Tree of Life has long-lasting therapeutic benefits.

Future research may also wish to explore alternative data collection methodologies. This research positioned its participants as individuals with rich stories and their own constructed realities. This stance called for a qualitative methodology which supported participants to share their experiences in their own words, resulting in the use of semi-structured interviews. However, it is recognised that this may have excluded YP who communicate differently. Future research could utilise other methodologies, such as photo-elicitation techniques (Pyle, 2013), to improve the accessibility of interviews whilst retaining the richness of interview data.

5.9. Research Conclusion

There is a significant concern for the wellbeing of CYP, with statistics demonstrating the rise in mental health conditions for school-aged populations (Newlove-Delgado et al, 2022). This concern is amplified for CYP described as having SEN, whose wellbeing is particularly at risk (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Sin et al, 2010) and is impacted by a complex intersection of social and emotional factors (Bear et al, 2002; Cullinane, 2020; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Gaspar et al, 2016; Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Pinto et al, 2019; Schwab, 2017; Taylor et al, 2010). However, mental health services are often inaccessible due to long waiting times (Young Minds, 2025), or unsuitable due to a lack of practitioner understanding around SEN (Allington-Smith, 2006; Rose et al, 2009; Sin et al, 2010; Vostanis et al, 2011). As a result, there is a clear need to consider how to support wellbeing for CYP described as having SEN beyond clinical treatment (Pathare et al, 2018) and within schools (DfE, 2018). Specifically, there is a role for EPs to support wellbeing and engage in therapeutic work (Atkinson et al, 2014; Birch & Gulliford, 2023; Price et al, 2017; Pugh 2010).

As part of this, EPs may draw on narrative therapeutic approaches (Atkinson et al, 2011). Narrative therapeutic approaches promote the belief that individuals hold stories about their lives, and that these can present challenges to wellbeing if overwhelmed by themes of problem and deficit (Denborough, 2023). Such approaches encourage participants to reflect on their lives and retell their stories with a focus on their rich experiences, developing

alternative narratives of strength and hope (Denborough, 2023). The Tree of Life is an example of a narrative therapeutic approach which has been utilised to support a range of groups who experience collective vulnerabilities (Denborough, 2023), including AIDS-orphaned adolescents (Hirschson et al, 2018), unaccompanied refugee CYP (Jacobs, 2018), and inpatients (Wellman et al, 2016). However, there is little research which explores the experiences of CYP described as having SEN engaging with the Tree of Life, and the existing studies hold a range of limitations (Fleming et al, 2023; German, 2013).

An SLR explored the experience of the Tree of Life for participants to identify the key features and possible benefits of the approach. A thematic synthesis of literature found the Tree of Life to be a largely positive experience characterised by a psychologically safe space, social connections, and the development of alternative perspectives. It also highlighted the Tree of Life as a valued approach, with unique features compared to other psychosocial interventions. The thematic synthesis highlighted the richness of the Tree of Life experience, emphasising the need for further research into the experiences of participants described as having SEN.

The current research aimed to address the following research question: *what is the experience of YP who are described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life?* The Tree of Life was completed with a class group of 14 YP described as having SEN, following which four participants were recruited via purposive and volunteer sampling to share their experiences in semi-structured interviews. An IPA was conducted, resulting in the interpretation of six GETs to represent the shared features of participants' accounts. These were: Nurturing Positive Emotional States, Navigating Discomfort, Fostering Connection and Togetherness, Expanding Thinking and New Insight, Exploring and Connecting with Identity and A Space for Self-Expression. These GETs highlighted the converging and diverging experiences of participants, influenced by their personal positionalities and prior experiences.

These findings largely align with existing literature, highlighting the power of the Tree of Life as a therapeutic approach to promote positive emotion, connection, and self-esteem. The research also offers novel findings, building on the current literature to highlight the variations in how participants may experience the Tree of Life. Although this research is grounded in a desire to support the wellbeing of YP described as having SEN, it is intentionally not stated that the Tree of Life achieves this outcome. This is because wellbeing

is a complex personal construct and may differ for each participant. Additionally, the findings indicated that the Tree of Life also generated feelings of discomfort for some participants, highlighting the complexity of the Tree of Life experience. Instead, it is suggested that the Tree of Life may nurture social and emotional changes which contribute to improved wellbeing.

A methodological review highlighted the strengths of this research. For example, by using IPA, the researcher was able to explore participants' experiential accounts in depth, presenting interpretations of their experiences driven by phenomenological inquiry. Furthermore, the study's small sample size allowed for this analysis to be thorough and for the researcher to become immersed in participants' accounts. Methodological limitations were also considered, including the limited capacity to generalise findings to wider populations, potential biases associated with sampling, and the possible impact of one researcher carrying out all aspects of the research.

This research holds implications for the practice of schools, including the importance of strengths-based, person-centred work which nurtures the self-esteem and the development of connections for YP described as having SEN. Implications for EP practice were also discussed, such as the possibility for EPs to engage in therapeutic activities, use narrative therapeutic principles in their broader casework, and provide supervision on the use of therapeutic approaches. Suggestions for the implementation of future Tree of Life interventions are also offered, focusing on the practicalities of supporting participants and managing group dynamics. Finally, implications for future research were explored, highlighting the possibilities for new methodologies, sampling techniques, and adaptations to the Tree of Life intervention.

This research offers a distinctive contribution to the field, presenting an exploration of the experiences of YP who are described as having SEN engaging in the Tree of Life. It is hoped that these findings will be of use to any practitioner who wishes to support others using narrative therapeutic approaches, and specifically the Tree of Life. This research has highlighted the power of bringing YP's preferred narratives to life, and has served as inspiration for the researcher to utilise narrative therapeutic approaches in their future role as an EP.

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Appendix 1: Databases and Search Limiters

Search sites and databases	Limiters	Before limiters	After limiters
Informit ● Australian Public Affairs Full Text (APAFT) ● Business Collection ● Engineering Collection ● Family & Societies Collection ● Health Collection ● Humanities & Social Sciences Collection ● Indigenous Collection ● Literature and Culture Collection	Publication date 01/2006-04/2025, English, report or journal, peer reviewed	56	22
EBSCO ● Education Databases o ERIC o Teacher Reference Center o SPORTDiscus o Educational Administration Abstracts o eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) o Education Abstracts (H.W. Wilson) ● Psychology	Publication date 01/2006-04/2025, English, academic journal, peer reviewed	405	166

Search sites and databases	Limiters	Before limiters	After limiters
○ Child Development & Adolescent Studies ○ European Views of the Americas: 1493 to 1750 ○ eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) ○ CINAHL Ultimate			
PsycNET ● PsycArticles	N/A	2	2
Scopus ● Arts and humanities ● Psychology ● Social science ● Health professions	2006-2025, English, document type article, source type journal, filtered by subject area	594	259
Wiley Online Library ● Psychology ● Education ● Family and child studies ● Cultural studies ● Sociology	2006-2025, journals	593	280

Appendix 2: CASP Appraisal Table for Each Included Paper

CASP Criteria	Bolt et al (2024)	Casdagli et al (2017)	Fleming et al (2023)	Haselhurst et al (2021)	Ibrahim & Tchanturia (2018)	Khawaja et al (2022)	Németh et al (2024)	Randle-Philips et al (2016)	Rowley et al (2020)	Vitale et al (2019)	Wellman et al (2016)
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

CASP Criteria	Bolt et al (2024)	Casdagli et al (2017)	Fleming et al (2023)	Haselhurst et al (2021)	Ibrahim & Tchanturia (2018)	Khawaja et al (2022)	Németh et al (2024)	Randle-Philips et al (2016)	Rowley et al (2020)	Vitale et al (2019)	Wellman et al (2016)
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Can't tell	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Can't tell	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes
Is there a clear statement	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

CASP Criteria	Bolt et al (2024)	Casdagli et al (2017)	Fleming et al (2023)	Haselhurst et al (2021)	Ibrahim & Tchanturia (2018)	Khawaja et al (2022)	Németh et al (2024)	Randle-Philips et al (2016)	Rowley et al (2020)	Vitale et al (2019)	Wellman et al (2016)
of findings?											
How valuable is the research?	This paper is valuable for understanding the Tree of Life in a healthcare setting, from a family perspective, and for three different participant groups	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of CYP with diabetes experiencing the Tree of Life, including aspects of the Tree of Life which CYP found to be valuable and how the group supported them. It was conducted over time with a large sample size.	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of autistic CYP in a specialist setting engaging in the Tree of Life. This includes the aspects they did and did not like, as well as how the experience supported them socially.	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of parents with children with chronic health conditions, with findings reported in detail with supporting quotations.	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of the Tree of Life for participants with anorexia nervosa, with findings reported in depth with supporting quotations.	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of the Tree of Life for this group of participants, suggesting that the Tree of Life is a culturally sensitive approach which promotes social connection.	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of the Tree of Life for people with learning disabilities and highlights how the Tree of Life can support both service users and staff.	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of the Tree of Life for people with learning disabilities, how it supports them, and what adaptations could support similar groups in future.	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of the Tree of Life for parents of CYP with SEN, including what they find to be valuable and what most supports them.	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of the Tree of Life for refugee women living with HIV and the case study approach gives valuable insight into individual experiences.	This paper is valuable for understanding the experience of the Tree of Life for people on an inpatient ward, including how it supported relationships, sharing, and strengths-awareness.

Appendix 3: Excluded Studies with Exclusion Criteria

Reference	Exclusion criteria
Bayley, C. (2025). The strength of a forest: lessons learnt from a Tree of Life workshop with people who have experiences of homelessness. *Housing, Care and Support*, *28*(1), 14-25.	Not accessible
Butera-Prinzi, F., Charles, N., & Story, K. (2014). Narrative family therapy and group work for families living with acquired brain injury. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, *35*(1), 81-99.	2. Descriptive paper
Carmichael, L., & Denborough, D. (2015). Listening for alternative stories: Narrative practice with vulnerable children and young people in India. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, *1*, 57–100.	Not accessible
Casdagli, L., Fredman, G., Huckle, E., Mahony, E., & Christie, D. (2021). The contribution of peer trainers to the Tree of Life project for young people living with Type 1 Diabetes: Building community. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *26*(1), 39-50.	2. Descriptive paper
Casdagli, L., Portnoy, S., Flannery, H., & McParland, J. (2023). Online adaptations of tree of life and beads of life groups alongside sustaining our community of peer trainers. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *28*(1), 99–115. https://doi.org/10.1177/13591045221127973	2. Descriptive paper including reflections on narrative group more broadly, not just Tree of Life

Reference	Exclusion criteria
Chimpén-López, C. A., Pacheco, M., Pretel-Luque, T., Bastón, R., & Chimpén-Sagrado, D. (2022). The couple's tree of life: Promoting and protecting relational identity. *Family Process*, *61*(4), 1403–1416. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12727	4. Not using Tree of Life
Chow, E. O. W., & Fung, S.-F. (2021). Narrative Group Intervention to Rediscover Life Wisdom Among Hong Kong Chinese Older Adults: A Single-Blind Randomized Waitlist-Controlled Trial. *Innovation in Aging*, *5*(3), igab027–igab027. https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igab027	5. No participant views on Tree of Life
Dickson, J. (2009). The 'Mighty Oak': Using the 'Tree of Life' methodology as a gateway to the other maps of narrative practice. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, (4), 9-23.	5. No participant views on Tree of Life
Elhassan, O., & Yassine, L. (2017). Tree of Life with young Muslim women in Australia. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, (3), 27-45.	2. Descriptive paper
Farooq, R., Addy, C., Smyth, G., Appiah, A., & Kennedy, P. J. (2021). No one's gonna tell your story better than you are": The use of a Narrative Therapy Approach informed by the Tree of Life with Children and Young People subject to Sexual Exploitation. In *Clinical Psychology Forum* (342) 24-34.	2. Descriptive paper
Ferguson, L., Reed, D., Oliver, J., Halpin, L., Moss, K., Hughes, R., Rust, S., R., Hayley, R., Murray, J. (2021). Adventuring through the virtual forest: An evaluation of a virtual Tree of Life group. *Clinical Psychology Forum* (340), 36-40. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpscpf.2021.1.340.36	Not accessible

