An Exploration of the Retrospective School Experiences of Late-diagnosed Autistic Women and the Potential Role of the Educational Psychologist.

Submitted by Lily May Mazzotta, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Educational Psychology in Educational Child and Community Psychology, November 2023.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that any material that has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University has been acknowledged.

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Abstract

This two-phase qualitative study explored the retrospective school experiences of women diagnosed with autism in adulthood and how educational psychologists may work to support autistic girls in their educational settings. The first phase of the research employed semi-structured interviews to gather the school experiences of five autistic women with a specific focus on perceived barriers and facilitators to their positive school experiences. The second phase of the experience sought the views of educational psychologists regarding how they may support autistic girls in their educational setting. Composite vignettes were created using phase one data and presented to five educational psychologists to elicit discussion in two focus groups.

The findings from phase one of the research suggest that safe spaces, positive relationships with school staff, friendships, hobbies and interests, self-management of needs, and an enjoyment of learning were all important facilitators to autistic girls' positive school experiences. Phase two findings indicate that educational psychologists may be able to support autistic girls in their educational settings through sharing of knowledge and expertise with school staff, working directly with children and young people, and through direct work with parents and families.

The findings from the current research highlight the importance of training and education for school staff, particularly regarding the presentation of need in autistic girls and appropriate accommodations and adjustments.

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

ASC	Autism Spectrum Condition
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
CYP	Children and Young People
DSM-V	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th Edition)
EBSA	Emotionally-Based School Avoidance
EHCP	Education, Health, and Care Plan
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 Autism Spectrum Conditions

The National Autistic Society (2018) defines autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people communicate and interact with the world. According to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2011), around 1% of children in the United Kingdom have a diagnosis of autism. Furthermore, autism is one of the most common primary areas of need for children and young people identified as having a special educational need, with autism spectrum condition (ASC) being the most common type of need for those with an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) (Department for Education, 2023).

1.2 Terminology

There is some disparity in the language used to refer to autism. Two of the most prevalent terms are Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC). Both terms refer to the same set of characteristics and behaviours associated with autism (National Autistic Society, 2018). Although ASD is more widely used in the medical field to refer to autistic people (National Autistic Society, 2018), the term has been rejected by many autistic individuals as "disorder" may depict autism as something wrong or negative (Baron-Cohen, 2017). Historically, Asperger's Syndrome was also used as a diagnostic label and had many of the same characteristics as autism, excluding the general delays in language and cognitive development. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), Asperger's Syndrome is no longer a standalone diagnosis, and all autism-related conditions are included

under the umbrella term Autism Spectrum Disorder. I will use both person-first (woman with autism) and identity-first (autistic woman) to reflect the diverse preferences of the women interviewed in phase one of this study. Additionally, the term "late-diagnosed" has been used to describe women diagnosed with autism in adulthood due to its brevity. Furthermore, in this research, late-diagnosed autistic women will be referred to as autistic girls when discussing their school experiences. This also will apply to the fictional girls described in the composite vignettes who have been created based on the real experiences of the late-diagnosed autistic women who were interviewed as part of the current research (see appendices H and I). This is because autism is a lifelong developmental condition, and is not one that is acquired, meaning that these women and girls have always been autistic even before their diagnosis.

1.3 Gender Differences in Autism

This research is focused on the experiences of autistic women. The women interviewed as part of this study may be described as cisgender (the sex they were assigned at birth is congruent with their gender identity). However, it is accepted that it is important to gather the views of both cisgender and transgender women to gain a more accurate and inclusive view of the experiences of autistic women, especially when the existing literature in the area indicates that autistic individuals are likely to experience gender dysphoria and express scepticism about traditional gender ideologies (George & Stokes, 2016; Glidden et al., 2016).

The male to female ratio of autism has been reported to be approximately between 4:1 and 5:1 (Christensen et al., 2018; Fombonne, 2009). However, a meta-analysis

has found that the real ratio is likely to be closer to 3:1, with the findings indicating that autistic females are more likely to be missed or misdiagnosed, possibly due to their presentation of need (Loomes et al., 2017). Additionally, girls with stronger verbal skills and a higher IQ are far less likely to receive a diagnosis, or will receive a diagnosis later in life, in comparison to autistic males (Loomes et al., 2017). It has been suggested that a reason for a lack of diagnoses in women is due to the traditional assessment and diagnostic process (Knickmeyer et al., 2008). One of the components of the DSM-V criteria for an autism diagnosis outlines "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, research has shown that autistic females are more socially motivated than their male counterparts, and often want and are able to form positive social relationships and friendships (Dean et al., 2014; Head et al., 2014; Sedgewick et al., 2016), meaning that their presentation may not typically appear to meet some of the diagnostic criteria. Sedgewick et al. (2016) revealed that autistic girls are likely to have friendships similar in quality and closeness to that of neurotypical girls, although other studies indicate that autistic girls may struggle to form and maintain friendships due to difficulties with perspective-taking and understanding of friendship expectations (Cook et al., 2018; Cridland et al., 2014).

Another core component of the DSM-V is "highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus" (APA, 2013). Research has shown that the interests of autistic girls are often less intense than autistic boys, and the focus of autistic girls' special interests are more likely to be in line with the interests of neurotypical girls (Gould, 2017). For example, autistic girls are more likely to show interest in animals

(Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011), and collect facts about people, rather than things, as is commonly demonstrated by autistic boys (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015).

Furthermore, other research shows that autistic females are more likely to engage in "masking" or "camouflaging" behaviours, which refers to the subjective experience of autistic people acting in a way in which they think they would best "fit in" with other, neurotypical people (Hull et al., 2017). Research by Gould (2017) found that autistic girls' social interactions appeared, on the surface, to be almost identical to those of non-autistic girls. Although the autistic girls' social challenges were not obvious to the observers (playground attendants), they were noticed by their peers which put them at increased risk of group exclusion and subsequent social isolation. Gould (2017) argues that engaging in masking or camouflaging behaviours makes girls socially vulnerable and less likely to receive intervention or support.

Research indicates that autistic females are more likely to receive a diagnosis of autism later in life in comparison to autistic men. Prior to receiving an official diagnosis, autistic women have expressed perpetual feelings of confusion and overwhelm (Hendrickx, 2015). In addition, research indicates that people who receive a late diagnosis of autism are likely to experience depression and anxiety, alongside feelings of "otherness" to the extent where they report feel alien (Stagg & Belcher, 2019).

Recent research by Russell et al. (2022) indicates that there was a 787% exponential increase in recorded autism diagnoses between 1998 and 2018, with a greater increase in diagnoses in females than males, and the greatest rise in diagnostic incidence among adults. It is hypothesised that the reasons for the increase in diagnoses may be due to legislative changes, such as the Autism Act

(2009) which states that there must be a government strategy for improving services for autistic adults. Perhaps as a result of this directive, there was a significant increase in adult autism diagnostic services across the country; in 2009, less than fifty percent of local authorities in England had adult diagnosis services, compared to ninety three percent in 2019 (National Autistic Society, 2019). The increase in diagnoses may also be partially due to the changes in the diagnostic criteria outlined in the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Changes included the addition of sensory issues under the category of restricted/repetitive behaviour, including hyper or hypo-reactivity to sensory stimuli and/or unusual interests in sensory stimuli.

1.4 The Educational Experiences of Autistic Children

It is estimated that around 71% of autistic children in England attend a mainstream school (National Autistic Society, 2021). However, research indicates that 74% of parents feel that their autistic child's school place does not meet their child's needs (National Autistic Society, 2021), and autistic children themselves report being misunderstood and unsupported at school (Brede et al., 2017). Research has shown that autistic children possess more negative perceptions of school and education than their neurotypical peers (Humphrey & Symes, 2011; National Autistic Society, 2021), and that autistic children typically report feelings of loneliness (Baulminger & Shuman, 2003), sensory overwhelm (Banda et al., 2009) and friendship difficulties (Rowley et al., 2012) in their school environment. Additionally, research indicates that autistic children may be more likely to be bullied than their neurotypical peers (Carter, 2009; Humphrey & Hebron, 2015; Rowley et al., 2012), with Heinrichs (2003) describing autistic children as the "perfect targets" due to their different social skills and often unusual special interests.

Furthermore, autistic children say that they did not receive adequate support in their educational settings, especially in terms of social support (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Nevertheless, a study by (Dillon et al., 2016) found that the secondary school experiences of autistic children were similar to the reported secondary school experiences of neurotypical children. However, the sample size used in this study was relatively small, consisting of 28 participants in total, meaning it is therefore difficult to generalise the results of this study to the wider population. Furthermore, the research used participants (autistic and neurotypical students) who had all attended the same secondary school which may partly explain the lack of diverse school experiences.

1.5 The Role of the Educational Psychologist

Educational psychologists (EPs) work with children and young people who are experiencing problems that can hinder their chance of learning (British Psychological Society, 2023). According to Fallon, Woods and Rooney (2010), EPs are "*scientist practitioners who utilise, for the benefit of children and young people, psychological skills, knowledge, and understanding through the functions of consultation, assessment, intervention, research, and training at organisational, group, and individual level across educational, care, and community settings" (p.4).* As the needs of autistic students often include a range of SEN categories, such as social, emotional, and mental health; cognition and learning; communication and interaction; and physical and sensory needs, it is argued that supporting autistic children and young people to achieve personalised outcomes is an important part of the EP role (Robinson et al., 2018).

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

The aim of the following literature review is to provide context for the current study and to explain how it contributes to the existing body of knowledge in this area (Boote & Beile, 2005). The review will examine the literature relating to the school experiences of autistic females, including some of the challenges and protective factors they encounter, and the role of the Educational Psychologist in supporting, directly or indirectly, autistic children. The phrases "autistic girls/children/individuals" and "girls/children/individuals with autism" have been used interchangeably throughout this review due to a general disparity within the neurodiverse community regarding preferred terminology. The term "Asperger's" has only been used when taken directly from a study or research paper which used that term specifically.

2.1 Search Strategy

The literature for this review was sourced from electronic databases EBSCO and PsycINFO between May 2022 and January 2023. These databases were selected to provide a broad range of literature relevant to the subject matter of education and psychology. The search terms used included, "autistic girls", "girls with autism", "autistic women", "women with autism", "school experiences of autistic girls", and "late-diagnosed autistic women". This initial database search generated 6,681 results in total. The number of results was narrowed down by refining the search criteria through the addition of "AND" in the search terms. For example, "autistic girls" AND "school experiences". The journals "Autism: the International Journal of Research and Practice" and "Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders" were also electronically searched for any relevant pieces of research. The resulting articles were scanned by title, then by reading of the abstract, and further narrowed down

based on their relevance to the current research topic. In total, eleven key studies were selected for review, although references within the eleven key papers led to the examination of other relevant papers which have been included in the current literature review where relevant and appropriate.

Figure 1.

Flow Chart to Illustrate the Process of the Search Strategy used for Part One of the Literature Review.
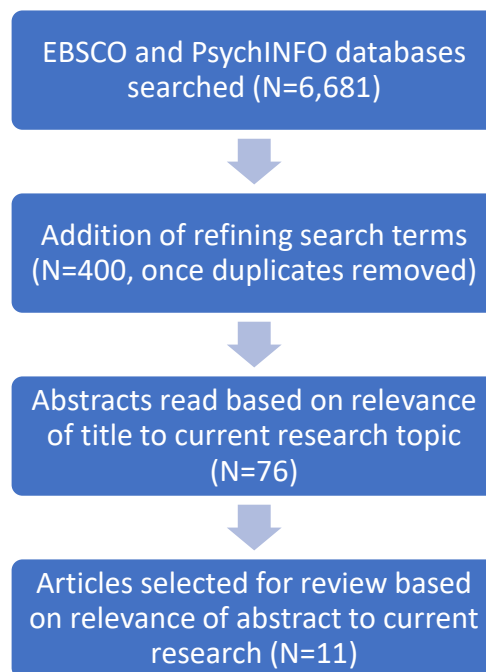
A second search of the databases examined literature about the role of the Educational Psychologist in supporting autistic children in schools. The term "school psychologist" was also included to generate results from the USA. An initial search of the databases using search terms "educational psychologist" OR "school psychologist" AND "supporting autistic children" AND "school" generated 935 results. The resulting articles were scanned by title, then by reading of the abstract, and further narrowed down based on their relevance to the current research topic. Three

papers were selected due to their relevance to the focus of the current study. Many of the results generated focused on the role of the Educational Psychologist (or school psychologist) in the identification of autism in children, though these were discounted as they were not wholly relevant to the focus of this thesis.