Reference	Exclusion criteria
Fraser, J., Williams, L., Hayes, M., Akpan, U., & Bowerman, U. (2018, December). Humanising the inpatient experience through service user led Tree of Life workshops. In *Clinical Psychology Forum* (312) 7-13.	2. Descriptive paper
Gardner-Elahi, C., & Zamiri, S. (2015). Collective narrative practice in forensic mental health. *Journal of Forensic Practice*, *17*(3), 204–218. https://doi.org/10.1108/JFP-10-2014-0034	5. No participant views on Tree of Life
Herring, N. (2021). Young people, living in care and adopted, talk about their experiences of receiving an NHS therapeutic intervention. Qualitative research analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *Journal of Family Therapy*, *43*(3), 426-444.	Not accessible
Hill, J., & Soprych, A. (2024). Beginning the Healing Journey: Re-Storying Violent Loss through Tree of Life Narrative Groupwork. *Advances in Social Work*, *24*(2), 269-285.	2. Descriptive paper
Hirschson, S., Fritz, E., & Kilian, D. (2018). The Tree of Life as a Metaphor for Grief in AIDS-Orphaned Adolescents. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, *40*(1), 87–109. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10465-017-9243-7	5. No participant views on Tree of Life
Hughes, G. (2014). Finding a voice through 'The Tree of Life': A strength-based approach to mental health for refugee children and families in schools. *Clinical child psychology and psychiatry*, *19*(1), 139-153.	2. Descriptive paper

Reference	Exclusion criteria
Hyde, J. M. (2022). Enriching Young People's Deficit-Oriented Personal Stories through Co-construction in Storytelling-Based Research. *Storytelling, Self, Society*, *18*(1), 122–152. https://doi.org/10.1353/sss.2022.0001	5. No participant views on Tree of Life
Ibrahim, J., & Allen, J. (2018). The highs and lows through recovery: An integrative group combining cognitive behavioral therapy, narrative therapy, and the tree of life. *group*, *42*(1), 23-33.	4. Not solely Tree of Life
Jacobs, S. F. (2018). Collective narrative practice with unaccompanied refugee minors: "The Tree of Life" as a response to hardship. *Clinical child psychology and psychiatry*, *23*(2), 279-293.	2. Descriptive paper
Ken, T. (2022). Bringing narrative practices to work with Anangu people. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, *2022*(2), 18–24. https://doi.org/10.4320/ULHF5982	2. Descriptive paper
Koganei, K., Asaoka, Y., Nishimatsu, Y., & Kito, S. (2021). Women's psychological experiences in a narrative therapy-based group: An analysis of participants' writings and Beck Depression Inventory–Second Edition. *Japanese Psychological Research*, *63*(4), 466-475.	4. Reflections on narrative group more broadly, not just Tree of Life
Kumari, D., P. (2025). Evaluating the effectiveness of a tree of life (ToL) intervention on an older adult (OA) psychiatric ward. *FPOP Bulletin: Psychology of Older People, 1(169).* https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsfpop.2024.1.169.55	Not accessible

Reference	Exclusion criteria
Lau-Zhu, A., & Mann, J. (2023). “I'm a man now”: Using Narrative Therapy to support an adult with Down syndrome transition to a new life. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *51*(4), 577–585. https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12526	5. No participant views on Tree of Life
Loubser, J., & Muller, J. C. (2011). The use of metaphors in Narrative Research in exploring and describing experiences of adolescent male orphans affected by HIV and AIDS. *HTS: Theological Studies*, *67*(2), 1-9.	2. Descriptive paper
Martin, D. (2022). A tree of spirituality: Exploring insider knowledges of balancing Catholic and first nations identities using narrative practices. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, *2*, 25–32. https://doi.org/10.4320/VWHV2408	2. Descriptive paper
McDonald, C., Townsend, J., & Gillespie, C. (2024). The “Team Tree” Professional Tree of Life intervention: development and evaluation within the acute inpatient psychiatric setting. *Mental Health Review Journal*, *29*(2), 224-238.	Not accessible
Méndez, G. A., & Cole, E. M. (2014). Engaging Latino Families in Therapy: Application of the Tree of Life Technique. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, *25*(3), 209–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/08975353.2014.939932	2. Descriptive paper

Reference	Exclusion criteria
Meyer, J. (2014). Development of alternative interpretations: The story of an orphaned boy affected by HIV and AIDS and father abandonment. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, *35*(2), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i2.884	2. Descriptive paper
Mrema, D. (2023). Using narrative practices to support academic development in an after-school program. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 16-24.	2. Descriptive paper
Mustafa, S., Van Laarhoven, C., Spencer, A., & Marrington, C. (2021). Using the tree of life remotely to connect community team colleagues during covid-19 lockdown. In *Clinical Psychology Forum* (337), 19-24.	Not accessible
Ncube, N. (2006). The tree of life project. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, *2006*(1), 3-16.	2. Descriptive paper
Ngwenya, D. (2016). " Our Branches Are Broken:" Using the Tree Of Life Healing Methodology with Victims of Gukurahundi in Matebeleland, Zimbabwe. *Peace and Conflict Studies*, *23*(1), 2.	4. Not just Tree of Life

Reference	Exclusion criteria
Nicholas, E. (2021). Seeing the forest for the trees: Exploring the forest aspect of the Tree of Life process to sustain and nourish socioecological activism. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, (1), 1-9.	2. Descriptive paper
Parham, S. (2019). Using the tree of life group in UK mental health contexts. (Doctoral dissertation, Canterbury Christ Church University).	2. Thesis
Pipe, T. B., Mishark, K., Hansen, R. P., Hentz, J. G., & Hartsell, Z. (2010). Rediscovering the Art of Healing Connection by Creating the Tree of Life Poster: A Pilot Program for Hospitalized Older Adults. *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*, *36*(6), 47–55. https://doi.org/10.3928/00989134-20100330-04	5. No participant views on Tree of Life
Schweitzer, R. D., Vromans, L., Ranke, G., & Griffin, J. (2014). Narratives of healing: A case study of a young Liberian refugee settled in Australia. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, *41*(1), 98-106.	5. No participant views on Tree of Life
Serendipity, K. (2024). Departing from stigma and secrecy and elevating stories of agency: Narrative practice in the voices of sex workers. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 2-14.	2. Descriptive paper

Reference	Exclusion criteria
Sohail, R., Carton, A., Samuel, R. (2022). A service evaluation of a Tree of Life workshop for young people with congenital heart disease. *Clinical Psychology Forum* (349), 52-57.	Not accessible
Stark, M. D., Quinn, B. P., Hennessey, K. A., Rutledge, A. A., Hunter, A. K., & Gordillo, P. K. (2019). Examining Resiliency in Adolescent Refugees Through the Tree of Life Activity. *Journal of Youth Development (Online)*, *14*(2), 130–152. https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2019.692	5. No participant views on Tree of Life
Stiles, D. A., Alaraudanjoki, E., Wilkinson, L. R., Ritchie, K. L., & Brown, K. A. (2021). Researching the Effectiveness of Tree of Life: an Imbeleko Approach to Counseling Refugee Youth. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *14*(1), 123–139. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-019-00286-w	2. Research proposal
Tobin, L. (2023). "Thinking about what makes you you": An exploration of the experience of care leavers in engaging with collective narrative practice through the Tree of Life (Doctoral dissertation, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust/University of Essex).	2. Thesis
Wonders, S., & Lee, C. (2019). Exploring roots and fruit: Using the 'Tree of Life' to help teams manage change. In *Clinical Psychology Forum* (Vol. 315, pp. 22-26).	Not accessible

Appendix 4 Example of the Thematic Synthesis Coding Process

Belonging and the Collective	Connection and Relationships	Positive Identity and Empowerment	A Preferred and Helpful Approach	Unique Features of the Tree of Life	Sharing Experiences	Learning from Each Other	Emotional Expression
Feeling part of collective	connecting with others	Similarity and individuality	Helpful	External validation	Sharing experiences	Resourcefulness of group	Validating feelings
Belonging	Relating to others	Positive self view	Value for helping them and others	Helpful tool for later reflection	Feeling of openness	Learning from others	Letting out feelings
Belonging	Relating to others	Self-reflection	Helpful	Celebration is valued	Space to share without fear of judgement	Resourcefulness of group	Expressing feelings
Meeting others with shared experiences	Connecting people	Strengths and individual qualities	Value of activity for self and others	A different kind of activity	Expressing feelings	Learning about own needs	Expression
Meeting others with shared experiences	Empowered by connection with others	Self-esteem	Tree is valued and will be kept	A different way of interacting	Understanding each other	Learning from other people	Discussing emotions
Not alone	Connection	separating them from issues	A resource for future	Ability to share what is safe	Feeling understood	Learning new things	Talking is helpful
Part of collective	Social connections	Realisation of skills	An important resource	Holding back if not feeling safe	Meeting people in similar situations	Lots of new information	Safe space to talk
	Growing closer as a result of learning	Separated from problem	Positive focus of activity	Strengths focus is novel	shared experiences	Learning from others	Expressing emotions, letting go
Not alone	Group connections developed	Greater self-care	Valued input from facilitators	Engaging	Sharing experiences	Resourcefulness amongst community	Safe space to open up
Belonging	Social connection	Separating from problems	Expression is valued	Developing richness of story through approach	Sharing experiences	Learning from group	Expressing feelings
Belonging		Moving away from single identity	Wider reaching impact	Better than other groups	Relating to similar people	Giving to others	Emotional release
Awareness of collective	Connecting with new people	Awareness of strength		Tree as developing over time and useful for the future	Comforting to know others experiences	Resourcefulness	
Not alone	Developing relationships	Developing fuller ideas of who they are	Helpful and positive	Different to usual channels of support	Sharing is novel	New knowledge	
Belonging and group cohesion	Connection with others	Wider than just problems	Focus on self is helpful	Control over involvement	Sharing with group	Resourceful group	
Feeling of not being alone	Meeting new people	Richness of themselves	Tree is used to reflect life and is valued	Tree as a useful tool	Space to express feelings	Learning from each other	
Awareness of collective experience	Friendships	Holistic focus	Group is valuable	Safe distance from past	Value of opening up	Learning experience	
Not alone	Connecting with each other	Representing life	Tree as valuable	Metaphor helps to retain	An accessible method for expression	Understanding perspectives	
Value of group in therapeutic context	Connecting with other people	Expanding sense of self	A safe experience	Metaphor was welcomed	Talking about lives	Learning from each other	
Collective activity	Connection with others	Awareness of own strengths	Value of safe space	Tree metaphor is helpful and accessible	Facilitating open communication	Learning from others	
Togetherness in group	social connection	Rich descriptions of life		Tree metaphor is helpful and accessible	Seeing a new side to each other	Taking resources from group	
Belonging and cohesion	Connecting with others	Awareness of qualities as strengh	Therapeutic	Tree as a helpful metaphor	Learning about others and cultures	Learning and resources from others	
Not alone	Connections developing	Recognition of rich backgrounds	Sense of security	Better than other psychological support	New learning fosters connection	Valuing own history when hearing other people's stories	
Group reflection	New connections	New views of strengths	Relaxing	Benefits compared to other approaches	Becoming more familiar supports relationships	Changed views in response to group members	
Togetherness and strength	Trusting group	Awareness of strengths	Warmth and positivity	Preparation needed for accessibility	Learning about each other		
Not alone, awareness of support network	Connection with others	Upskilled	Supportive, helpful	Need for accessibility	Learning previously unknown things		
Bringing people together	Positive to meet others	Self-esteem and awareness of strength	Therapeutic	Global applicability of concepts	Learning about others		
Connection over shared experiences	Improved social life	New awareness of strengths	Supporting wellbeing	Relevance of questioning for all groups	Learning about things in common		
Community and togetherness	Identifying strengths in others	Changed view of self and strengths	Increased wellbeing for self and others in life		Sharing about life		
Group support	Safe space to share	Feeling more capable and empowered	Stronger		Learning about others		
Not alone	Supporting each other	Representing strengths	Reducing shame		Understanding other peoples stories		

Appendix 5: Thematic Synthesis Descriptive and Analytic Themes

Analytical Theme	Descriptive Themes	Number of Studies Included	Example Quotation
The Importance of the Group Context	Belonging and the Collective Experience	10	If some of them were not HIV, I don't think this session would be as open like this, because we don't know each other but we connect somehow (Vitale et al, 2019, p. 4)
	Connection and Relationships	11	Interviewees also expressed their enjoyment in Meeting new people (Theme 4 P) and interacting with staff, which was also supported by informal feedback from staff (Németh et al, 2024, p. 7)
	Sharing Experiences	11	In discussion, participants noted that they had not known information about each other, such as the fact they had all experienced exclusions from previous schools or shared diagnoses in common. This knowledge seemed to improve the group cohesion and sense of belonging within the group (Fleming et al, 2023, p. 144)
	Learning from Each Other	7	… described the sessions as "a really good flood of knowledge". Young people saw themselves as experts able to "learn from each other's experience" and to "think about what you do and others do to cope" (Casdagli et al, 2017, p. 13)

The Value of the Tree of Life	Unique Features of the Tree of Life	7	One parent commented: "Just the whole programme, the way it looks . . . it's all designed to make you think . . . about what went on before, where you are now, and what your aspirations are." (Rowley et al, 2020, p. 122)
	Creative Process	4	Yes, I think with me, the technical (i.e., taking part in arts activities) was more than opening up about my past or my life. I think I'm most comfortable talking about myself when I feel safe, yes. Yes, like I said, to me, it ended up bringing out the big child which is in me... You're just putting something on paper that just comes out of your mind and your past (Vitale et al, 2019, p. 7)
Alternative Thinking and Change	New Perspectives	7	Hania said: '[the group is] making me look at things in a different light (Haselhurst et al, 2021, p. 58).
	Positive Identity and Empowerment	10	Realising that diabetes is just one part of me helps me in feeling more confident (Casdagli et al, 2017, p. 14) Attendees generally agreed that the ToL metaphor empowered them to plan their recovery: This is very much like where are you coming from, where do you want to go, and there's something (Wellman et al, 2016, p. 177).
	Change for the Future	8	This has kept me going and it's made me look at what I'm good at, what I can do when I get out of hospital (Wellman et al, 2016, p. 177).

Psychologically Safe and Supportive	A Preferred and Supportive Approach	7	Participant 2. It has a positive drive to it, and I think that's what made it so potent! (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018, p. 87)
	Reflecting and Reconnecting	7	They reported that they found reflecting on their past and discussing their roots helpful (e.g.,"I liked talking about our foundations and roots and doing this now is blessing") (Khawaja et al, 2022, p. 37)
	Emotional Expression	5	I felt included and happy that I could express my feelings They can learn a lot and relate to new people (Bolt et al, 2024, p. 988)
	Positive and Engaging	7	For example, Bruce and Hazel pointed to the 'happy face' visual answer option, Ivy said 'happy [referring to the happy face], it was good,', and Ackley said 'it was all good.' (Németh et al, 2024, p. 6)

Appendix 6: Reflexive Research Journal Extract Detailing the Researcher's Experience of the Tree of Life

27.11.2024

Today, we had a DAEP taught session around narrative therapeutic approaches and the Tree of Life. As part of this, we engaged in the Tree of Life as a group. We all contributed to make one big tree to represent our cohort experience. This involved lots of collaboration, creativity, and discussion about our shared experiences. I left feeling closer to the group and with a sense that we had been on a journey together over the last three years.

I am reflecting on how I experienced the Tree of Life, and how to ensure I appropriately bracket my experiences when completing analysis. I think there are a few key differences between my experience and the participants' experiences which will help me to separate the two. Firstly, my cohort worked together to build one Tree, which meant that it did not entirely represent my story or my views. For example, there were several challenges described on our Tree (visually represented with bugs rather than storms) which I did not relate to. Furthermore, we were under a time pressure to complete the Tree, meaning much of the time was spent cutting out and colouring in leaves and fruits, rather than engaging in conversation and reflection. Although it was a positive experience, I do not consider myself to have encountered many narrative therapeutic elements of the process, unlike participants in this research.

Appendix 7: Stakeholder Engagement Letter

School of Psychology

Engagement Letter

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Title of Project: Exploring the experience of children and young people with special educational needs engaging with the Tree of Life

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1601R

Researcher: Emily Harris Email: lpxeh3@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis Email: lpayf@nottingham.ac.uk

Dear ___,

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Nottingham. As part of my training, I am conducting research exploring the experiences of children and young people with special educational needs taking part in the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life is a group-based therapeutic tool to support people to reflect on their stories in a way that celebrates their strengths and resilience. This includes reflecting on their background, strengths, hopes and dreams, important people in their lives, the gifts they have received from others, and the challenges they have encountered. I will then conduct individual, informal interviews with participants to gather their views on the experience. The interviews will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed and analysed.

There is limited research which seeks the views of children and young people with SEN on their experience of the Tree of Life. This research presents an opportunity for children and young people to share their experiences and views in an informal and supportive context. This will hopefully support an understanding of how children and young people can be supported in future.

I am contacting you to ask for your permission and support to conduct this research in your setting.

As a researcher, my role will be as follows:

- To design all resources (including letters, information sheets, consent forms, Tree of Life workshop).
- To provide participant selection criteria.
- To lead all Tree of Life workshops.
- To conduct all interviews.
- To manage practicalities around the research including ethical approval, data management (e.g., intellectual property, data protection, data analysis), and write up of findings.

- To provide a summary of the research, including findings and suggestions for future research.
- To credit supporting staff and participants (anonymously) in a written acknowledgement in the final published research.
- To provide the setting with Tree of Life resources once the research has been published.

The assistance I am seeking is as follows:

- Staff and children/young people to give their views on the accessibility of resources.
- Staff to support recruitment based on the participant selection criteria, including forwarding letters to interested parents and children/young people.
- Minimum of two class-based adults (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants) to support the Tree of Life workshops, including supporting with creating drawings, supporting children/young people's understanding of content, and emotional safety (during the discussion of potentially sensitive topics).
- An adult to be present during interviews if participants wish. Alternatively, an adult to make regular visual check ins throughout interviews.

The participant selection criteria is as follows:

- A group of eight or more children/young people in the same year group
- To have Special Educational Needs
- To communicate verbally in English (with visual and other supports supplementing this communication)
- All participants to be familiar with each other (to facilitate an environment of emotional safety)

Thank you for reading and considering this request. If you agree to take part in the research, please see the attached form. Please feel free to contact me at the above email address if you would like further information.

Yours sincerely,
Emily Harris (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

Appendix 8: Stakeholder Engagement Agreement Form

School of Psychology

Stakeholder engagement

Title of Project: *Exploring the experience of children and young people with special educational needs engaging with the Tree of Life*

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1601R

Researcher: Emily Harris Email: lpxeh3@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis Email: lpayf@nottingham.ac.uk

As a researcher, I commit to:

- Design all resources (including letters, information sheets, consent forms, Tree of Life workshop).
- Provide participant selection criteria.
- Lead all Tree of Life workshops.
- Conduct all interviews.
- Manage practicalities around the research including ethical approval, data management (e.g., intellectual property, data protection, data analysis), and write up of findings.
- Provide a summary of the research, including findings and suggestions for future research.
- Credit supporting staff and participants (anonymously) in a written acknowledgement in the final published research.
- Provide the setting with Tree of Life slides once the research has been published.

As a supporting stakeholder engaging with this research, I commit to enabling:

- Staff and children/young people to give their views on the accessibility of resources.
- Staff to support recruitment based on the participant selection criteria, including forwarding letters to interested parents and children/young people.
- Minimum of two class-based adults (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants) to support the Tree of Life workshops, including supporting with creating drawings, supporting children/young people's understanding of content, and emotional safety (during the discussion of potentially sensitive topics).
- An adult to be present during interviews if participants wish. Alternatively, an adult to make regular visual check ins throughout interviews.

The participant selection criteria is as follows:

- A group of eight or more children/young people in the same year group
- To have Special Educational Needs
- To communicate verbally in English (with visual and other supports supplementing this communication)
- All participants to be familiar with each other (to facilitate an environment of emotional safety)

This study has been fully explained to me and I commit to assisting with the research as outlined above.

Name (in block capitals):

Signature:

Date:

I have explained the study to the above stakeholder and commit to undertaking the research as outlined above.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Appendix 9: Example Tree of Life Slides

Ground rules…

- What is important to us?
- How can we keep ourselves safe?
- How can we be supportive?

Roots – your background

- What is your background?
- Where do you come from?
- Where is your family from?
- Where were you born?
- Where did you go to school?
- If you don't know, how can you find out?

Trunk – your skills and strengths

- What talents and skills do you have?
- What are you good at?
- What are you proud of?
- What do other people say you are good at?
- Can you write? Draw? Play an instrument?
- What is good about your personality?

Appendix 10: Reflexive Research Journal Extract from the Tree of Life Session Delivery

Session One

Today, I delivered the first Tree of Life session. This included 'getting to know each other' games, creating ground rules, and starting the Roots. I am reflecting on the session and the nature of the Tree of Life in this context.

Firstly, I am wondering the extent to which group members will engage with the approach in a classroom context. They spent time discussing their roots with each other, but I could see that they eventually moved on to other topics of conversation. Whilst this isn't inherently negative, because they are still engaging with the collective nature, I wonder whether the Tree of Life would be more effective in a smaller group, or as an intervention run outside of the classroom.

I also wonder whether a secondary school classroom supports or hinders the development of a therapeutic environment and psychological safety. At several points throughout the session, the co-facilitator gave out 'behaviour warnings'. This might reflect the need for future researchers or Tree of Life facilitators to carefully consider group dynamics or adapt the Tree of Life for use outside of the classroom.

Appendix 11: Participant Information Sheet with Simple Summary

An additional participant information sheet was developed to include symbols but is not appended for copyright reasons.

School of Psychology
Participant Information Sheet

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Title of Project: *Exploring the experience of children and young people with special educational needs engaging with the Tree of Life*

Insert Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1601R

Researcher: Emily Harris Email: lpxeh3@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Yvonne Francis Email: lpayf@nottingham.ac.uk

Hi. My name is Emily. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist.

This is an invitation for you to take part in a research study exploring your experience of a workshop called the Tree of Life. 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. You can ask someone to help you.

What will happen?

We will do a Tree of Life workshop with some of your school friends. The Tree of Life helps us to think about our lives, what has happened to us, and what we are good at. We will think about our background, strengths, dreams, who is important to us, how others have helped us, and the challenges we have faced.

After this, you will meet with me, and we will talk about what you thought about the Tree of Life. This will be relaxed, and you can say as much or as little as you want. You can have an adult with you if you like. We will record our talk so I can change our speech to writing later and think about what you told me.

What are the benefits of taking part?

There is not much research like this already so you will be helping people to understand what the Tree

of Life is like and what other support young people like you might like in future.

You will be supported to tell me what you think and share your honest views.

What are the risks of taking part?
We might talk about some things that remind you of sad or worrying times in your life. You can stop talking at any time and we will check in with you to make sure you are okay. You can have someone with you if you want. After, I will talk to you about the research, and you can ask me questions. We will make sure you have people who can support you.

When I write the research as a document for other people to read, your name will be removed so no one can identify you. Because I will only interview a few young people, someone who knows that you have spoken to me might be able to tell which stories are yours. I will make sure your Tree drawings are anonymous (do not have your name on) and do not have parts of your story that could identify you.

What will happen to the data?
This research will be published in a thesis (a long piece of writing for a university), and possibly in a journal (a shorter piece of writing for other psychologists) or a presentation.

You can decide whether to take part in this research. You do not have to take part and can stop at any time. All data (including your name and what you say) will be kept private and only used for the research. It will follow the law about data (Data Protection Act). The University of Nottingham will process your personal data. Please see the attached Privacy Notice, which explain how this is done and the rights you have.

If you have any questions, please ask. You can contact us after the research using the email address at the top. You can ask someone to help you.

If you agree to take part, please fill in the consent form and hand it to ___ at school.

Thank you,
Emily

Simple summary

My name is Emily, and I am a researcher.

I would like to hear what you think about an activity called the Tree of Life. This would help us to understand what it is like for you and how to help young people in future.

I will ask you questions, and you can have pictures to help you. I will record the sound in our conversation. This will last no more than 30 minutes.

You can have an adult with you if you like. If you find anything upsetting, we can stop or talk about it afterwards.

You do not have to take part and can stop at any time. You will have symbols so you can tell me if you want to stop.

Everything you say will be confidential unless I am worried about you or someone else. Your data will be kept safe. See the Privacy Notice for more information.

You can ask me questions if you want to know more.

Thank you!

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

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 12: Parent/Carer Information Sheet

School of Psychology

Parent/Carer Information Letter

Title of Project: *Exploring the experience of children and young people with special educational needs engaging with the Tree of Life*

Insert Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1601R

Researcher: Emily Harris Email: lpxeh3@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis Email: lpayf@nottingham.ac.uk

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Nottingham. As part of my training, I am conducting research exploring the experiences of children and young people with Special Educational Needs taking part in the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life is a group-based therapeutic tool to support people to reflect on their stories in a way that celebrates their strengths and resilience. This includes reflecting on their background, strengths, hopes and dreams, important people in their lives, the gifts they have received from others, and the challenges they have encountered.

I am contacting you to ask for your permission to invite your child/young person to join this research.