Figure 2.

Flow Chart to Illustrate the Process of the Search Strategy used for Part Two of the Literature Review.
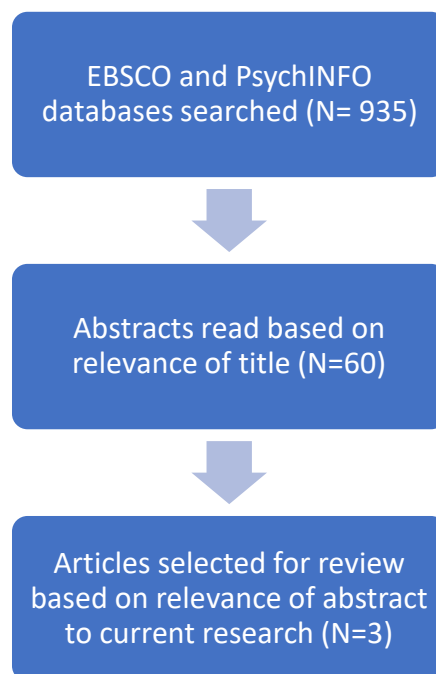
2.2 Barriers Faced by Autistic Girls in Their School Settings

2.2.1 The School Environment

Several of the reviewed studies indicate that one barrier which prevented autistic girls from coping and thriving in school was their school environment (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Honeybourne, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2021; Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015). Some of the challenges experienced included

sensory sensitivities which made many aspects of the school environment overwhelming, with noise being identified as a particular barrier in many of the studies reviewed (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021; Jarman & Rayner, 2015). In Goodall and MacKenzie's (2019) study, one participant said, "*I was very stressed trying to cope with the noise, the large class sizes, the constant changing of classrooms. … Everyone was coming out and it was just swarmed with people pushing, running, shoving, throwing bottles" (p. 506).* Though this study is useful in exploring the individual experiences of the autistic girls included in the research, only two participants were included in this study, making it difficult to generalise the experiences of these girls to the general population of autistic girls.

In the reviewed studies, girls often reported that their sensory sensitivities were worsened by a lack of staff understanding and therefore a lack of appropriate support or adjustments to help them manage their sensory sensitivities (Jarman and Rayner, 2015). When staff were more understanding and exercised flexibility in their approach, for example by allowing children to adjust timings of transitions or allowing music to aid concentration, this facilitated a reduction of stress and anxiety in autistic girls at school (Jarman and Rayner, 2015). Furthermore, autistic girls made adaptations to their own behaviour to help minimise their anxiety linked to their school environment, for example by waiting around in the classroom before going to the lunch hall to avoid busy transition periods (Moyse and Porter, 2015), or the pro-active use of ear defenders during loud periods (Tomlinson, Bond and Hebron, 2022).

Furthermore, the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) includes the possible presence of sensory issues as part of the diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder. The term "sensory processing" refers to the way in which an

individual's nervous system manages sensory information it has received from the sensory organs (Lane, Miller & Hanft, 2000). Research from the USA by Pastor-Cerezuela et al. (2020), found that sensory processing differences in autistic participants predicted executive and cognitive dysfunctions in the specific domains of inhibitory control, auditory sustained attention, and short-term verbal memory. Additionally, the autistic participants demonstrated higher levels of sensory, executive, and cognitive dysfunction than the comparison group of participants. This was reflected in Jacobs et al.'s (2021) study, whereby sensory issues were identified by autistic girls as a barrier to learning. Noise was reported by participants as a factor which negatively impacted them emotionally and physiologically, and this had a subsequent impact on their ability to engage with learning. One participant stated that noise "*disrupts my learning, sometimes I can't even write when it's too loud since I can't think clearly with all the distraction*"(p. 205). This feeling was echoed by other participants in the study, who linked noise to feelings of stress, physical discomfort (including headaches), and heightened emotional responses (including tearfulness). Though this study consisted of a relatively small sample size of five participants, these findings have been reflected in other studies, including by Jarman and Rayner (2015), who found that these types of responses are commonly reported by autistic students because of the associated sensory difficulties they experience which are likely to be heightened in dynamic school environments.

However, the school environment may also act as a facilitator for positive school experiences. For example, in one of the studies reviewed, one participant said that some aspects of the school environment, in particular its green spaces, special areas for SEN pupils, and artwork displayed on the walls, helped to instil a sense of calm for her when she was at school (Tomlinson, Bond and Hebron, 2022).

2.2.2 Accessing Classroom-based Learning

Another barrier identified in the literature which prevented many autistic girls from coping and thriving in their educational setting was their inability to access some elements of classroom-based learning (Cook, Ogden and Winstone, 2018; Jacobs et al., 2021; Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015). Specific challenges included difficulty concentrating for extended periods (Tomlinson, Bond and Hebron, 2022), difficulty following the structure of the lessons (Moyse and Porter, 2015), the need for clear language (Cook, Ogden and Winstone, 2018), difficulty following instructions (Honeybourne, 2015), difficulty understanding success criteria of learning tasks (Moyse and Porter, 2015), and engaging in pair or group-based learning activities (Jarman and Rayner, 2015). Furthermore, other participants noted that their schools did not provide them with any learning which was sufficiently challenging or interesting to them, leading to boredom and subsequent disengagement with classroom-based learning (Honeybourne, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2021; Zakai-Mashiach, 2022).

Jacobs et al. (2021) specifically researched facilitators and barriers to autistic girls' accessing classroom-based learning. All five participants cited difficulty getting organised to start a task as a barrier to learning. All participants but one reported that they do not understand written assignments, and that they require additional explanation to help them better understand what they have been asked to do. Three participants stated that a barrier to learning is their lack of confidence to ask questions when they do not understand something. One participant said, *"I wait for a bit because I don't want to ask because that would be weird . . . so I wait and eventually I convince myself to ask and then I finally understand what I have to do and even if its halfway through the lesson - then I start"* (p.204). Other identified

barriers to learning included difficulty finishing assignments on time, feelings of anxiety, sensory issues, and feelings of worry about social things.

2.2.3 Others' Understanding of Autism

Another identified barrier included other people's understanding, or lack thereof, of autism (Bargiela et al., 2016; Cridland et al, 2014; Zakai-Mashiach, 2022), which impacted upon their flexibility in making adjustments and accommodations based on the girls' presentation of need. A lack of staff understanding of the girls' presentation of need also led to unrealistic or inappropriate expectations of them which added further pressure (Bargiela et al., 2016). Furthermore, staff members appeared less adept in understanding autism in girls and seemed better able to understand, and subsequently make accommodations for, autistic boys (Cridland et al., 2014). Tools like pupil passports were somewhat effective in explaining presentation of need but were dependent in staff taking the time to familiarise themselves with them, which does not always happen (Tomlinson, Bond and Hebron, 2022). Interview data from Bargiela et al.'s (2016) study revealed that autistic girls felt as though their quiet and passive behaviours were viewed as being socially acceptable for girls, and so they largely went unnoticed by their teachers. Some participants suggested that if they had behaved in a more disruptive manner, they might have been noticed sooner. Alternatively, a number of young women in the study commented that in secondary school, their teachers' perception of their behaviour changed. Some women in the study report being viewed by their teachers as rude or lazy after having made a social faux-pas due to their misunderstanding of social rules.

Teachers' understanding of autism was explored in Jarman and Rayner's (2015) study. One of the key themes identified was teachers' recognition of the autism

diagnosis in females. Some parents reported that they experienced difficulty convincing teachers that their daughter was autistic. One participant said, *"When I told the principal she has Asperger's, he looked at me and laughed before he realised I was serious"* (p. 132). Similarly, in Tierney et al.'s (2016) research, participants reported that teachers did not believe them when they confessed the difficulties they had been experiencing due to their outward presentation and "masking" behaviours. In line with Bargiela et al.'s (2016) study, participants in Jarman and Rayner's (2015) study felt as though their daughters' autism was dismissed due to a lack of behavioural issues, with one parent explaining, *"my daughter holds her emotions in during the day and then melts down in the car and at home. The teachers see none of her behaviours, they find it difficult to believe she has Asperger's"* (p. 133).

Furthermore, participants highlighted a feeling that teachers lacked understanding about the specific difficulties faced by autistic girls, and a consequential unwillingness to adapt classroom practice to make accommodations. A key barrier which participants felt teachers did not understand was their sensory sensitivities, with participants hypothesising that their sensory needs went unnoticed due to self-initiated coping skills which led to compliant behaviour and good academic performance. However, participants identified that masking needs came at a personal cost, including a lack of free time from completing additional work outside of class, and high levels of stress.

Another need which participants identified as being misunderstood by teachers was their difficulties with executive function and organisation (Jarman & Rayner, 2015). Participants highlighted challenges with planning, prioritisation, time management, and multi-tasking, which they felt their teachers did not understand based on the

structure of classroom-based learning. For example, teachers would set deadlines for two pieces of homework on the same day, which caused high levels of stress in autistic participants who struggled with executive function, including time management and multi-tasking. In line with previous research about the specific challenge of handwriting for autistic children (e.g. Church et al., 2000; Saggers et al., 2011), Jarman and Rayner's (2015) study highlighted handwriting as a key difficulty which was misunderstood by teachers of autistic girls. Participants reported that their poor handwriting was labelled by teachers as carelessness, with one participant stating, "*I found handwriting very difficult, holding the pencil or pen took up so much energy it made me sick*" (p.134).

In general, parents in Jarman and Rayner's (2015) study expressed a general negative perception of teachers in relation to their daughters' school experiences. One parent commented, *"working with the school has been the most difficult part of having a child with ASD"* (p. 133), and the authors concluded that teachers need to receive better training in understanding the difficulties faced by autistic girls so that they are better able to support them in the classroom. Though Jarman and Rayner's (2015) study may be limited by its lack of control group for comparison, the results of their study are congruent with other studies in the field (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse & Porter, 2015; Tierney et al., 2016).

Peer understanding of autism was also identified as a challenging aspect of autistic girls' school experiences. This included friends not believing they were autistic, or friends feeling that autism was used as an excuse for certain behaviours (Dean, Harwood, and Kasari, 2017). Goodall and Mackenzie's (2018) study indicated that peer understanding, or lack thereof, of autism, was a barrier to autistic girls' sense of inclusion at school, with one participant adding, "*Many pupils in mainstream schools*

*don't understand anything about autism" (*p.510). The same participant expressed views that mainstream education was not suitable for all autistic children, citing reasons of peer ignorance about autism, bullying, and a lack of teacher support. The literature indicates that autistic girls' experiences of school would have been improved by others having a greater understanding of autism, including how autism may present differently in females (Tomlinson, Bond and Hebron, 2022).

2.2.4 Social Relationships and Inclusion

Friendship and social issues were identified as a challenging aspect of autistic girls' school experiences. Barriers included struggling to know how to present oneself in social situations (Cridland et al., 2014), difficulties with perspective taking (Cook, Ogden and Winstone, 2018), and issues with understanding the social and emotional expectations of friendships (Cridland et al., 2014; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019). Furthermore, autistic girls were likely to mask their friendship issues by maintaining proximity to their peers (Dean, Harwood and Kasari, 2017).