Your child/young person will join the Tree of Life workshop alongside some peers. This involves a maximum of six sessions, once per week as part of their school day. If your child/young person decides to participate in this research, they would then be invited to join an informal interview with me to share their views on their experience of the Tree of Life workshop. To support this research, the interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed. The whole interview will last for no more than 30 minutes.

What are the benefits of taking part?

There is limited research which seeks the views of children and young people with Special Educational Needs on their experience of the Tree of Life. This research presents an opportunity for your child/young person to share their experiences and views in an informal and supportive context. This will hopefully allow the researcher and others to understand how children and young people can

be supported in future.

What are the risks of taking part?

It is anticipated that the Tree of Life and subsequent interview will be a positive experience overall. However, by discussing their experiences, your child/young person may recall sensitive issues and have feelings of discomfort. Their wellbeing will be consistently prioritised, and they will be able to end the discussion at any time. The interview context will be informal, will be participant-led, and your child/young person can have a supporting adult with them if they wish. If they do not wish to have a supporting adult, an adult will be asked to check on them at regular intervals. The researcher will have a debrief with your child/young person following the interview to check in on their wellbeing, offer support, and identify who they can speak to if they require further support.

All data will be anonymised, and your child/young person will be assigned a pseudonym. Due to the small-scale nature of the study, their experiences may be identifiable to someone who knows that they are participating in this research.

What will happen to the data?

This research is conducted as part of an Educational Psychology doctorate and will be published in a thesis. It may also be published as a journal article or presentation.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you/your child/young person are under no obligation to take part. You/your child 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 do not hesitate to ask now. We can also be contacted after your participation at the above email address.

Thank you for reading this letter and considering this request. Please feel free to contact me at the above email address if you would like further information or are interested in taking part. Alternatively, please let ___ (SENCo) know that you would like to take part and she can arrange for further information to be sent to you.

Yours sincerely,
Emily Harris (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

Appendix 13: Participant Consent Form

An additional participant consent form was developed to include symbols but is not appended for copyright reasons.

School of Psychology

Participant Consent Form

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Exploring the experience of children and young people with special educational needs engaging with the Tree of Life

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1601R

Researcher: Emily Harris Email: lpxeh3@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis Email: lpayf@nottingham.ac.uk

Please answer these questions independently. Please tick the boxes below.

	YES	NO
I read and understood the information sheet		
I had the chance to ask questions about the study		
If I asked questions, my questions have been answered well enough		
I understand that I can say no to joining in with the study and can change my mind at any time		
I understand that the researcher will record the sound in our interview		
I agree for my drawing to be made anonymous and added to the research writing		

I understand that my data will be used for this research and will not be shared unless the researcher is worried about me or someone else		
I agree to take part in the study		

This study has been explained to me, I understand the information, and I agree to take part.

Name (in block capitals):

Signature:

Date:

I have explained the study to the above participant, and they have agreed to take part.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Appendix 14: Parent/Carer Consent Form

School of Psychology

Parent/Carer Consent Form

Title of Project: *Exploring the experience of children and young people with special educational needs engaging with the Tree of Life*

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1601R

Researcher: Emily Harris Email: lpxeh3@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis Email: lpayf@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
- I give permission for the interview with my child/young person to be audio recorded. YES/NO
- I give permission for my child's/young person's drawing to be anonymised and included in the written version of this research. YES/NO
- Do you understand that your child's/young person's data will only be used for this research and will not be shared unless the researcher is concerned for the safety of your child/young person or someone else? YES/NO
- Do you understand that this research will be published in a thesis and may also be published in a journal? YES/NO
- Do you understand that you/your child/young person are free to withdraw from the study? (at any time and without giving a reason) YES/NO
- Do you agree to take part in the study? YES/NO

This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree for my child/young person to take part.

Name (in block capitals):

Signature:

Date:

I have explained the study to the above parent/carer, and they have agreed for their child/young person to take part.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Appendix 15: Ethical Approval from the University of Nottingham

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: **S1601R**

Tuesday 11th June 2024

Dear Emily Harris & Yvonne Francis

Ethics Committee Review
Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research ': Exploring the experience of children and young people with Special Educational Needs engaging with collective narrative practice through the Tree of Life.'

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 16: Accessible Research Glossary

An additional research glossary was developed to include symbols but is not appended for copyright reasons.

Research words

What is research?

- Research means trying to find out more about something.
- Research might be asking questions to find information about something.
- Research helps us to solve problems or understand something better.
- A person who does research is a researcher.
- Research might be explained in a report.

What is data?

- Data is information in research. This might be what you have told a researcher.
- Data can also be your name and personal details.

What is confidentiality?

- Confidentiality means that researchers must keep your information private and not tell other people what you have said unless they are worried about you or someone else.
- Confidentiality means that your name and details will be kept private.

What is anonymity/anonymous?

- Anonymous means your name and any details that can be used to figure out who you are will be removed

What is consent?

- Consent means saying yes to being part of research.
- Consent is voluntary. You can decide if you want to consent. You do not have to consent.
- You can change your mind about consent at any time.

Appendix 17: Participant Debrief Form

An additional participant debrief form was developed to include symbols but is not appended for copyright reasons.

School of Psychology

Participant Debrief

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Title of Project: *Exploring the experience of children and young people with special educational needs engaging with the Tree of Life*

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1601R

Researcher: Emily Harris Email: lpxeh3@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis Email: lpayf@nottingham.ac.uk

Thank you so much for taking part in this research. You will hopefully help us to understand the Tree of Life and how young people like you can be supported.

I will follow the law to make sure your data (words and name) are kept safe (Data Protection Act, 2018). When I write the research, your name will be removed so no one can identify you. As I will only interview a few young people, someone who knows that you have spoken to me might be able to tell which stories are yours.

If you do not want me to include your views, you can tell me, and I will delete your data. Please email me or ask someone to help you to contact me on or before Friday 6th December 2024.

I hope this has been a good experience and you have felt supported. We talked about who you can speak to at home or school if you need help. If you are still worried or unhappy, please email me or ask someone to help you to contact me. I can suggest who you might be able to talk to for more help.

Yours sincerely,
Emily

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

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 18: Parent/Carer Debrief Form

School of Psychology

Parent/Carer Debrief

Title of Project: *Exploring the experience of children and young people with special educational needs engaging with the Tree of Life*

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1601R

Researcher: Emily Harris Email: lpxeh3@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis Email: lpayf@nottingham.ac.uk

Thank you so much for supporting your child/young person to participate in this research exploring their experiences of taking part in the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life is a group-based therapeutic tool to support people to reflect on their stories in a way that celebrates their strengths and resilience. This includes reflecting on their background, strengths, hopes and dreams, important people in their lives, the gifts they have received from others, and the challenges they have encountered. There is limited existing research which seeks the views of children and young people with Special Educational Needs on their experience of the Tree of Life. Your child/young person's contribution will hopefully support a greater understanding of this approach and how children/young people in schools can be supported more widely.

All data will be stored securely in line with the Data Protection Act (2018) and used for research purposes only. All data will be anonymised, and your child/young person will be assigned a pseudonym during the publication of this research. Due to the small-scale nature of the study, their experiences may be identifiable to someone who knows that they are participating in this research. If you want to withdraw your child/young person's data from this research, this can be done up until the data has been transcribed and anonymised. If you would like to withdraw their data, this can be arranged by contacting me on or before Friday 6th December 2024.

I hope this has been a positive experience for your child/young person. Please be assured that adults were available to support them throughout the process, and they have been supported to consider who they can speak to in school and at home if they have any questions or worries. However, if they felt distressed following this involvement, please do not hesitate to contact me. I will make suggestions for further support, including speaking with pastoral staff at school and free external counselling services.

Yours sincerely,
Emily

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

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

Appendix 19: Interview Schedule

A simplified version of the interview schedule was developed to include symbols and was provided for participants but is not appended for copyright reasons.

The question in bold was asked initially. Subsequent questions were introduced to further explore participants' views in line with the semi-structured nature of the interview.

- **Tell me about your experience of the Tree of Life.**
- How was your experience of/how did you feel when:
    - Drawing the Tree of Life?
        - Drawing/talking/thinking about the Roots/your background?
        - Drawing/talking/thinking about the Ground/your life now?
        - Drawing/talking/thinking about the Trunk/your strengths and skills?
        - Drawing/talking/thinking about the Branches/your hopes and dreams?
        - Drawing/talking/thinking about the Leaves/your important people?
        - Drawing/talking/thinking about the Fruit/gifts you have received?
    - Putting our Trees together and sharing during the Forest of Life
    - Drawing/talking about the Storms of Life
    - The Ceremony and end session
- How did you feel when sharing your Tree with others? What was it like?
- How did you feel when other people shared their Trees? What was it like?
- What do you remember most about your Tree? What stands out?
- What do you remember most about the group? What stands out?
- What was good about the Tree of Life? Were there any parts that you liked?
- What was not good about the Tree of Life? Were there any parts that you did not like?
- Is there anything else about your experience that you would you like to tell me?

Throughout the interviews, prompt questions were used to encourage participants to share in greater depth. These included the following:

- What was that like?
- Can you tell me more?
- How did that feel?
- What did you think about that?

Appendix 20: Reflexive Research Journal Extracts from Data Analysis Process

Step 1: Reading and Re-Reading

I finished transcribing my data and started the data analysis process for Elena. Initially, I found myself reading, re-reading, and making notes on Elena's transcript with narrative theory in mind. On reflection, I think I am keen to make sense of participants' experiences, and I wonder whether I am intuitively applying theoretical perspectives in an attempt to do so. I have since been more aware of my prior knowledge and biases, bracketing what I know about theory to fully engage in an exploratory, inductive approach.

I am also finding myself reflecting on what I recall of participants' experiences during the Tree of Life sessions. My facilitator role often carried me to different areas of the room to support a range of YP, and so I cannot always remember the finer details of participants' experiences. I am consciously attempting to bracket these memories, immersing myself in Elena's transcript to focus only on her lived experiences.

Step 2: Exploratory Noting

I have found the repetitive nature of reading, re-reading, and exploratory noting to be important in developing my interpretations. Before starting IPA, I did not appreciate how many times I would need to read and re-read the transcripts. I can see it is important to keep engaging with this process over time, as I am still seeing new meaning within the data with each read. In particular, during later reads, I notice that I am making more linguistic notes. I believe this represents moving past my initial impressions of the data towards more in-depth interpretations of participants' experiences.

Step 3: Constructing Experiential Statements

Creating experiential statements has been the most challenging part of the IPA process so far. I have questioned whether my statements are constructed correctly, particularly compared to Smith et al's (2022) examples. However, Smith et al (2022) describe experiential statements as 'pithy summaries' grounded in the exploratory notes, which reassures me that statements should be based on my interpretations and cannot be objectively right or wrong.

Steps 4 and 5: Searching for Connections Across Experiential Statements, and Naming and Organising the Personal Experiential Themes

Smith et al (2022) outline several methods for completing steps 4 and 5. They recommend printing or handwriting all statements before cutting them up and moving them around. They suggest that this is preferrable so they can be easily moved and so the researcher isn't influenced by the order of statements. However, they also note that this can be done virtually. Before starting the analytic process, I considered which method to use. Eventually, I decided to use Excel and sort statements virtually. As Smith et al (2022) note, this process is doable if the researcher can easily move materials around onscreen, which Excel allows for. I also randomly ordered the statements before starting analysis to mimic the physical process they describe. Personally, I found this to be effective and easy to manage, whereas I think I would be overwhelmed physically dealing with lots of paper.

Like most other aspects of IPA, I have found this to be a lengthy and iterative process. I spent a significant amount of time organising and re-organising statements to find connections and create groupings. I have frequently referred to Elena's transcript to ensure her PETs are grounded in her experiential account and represent my interpretations of her experiences.

Step 6: Continuing Individual Analysis of Other Cases:

As I analyse each dataset, I am taking care to bracket my knowledge of other participants' PETs. So far, many of the PETs are similar. I am wondering whether this represents common experiences between participants, or rather represents my biases influencing my interpretation. I am conscious of this, so I am taking time to complete other tasks between each participants' analysis to remove myself from one context before entirely embedding myself in the next.

Step 7: Creating Group Experiential Themes Across Cases

I am now creating GETs. I am keen to maintain the idiographic commitment of IPA and ensure that all participants' PETs were represented in the GETs. I was initially worried about how to achieve this, but on reflection, I think the convergence and divergence of participants' experiences naturally emerges throughout the GETs. For example, 'Nurturing

Positive Emotional States' is a common feature of participants' accounts, but each individual experiences this differently. I can see that there will be opportunities to explore how GETs were experienced for each participant in the findings chapter, and I hope this honours the idiographic nature of IPA.

I am reflecting on how this process has been anything but linear. Even when creating my GETs, I am revisiting my PETs to consider whether they really do capture the essence of participants' data. Again, this seems typical of the iterative, flexible nature of IPA.

Appendix 21: Example Transcript, Exploratory Noting, and Experiential Statements (Zara)

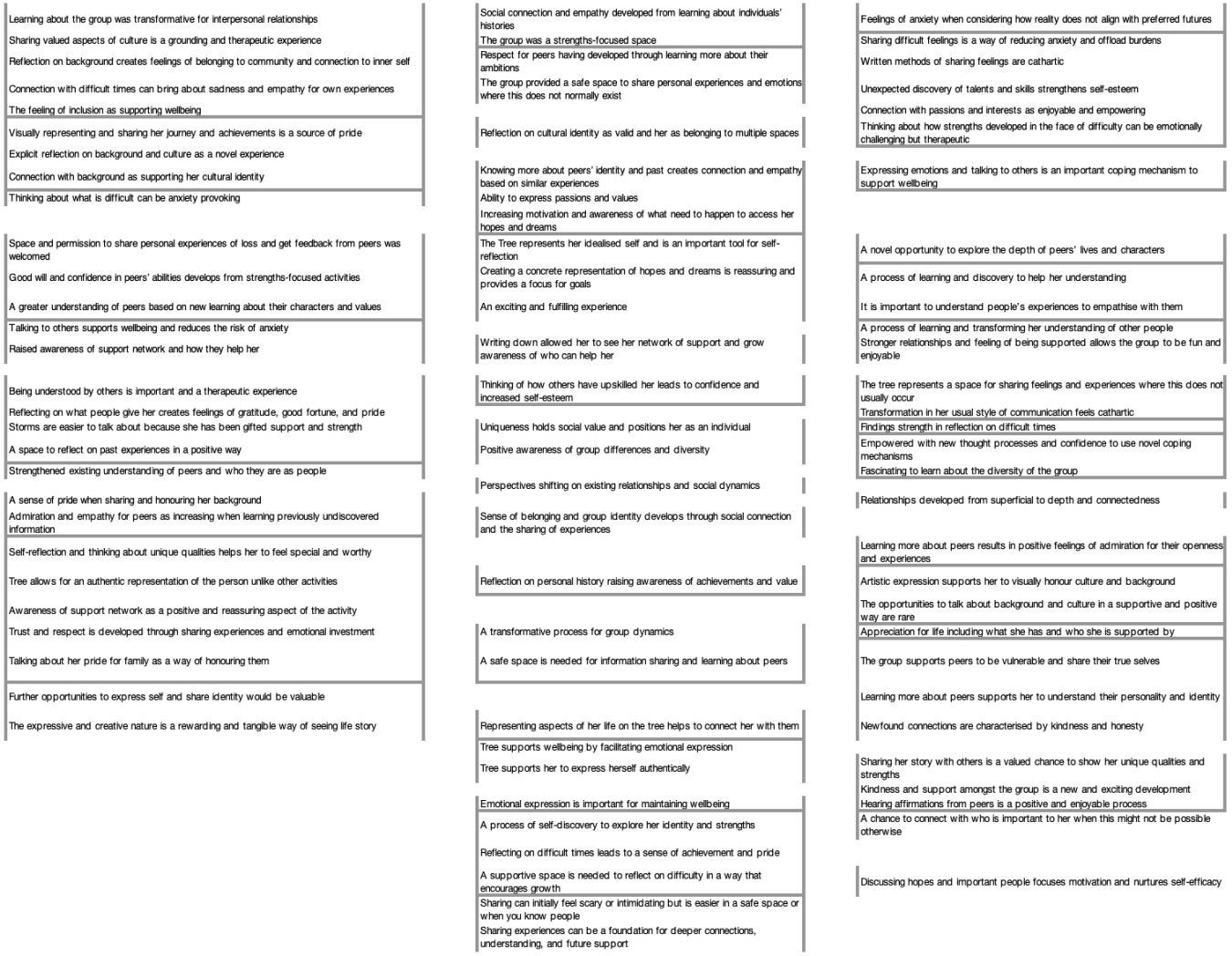
Who: interviewer (I) or Zara (Z)	Transcript	Exploratory notes Descriptive/Linguistic/Conceptual	Experiential statements
I	So can you tell me about how it felt doing your branches, your hopes and dreams?		
Z	Okay that felt nice because I loved it. I loved saying I want to be a neurologist and looking at brains. That's like, I just love it because it's like, we talk about the brain, but I feel so interested, I want to learn more. Like, what do you do to make up the person? Cause I love helping people.	Positive experience In touch with career ambitions Space to talk about passions Keen to learn more about chosen field Loved repeated – passionate about aspects of her tree Loved saying – expressive nature was valued. Sharing with peers, proud to share ambition? Promoting connection with values and what is important to her – helping people	The ability to express passions and values Increasing motivation and awareness of what need to happen to access her hopes and dreams

		Want to learn more – thinking about hopes and dreams creates a focus on the future and what she needs to do to achieve ambitions	
I	Ah so it was a way for you to talk about some of the things that were important to you.		
Z	Yeah.		
I	How did you feel when you were doing that?		
Z	I felt amazing because I felt like, because I love being like, learning about, I love learning about the brain and how people take care of the brain and take care of people. It just feels like calming to me, and I just love it. Like one day I wish I can just like look at it all and be like oh that's me now.	Positive and enthusiastic Love learning about her passions Relaxing and mindful Wanting to look back on the Tree in future Amazing – really good, in touch with passions, exciting, fulfilling Calming – relaxing, soothing, reassuring I wish – hope for the future, tree representing idealised view of what she would want	An exciting and fulfilling experience The Tree represents her idealised self and is an important tool for self-reflection Creating a concrete representation of hopes

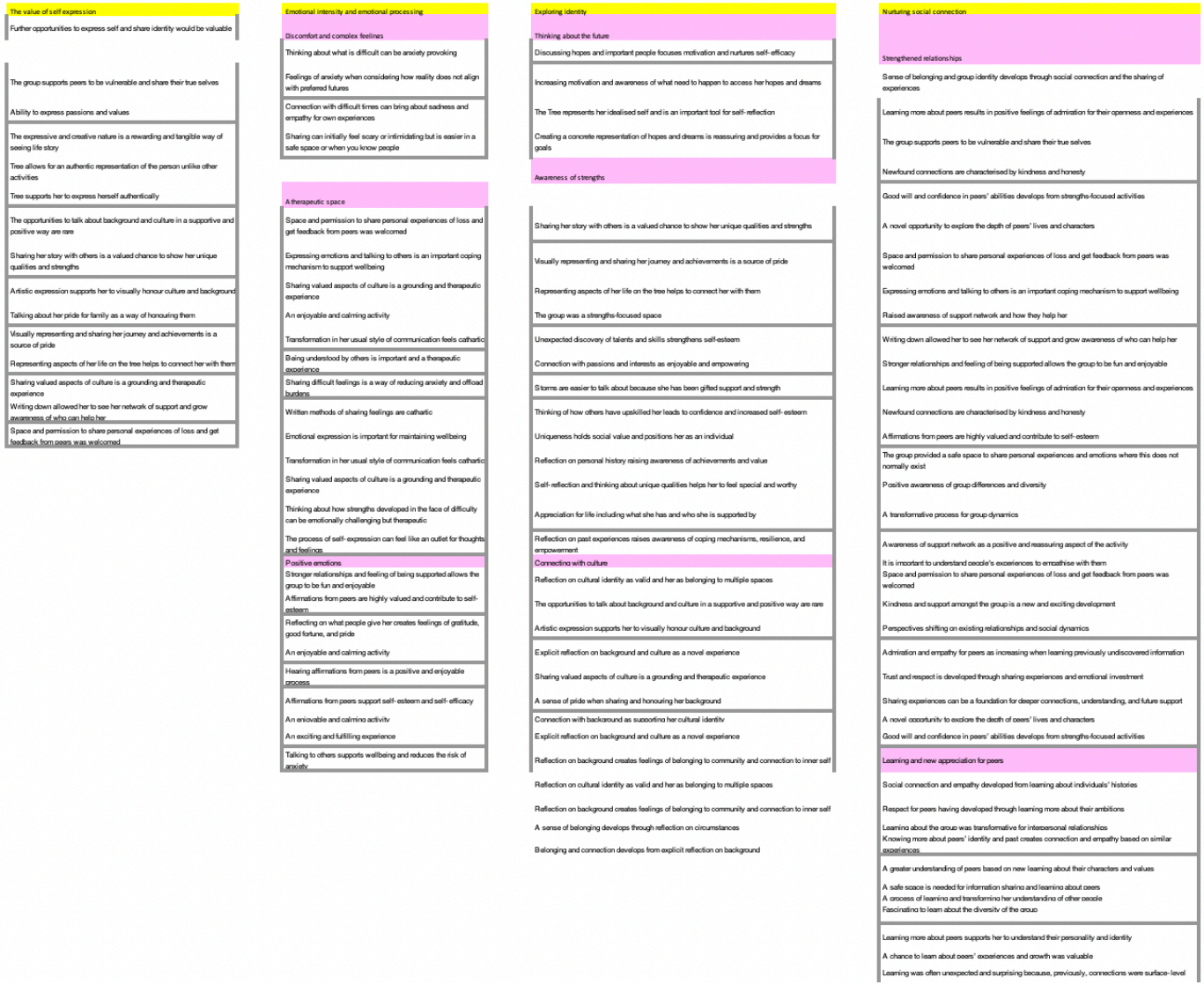
		Tree connects her with passions and energises her to work towards goals Tree provides a focus for the future and a goal to work towards A sense of connection with a preferred ideal self	and dreams is reassuring and provides a focus for goals
I	Okay. How did you feel hearing about other people's hopes and dreams?		
Z	I thought their hopes and dreams would be different, but they, but like their hopes and dreams, like, suit their personality. Like, I hope they become that, I wish them the best. Because it's very hard to, like, do it because you have to pass your GCSEs or like, another course. But I felt like, oh I believe in them, they can do it.	Surprised at other people's hopes and dreams Recognising how characteristics align with ambitions Belief in peers – positive view of their abilities I believe in them – faith, confidence, fostering good feeling amongst peers Deeper understanding of peers has helped her to understand their motivations and strengths better Belief in peers thanks to newly-developed awareness of strengths seen on tree	Good will and confidence in peers' abilities develops from strengths-focused activities A greater understanding of peers based on new learning about their characters and values

Appendix 22: Example Searching for Connections Between Experiential Statements (Zara)

Before grouping:



After grouping:



Appendix 23: Example PET Table (Zara)

PETs are presented in **UPPERCASE BOLD** and subthemes are presented in **Title Case Bold.** Experiential themes and associated quotations are shown below each subtheme.