Making and maintaining friendships has been identified as a barrier to autistic girls' positive school experiences throughout the literature (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018; Dean, Harwood & Kasari, 2017; Honeybourne, 2015; Zakai-Mashiach, 2022). Research indicates that external support was vital for autistic girls in making and maintaining friendships, with mothers often acting as facilitators for their daughters' social interactions (Calder et al., 2013; Tierney et al., 2016). Furthermore, when choosing friends for themselves, autistic girls commented that they tended to choose friends who nurtured them and who had actively supported them in their acquisition and development of their social skills (Tierney et al., 2016).

In Goodall and MacKenzie's (2019) study, participants ranked social exclusion as their number one worry about attending mainstream school and spoke in detail about their experiences of loneliness and isolation, with one participant adding, "*I found that I had no close friends and no one to talk to. I felt very lonely and often found myself without anyone to play with. I was isolated and separate, in like a bubble of depression and anxiety … but, I still felt the centre of attention with others looking at me and judging*" (p. 507). Social exclusion was identified as a challenging factor of autistic girls' school experiences in most of the studies reviewed (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Ogden and Winstone, 2018; Zakai-Mashiach, 2022). Examples of social exclusion included being picked last for team sports in PE lessons, and not being invited to social events (Cook, Ogden and Winstone, 2018). Furthermore, girls were more likely to be shunned by their peers during adolescence due to pressure to "fit in" during this period, with participants reporting feelings of otherness, loneliness, and isolation, as well as some instances of bullying (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse and Porter, 2015).

Bullying was also identified as a predominant factor in many autistic girls' school experiences in the studies reviewed (Cook, Ogden and Winstone, 2018; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008), with research suggesting that between 40 and 82 per cent of autistic children have experienced bullying at school (Rowley et al., 2012; Schroeder et al., 2014). A participant in Goodall and MacKenzie's (2019) study described her experience of bullying in school: "*I was bullied when I was younger . . . verbal physical and there was once . . . sexual . . . which is bad*" (p. 507). This was similarly reflected in Zakai-Mashiach's (2022) study, with many participants reporting bullying as a part of their school experience. One participant said, "*They [her classmates] claimed that I was weird, they bullied me. It*

is very difficult for me to talk about what happened there. I have scars in my soul from that time. I just tried to be part of them… I was completely alone" (p.6). One strength of Zakai-Mashiach's (2022) study is its exploration of the experiences of participants from a non-western culture. The inclusion of this study in the current literature review indicates that some aspects of the school experiences of autistic girls span different cultures, particularly autistic girls' experiences of being bullied in school.

The research indicates that issues with social relationships were exacerbated by girls' social communication difficulties (Kreiser & White, 2014; Sedgewick et al., 2016). Girls with autism may have difficulty understanding and responding to more subtle distinctions in non-verbal communication which can result in misunderstandings, including adverse reactions from peers, leaving them potentially vulnerable to relational conflict (Kreiser & White, 2014). The literature suggests that conflict in itself is an issue for girls with Autism (Kirkovski et al., 2013; Sedgewick et al., 2016). Research by Sedgewick et al. (2016) suggests that increased aggression exists in the friendships of autistic girls compared to the friendships of their neurotypical peers, indicating that autistic girls may experience difficulties identifying and/or managing conflict within their friendships.

2.2.5 Transitional Periods

Transitional periods, such as the move from primary school to secondary school, have been identified as a challenging part of autistic girls' school experiences (Cridland et al., 2014; Zakai-Mashiach, 2022), with the change in environment, routines, and social and academic demands being cited as factors which girls found hard to navigate (Cridland et al., 2014). Some girls in the studies reviewed reported

that they viewed transitional periods, such as the transition from primary to secondary education, as an opportunity for a fresh start following previous difficult school experiences (Zakai-Mashiach, 2022). However, these hopes were often not realised, with the stress of the transitional period and its associated changes impacting the girls' perceived opportunity for a fresh start (Zakai-Mashiach, 2022). Additionally, research by Dillon and Underwood (2012), found that the transition between primary and secondary school was particularly difficult for children with autism. Their findings indicate that transition is especially problematic in the first year, although there were signs of improvement by the second year, with the establishment of friendship groups and peer acceptance appearing to be key for a successful transition.

Furthermore, transitions within the school day have also been reported as a barrier in autistic girls' school experiences (Honeybourne, 2015; Moyse & Porter, 2015), with sensory issues, including noise and crowdedness, being cited as one of the main challenges of the transition period (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2018). In the studies reviewed, some girls reported that they made accommodations for themselves to better manage these transition periods, including returning early from lunch and break times to avoid busy corridors (Moyse & Porter, 2015).

2.3 Facilitators to Autistic Girls' Coping and Thriving in School

2.3.1 Support with Learning

Jacobs et al. (2021) explored some facilitators of learning for girls with autism. Of the five participants in this study, all five cited tasks being broken down into sections or chunks facilitated learning, and all participants but one cited help with time management and help in class as facilitators to learning. Participants also mentioned

extra time to complete tasks, help with organising work, and pre-teaching of new work. Other studies identified facilitators to learning including personalised planning and visual support (Jarman and Rayner, 2015), following a regular and predictable timetable (Honeybourne, 2015), and being provided with a clear success criteria for completing learning tasks (Moyse & Porter, 2014).

2.3.2 Teachers' Attitudes Toward, and Understanding of, Autism

One of the main facilitators to learning identified in the literature is teachers' attitudes toward, and understanding of, autism in girls, including an awareness of the specific challenges they face (Honeybourne, 2015; Jarman & Rayner, 2015). Research by Jarman and Rayner (2015) suggests that teachers being flexible and supportive in their approach is helpful for facilitating learning and inclusion for autistic girls. This includes a flexibility in providing accommodations, for example, allowing a child with autism to use headphones in class to aid concentration and negate the negative impact of the noisy classroom environment on a child who may be prone to experiencing sensory overwhelm. Jarman and Rayner's (2015) study also highlights the importance of teachers helping autistic children feel included and valued in their educational setting, with one participant reporting that her teachers' encouragement of her in pursuing her passions was one of the only reasons she coped throughout high school.

Similarly, in Honeybourne's (2015) study, participants identified ways in which school staff could positively contribute towards their school experiences. Suggestions for staff included exercising patience with autistic children in interactions, emphasising the positive aspects of autistic girls' nature, supporting autistic girls to build confidence and positive self-esteem, and providing education about autism to

promote better self-understanding and the understanding of their peers. The author recommends that schools should be mindful of the hidden difficulties autistic girls experience in the school setting and should aim to provide an inclusive environment for autistic students, with a particular focus on the development of friendship skills, building self-esteem, and improving confidence in these children and young people.

2.4 The Experiences of Late-Diagnosed Autistic Women

Prior to receiving a diagnosis, autistic women have expressed perpetual feelings of confusion and overwhelm (Hendrickx, 2015). In addition, research indicates that people who receive a late diagnosis of autism are likely to experience depression and anxiety, alongside feelings of "otherness" (Stagg & Belcher, 2019). Bargiela et al.'s (2016) study of 14 late-diagnosed autistic women found that all participants but one reported clinically severe anxiety and elevated levels of distress, highlighting the importance of identifying autistic women and providing support for co-occurring emotional and mental health difficulties when necessary.

As aforementioned, autistic women are likely to engage in "masking" or "camouflaging" behaviours to appear to fit in with their neurotypical counterparts (Hull et al., 2017). Research indicates that engaging in this behaviour is mentally exhausting (Bargiela et al., 2016), with one late-diagnosed autistic woman reporting, *"It's very draining trying to figure out everything all the time, everything is more like on a manual, you've got to use one of those computers where you have to type every command in"* (p. 3287). Though Bargiela et al.'s (2016) study had a small sample size of fourteen participants, these findings have also been mirrored in larger studies. For example, in Bradley et al.'s (2021) study of 277 autistic people, over a quarter of participants described masking or camouflaging as "exhausting", with one

participant reporting, *"It is EXHAUSTING. It's like trying to solve mathematical equations in your head all day long while carrying on as normal"* (p. 324).

Many late-diagnosed autistic women have frequently been mislabelled and misdiagnosed prior to receiving their diagnosis of autism (Eaton, 2017), and for some late-diagnosed autistic women, their mental health struggles included suicide attempts and self-directed physical harm (Leedham et al., 2020). One of the reported influences on poor mental health pre-autism diagnosis was the perceived lack of agency the women had in understanding themselves, something these women had lived with for many years prior to their diagnosis (Leedham et al., 2020). Participants in this study reported feelings of hopelessness in their own journeys to diagnosis and expressed feelings of a power imbalance between themselves and the clinicians assessing them. One woman discussed the difficult diagnostic process and shared feelings of being misunderstood or unheard by professionals, adding "*… [it] got to a point where I was almost convinced that they wanted to be right, and I'd actually buried some deep trauma and I had no memory of it and I started questioning the whole – like everything"* (p.139). Authors emphasise the importance of valuing self-understanding within a diagnostic framework where an individual's needs and strengths can be more affectively assessed, identified, nurtured, and supported.

2.5 The Role of the Educational Psychologist

The role of the Educational Psychologist (EP) in supporting autistic children, particularly autistic girls, is one that has not been well-researched at present. However, during the current literature review, one study was found that explored the role of the EP in supporting autistic girls. O'Hagan and Bond (2019) found that EPs reported that they were rarely directed by schools to work with autistic girls or girls

who may be autistic, and much of their work with girls was centred around concerns of mental health needs or school avoidance. In addition, their study indicated that EPs felt as though school staff were largely ill-equipped to identify autism in female pupils, and that girls who were referred to EPs for mental health concerns, including anxiety, often eventually received a diagnosis of autism following further investigation. Furthermore, EPs suggested that autistic girls were less likely to be referred to EP services by their schools due to their presentation of need. EPs reported that girls were likely to internalise their needs, and that EPs were only likely to become involved with these girls when their needs became externalised and/or extreme, including emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA) behaviours. The authors conclude that the role of the EP in supporting autistic girls is often not utilised, but that EPs may play a vital role in terms of consultation, assessment, and intervention in the support of autistic girls in their school setting and beyond.

Another study by Robinson et al. (2017) surveyed EPs in the UK and Ireland about their use of evidence-based interventions to support autistic children. Their study found that EPs were most often involved with the implementation of visual supports, social stories, reinforcement, modelling, antecedent-based interventions, prompting, and social skills training. The EPs surveyed indicated that the most influential factors in their decision-making when planning interventions for autistic children were the child or young person's individual needs and other school-specific factors such as the capacity of school staff to deliver an intervention and staff members' level of training in specific interventions. Though this study is useful in determining some of the types of support EPs might offer to autistic children in their practice, the authors acknowledge that future research including focus groups or interviews would be

useful in gathering a richer picture of EPs' approaches to interventions and support for autistic individuals.

One review by Williams et al. (2005) aimed to outline the empirical evidence for a range of interventions and techniques school psychologists might use to support the inclusion of autistic children in their educational settings. Their review suggested that school psychologists might recommend various interventions to support the inclusion of autistic children, including social skills training and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), interventions which encourage social and behavioural changes in the autistic individual. However, interventions like ABA have been criticised by some autism advocates (Wilkenfeld & McCarthy, 2020), with many autistic individuals rejecting the medicalised model of autism and instead arguing that autistic behaviours typically labelled as problematic are actually a consequence of intolerance from non-autistic people (Kapp et al., 2013).

2.6 Summary of Literature Review

Though the research exploring the educational experiences of autistic girls is only recently emerging and so there is relatively limited literature in the field, this review indicates that the findings of the studies which do exist are largely consistent. Key findings across the literature includes a necessity for schools to develop a deeper understanding of autism in girls, and to provide better provisions for inclusion.

However, it is noted that the majority of the key papers examined in the current review (ten out of eleven) explore the experiences of autistic girls or women in a Western context. It is likely that the experiences of autistic girls or women in other cultural contexts would likely be different to those expressed in the studies reviewed,

but it has not been possible to provide an in-depth exploration of the literature beyond the Western context, excepting Zakai-Mashiach's (2022) study, due to an absence of literature.

In general, this literature review has highlighted the importance of providing support to help autistic girls cope and thrive in their educational setting. Educational Psychologists are in a prime position to provide this support to children and young people, either through direct work with students or indirectly through more systemic-based work with educational settings, yet there appears to be exist limited research into the role of the EP in supporting autistic children, especially autistic girls. Informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory, it could also be argued that schools are best placed to inform and encourage change in various ecological systems in which children reside. Furthermore, given the psychological expertise of the Educational Psychologist, they could also be preferably placed to provide support to school staff in developing systems to support autistic girls in their educational setting. It is hoped that the current research might illuminate a potential role for Educational Psychologists to work in supporting autistic girls in their school environments.

2.7 Rationale

This literature review suggests that school staff may have limited understanding of female autism and be less likely to made adaptations and accommodations to meet their needs (Jarman & Rayner, 2015; Moyse & Porter, 2015). Despite this, there exists few studies which address this issue, therefore highlighting the need to capture the lived experiences of autistic women and girls to inform better support for autistic females in their educational setting. Furthermore, few studies have explored

the role of Educational Psychologists in supporting autistic children, particularly autistic girls, in their educational setting. Given the expertise of EPs, it may be assumed that they are well placed to work with school staff to provide more effective support for autistic girls in their school environments.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1 Overview

In this chapter, I will discuss the ontology and epistemology that informs my methodological position. I will also discuss my research design which briefly details the design for each phase of the current research. Finally, I will discuss the ethical considerations taken in accordance with the current study.

3.2 Ontology

Ontology is the science of what is (Welty, 2003). The ontological position adopted in the current research is relativist. The relativist approach supposes that reality is a subjective experience which exists differently in the mind of each individual and cannot exist independently from a person's theoretical beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Robson, 2002). The relativist position seemed most appropriate to the current research as its focus is on understanding the experiences of late-diagnosed autistic women and the meaning of these experiences as understood by each individual participant.

3.3 Epistemology

 According to Burr (2017), language is an important part of socially constructed knowledge, and that alternative narratives of the same situation or occurrence can lead to different understandings, none of which are necessarily wrong. Additionally, Willig (2013) contends that there are multiple knowledges as opposed to a single

knowledge, indicating that it is the duty of the researcher to seek to understand several constructions of meaning in the context of the current research.

This piece of research employs a constructionist paradigm, which supposes that meaning is constructed rather than discovered, and that humans create meaning as they interact with the world around them (Crotty, 1998). The constructionist paradigm assumes that one's understanding of the world is influenced by social processes and that our concept of reality is a result of our interactions with others in the society in which we live (Burr, 2003). In the context of research, an inquiry is viewed as a collaborative process between those involved, namely the researchers and the participants, in the construction of new understandings of knowledge and meaning (McNamee, 2012).

3.4 Positionality

The constructionist paradigm also highlights how the researcher's own experiences and dispositions may influence the development and interpretation of the data, as well as the knowledge that is constructed through their inquiry (Given, 2008). It is therefore important to consider the researcher's own positionality. Positionality "reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p.71), which therefore can be seen to affect the totality of the research process (Holmes, 2020). In the context of the current research, I am a woman in my late twenties from the south-west of England. I previously worked as a secondary school teacher in both mainstream and specialist settings where I had the experience of supporting girls with social communication difficulties and sensory processing differences. Furthermore, my experience as a trainee educational psychologist has further developed my interest in the

experiences of late-diagnosed autistic girls. Since starting the doctorate, I have learned about how autistic girls may present differently to autistic boys, and my own placement experience as a trainee educational psychologist has led me to believe that autistic girls may fly under the radar due to their different presentation of need. These experiences have influenced my areas of research interest and my general approach to the current research. For example, the research aims of the current study, which intended to explore the barriers faced by autistic girls in their educational setting as well as the role of the educational psychologist in supporting autistic girls, may have been motivated by my ambitions to improve my own practice as an educational psychologist. The research questions have also likely been shaped by my experiences. As aforementioned, my professional experiences as a trainee have contributed to my pre-existing perceptions of some of the barriers encountered by autistic girls in their school settings, which motivated my exploration of this topic within the research questions. Therefore, it is important that I adopt a reflexive approach and consciously consider how my own positionality may influence my role in the development and interpretation of data, while also acknowledging that no matter the extent of reflexive practice I engage in, there will always exist some element of bias and subjectivity (Holmes, 2020).

3.5 Research Design

This study adopts an interpretivist approach which allows the exploration of people's experiences in detail and permits the researcher to identify issues from the perspective of participants and further understand the meaning or interpretations they give to behaviour, events, or objects (Hennick et al., 2020). This study aims to explore the experiences of late-diagnosed autistic women and the potential role of

the educational psychologist in supporting autistic girls to cope and thrive in their educational settings.

3.6 Ethics

Prior to conducting the current research, ethical approval was sought and granted by the university's ethics committee (certificate number: 530551; see Appendix J). The research was considered to be of medium risk due to the potential risk of psychological distress which may be experienced by participants when discussing potentially challenging personal experiences. Further ethical considerations for each phase of the research will be explored within chapters four and five respectively.

CHAPTER 4: Phase One

4.1 Phase One Research Design

4.1.1 Aims:

- To explore the retrospective school experiences of late-diagnosed autistic women.
- To explore what late-diagnosed autistic women identify as the barriers and facilitators to their positive school experiences.

4.1.2 Research Questions:

1. How do late-diagnosed autistic women describe their school experiences?
   a. What factors contributed to any positive experiences that late-diagnosed autistic women had at school, despite their late diagnosis?

b. What do late-diagnosed autistic women feel has acted as a barrier to their positive school experiences?

c. How do late-diagnosed autistic women describe the impact of their school experiences on their emotional wellbeing and mental health?

4.2 Phase One Methods

4.2.1 Participants

Phase one participants were selected purposively with the following inclusion criteria:

- Female.

- Aged 18 or over at the time of data collection.

- Formal diagnosis of autism or Asperger's Syndrome.

- Received diagnosis in adulthood (aged 18 or older).

- Able to express themselves verbally.

To begin the process of recruitment, I created a digital poster containing details of the study and inclusion criteria, which I shared on relevant social media platforms (see Appendix A). Following the circulation of the recruitment poster, ten women contacted me to express an interest in participating in the research. All women who expressed an interest were emailed a participant information sheet containing further detail about the current research and what participation would entail, alongside a participant consent form which they were asked to sign and return if they wished to participate. Of the ten women who initially expressed an interest, five signed and returned the consent form, and online interviews were arranged via email communication.

Participants' ages at the time of the current research ranged from twenty-seven to thirty-nine years, and ages at diagnosis ranged from twenty-two to thirty years. Two participants were assessed and diagnosed via the NHS, and three participants had a private assessment and diagnosis. Following their interviews, participants were asked about their clinical diagnosis. The terminology used in participants' diagnoses paperwork varied; two participants were diagnosed with "autism spectrum condition", one participant's diagnosis stated: "you meet the official DSM-5 criteria for autism", one participant's diagnosis states autism spectrum disorder with sub-type: Asperger's Syndrome, and another participant's diagnosis states Asperger's Syndrome. Both participants whose diagnosis lists Asperger's Syndrome prefer not to use this as a description of themselves and instead describe themselves as autistic. None of the participants had an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) or a Statement of Special Educational Needs when they were at school.

Table 1

Information About Phase One Participants

Pseudonym assigned by researcher	Age at time of research (years)	Age at diagnosis (years)	Wording of diagnosis	EHCP/Statement when attending school (yes/no)
Maria	39	30	Autism Spectrum Disorder with sub-type: Asperger's	No

Hannah	27	25	Autism Spectrum Condition	No
Rosie	27	26	Autism Spectrum Disorder	No
Layla	27	22	Autism Spectrum Condition	No
Olivia	33	28	Asperger's Syndrome	No

4.2.2 Phase One Data Collection

The first phase of this research explored the retrospective school experiences of late-diagnosed autistic women. To capture their experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants. It was decided that interviews be conducted individually, rather than in a group setting, due to the personal nature of the questions. Semi-structured interviews typically follow a set of guide questions or topics centred around a particular topic but also allow flexibility to explore other topical trajectories as the discussion unfolds (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). The questions are often open-ended and provide an opportunity for the participant to discuss their feelings, opinions, or experiences in as much detail as they would like (Galletta, 2013). This method of interviewing seemed most appropriate for the

current research as the focus was on individual school experiences which are likely to be broad and unique to each participant, meaning that novel topics may arise with each interview.

One of the main advantages of using semi-structured interviews as a data collection method is that they allow the interviewer flexibility in their approach to questioning (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). This was deemed to be especially beneficial given the nature of this research and the variability which may arise in participants' stories. A further advantage of this method is that it allows the researcher to follow up verbal and non-verbal cues to decipher information which may be relevant to the final analysis of data (Ritchie et al., 2013). However, it is acknowledged that semi-structured interviews may be limited by their susceptibility to researcher bias (Chenail, 2011), and that the success of the interview in the generation of meaningful data may be dependent on the ability of the interviewer to explore relevant avenues for discussion and ask appropriate follow-up questions (Doody & Noonan, 2013).

4.2.3. Developing the Interview Schedule

The semi-structured interview schedule used was developed in accordance with the guidance proposed by Galletta (2013), who advised that each question should be "clearly connected to the purpose of the research, and its placement within the protocol should reflect the researcher's deliberate progression toward a fully in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study" (p.45). The questions used in the current research were based around two main areas of participants' experiences: their general school experiences and the barriers and facilitators they encountered.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to capture the views of these women due to the richness of the data typically generated (Schultze & Avital, 2011). Patton

(2014) asserts that "questions should be asked in a truly open-ended fashion so people can respond in their words" (p.53). In accordance with Patton's advice, the interview questions were informed by the overarching research questions for phase one of the study and used an open-ended format. Furthermore, the design of the schedule was created using Bearman's (2019) three-step process. Step one involved articulating questions around core events that may illuminate the phenomenon of interest. Bearman (2019) suggests using questions which start with open-ended statements like, "tell me about a time when…". Step two entailed finding an intuitive structure. According to Kvale (2007), a semi-structured interview should flow in a way that is reflective of a regular conversation. This part of the process largely involved practising the interview schedule with friends and family members to ensure the questions elicited rich and detailed answers and that they were ordered in a way that felt natural. The final step of the process involved refining the schedule. At this stage, I piloted the schedule with a fellow trainee Educational Psychologist and asked for their honest feedback and criticism to help me make amendments where necessary (see Appendices D and E for initial interview schedule and changes made after piloting).

The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that the conversation was flexible and allowed the participant to discuss whatever topics they felt were relevant. Furthermore, the open-endedness of the questions invited participants to share as much or as little as they wanted. The questions explored participants' school experiences and were largely based upon themes identified in the research literature. The main themes examined in the interview schedule were as follows:

- Factors which enabled positive school experiences.
- Barriers/challenges faced in school.

- Experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

- Journey to autism diagnosis.

- Consideration of missed diagnosis or misdiagnosis.

- Reflections on impact of late-diagnosis.