PET 1: EXPLORING IDENTITY

Connection with Culture

Reflection on cultural identity as valid and her belonging to multiple spaces

- *"I was born in the UK though, but, like, when I was drawing it, I felt like I was part of something, included in something."* (p. 5)

Artistic expression supports her to visually honour culture and background

- *"Yeah, you know I actually did love drawing the Tree because like we talked about our background and like, I love being, like, where I came from"* (p. 32)

Sharing valued aspects of culture is a grounding and therapeutic experience

- *"I don't know how to explain it, but it was very calming to talk about my background and where I came from."* (p. 32)

A sense of pride when sharing and honouring her background

- *"It felt nice because you are part of a community that I love so much. Like, I respect everyone's community and all that and respect where they came from but its actually really nice to think about where you come from as well."* (p. 6)

Reflection on background creates feelings of belonging to community and connection to inner self

- *"Okay, so like, being, like, part of, like, Pakistan and all that. I just love the culture and all that."* (p. 4)

Awareness of Strengths

Sharing her story with others is a valued chance to show her unique qualities and strengths

- *"They were like, oh that's true because like sometimes you get a bit mad and that, but like oh you are really amazing, you're amazing in your own way, unique. Oh, well done, like, you're so unique. And I'm, like, so proud of that and it was so good*

because, I'm, like, I believe myself I'm unique. I can do good things in life, and I can, like, have my GCSEs and become a better person. And, like, yeah." (p. 35)

Visually representing and sharing her journey and achievements is a source of pride

- *"Mine was like, oh, I have so much things I can be proud of. Like, I came this far, and I did, like, amazing stuff to other people and like showed them I love them and care about them."* (p. 19)

Representing aspects of her life on the tree helps to connect her with them

- *"Where I come from, where I want to be, and my friends. They are like the main people that I love. And my family and my pets. So yeah. So, like, um, the main people are my family and my pets, and myself, and then being like a neurologist with the brain."* (p. 21)

The group was a strengths-focused space

- *"Literally like, really good. I really enjoyed the, like, talking about it and talking about like, talking about people around like their things too. Like thinking about what happened in their lives too. So interesting to hear about what they went through and how they felt about it, and how things left them a better person and all that."* (p. 1)

Unexpected discovery of talents and skills strengthens self-esteem

- *"It actually felt nice because I had like, some talents in me that, and some skills, that I didn't really think I would have." (p. 8)*

Thinking About the Future

Discussing hopes and important people focuses motivation and nurtures self-efficacy

- *"Yeah, I care about my family so much. I put them as my top priority. Like, I'm going to make them so proud. And I'm so, I actually just believe in myself because I can do this, and like if I didn't believe in myself, I'd be like, very miserable and like really sad about it. But I believe in myself now."* (p. 37)

Increasing awareness of what need to happen to access her hopes and dreams

- *"Okay that felt nice because I loved it. I loved saying I want to be a neurologist and looking at brains. That's like, I just love it because it's like, we talk about the brain, but I feel so interested, I want to learn more. Like, what do you do to make up the person? Cause I love helping people."* (p. 11-12)

The Tree represents her idealised self and is an important tool for self-reflection

- *"Like one day I wish I can just like look at it all and be like oh that's me now."* (p. 12)

Creating a concrete representation of hopes and dreams is reassuring and provides a focus for goals

- *"I felt amazing because I felt like, because I love being like, learning about, I love learning about the brain and how people take care of the brain and take care of people. It just feels like calming to me, and I just love it."* (p. 12)

PET 2: EMOTIONAL INTENSITY AND EMOTIONAL PROCESSING

Discomfort and Complex Feelings

Thinking about what is difficult can be anxiety provoking

- *"I have to calm myself down and stuff."* (p. 6)

Feelings of anxiety when considering how reality does not align with preferred futures

- *"Right now, it's like, it's okay but like I'm kind of struggling with maths and science a bit, so like so far I think it's fine, but I think it could get better."* (p. 6)

Connection with difficult times can bring about sadness and empathy for own experiences

- *"Yeah, like, putting your storms on because, like, I went through it and I felt, I felt bad for myself because I went through it."* (p. 28)

Sharing can initially feel scary or intimidating but is easier in a safe space or when you know people

- *"I believed in myself I could do it because like, I knew, like, I could do this because I usually spoke about stuff with my friends, and they are no different from my classmates."* (p. 24)

A Therapeutic Space

Space and permission to share personal experiences of loss and get feedback from peers was welcomed

- *"To be honest, I would say I was like very curious about what they were going to say because my storms are, like, really deep and they're like really sad and stuff, because, like, a lot of people passed away and all that."* (p. 10)

Expressing emotions and talking to others is an important coping mechanism to support wellbeing

- *"Because, like, I put, like, the people I trust and the people I can talk to if I ever, like, feel sad or something happens because like, if I just leave it in me it would just hurt me even more. So, like, I knew."* (p. 15)

Sharing valued aspects of culture is a grounding and therapeutic experience

- *"I don't know how to explain it, but it was very calming to talk about my background and where I came from."* (p. 4)

An enjoyable and calming activity

- *"Like, it was so much fun talking about it and writing stuff on there and watching it grow. It felt so nice. It felt like a relief to me."* (p. 25)

Transformation in her usual style of communication feels cathartic

- *"Yeah, like, putting your storms on because, like, I went through it and I felt, I felt bad for myself because I went through it. I didn't really tell anyone until I put it on there. Like, yeah, it felt like a relief to me."*

Being understood by others is important and a therapeutic experience

- *"It actually felt nice because like I can speak about some of what I went through and they could understand me and what I did to, like, do that and what happened to me when I did it. How I felt."* (p. 28)

Sharing difficult feelings is a way of reducing anxiety and offload burdens

- *"It felt good because I knew like it would be on somewhere. If I write something it made me like calm and not, like, on my chest if like I just had, like, all the things coming up and it like piles up. Yeah."* (p. 7)

Positive Emotions

Stronger relationships and feeling of being supported allows the group to be fun and enjoyable

- *"No, I loved all of them. It was so fun and there was, like, it was very interesting to see like what they went through and how I understand them now. So, like, it's very nice."* (p. 27)

Affirmations from peers are highly valued and contribute to self-esteem

- *"Oh my gosh, I actually felt so happy because someone said I'm amazing and I'm so smart, and I got so happy. I think one said I'm so proud of you and I was so happy. Like it was actually so sweet. But I knew they would be, like, I was honest about what I was thinking, and I was like that's so sweet of them."* (p. 34)

Reflecting on what people give her creates feelings of gratitude, good fortune, and pride

- *"And like when I grew up I was like, oh, I can do this, because sometimes like when I can't spell certain things they can teach me and I'm, like, so proud of that."* (p. 15)

An enjoyable and calming activity

- *"It felt so nice. It felt like a relief to me." (p. 25)*

Hearing affirmations from peers is a positive and enjoyable process

- *"Yeah, I literally was like oh that is actually, like, so sweet of them. I was like wanting to jump for joy in the middle of the class. But it was actually so much fun, I actually loved it."* (p. 36)

Affirmations from peers support self-esteem and self-efficacy

- *"They were like, oh that's true because like sometimes you get a bit mad and that, but like oh you are really amazing, you're amazing in your own way, unique. Oh,*

well done, like, you're so unique. And I'm, like, so proud of that and it was so good because, I'm, like, I believe myself I'm unique. I can do good things in life, and I can, like, have my GCSEs and become a better person. And, like, yeah." (p. 35)

PET 3: THE VALUE OF SELF-EXPRESSION

Further opportunities to express self and share identity would be valuable

- *"I thought I feel sad because I didn't want it to end. It went so fast. Its like, we did it for six weeks I think, and those six weeks went so fast. I still wanted to put more on the Tree."* (p. 25)

The group supports peers to be vulnerable and share their true selves

- *"So, when it came to their strengths, I didn't think they had those kind of strengths. I was like, oh my gosh, they look, like, I think they're being themselves now, being honest about what strengths they have. And I'm like, oh, I can see that in them, because like the person actually matches the strengths and I'm like, oh, that's actually so cute."* (p. 33)

Ability to express passions and values

- *"Okay that felt nice because I loved it. I loved saying I want to be a neurologist and looking at brains."* (p. 11)

The expressive and creative nature is a rewarding and tangible way of seeing life story

- *"Like, it was so much fun talking about it and writing stuff on there and watching it grow. It felt so nice. It felt like a relief to me."* (p. 25)

Tree supports her to express herself authentically

- *"Like, I felt like, if I just put stuff on there that was not true it would be bad because I'd know it was a lie. I don't like to lie about stuff, so I put the truth on there and it felt nice. I'm not lying about my feelings because if I put, like, lies on there, it would not be me, it'd be someone else, so it felt really… because you have to talk about yourself, not somebody else."* (p. 22)

Sharing her story with others is a valued chance to show her unique qualities and strengths

- *"I actually felt lucky because I feel like I'm special and unique. Like other people can't have the stuff I do. And I feel, when I'm like, I feel so much happier when I'm unique"* (p. 16)

Space and permission to share personal experiences of loss and get feedback from peers was welcomed

- *"To be honest, I would say I was like very curious about what they were going to say because my storms are, like, really deep and they're like really sad and stuff, because, like, a lot of people passed away and all that."* (p. 10)

PET 4: NURTURING SOCIAL CONNECTION

Strengthened Relationships

Sense of belonging and group identity develops through social connection and the sharing of experiences

- *"Like, it just feels nice when you feel like a part of a community that can literally talk to you and speak to you all the time if you want them to speak to you."* (p. 19)

Learning more about peers results in positive feelings of admiration for their openness and experiences

- *"They put, like, honest stuff on there. And I was like, wow, I didn't really know anything like that, and I am so proud of them."* (p. 31)

The group supports peers to be vulnerable and share their true selves

- *"So, when it came to their strengths, I didn't think they had those kind of strengths. I was like, oh my gosh, they look, like, I think they're being themselves now, being honest about what strengths they have. And I'm like, oh, I can see that in them, because like the person actually matches the strengths and I'm like, oh, that's actually so cute."* (p. 33)

Newfound connections are characterised by kindness and honesty

- *"Oh my gosh, I actually felt so happy because someone said I'm amazing and I'm so smart, and I got so happy. I think one said I'm so proud of you and I was so*

happy. Like it was actually so sweet. But I knew they would be, like, I was honest about what I was thinking, and I was like that's so sweet of them." (p. 34)

Good will and confidence in peers' abilities develops from strengths-focused activities

- *"Like, I hope they become that, I wish them the best. Because it's very hard to, like, do it because you have to pass your GCSEs or like, another course. But I felt like, oh I believe in them, they can do it."* (p. 13)

Raised awareness of support network and how they help her

- *"It felt nice because I have like solid important people that like, were with me and then I had to move somewhere else, but I'm still in touch with them. But like, I just like when I, I have like friends and I can just like tell them what happened, and like how I felt, like if something happened. Like, its good having people around who you can talk to because if you like don't speak to anyone you can like hurt yourself in some ways because you get piled up and you get worried about stuff." (p. 14)*

Stronger relationships and feeling of being supported allows the group to be fun and enjoyable

- *"No, I loved all of them. It was so fun and there was, like, it was very interesting to see like what they went through and how I understand them now. So, like, it's very nice."* (p. 27)

A transformative process for group dynamics

- *"Yeah, because some of the people, yeah, have like been nicer and like very respectful and that. Because, um, usually they spread things around, but they don't really now and they talk about like… its very nice when they speak about where they come from and like what they did and they, who they wanted to be. It just sounds so nice to me."* (p. 20)

Learning and New Appreciation for Peers

Social connection and empathy developed from learning about individuals' histories

- *"Literally like, really good. I really enjoyed the, like, talking about it and talking about like, talking about people around like their things too. Like thinking about*

what happened in their lives too. So interesting to hear about what they went through and how they felt about it, and how things left them a better person and all that." (p. 1)

Respect for peers having developed through learning more about their ambitions

- *"Yeah, so basically some of the people, yeah, want to be like, some people want to be like, like, very good jobs and others just want like some jobs that are, like, hard to get. Like it is very hard to get these kind of jobs because you have to pass your GCSEs and all that. And some people are like motivated to do it and others are just like I'm just going to try and see if I can do it."* (p. 2)

Learning about the group was transformative for interpersonal relationships

- *"That felt like, that felt like I knew them better now because I think before I didn't, like, know them that well, but now know, like, where they come from and, like, what they did and that is very nice."* (p. 11)

A greater understanding of peers based on new learning about their characters and values

- *"I thought their hopes and dreams would be different, but they, but like their hopes and dreams, like, suit their personality." (p. 13)*

A safe space is needed for information sharing and learning about peers

- *"Yeah, because some of the people, yeah, have like been nicer and like very respectful and that. Because, um, usually they spread things around, but they don't really now"* (p. 20)

Fascinating to learn about the diversity of the group

- *"They were all so different. It was interesting."* (p. 29)

Learning more about peers supports her to understand their personality and identity

- *"So, when it came to their strengths, I didn't think they had those kind of strengths. I was like, oh my gosh, they look, like, I think they're being themselves now, being honest about what strengths they have. And I'm like, oh, I can see that in them,*