4.2.4 Piloting

As recommended by Bearman (2019), the interview schedule was piloted prior to data collection. When I was in the second stage of the schedule design process, I piloted the schedule informally with friends and family members to find an intuitive structure so that the conversation flowed as naturally as possible. In the final stage of the design process whereby I was refining the schedule, I piloted the interview with a fellow trainee Educational Psychologist so that they could provide me with feedback regarding any necessary amendments. Following the pilot, some minor amendments were made to the language used in two of the questions for clarity and to minimise the likelihood of misunderstanding among participants (see Appendices D and E).

4.2.5 Procedure

Participants were all interviewed online via Microsoft Teams due to convenience and accessibility. The use of online video messaging platforms in the current research meant that participants came from a range of areas across the UK. Interviews were arranged for times that suited both the participants and the interviewer and lasted between forty minutes to one hour. Prior to the interviews, participants were sent information sheets containing further details about what the interview would entail and information about the research in general (see Appendix B). At the start of each

interview, participants were asked whether they were still happy to take part and reminded that they could pause or stop the interview at any point without needing to give an explanation. Participants were informed before the recording began.

All interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams and transcribed in Microsoft Word. Recordings will be deleted once the write up of this research is complete.

4.3 Phase One Ethics

Phase one participants were provided with an information sheet, (see Appendix B) containing details of what participation would entail, alongside a consent form, which they were required to sign and return before the interviews. The resources provided to the participants were checked for readability using a digital program called Readable. The resources were also written in accordance with the ethical guidelines proposed by the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) regarding working with vulnerable populations.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were used in phase one of the current research as they serve as an appropriate tool to discuss sensitive matters as the researcher is able to debrief with the participant, signpost where necessary, and remind the participant that they do not need to answer the question if they sense the participant is uncomfortable or distressed (Fylan, 2005). This is in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct which asserts that members should consider "the importance of compassion, including empathy, sympathy, generosity, openness, distress tolerance, commitment and courage" (British Psychological Society, 2021, p.8). This is particularly relevant for the current research as it is likely that sensitive topics may arise in the interview process.

Research indicates that some autistic individuals may find it difficult to cope with elements of uncertainty (Jenkinson et al., 2020). It is therefore possible that participants may have experienced undue distress during the interview process if they felt unprepared for the content of the questions, which seems to contradict the aforementioned ethical guidelines proposed by the British Psychological Society (2021). This was taken into consideration by the researcher and participants were provided with a guide outlining topics likely to be discussed in the interview. The guide made it clear that other topics may be discussed beyond those stated on the guide but that participants did not have to discuss anything they felt uncomfortable with.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the online meeting, prior to each interview starting, participants were reminded of what taking part in the current research would entail and were provided the opportunity to ask questions relating to the research. Subsequently, participants were asked again if they consented to take part. After giving verbal consent, participants were reminded that they could pause or stop the interview at any time without having to provide a reason for doing so. Participants were informed before the recording started. At the end of each interview, participants were asked how they were feeling and were provided an opportunity to ask questions. Following each interview, participants were emailed to thank them for their time and asked whether they had any follow-up questions relating to the research, whether they would like to provide any feedback, or whether they required signposting to any support services following participation in the current research.

Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were protected by allocating each participant a pseudonym. The document containing links between the participants'

actual names and their pseudonyms was produced and is not accessible to any person other than the researcher.

In line with GDPR regulations, data will be stored on a password-protected computer and will be destroyed when the write-up of this thesis is complete.

4.4 Phase One Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) in order to obtain a "rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78). Thematic analysis was selected as the method for data analysis as it provides a detailed exploration of the data which takes into account the individual experiences of each participant and explores common themes across the dataset. The reflexive approach to thematic analysis emphasises the researcher's active role in knowledge production and asserts that codes generated represent the researcher's own interpretation of the data (Byrne, 2022). By its nature, thematic analysis can be seen to reject any positivistic approaches to data analysis and interpretation, and instead encourages the researcher to embrace reflexivity, subjectivity, and creativity as part of the knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The subjectivity of the thematic analysis approach means that the researcher should not assert reliability or accuracy in their coding of the data. Rather, this method of analysis was selected as it affords flexibility and allows for themes to be identified based on their importance and relevance to the research questions, rather than by frequency (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, it is proposed that analytic methods like thematic analysis are useful when exploring an under-researched area such as the topic of the current

study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Completing the thematic analysis involved following the six-stage process outlined below:

1. Transcription and repeated reading of the transcripts to promote familiarisation with the dataset.
2. Generating initial codes and beginning to map out key themes.
3. Repeated examination of the dataset to determine key themes.
4. Review and refinement of key themes.
5. Finalising and naming identified key themes.
6. Reporting the findings.

The data were coded in Microsoft Word, using the tracked changes function to make comments on highlighted areas of text (see Appendix C), and thematic maps were developed and then reviewed to generate the final themes. Initial coding was based on the research questions, but further codes and themes arose throughout the process. Table 2 (below) illustrates how the data were coded, including the generation of an initial code, initial identified themes, review and refinement of themes, and lastly, final themes and sub-themes. The example provided below shows a clear link to research question 1a (What factors contributed to any positive experiences that late-diagnosed autistic women had at school, despite their late diagnosis?).

The data analysis process was extensive and took several weeks to complete due to the necessity to repeatedly examine the dataset to determine and subsequently refine the key themes. As part of my reflexive practice, I engaged in peer debriefing with a colleague who could provide an "outsider's perspective" (Ritchie et al., 2009), which supported me in identifying potential biases, challenged my initial

interpretations, and prompted me to consider alternative understandings of the data. See the table below for an example of how the data were analysed.

Table 2

An Example to Illustrate the Process of Thematic Analysis

Quotation	Initial coding	Initial identified themes	Review/refinement of themes	Final theme and sub-themes
Hannah: *"I spent a lot of time in the music department, so most lunch times I was in the music department rather than being out and about. Which I now kind of understand a little bit and it was to do with food. It was to do with being outside in the cold cause I'm really super sensitive to*	Avoiding sensory and social triggers during unstructured periods.	Safe space as protective factor in sensory and social/communication needs.	The role of a safe social space in school.	The importance of safe social spaces.

temperature. It was to do with like busyness and crowds and socializing."		51		
Layla: *"but I definitely had a bit of a target on my back from quite a lot of people, so I'd find that quite challenging and upsetting. I spent every break time and every lunchtime initially in the library always and then that progressed to being split between the library and the music rooms because I would go and play the piano as well. So that was sort of my refuge really."*	Seeking safe space to retreat to during unstructured times to avoid challenging interactions with peers.			

The themes generated from the semi-structured interviews in phase one of the current research were used to develop materials for the focus groups conducted in phase two.

4.5 Phase One Findings

This section will outline the key findings from the semi-structured interviews carried out in phase one of the current research with late-diagnosed autistic women.

The reflexive thematic analysis used produced key themes relating to the phase one research questions.

Research Question 1: How do late-diagnosed autistic women describe their school experiences?

Research Question 1a: What do late-diagnosed autistic women feel has enabled them to have positive experiences of school despite their late diagnosis?

Table 3

Themes and Sub-themes Relating to Research Question 1a

Themes	Sub-themes
The importance of safe spaces	Avoiding sensory triggers
	Avoiding difficult social interactions
Positive relationships with school staff	Having someone to talk to
	Feeling supported by staff during difficult times
Positive friendships	

Hobbies and interests	Making school more enjoyable
	Meeting people with shared interests
Self-management of needs	Making adjustments in line with needs
Enjoyment of learning	

4.6 Enablers of Late-Diagnosed Autistic Women's Positive School Experiences

4.6.1 The Importance of Safe Spaces

Phase one participants identified safe spaces as an important enabling factor in their school experiences. Participants described safe spaces, including the school library and music rooms, as being places they could retreat to in order to avoid sensory triggers or difficult social interactions, particularly during the unstructured parts of the school day like break or lunchtime.

Hannah described spending time in the school's music rooms at lunchtime as a protective factor against sensory elements of school she found difficult. Hannah also described the music rooms as a place where she could pursue her interests.

Hannah: *Most lunch times I was in the music department rather than being out and about, which I now kind of understand a little bit and it's it was to do with food. It was to do with being outside in the cold cause I'm really super sensitive to temperature. It was to do with like busyness and crowds and socializing and also because I love music.*

Participants also described safe spaces as important for helping them avoid difficult social situations.

Layla: *I definitely had a bit of a target on my back from quite a lot of people, so I'd find that quite challenging and upsetting, so I spent every break time and every lunchtime initially in the library always and then that progressed to being split between the library and the music rooms because I would go and play the piano as well. So that was sort of my refuge really.*

Olivia described her secondary school's safe spaces as quiet areas she could go to seek adult support.

Olivia: *There was always somewhere you could go so. You could either go to the library and let them know that you needed a quiet space, or there was a special educational needs section. There was like a little office attached to the IT department where some of the support workers worked. And they would be there having their lunch, and they would always say, look, just come and see us if you need to.*

4.6.2 Positive Relationships with School Staff

Phase one participants identified positive relationships with school staff as an important enabling factor in their positive school experiences. One participant described that she had a particularly good relationship with her head of house who provided support which helped her to stay on track in school.

Maria: *I did have a good relationship with - we were split secondary schools into like houses - so my head of house, I had a good relationship with her. But I think that was like, it was just incidental, like I think that provided a lot of support, that was really helpful for me. And helped me kind of like then stay on track.*

Some participants felt that they got along better with staff members than they did with their peers.

Rosie: *I would almost much prefer and kind of get on better with my teachers than I did with what people around me.*

Layla: *I loved loads of my teachers. I was always, like wanting to hang out with the teachers and wanting to kind of spend more time with them… I was always with the librarian and she and I were, I mean, we're still in touch. We're still friends.*

Layla also stated that the reason she liked spending time with staff members was because adults were more direct in their communication with her, and she felt her special interests were accepted by school staff.

Layla: *The librarian and the music teacher were my friends…I felt like I knew where I stood with them… So I found those relationships much less complicated and they didn't think that I was weird for wanting to talk about, you know, kind of the things that interested me.*

Another participant reflected that her relationships with school staff were, at times, closer than those she had with her friends and family members, and she felt as

though she could confide in trusted staff members when she was experiencing poor mental health.

Hannah: *I started getting to know teachers quite well and building really good relationships. And I wasn't scared of them and was then able to go to them with things. I then spent a lot of time with my teachers and from kind of the end of year 9 onwards, and, I would just go to them and tell them stuff that was happening, like problems and things. Yeah, I trusted them a lot. From kind of around year 10 when my mental health started going downhill, I was very much, like, I would confide in my teachers. But I didn't want anyone at home to know or anything. And so my teacher relationships - my relationship with my teachers - was almost stronger than like friends and family.*

Furthermore, participants singled out specific members of staff who went above and beyond to offer support which had a positive impact on their wellbeing.

Olivia: *[teacher] was an absolute godsend. She took time out of her own lunch break to look over my spellings and teach me some maths, and she like she would just go out of her way, and I don't think I was the only one, she would do it with a couple of others as well. It was like she knew I needed that extra boost and. All of my grades started coming up because of it, and my self-esteem.*

Maria: *I remember that this one teacher, I never had anything to do with, she never taught me, umm, and I remember, I was coming out of a French lesson out of the languages department one day where I'd like been held back and spoken to again and all that kind of thing, and she just caught me and said if you ever want to come and talk like you can come find me.*

Finally, one participant reflected that her positive relationship with an identified member of staff was important for making her feel like she had an advocate when things went wrong.

Maria: *I remember going to my head of house and saying like straight like after the lesson going and finding her, and saying this has happened but I didn't mean it in this way and her listening to me and not immediately kind of taking the side of the other adult and saying it's fine, we can resolve this. So feeling like you've got someone on your side.*

4.6.3 Positive Friendships

Phase one participants identified friendships as an important enabling factor in their positive school experiences despite their late diagnosis. One participant, Maria, described the importance of acceptance within her friendship group.

Maria: *I feel really fortunate for like, all the kind of like friendships I've had actually from being at school and like kind of continuing. I've always felt quite accepted by my friends.*

Similarly, Rosie described her friends as non-judgemental and as providing a good support system in school.

Rosie: *I had a really good group of friends and like a really good support system, and I think just kind of having people around me who, like, weren't judging me for what I was saying or doing or whatever, like, just supportive people, I think like around me.*

Furthermore, one participant identified that her friendships felt reciprocal and that her friends would offer one another support in difficult times. She also identified these friendships as a protective factor against succumbing to the influence of peer pressure. In response to the question, "how would you describe your friendships at school?", Maria responded as follows:

Maria: *I think quite strong. I've always felt really quite loyal to, you know, friends. I've never been somebody to have, like, lots of different friends. But the friendships that I've had and I've got, have always been strong friendships where I feel understood and I feel I offer something to my friends as well in terms of being a good friend and like, you know, when I look back, I think I was, I was always somebody that would listen to my friends. And also, I guess that acceptance, like having that acceptance both ways and, and not necessarily just going along with umm, yeah, peer pressure.*

Another phase one participant described her friendships as being useful because it meant she always had someone to spend time with at school. She described her friendship group as "the misfits" who did not fit into any other group.

Layla: *there was a group, quite a big group, which was sort of the Misfits, really. All the people who didn't fit into any other group all sort of congregated together. So, anyone who didn't have another group of friends just sort of fell into that group by default, which was quite handy because it meant that there were always people there. And I did make friends with some of the people in that group. So I did have a few friendships and, umm, people that I got on with and people that I enjoyed.*

4.6.4 Hobbies and Interests

All phase one participants identified having a hobby or interest as an important aspect of their positive school experiences. Many participants identified their hobbies and interests as things they could immerse themselves in during break or lunchtimes which they otherwise found difficult.

Layla: *I spent every break time and every lunchtime initially in the library always and then that progressed to being split between the library and the music rooms because I would go and play the piano as well.*

Hannah: *I enjoyed the kind of performing arts side of things, so music and drama, that's kind of what I've gone into. I spent a lot of time in the music department, so that kind of most lunchtimes I was in the music department rather than being out and about.*

Other participants identified their interests as helping them to feel calm when at school.

Olivia: *I loved music... I always had my CD player going round school. I would always plug in my earphones and just listen to a bit of music to calm myself down for the day, or at lunchtime or just after school before my mom picked me up.*

Furthermore, some participants used their hobbies or interests to join groups or clubs which served as a positive aspect of their school experiences.

Maria: *Sport was a massive positive about school actually because I was really involved in lots of like sports clubs and doing well in them.*

Layla: *I was a cathedral chorister, so I had a knowledge of classical music that was, you know, way past any of my teenage friends, understandably. But it meant that I had somebody that I could talk about that with. And they didn't just think that I was kind of being weird. So I really enjoyed that.*

4.6.5 Self-management of Needs

One enabling factor to participants' positive experiences of school was the management of their own needs. Some participants felt that they needed to make adjustments to their own days in order to cope with some of their sensory needs. For Layla, her main sensory triggers were noise and crowds, which she attempted to avoid by offering to help the teachers.

Layla: *I'd offer to, you know, help do the display boards at lunchtime rather than go and be in the playground where it was noisy and busy where I didn't like it. And in secondary I would do the same thing; I would get involved in other things… I think because I found ways to self-manage in terms of hanging out in the library and the music rooms, I just wasn't really letting people know necessarily how much I was struggling.*

In contrast, Hannah's sensory sensitivities were related to temperature, crowds, and food. To avoid being exposed to these sensory triggers Hannah spent lunchtimes inside.

Hannah: *most lunchtimes I was in the music department rather than being out and about. Which I now kind of understand a little bit and it's it was to do with food. It was to do with being outside in the cold cause I'm really super sensitive to temperature. It was to do with like business and crowds and socializing.*

Olivia shared that music helped her feel calm when she was exposed to sensory triggers.

Olivia: *I would always plug in my earphones and just listen to a bit of music to calm myself down for the day… music was definitely my way of calming myself down.*

Other participants employed strategies to help manage their own learning needs, including self-teaching. Maria reflected that, due to her negative relationships with most teachers which she felt occurred as a result of their misunderstanding of her different communication style, meant that she was unable to approach them for support.

Maria: *I felt like I used to kind of go home and I'd spend quite a lot of time kind of reteaching myself what had been done in lessons because I wouldn't have processed it fully. Or my attention would have been affected. So when it came to*

attempting homework, I would have to go back over what was done in the lesson to then feel like right now I can attempt a piece of homework on it.

4.6.6 Enjoyment of Learning

Enjoyment of learning was linked to positive views of school. Participants expressed that the academic elements of school were some of their favourite aspects of the school experience and promoted good wellbeing. For Rosie, it was the process of learning which was most enjoyable.

Rosie: *I was really academic and I really like the thing that I liked most about school was actually the learning and the subjects and the lessons as opposed to like the social sort of side of things.*

For Hannah, enjoyment of learning was more about attainment, and she described going "above and beyond" to achieve a high level of academic attainment. Similarly, Layla described being a "high achiever" who "enjoyed doing well". Additionally, Layla described how her academic achievements gave her a sense of pride and contributed to feelings of positive self-esteem. Layla also described how her love of learning helped her get through school when she was finding other aspects of school challenging.

Layla: *I had periods of really quite high anxiety but enjoying learning was always kind of the bit that got me through school, even when all the other stuff was tricky.*

Furthermore, Layla expressed enjoyment in being challenged academically as much of the work set was too easy and she experienced feelings of boredom. Layla voiced

appreciation for the teachers who set her extra work and described these staff

members as "good teachers".

Research Question 1b: What do late-diagnosed autistic women feel has acted as a barrier to their positive experiences of school?

Table 4

Themes and Sub-themes Relating to Research Question 1b

Themes	Sub-themes
Others' understanding of autism	Feeling misunderstood by school staff
	Needs going unrecognised and unmet by adults
Difficult peer relationships	Not fitting in with peers
	Difficulties making and maintaining friendships
	Experiences of being bullied
Sensory sensitivities	
Masking	Needs going unmet

4.7 Barriers to Late-Diagnosed Autistic Women's Positive School Experiences

4.7.1 Others' Understanding of Autism

Phase one participants identified others' understanding of autism, or lack thereof, as a barrier to their positive school experiences. Participants reflected that teachers did

not appear to have or demonstrate an understanding of their needs or make reasonable adjustments based on these needs. One participant reflected that she felt misunderstood by school staff, and that teachers viewed her behaviours as defiant, rather than as an expression of her needs.

Maria: *I think teachers would just become quite tired of me. I remember, I would just walk into a lesson and I would do one small little thing, sometimes on purpose, sometimes not, and they would just get me out. So, they just have a table set up outside already.*

Furthermore, Maria shared that she did not feel liked by school staff which had a negative impact on her wellbeing.

Additionally, Olivia reported that a teacher did not handle incidents of bullying effectively, and rather than helping the participant overcome social difficulties with her peers, she felt as though the teacher's actions isolated her further. This experience greatly impacted Olivia's trust in her teachers whom she had previously viewed as trustworthy people who kept her safe, and further exacerbated her feelings of otherness and loneliness.

Olivia: *The bullying side of it was absolutely awful. So much so one of my tutors or teachers back in the day, she didn't deal with it properly. Instead of punishing those that were bullying me, she decided to, in some respect, punish me by locking me in the staff room with her and the rest of the staff, and therefore they had to go out and get me some lunch and which was a takeaway curry in the end, rather than actually going to find my lunch that had been prepacked. And it was just absolutely awful.*

Another phase one participant reported that her teacher's handling of her friendship issues made things more difficult for her rather than better. As in Olivia's experience

outlined above, Rosie's teacher did not appear to consider Rosie's own opinions about the situation, and their actions ultimately increased Rosie's feelings of social isolation.

Rosie: *I was going through like the difficulties in friendships when I was about 10 or 11. My parents kind of like got involved with my teacher and we were trying to solve it but it didn't really work because my teacher was just trying to force the friend who didn't really want to be friends with me to be friends with me, and that made it really difficult.*

Teachers' understanding of participants' sensory needs was also identified as a barrier to their positive school experiences. Olivia outlined an experience whereby her teacher became angry when she attempted to manage her own sensory needs, in this case hyperacusis, by putting her fingers in her ears to reduce the amount of noise entering her ears. She reported that the teacher "really did not like that", and that she was punished by being made to stand up and go outside of the assembly hall. Olivia felt as though her teachers did not understand her, and that they viewed her behaviours as defiant rather than functional.

Phase one participants also reflected that their teachers did not appear to understand some of their learning needs. Olivia described a situation whereby the teacher did not understand her reading difficulties, and that she was forced to stand up and read in front of the class despite the text being too advanced for her level of ability. She reported that this experience had a negative impact on her self-confidence and led to feelings of frustration. Olivia's use of the word "forced" indicates that she was told to do things against her will and that her views or needs were not always taken into consideration by teachers, something which has arisen throughout participants' school experiences.

Similarly, Maria reflected that she struggled to perform under pressure in examination situations. Though she was academically able, she was not able to demonstrate her abilities in exam settings due to the feelings of stress and anxiety she experienced. Furthermore, she felt that her communication differences meant that she was unable to talk to her teachers about her concerns. She remembers thinking, "What's going on here? Why have you done this?", but was not able to explain this to members of staff. Maria considered that, if she had more positive and trusting relationships with staff members, she might have been able to talk about these issues and they may have been rectified more quickly or effectively, therefore highlighting the importance of positive staff-pupil relationships.

Other participants reflected on how their autism was not understood or identified by school staff, and the difference it may have made if it were picked up on earlier in their lives. Rosie felt it was "glaringly obvious" that she was autistic, but that no one ever picked up on it. Like Maria, Rosie also considered that she may have benefitted from having a trusted adult to talk to about her issues which would have had a positive impact on her wellbeing.

Rosie: *I just think if someone had and given me the time to actually talk about it and discuss what was difficult for me then it might have made a difference to how I, well, probably, my whole life. But yeah, like it would have been nice, I think to like, have someone like you know, actually take time to make things help me make things easier for me rather than…I just sort of struggled through a little bit. So yeah, it would have been helpful.*

When asked what would have helped her at school, Olivia reported, "the teacher's having an understanding would have helped a lot". Likewise, Maria shared that her teachers lacked an understanding of her needs and did not appear interested in trying to understand the reasons behind her behaviours which may have ultimately helped her in school.

Researcher: *What do you think the adults could have done differently in that situation?*

Maria: *I think just being a bit more curious about what was going on. And not just putting it down to bad behaviour and actually thinking about the reasons behind that. And not putting the onus on me to change. And actually thinking, even if there wasn't that kind of understanding of what was driving the behaviour, maybe just a little bit of thinking about what to do about it. So even if we can't understand why this is happening, this might be supportive in making that change or supporting me to make change.*

4.7.2 Difficult Peer Relationships

Phase one participants identified difficult relationships with peers as a barrier to their positive school experiences.

Researcher: *Tell me about some of the challenges you faced at school.*

Rosie: *Definitely friendships and like being around like my peers and things like that, like I really struggled. Like I had difficult friendships kind of went from when I was About 10 to about 14 maybe. I went through difficult periods with people, so it was definitely the social side of things.*

Participants discussed their difficulties in making and maintaining friendships at school. Layla shared that she never had a best friend at school, though she longed for one, which had a negative impact on her emotional wellbeing.