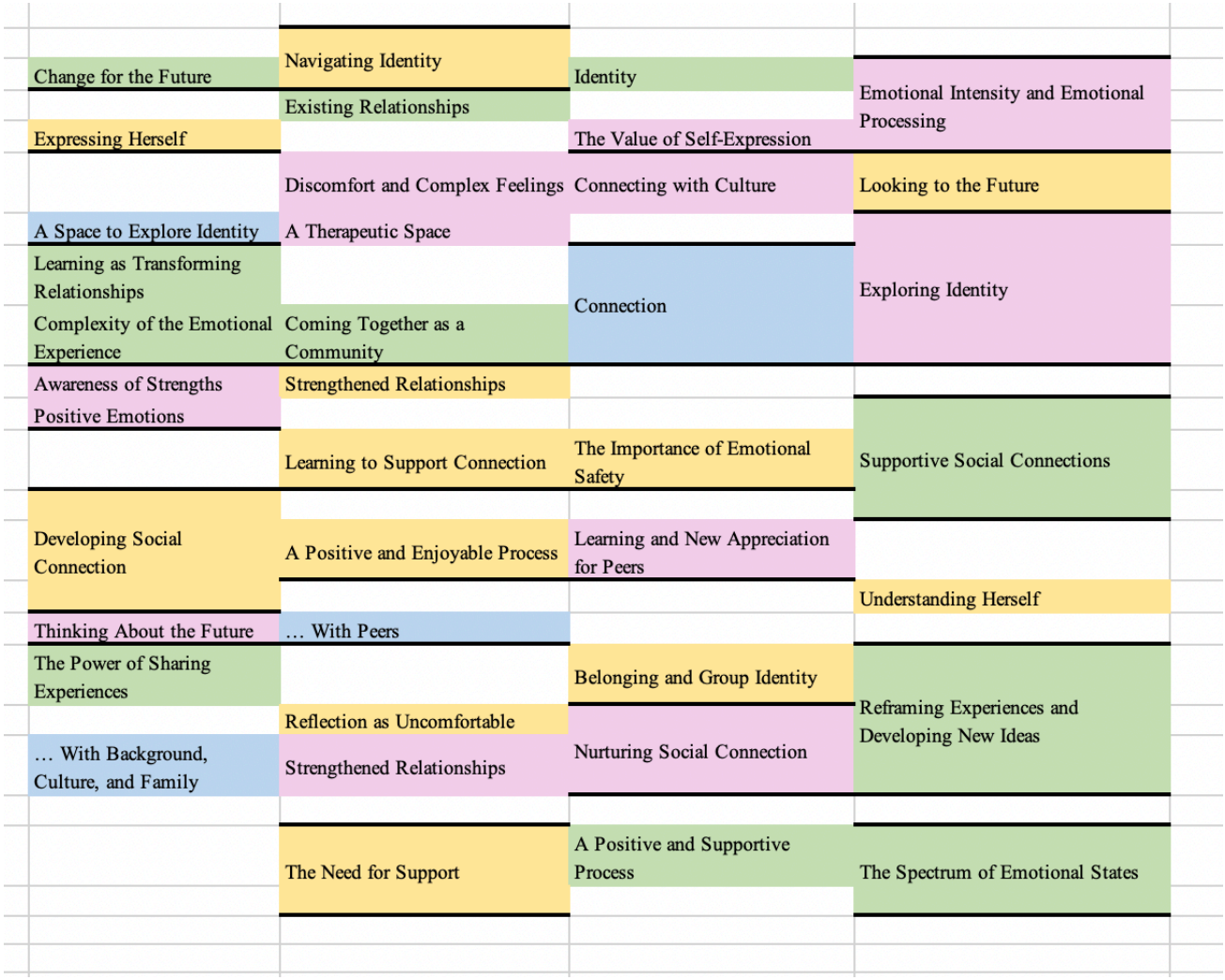
because like the person actually matches the strengths and I'm like, oh, that's actually so cute." (p. 33)

Strengthened existing understanding of peers and who they are as people

- *"Actually, that felt like, um, I felt like I knew the person, like, I knew them at the start, and I thought like I know them so well but like when we like talked about like what they went through, I was so shocked because they went through like a lot of amazing stuff"* (p.17)

Appendix 24: Example Searching for Connections Across PETs to develop GETs

Before grouping:



After grouping:

	Navigating Discomfort	
Nurturing positive states		
A Therapeutic Space	Discomfort and Complex Feelings	Fostering Connection and Togetherness
Positive Emotions	Reflection as Uncomfortable	Coming Together as a Community
A Positive and Enjoyable Process	Emotional Intensity and Emotional Processing	Strengthened Relationships
A Positive and Supportive Process		Learning to Support Connection
Priya ES		Existing Relationships
	The Spectrum of Emotional States	Connection
	The Importance of Emotional Safety	Learning as Transforming Relationships
Exploring and connecting with identity	Complexity of the Emotional Experience	Developing Social Connection
Navigating Identity	Priya ES	
Awareness of Strengths	The Need for Support	… With Peers
Exploring Identity		Learning and New Appreciation
		Supportive Social Connections
Understanding Herself		
… With Background, Culture, and Family	A Space for Self-Expression	
Connecting with Culture	The Power of Sharing Experiences	Belonging and Group Identity
Identity	The Value of Self-Expression	Nurturing Social Connection
A Space to Explore Identity	Expressing Herself	
Reframing Experiences and Developing New Ideas		
Change for the Future		
Looking to the Future		
Thinking About the Future		

Appendix 25: GET Table

GETs are presented in **UPPERCASE BOLD** and subthemes are presented in **Title Case Bold.** Associated quotations are shown below each subtheme.

NURTURING POSITIVE EMOTIONAL STATES

Uplifting and Enjoyable

- *"It was really fun. I enjoyed it and I feel like I got to know more about my classmates that I wouldn't have known if we hadn't done this. I really enjoyed it" (Elena, p. 1)*

  "… it was actually so much fun, I actually loved it." (Zara, p. 36)
- *"… just being able to share my stuff, and just sit there and have a laugh."* (Kayleigh, p. 31)
- *"I felt, uh, really good about myself and I was really proud of myself."* (Elena, p. 20)
- *"I was happy. I went straight home and showed my mum [the certificate] … I didn't stop talking about it ever since we started it. I was like, mum, we are having this Tree of Life, and she was like, what the hell is that? And I explained it to her the best I could."* (Kayleigh, p. 19)
- *"I literally was like oh that is actually, like, so sweet of them. I was like wanting to jump for joy in the middle of the class."* (Zara, p. 35)
- *"Oh my gosh, I actually felt so happy because someone said I'm amazing and I'm so smart, and I got so happy."* (Zara, p. 34)
- *"Interviewer: how did you feel when you were thinking about your hopes and dreams?*

Priya: Proud… because I imagine, was my grandpa and my grandfather, and he was wish I would be, like, a doctor…" (Priya, p. 6)

- *"It made me, uh, kind of good because, um, I care for them a lot… And, um, just really thinking about good memories, um, just made me feel good, cause I really liked what, um, what we used to do."* (Elena, p. 10)
- *"I felt, uh, really good about myself and I was really proud of myself. And my mum told me good job and then, uh, I don't know what she did with the certificate. Um, she did have a box with like a bunch of old pictures of us and just stuff and drawings that we made. And she usually keeps them all there so I, she probably put it in there."* (Elena, p. 19-20)
- *"I mean… well obviously, um, I think that my friends, it was like nice to see them happy when you say about them."* (Kayleigh, p. 7)

Promoting Therapeutic Growth

- *"This honestly really helped my mental health, and I really liked it."* (Elena, p.27)
- *"It helped me with my emotions because, like, when I get like sad, I can just put it on there. That was nice."* (Zara, p. 21)
- *"If I write something it made me like calm and not, like, on my chest if like I just had, like, all the things coming up and it like piles up."* (Zara, p. 7)
- *"I feel like everyone was just there, like happy, like nobody, like everyone… Obviously we always have a laugh and that, but I feel like everyone was just themselves. I don't know how to explain it."* (Kayleigh, p. 23)
- *"Um, I felt a little sad because I have lost some of the things. But I also felt, uh, really, uh, happy and connected with my inner self."* (Elena, p. 6)

- *"It felt good because I knew like it would be on somewhere. If I write something it made me like calm and not, like, on my chest if like I just had, like, all the things coming up and it like piles up. Yeah."* (Zara, p. 7)
- *"Because, like, I put, like, the people I trust and the people I can talk to if I ever, like, feel sad or something happens because like, if I just leave it in me it would just hurt me even more. So, like, I knew."* (Zara, p. 14-15)
- *"So, it made me, like, think of, like, what I do to stay strong. If I have a storm, I like, try to cope by, like, reading. Like, I just try to find, like, a book that I would like to read, or I just listen to music, or I just do my homework and listen to music so I just, like, calm down. Or I just go and take a nap."* (Zara, p. 29)
- *Interviewer: when you were drawing your ground, which is your life at the moment, how did that make you feel*

  Priya: Confidence. (Priya, p. 4)

NAVIGATING DISCOMFORT

Reflection Evoking Complex Feelings

- *Interviewer: How did it feel to think about the difficult times in your life?*

  Priya: Scared. (Priya, p. 8)
- *Interviewer: how did it make you feel thinking about those things during the storms?*

  Elena: Really sad. Like [YouTuber] released a video when he said he was going to quit and I did find that and I'm not the kind of person that would, um, usually cry over anything really. I felt really sad when it happened. (Elena, p. 18)
- *"I felt bad for myself because I went through it."* (Zara, p. 28).

- *"Because I don't really talk about my background that much. So, it's like… to sit there and then, like, think of it, because you don't really remember anything from your childhood. Which is really weird. Because you're just a busy little kid and then you grow up and then, you remember when you look at pictures but it's like, its gone. Just vanished."* (Kayleigh, p. 2)
- *"Right now, it's like, it's okay but like I'm kind of struggling with maths and science a bit, so like so far I think it's fine but I think it could get better. I have to calm myself down and stuff".* (Zara, p. 6)
- *"So to like think about it. It felt nice to be honest but like when you like think about like what you went through and how did you do it, it was kind of complicated because you have to think about a lot of stuff. Like you went through a lot of stuff, and you put like the main stuff on there. Like how do you feel, what do you do to become it, like…"* (Zara, p. 9)
- *"I just wanted to write that because I just want to have, nobody I was, because it can be like something that how bad happened but one day, we was all sleeping at the night and someone knocking at the door…"* (Priya, p. 5)
- *"So, I am sad that he is not there anymore, and we don't see him as much. And also, that, um, that we had to give away, um, my cat cause my mum wanted to give her away."* (Elena, p. 17)
- *"I don't know. Cause like… I don't really see like my whole family, so I don't really know that much."* (Kayleigh, p. 3)

Nerves Related to Sharing

- *"It was a bit more like, scarier, because like, obviously, you don't know if they are going to judge you or not."* (Kayleigh, p. 14)

- *"It was a bit scary but cause they all shared their Tree I felt like I should also say something about my Tree."* (Elena, p. 28)
- *"I believed in myself I could do it because like, I knew, like, I could do this because I usually spoke about stuff with my friends, and they are no different from my classmates."* (Zara, p. 23)
- *"It's hard to find the right words. Yeah. But I don't really talk about it because I feel like, cause like some people might not want to listen and I don't want… If they are not going to listen, then I don't see the point in telling them."* (Elena, p. 19)

FOSTERING CONNECTION AND TOGETHERNESS

Learning and Discovery

- *"Um, that (name) wanted to be a police officer. Um, how (name) wanted to be a head surgeon, I don't remember what it was called exactly. And I thought that, um, that was really cool. I learned that (name) was originally from, um, what was it, it was either London or, uh, it's called after a football team. Manchester. From one of them. And I thought that was really cool. And (name) used to live in a small town, that was really cool, and I liked how he talked about the town. And I enjoyed listening to them."* (Elena, p 20- 21)
- *"The group was, like, very like, talkative and all that, but they have like, never really spoken about their backgrounds before. But when it came to the Tree, like, they spoke about it, they be so honest about it and what they did. And I felt, I actually felt, like, happy because they're not lying about it. They're being so honest about it, because sometimes they do, like, lie about stuff, but they are being so honest… I was like, wow, I didn't really know anything like that, and I am so proud of them."* (Zara, p. 31)

- *"I felt happy. Because like, obviously, you see everybody's and when everyone shared them, they show things that you probably, that you would never hear a day in your life. So, yeah, got to know my class more."* (Kayleigh, p. 15)
- *"That felt like, that felt like I knew them better now because I think before I didn't, like, know them that well, but now know, like, where they come from and, like, what they did and that is very nice."* (Zara, p. 11)
- *"India is my culture. Here like some Christians they just have, like, culture. Kayleigh is like Christian, she said doesn't have culture because we are like English people."* (Priya, p. 2)
- *"I really enjoyed the, like, talking about it and talking about like, talking about people around like their things too. So interesting to hear about what they went through and how they felt about it, and how things left them a better person and all that."* (Zara, p. 1)
- *"Yeah, so basically some of the people, yeah, want to be like, some people want to be like, like, very good jobs and others just want like some jobs that are, like, hard to get."* (Zara, p. 2)
- *"Before, I only knew that they were in the same set as me and they have similar learning, um, knowledge as me, but, um, now I know a lot more about their background and it's not too different to mine."* (Elena, p. 4)
- *"But like, um, it was actually just really good knowing about what they, um, what their storms were like and what they did to, like, become someone, like, they could not become, like they thought they couldn't become that person."* (Zara, p. 10)
- *"Actually, that felt like, um, I felt like I knew the person, like, I knew them at the start, and I thought like I know them so well but like when we like talked about like what they went through, I was so shocked because they went through like a lot of*

amazing stuff. I'm literally like so proud of them and they have so many achievements." (Zara, p. 17)