Layla: *I always used to come home and cry and cry and cry to my mum and say, "I've not got a best friend. I've never had a best friend like all the characters in books. They all have a best friend and I've never had that, and I don't think I'll ever have it". And when I was in primary, mum was like, "Oh, secondary school's bigger, you'll meet someone there". And then in secondary, "College is bigger, you'll meet someone there". And then at college, "Uni is bigger". And I just thought, it's never going to happen.*

Rosie reflected on how she became fixated on particular peers and then experienced distress when she had to share her friends.

Rosie: *I would go through phases where I would get very attached to one person in particular, like I would be, like you know, very fixated on one friendship. Like when I was in primary school, I was best friends with this boy, my friend. And then he met someone else, and then he preferred to spend time with her. And it was like the end of the world to me.*

Similarly, Layla described how she always felt like an "add-on" in her friendship group, and that her friends would often spend time together without including her.

Layla: *I was usually the the add-on. So, for example, there was a group of three girls who, they didn't know each other before, but they all met in year seven at the start of school, secondary school. The three of them formed a little group and sometimes I would hang out with them. So they always did stuff together. And then I sometimes joined them. But I was very much the add-on and that was the case in other groups as well.*

Layla also went on to note that she often made friends with people much younger or much older than her, even identifying adult staff members as her friends.

Layla: *I've always been friends with people older and younger than me. My friendships have tended to go one of those ways, or both, rather than necessarily just people my age… And then really, it was like the librarian and the music teacher. They were my friends.*

Some participants shared that they did not feel as though they fit in with their peers and had trouble finding their place in school.

Olivia: *School was an absolute nightmare. I never really fitted in. I was always trying to find the right clique, shall we say, to fit in. There were two that I was trying so hard to fit in with, but they were the complete opposite. And it never really worked.*

Layla: *There was a group, quite a big group, which was sort of the misfits, really. All the people who didn't fit into any other group, all sort of congregated together. So*

anyone who didn't have another group of friends just sort of fell into that group by default.

Additionally, phase one participants reported feeling different to their peers which made it difficult to relate to others.

Maria: *I knew I was different, I just didn't know why. And I remember saying to a friend once, asking her if, like, "Am I weird?" And she's like, "No, of course you're not weird". But at that age, I definitely knew there was something different about me. I just don't know what it is.*

Layla described that, although she felt different, she believed that all teenagers felt this way.

Layla: *I just always felt different. I know it's a cliche and I think that was almost in itself part of the struggle because I was quite, I think it was a relatively self-aware teenager, particularly thinking about secondary school and...you know, all teenagers think that they're different and all teenagers think that nobody else is like them. And so, you know, this must be how everybody else is feeling... I think as I say, I was aware that feeling like you're different was not a unique experience, but I think and so I was quite hard on myself because of that.*

Rosie reflected that she had different interests to her peers which put a strain on her friendships, particularly as she got older. Rosie reflected that her lack of shared interests led to her feeling left out and different to her friends.

Rosie: *When you're getting older and then the people around you are like starting to do things that you don't want to do, like in college, people are having house parties and I don't drink and like I it just then it becomes not a very nice environment when you've got people who wanna go out or like go to parties all the time and I don't, and I guess not wanting to do the same things as people around me and struggling just with like the social stuff in general.*

Other participants described their experiences of being bullied throughout school. Participants shared that it was perhaps their difference to other children which made them targets for bullies. This experience had a negative impact on participants' wellbeing and made break and lunch times particularly challenging.

Olivia: *We have always known there was something different about me… I was bullied because I always was a bit different.*

Layla: *Socially, I found it much harder, much more complicated…I definitely had a bit of a target on my back from quite a lot of people, so I'd find that quite challenging and upsetting.*

4.7.3 Sensory Sensitivities

Phase one participants identified sensory sensitivities as a barrier to their positive school experiences. Some participants outlined that lunchtimes were difficult in terms of encountering sensory triggers and so participants found other ways to spend their time.

Hannah: *Most lunchtimes I was in the music department rather than being out and about. Which I now kind of understand a little bit and it's it was to do with food. It was to do with being outside in the cold cause I'm really super sensitive to temperature. It was to do with like business and crowds.*

Layla: *I'd offer to, you know, help do the display boards at lunchtime rather than go and be in the playground where it was noisy and busy.*

Olivia described how she tried to manage her own sensory needs in school.

Olivia: *With my Aspergers comes something called hyperacusis. It's when my ears pick up the different pitches. So I can still hear mosquitoes and alarms that shouldn't be heard by anyone over the age of 25… But when I was in school, I had this habit of rather than actually putting my finger in my ear, I would put it just on the outside and fold the flap in so that I could still hear, but it wasn't as loud.*

Hannah discussed how some of her sensory needs led her to feeling unsafe and fearful in school. She described being "squeamish and super sensitive", particularly in relation to other people's health conditions. This sensitivity led to Hannah becoming "obsessive" about certain aspects of her environment, especially food, temperature, and toileting. She describes that she could sense when aspects of her sensory environment were "slightly off", which led to her feeling incredibly upset. Furthermore, Hannah described that her physical and sensory needs were not consistently met in school. She reported that the toilets were often closed at

lunchtimes due to other children misusing them, so there was not an opportunity to use them all day as she felt it was "wrong" and against the rules to go during lesson time. This experience had a negative impact on Hannah's wellbeing and she described it as feeling "really scary".

4.7.4 Masking

Most phase one participants identified masking as a barrier to their positive school experiences.

Rosie: *So I'm very, very good at masking and looking back, I must that must have been one of the reasons why I people didn't pick up on it because I was good at masking, because I was good at blending in.*

Layla shared that masking felt like hard work but that it was ultimately futile in helping her to fit in with her peers socially.

Researcher: How do you view your school experiences differently since receiving your diagnosis?

Layla: *I think my secondary school self, I think looking back and seeing just how much she was masking and just how difficult she was finding things and how weird and out of step she felt and not knowing why, and not having any kind of names for the things that she was experiencing and all of that stuff and just working so hard at everything and to you know, to fit in and nothing she did was right, like socially, like other people, you know, I just sometimes I felt like I could never win no matter what I did.*

Conversely, Maria reflected that masking was a useful tool that enabled her to get through secondary school and achieve her GCSE qualifications.

Maria: *I remember just being told, "You've got three months to turn things around. And for your behaviour to change". ...I look back now and think that's the time where I kind of made a conscious decision to like, I didn't obviously know the term masking at that point, but I thought that's a that was a time when I probably really started to mask… I have just got to keep my mouth shut, keep my head down, not get myself into any trouble, and that's what I did… things were a lot more settled then for, like, GCSE years moving forward.*

Research Question 1c: How do late-diagnosed autistic women describe the impact of their school experiences on their emotional wellbeing and mental health?

Table 5

Themes and Sub-themes for Research Question 1c

Themes	Sub-themes
Experiencing poor mental health	Feelings of stress and anxiety
	Long-lasting impact on mental health and relationships
Developing empathy	

4.8 The Perceived Impact of Late-Diagnosed Autistic Women's School Experiences on Their Social, Emotional, and Mental Health

4.8.1 Experiencing Poor Mental Health

Phase one participants reflected that some of their school experiences had an impact on their mental health. Some participants described that their school experiences led to feelings of anxiety or depression.

Rosie: *I was very, very anxious. I definitely went through phases where, I didn't know it at the time, but looking back I was very depressed as a kid. And it stemmed from my friendship groups and the difficulties going through school and things like that.*

Layla: *I definitely had a bit of a target on my back from quite a lot of people, so we'd find that quite challenging and upsetting… I had periods of really quite high anxiety.*

Maria shared that her teachers' lack of understanding of her learning needs led to her experiencing feelings of stress and anxiety, particularly during exam periods.

Maria: *I remember a period of time where I experienced anxiety, but I didn't know what it was, so I didn't know I was experiencing anxiety. I would really get quite stressed around exams, feeling like I was having to like cram to try and get as much information as I possibly could, but also then struggling with the exam process, and not knowing why I struggle with exams.*

Maria further went on to outline that, although she now recognises that she experienced anxiety, she was unable to both recognise or manage her anxiety at the time.

Maria: *I didn't have very good self-awareness at that age. So, even though I was experiencing anxiety and stress, I wasn't fully aware of why I was or what it was and what to do about it.*

Hannah described that she felt unsafe and anxious in school, and that she subsequently experienced panic attacks and required some time off due to her mental health issues.

Hannah: *In primary school, well and into secondary school, probably up again until about year nine I never really felt safe…It was anxiety probably… I was picked on quite a lot… and then kind of later secondary school I really struggled with my mental health, so I had a lot of panic attacks, had quite a lot of time off.*

Olivia reflected that her school experiences, particularly her experiences of bullying, had an impact on her self-esteem and confidence which continue to impact her in adulthood.

Olivia: *It certainly affected my self-esteem, self-confidence, and I mean, I'm still trying to recover that.*

Similarly, Rosie described how her traumatic school experiences regarding social experiences continue to impact her relationships with others as an adult.

Rosie: *It's definitely like had a knock-on effect into adulthood because I suffer with sort of like emotional instability. And I do kind of have a lot of trauma from the social side of things, I guess, like when I was a kid and kind of how that impacts me and my friendships and my relationships now as an adult.*

4.8.2 Developing Empathy

Some phase one participants reflected that their own school experiences allowed them to develop empathy for others.

Olivia: *Although the bullying was horrible, it made me look at everybody and their own situations… I wouldn't change half of what's happened because it's made me realise that the only way to move past it is to be kind to others and actually show them that you don't need to be constantly on at them about their failures.*

Olivia also shared that she has used her experiences of bullying to help others with similar needs.

Olivia: *It gave me a different outlook… there was one lady in particular whose son was very autistic, and at one point I did temporarily help her take care of him, and it was having that background and knowing what I've been through.*

Similarly, Hannah described how she reflects on her own school experiences to support other autistic children she works with.

Hannah: *The difficulty is that there are so many things now that aren't right for autistic children in school…so it's things like uniform policies… I had a conversation with a boy the other day, who I know is autistic. He said, "It's really cold and it's making me feel ill and I just can't stay in this room if I don't have my hoodie on". And I was like, "OK, fair", and I shouldn't have let him keep it on, but I did because that's me. Like, that's literally me… it's things like, not like lenience, but reasonable adjustments around things like uniform.*

4.9 Phase One Discussion

Phase one findings will now be discussed in accordance with the research questions and in relation to the research literature in the area.

The first aim of phase one of this study was to explore how late-diagnosed autistic women describe their school experiences. Specifically, it explored what late-diagnosed autistic women identified as facilitators and barriers to their positive school experiences. The study also aimed to explore how participants' school experiences impacted their social, emotional, and mental health.

4.10 How Late-Diagnosed Autistic Women Describe Their School Experiences

Phase one participants' descriptions of their school experiences were broad and varied. In line with previous research in this area, many participants

Some participants described school as "an absolute nightmare", whereas others had a more positive view of their school experiences, describing themselves as being generally happy at school.

There appeared to be a distinction between participants' primary and secondary school experiences. Participants generally described their primary school experiences as more positive than their secondary school experiences. Participants described their primary schools as "kind" and "gentle", and as places they felt better understood and better supported by school staff. One participant reflected that she coped with primary school better than secondary school because it was more highly structured and there were fewer transitions and changes. The research literature indicates that transitions can cause feelings of stress and anxiety for autistic children (Banda et al., 2009), which may lead to disengagement in learning and academic underachievement (Ashburner et al., 2010; McAllister & Maguire, 2012).