Strengthened Bonds

- *"We used to only see each other as, um, classmates. Now, I feel like most of us see each other as, um, much closer friends."* (Elena, p. 15).
- *"I think proud. I think, um, could be a little bit, um, cause of their Trees. Some people just want to tell those like secret things."* (Priya, p. 7)
- *"Yeah, because some of the people, yeah, have like been nicer and like very respectful and that. Because, um, usually they spread things around, but they don't really now."* (Zara, p. 20)
- *"And like, I got to know you better and, like, [teacher] and got to know my whole class better."* (Kayleigh, p. 30)
- *"I love how much, how understanding the group was and how keen they were to learn more about me. I wasn't honestly expecting that. Normally, I am more of a quiet person and if I wish to talk with anyone or do anything with anyone, I'll let them usually talk more about themselves because um, I don't normally talk about myself that much. And, um, realising that people do want to listen has really changed my mind about my class."* (Elena, p. 24)
- *"Like, I hope they become that, I wish them the best. Because it's very hard to, like, do it because you have to pass your GCSEs or like, another course. But I felt like, oh I believe in them, they can do it."* (Zara, p. 13)
- *"... its actually really nice speaking about it with them so that they understand you even more. And, like, when we get to know each other, we know each other, like,*

better, and we can, like, trust each other and, like, speak to each other if we need something." (Zara, p. 24)

- *"I feel a little bit more, um, connected with my classmates now."* (Elena, p. 2)

Community and Belonging

- *"It felt like, um, I'm part of a, it, like before I did feel like I was part of a community, but I feel much, um, closer to it than I did before."* (Elena, p. 3)
- *"I feel like it just brought everyone together and we saw how similar some people actually are. And, like, because obviously we don't have conversations about just us and it showed that everyone has similarities."* (Kayleigh, p. 25)
- *"… to me it feels like we are actually similar and like we actually are a community. Because we are going to be in the same group for two years and a half now."* (Kayleigh, p. 27)
- *"Like, it just feels nice when you feel like a part of a community that can literally talk to you and speak to you all the time if you want them to speak to you."* (Zara, p. 18)
- *"But like, like, it's so nice knowing that you're like part of something, that people love you and they care about you, and they'll do anything for you. And, like, they can always, like, you can always, like, they'll always have your back, like, if you ever need something."* (Zara, p. 21)
- *"I feel like… It's about, like, us. Um, and like obviously we normally, like, some boys normally like get told off all the time. Um, so I feel like it just brought everyone together and we saw how similar some people actually are. And, like, because obviously we don't have conversations about just us and it showed that everyone has similarities."* (Kayleigh, p. 25)

- *"We all, like we've been there as a group for, since Year 7. So, we've all, and then this made us feel like a better, like, community. We know each other better."* (Kayleigh, p. 28)

EXPANDING THINKING AND NEW INSIGHT

Reframing Life Now

- *Interviewer: Is there anything about your Tree that surprised you?*
  Kayleigh: Probably how much, how like half the people moved throughout the whole Tree. Because obviously my mum and dad and sisters are at the roots and then they are at the leaves and fruits as well, in different ways. (Kayleigh, p. 13)
- *"I never really thought my dad actually did… did anything. Like, he's my dad and, I, I know, he did give me some things, but I never realised that he had, um, he has learned me to… he has taught me to draw, um, until I actually did that, I, that's when I realised…"* (Elena, p. 9)
- *"Um, pretty much the same. Um, but I realise how stupid our arguments are. Yeah."* (Elena, p. 24)
- *"They were all so different. It was interesting. They were like, um, I just talk to my friends and see like what they can help me with…. So, I feel like that's maybe a good way to cope with your stuff and or like, ask your therapist and all that. And I thought, like, I will talk more now."* (Zara, p. 29)
- *"Honestly, before this, I didn't want to open up because I thought people… I like drawing and um I kind… I also do like anime and stuff like that… people might call me weird and stuff like that. And then, after this, I realised that that was just something that, that just happens in movies. It's not real, right?"* (Elena, p. 27)
- *"Um, but I really, I realised I do care for her in some way."* (Elena, p. 8)

- *"It made me, um, kind of realise how many people do actually care for me and see me as a friend, instead of, um, how many people I used to, um, think were really close to me. I never really thought of how many people, um, cared about me. And now that we did this, I kind of realise."* (Elena, p. 7)
- *Okay that one was, like, that was difficult because like I had like so many people in mind and like I put the main people on there and they gave me so many skills and I am actually so thankful for that.* (Zara, p. 15)
- *"Um, learning that FNAF is one of my biggest problems somehow."* (Elena, p. 11)
- *"And, um, when we were thinking about our problems, um, I didn't realise how many problems I've actually had including to that game. I never really had any big problems in my life except from FNAF."* (Elena, p. 12)
- *"Um, it showed me how many passions I have and how much things I care about."* (Elena, p. 22)
- *"Easier. Because, um, well, it is easier because I have a lot of comfort shows, and that… obviously celebrities and friends and that. It's easier for me to overcome things now."* (Elena, p. 17)

Looking to the Future

- *"Um, I realised I have a bunch of backup plans… And I, and I do not want to, I do not know what I want to be anymore… I just realised how many things I want to do and now I'm just lost."* (Elena, p. 14)
- *"I have like so many choices, like the thing one should be, and I am getting a little confused up here."* (Priya, p. 1)
- *"I felt amazing because I felt like, because I love being like, learning about, I love learning about the brain and how people take care of the brain and take care of*

people. It just feels like calming to me, and I just love it. Like one day I wish I can just like look at it all and be like oh that's me now." (Zara, p. 12)

- *"Okay that felt nice because I loved it. I loved saying I want to be a neurologist and looking at brains. That's like, I just love it because it's like, we talk about the brain, but I feel so interested, I want to learn more. Like, what do you do to make up the person? Cause I love helping people."* (Zara, p. 11)
- *"Like, I'm going to make them so proud. And I'm so, I actually just believe in myself because I can do this and like if I didn't believe in myself, I'd be like, very miserable and like really sad about it. But I believe in myself now."* (Zara, p. 36-37)
- *"Um, like, I tell my grandmom yesterday, um, I should be like, do you know, the nail things. And uh, I should be like, uh, drive the, uh, helicopter or something."* (Priya, p. 1)

EXPLORING AND CONNECTING WITH IDENTITY

Self-Identity

- *"I enjoyed it and somehow, I got to know more about myself too. I've never really thought that deep about myself. I barely just realised all of it now… so I enjoyed that too."* (Elena, p. 5)
- *"It actually felt nice because I had like, some talents in me that, and some skills, that I didn't really think I would have. Like I can literally dance, I can literally, like, sing. Not as good at singing but, like, I'm, like, I'm really good at, like, English…"* (Zara, p. 8)
- *"Storms. Because like you'll find out, like, what person you are and what you did to become that person and how hard it was to become that person. Because if you are gonna do something, it's not gonna be easy because you go through a lot of stuff to*

become that person. And it, like, takes time and if you, like, believe in yourself, you can do it." (Zara, p. 23)

- *"I actually felt lucky because I feel like I'm special and unique. Like other people can't have the stuff I do. And I feel, when I'm like, I feel so much happier when I'm unique."* (Zara, p. 16)
- *"It actually felt nice. Like, talking about what, like, I did and how I felt and I grew up and it felt really nice to talk about it."* (Zara, p. 4)
- *"But when it comes to reading, it was kind of hard for me to spell out certain words and pronounce certain words. But it feels nice though. Because I like writing and I would do, like, a lot of writing."* (Zara, p. 8)
- *"Um, they say I always be kind with my friends and my family and my teacher too. And, uh, sharing with my friends the things, uh and like, what it should be like that, and sharing with my friends everything. And, uh, they say you are nice and something."* (Priya, p. 2)
- *"I think it helped when we got people to write them down because obviously it's hard to think about what are you good at… and because its, obviously, your point of view of yourself is different than other people's. So, it was a bit easier when some people say it about you."* (Kayleigh, p. 6)
- *"I think maybe my ground will. I feel like, when, like, I get older, some fandoms will, like, slowly like, not think of, but like they'll still be there but I'll focus more on others. Like, I used to be obsessed with Stranger Things. Um, I have a Stranger Things pencil case and a thing, book. It's, like, obviously the fandom is very small now because it hasn't, we haven't had a new season in a long time…"* (Kayleigh, p. 21)

Culture and Background

- *"Okay, so like, being, like, part of, like, Pakistan and all that. I just love the culture and all that. I like how the weddings are, and like I felt like peaceful drawing it. I don't know how to explain it, but it was very calming to talk about my background and where I came from."* (Zara, p. 4)
- *"Yeah, you know I actually did love drawing the Tree because like we talked about our background and like, I love being, like, where I came from. Because I went to Pakistan twice and it was so much fun when I went there…"* (Zara, p. 32)
- *"And the roots, um, really helped me reflect on my past, and I enjoyed it."* (Elena, p. 22)
- *"I respect my culture and like things, where I born, I have two. One is, I have Italian and one is Indian. And like Italy and India. Because my parents are born in India, my brother born in India, and my grandparents born in India too. But to me and my little sisters, my sister is three years old, she born in here in England. I was born in Italy."* (Priya, p. 3)
- *"Yeah, so like, when I was, like, I was born in the UK though, but, like, when I was drawing it, I felt like I was part of something, included in something. It felt really nice to be."* (Zara, p. 5)
- *"Yeah. I feel like I didn't know half of that stuff about me. Like, when, I only, I didn't know I was, like, I think my mum said a quarter Welsh."* (Kayleigh, p. 29)
- *"Cause obviously my mom and my sisters have been there since my roots. So obviously they're gonna go everywhere in my life. Cause, like, they are always by my side."* (Kayleigh, p. 11)

- *"Uh, I was calm and uh, I was respecting of my love of um my cultures and my country, everything, and my parents."* (Priya, p. 4)
- *"Um so my culture is like my food. We wear, like, a lehenga and sharara and we have like choli and like trouser suit when we go to like wedding. We can wear like anything."* (Priya, p. 3)
- *"It felt nice because you are part of a community that I love so much. Like, I respect everyone's community and all that and respect where they came from but it's actually really nice to think about where you come from as well."* (Zara, p. 6)

A SPACE FOR SELF-EXPRESSION

A Tool to Support Expression

- *"It was, like, really nice. I loved it so much, man. Like, it was so much fun talking about it and writing stuff on there and watching it grow. It felt so nice."* (Zara, p. 25)
- *"I put the truth on there and it felt nice. I'm not lying about my feelings because if I put, like, lies on there, it would not be me, it'd be someone else, so it felt really, because you have to talk about yourself, not somebody else."* (Zara, p. 22)
- *Interviewer: So how did it make you feel when you were drawing and writing [about your culture] on your Tree?*

  Priya: It make me feel happy. Yeah, happy. (Priya, p. 3)
- *Interviewer: What was it like to write things down?*

  Kayleigh: Better than to talk about them… Um, cause I'm like, it's easier to write things down than to say it out loud. (Kayleigh, p. 4-5)

Sharing Experiences with Others

- *"I didn't really tell anyone until I put it on there. Like, yeah, it felt like a relief to me."* (Zara, p. 27)
- *"It actually felt nice because like I can speak about some of what I went through and they could understand me and what I did to, like, do that and what happened to me when I did it. How I felt."* (Zara, p. 3)
- *"… it helps me to be more open with people because usually if someone says, 'how are you?' even though like I might be like a bit angry because, um, I just argue with [name] or [YouTuber] sent something out and I can't figure it out. Um, I would say oh yeah, I'm fine, there's nothing wrong… but next time I might say, um, no, I'm not fine. I'm mad because I just argued with my [name] or [YouTuber] released a random picture with, um, things, and no one gets what he is on about. I might open up to people instead of just keeping everything to myself."* (Elena, p. 26)
- *"[It helped] when we were in, like the separate groups instead of doing it as a whole class. So then, like, there's less interruptions and its, yeah, it is one teacher and just like five of us. Its way easier to talk like that than to be in a whole class."* (Kayleigh, p. 16)
- *"Like, its good having people around who you can talk to because if you like don't speak to anyone you can like hurt yourself in some ways because you get piled up and you get worried about stuff."* (Zara, p. 14)