However, some participants found that they faced similar challenges throughout primary and secondary school, and they did not express a preference for either stage of schooling. Three participants shared that they were bullied in primary school, although one woman noted that this was not as severe as the bullying she experienced at secondary school. Other social challenges faced at primary school

included difficulties making and maintaining friendships, with one participant reflecting on the feelings of distress she experienced when she was required to share her friend with others. Furthermore, one participant reported not feeling safe in either primary or secondary school, which she reflected may have been due to some of her sensory needs and her rejection sensitivity. The participant explained that her teacher once marked her work with a comment asking her to write in pen rather than pencil. After this, the participant reported feeling unsafe in the presence of this teacher and subsequently being hypervigilant about further incidents of criticism which resulted in increased feelings of anxiety and perfection-seeking behaviours. Recent research has indicated that autistic people, or people with autistic traits, are more sensitive to rejection (real or perceived) than their neurotypical counterparts (Lin et al., 2022), which may partially explain why this participant found it so difficult to accept the teacher's feedback. Additionally, research indicates that many autistic women and girls are likely to be perfectionists, who find it difficult to complete tasks that meet their own standards, and who are excessively self-critical and may be preoccupied with failure (Ashburner et al., 2010; Moyse & Porter, 2015). Perfectionist behaviour in autistic girls may be partly explained by rejection sensitivity, whereby doing tasks to a high standard leaves them less open to criticism but may also be due to the rigid and inflexible behaviours which are characteristic of many autistic individuals (Ashburner et al., 2010).

In general, participants described their secondary school experiences as more challenging. Some participants reflected that secondary school was more difficult due to the increased learning demands and exam pressure. One participant described an incident where she was asked to read aloud to the class, despite not

having the necessary reading ability to do so, which led to feelings of low self-esteem. Mental health challenges were more commonly described in association with participants' secondary school experiences. Some participants reported feelings of anxiety, triggered by exam stress, experiences of being bullied, and sensory overwhelm. Others reported feelings of depression and low mood which they linked to the challenges they faced with their peers. Difficulties with peers has been identified as a challenging aspect of autistic children's school experiences throughout the literature, with research indicating that autistic children are more likely to be bullied and experience social isolation at school (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015; Kloosterman et al., 2013; Schroeder et al., 2014).

In addition, participants reported finding it more difficult to manage their sensory needs in secondary school. Typically, secondary schools are more populous than primary schools and therefore often louder or more crowded. Sensory sensitivities or sensory overwhelm, particularly noise, may impact autistic children's ability to cope in their educational setting (Cai & Richdale 2017; Connor, 2000). Many participants reported managing their own sensory needs, for example, by putting headphones in and listening to music or retreating to a quieter area of the school, like the library, during busy periods.

Furthermore, some participants recognised that they struggled to cope with the transition between primary and secondary school. The transition period has been identified as a difficult period for autistic children which is in part due to the associated changes in routine, environment, and social and learning demands (Dillon & Underwood, 2012). The transition between primary and secondary school

may also be difficult for autistic children to manage because the transition period often coincides with the onset of puberty and the associated hormonal changes which may lead to further feelings of distress or confusion (Cridland et al., 2014; Milner et al., 2019).

4.11 What Late-Diagnosed Autistic Women Feel Has Enabled Their Positive School Experiences Despite Their Late Diagnosis

4.11.1 The Role of Safe Social Spaces

Having a safe space to use in school was identified as a key enabling factor in late-diagnosed autistic women's positive experiences at school. For some participants, safe spaces were viewed as places they could retreat to during unstructured periods, such as break and lunchtimes, which they otherwise found difficult due to their difficulties with peers and sensory needs. Late-diagnosed autistic women identified the school library as a safe space, perhaps because libraries are typically quiet and sparsely populated, thus reducing the likelihood of participants encountering challenging social or sensory situations. Access to a quiet space, like the school library, has also been identified in the research literature as an important aspect of autistic children's school experiences (Connor, 2000; Cunningham, 2022; Dedridge, 2007). One participant identified her school's music room as a safe space she could use both to avoid the challenges of the playground and to pursue one of her interests, playing the piano. In this sense, safe spaces may be useful in providing autistic children with protected areas they feel able to explore their interests or fascinations, something which has been identified as important for autistic children in the research literature (Dedridge, 2007).

4.11.2 Positive Relationships with School Staff

Positive relationships with school staff were identified as an enabling factor for late-diagnosed autistic women in having positive school experiences, with many participants reflecting that they preferred the company of school staff members more than they did their peers. One participant shared that she found it easier to communicate with adults due to their more direct communication style which left less room for confusion and uncertainty. Another participant revealed that she classed two members of staff as her friends, one of whom she has remained in contact with since school. Participants' preferences for relationships with adults due to their direct communication styles may be consistent with some of the social communication difficulties often experienced by autistic people. Research indicates that autistic children find it tricky to navigate complex social interactions which are typical of friendships in adolescence, especially in predominantly female friendship groups (Landa & Goldberg, 2005), which is perhaps why it is easier for autistic girls to interact with adults who may be better able to understand their needs and adapt their communication style accordingly. Alternatively, the relationship between an adult and child is less likely to be friendship-based, so there may be fewer demands for autistic children to navigate more complex social rules or dynamics which typically occur in friendships.

The importance of autistic children building close and trusting relationships with school staff is widely acknowledged in the research literature (Goodall & McKenzie, 2019; Honeybourne, 2015; Tobias, 2009).

4.11.3 Positive Friendships

Similarly, participants identified positive friendships as an enabling factor in their positive school experiences. Some participants described the qualities of their friends that they valued most, which included their friends being accepting, supportive, and non-judgmental. Other participants described their friendships as convenient and functional, with one participant outlining that her friendship group consisted of "misfits" who did not fit in with other peer groups. Interestingly, all participants valued friendships, with many discussing their strong desire to form close and meaningful relationships with their peers, something which may appear at odds with the stereotypical view which assumes that autistic children are not capable of forming quality friendships (Foggo & Webster, 2017). Autistic girls' desire to form friendships is well supported in the research literature, with various studies suggesting that autistic girls are just as likely to desire close and meaningful friendships as neurotypical girls, though they often lack the necessary social communication skills to develop said friendships (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018; Foggo & Webster, 2017; Sedgewick et al., 2016).

Participants described the positive impact their supportive friendships had on their emotional wellbeing in school. One woman described how she felt "quite fortunate" to have had such supportive friends in school and throughout her life. The same participant also revealed that she valued being a good friend in return and felt as though she offered reciprocal qualities to her friends, including listening to them and making them laugh. The role of meaningful friendships in promoting autistic girls' emotional wellbeing is well-established in the research literature (Foggo & Webster,

2017; Petrina et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2016) suggesting that girls may benefit from support in establishing friendships at school.

4.11.4 Hobbies and Interests

Having a hobby or interest that participants could pursue at school was identified as an enabling factor in late-diagnosed autistic women's positive school experiences. Some participants recognised that their hobbies or interests allowed them to meet peers with similar interests, which served as a point of connection upon which to build a friendship. Three participants cited music as an interest that they pursued at school, which also led to spending time with others who shared this interest, subsequently leading to positive social interactions and, in some cases, friendship. Research indicates that autistic children often benefit from shared interests to develop friendships (Koegel et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2021; Saggers, 2015), which suggests that autistic girls may benefit from attending clubs based on their hobbies or interests at school as a means of making friends.

Furthermore, participants reflected that they could pursue their hobbies and interests at break and lunchtimes, periods of school they found challenging due to the social and sensory challenges which typically arise during these unstructured times. In this sense, having a hobby may serve as a protective factor that gives autistic children something to do at break and lunchtimes which they may otherwise find difficult. Being able to pursue a special interest has been identified as an important factor in autistic people's wellbeing (Grove et al., 2018), indicating that autistic girls may benefit from regular opportunities to engage with their hobbies and interests at school.

4.11.5 Self-management of Needs

Participants reflected that managing their own needs was a factor that enabled them to achieve positive outcomes at school despite their late diagnosis. Some participants shared that school staff did not seem to understand their needs or make the necessary adjustments or accommodations, so they were required to manage their own needs. Participants' self-management of their sensory needs seemed most prominent, with three participants detailing measures they employed to cope with some of the sensory triggers they encountered in their school settings. One participant shared that she experiences hyperacusis, a form of noise sensitivity whereby sounds seem louder than they are (National Health Service, 2022). To cope with her experiences of hyperacusis, she covered her ears in a particular way to reduce external noise but still hear the voice of the class teacher. However, the participant commented that this type of self-management of her needs was not completely successful as her teachers viewed her behaviours as defiant and told her to stop covering her ears in school.

Other participants discussed their self-management of their learning needs. One participant shared that her teachers did not understand her needs and she was frequently sent out of the classroom which meant she missed out on key learning opportunities. To manage her own learning needs, the participant reported that she taught herself at home, often spending hours reading and revising the learning material to ensure she kept up with the rest of her class. Even when the participant was in lessons, she recognised that she did not always process or understand what

the teacher had said, meaning that she needed to re-teach herself in a way that she could better understand outside of the classroom.

Other studies of autistic girls' school experiences have also found that girls made adjustments in school to manage their own needs in response to their needs going unnoticed and unmet by adults (Moyse & Porter, 2015).

4.11.6 Enjoyment of Learning

Enjoyment of learning was identified as an enabling factor in late-diagnosed autistic women's positive school experiences. Most participants reported being academically able and enjoying the feeling of success they experienced in relation to their learning. Two participants cited learning as the element of school they enjoyed most, with one participant commenting that she requested more challenging learning tasks which were more reflective of her level of ability. Participants specifically referenced their enjoyment of maths, art, music, and performing arts. One participant reflected that she enjoyed the "routine" of learning and the sense of predictability this gave her. Autistic children's need for routine and predictability has been recognised in the research literature (Cunningham, 2022), indicating that autistic girls' school settings could be set up in a way that instils a sense of predictability to support their learning and other needs.

Alternatively, some participants did not enjoy learning and conversely identified learning as one of the main challenges they faced at school. However, the participants who found learning difficult emphasised that their learning challenges

were related to teachers not understanding their needs and therefore not making necessary adjustments and accommodations to meet these needs.

4.12 What Late-diagnosed Autistic Women Identified as Barriers to Their Positive School Experiences

4.12.1 Others' Understanding of Autism

Participants identified others' understanding of autism, or lack thereof, as a barrier to their positive school experiences. One participant reported that she had poor social communication skills and lacked social awareness, and as a result, did not interact with teachers in a way they deemed socially appropriate. The participant reflected that her teachers viewed her as rude and defiant, and she reported "not feeling very liked" by school staff members which had a negative impact on her emotional wellbeing. Interestingly, in Sciutto's (2012) study of autistic children's school experiences, participants felt as though their style of communication was misunderstood by teachers and they were often viewed as rude, though this was unintended by participants. Furthermore, the participant described that her teachers often sent her out of the classroom due to her perceived defiance or rudeness which further had a negative impact on her access to learning opportunities.

Similarly, another participant in the current study discussed a specific event whereby her teacher did not understand her learning needs linked to her autism. In this case, the teacher asked the participant to read aloud to the rest of the class without realising that the participant did not have the skills required to do so. The participant reflected that this had a detrimental effect on her self-confidence and self-esteem as

she felt embarrassed in front of her peers. The same participant also described

another incident whereby she got into trouble with a teacher for covering her ears to

manage her sensory sensitivity to sound which her teacher viewed as defiance. In

line with these findings, Jarman and Rayner's (2015) study found that teachers' lack

of understanding of autistic girls' needs led to a subsequent lack of flexibility and an

unwillingness to adapt their classroom practice. Therefore, it seems essential that

school staff possess an understanding of how autism may present in girls, and a

willingness to make reasonable adjustments to their practice and support in line with

their needs.

4.12.2 Difficult Peer Relationships

Difficult peer relationships were identified as a barrier to late-diagnosed autistic

women's positive school experiences. Despite having a desire for close and

meaningful relationships with their peers, some participants described their

difficulties in making and maintaining friendships. One participant shared the distress

she felt when she realised that the peer she viewed as her best friend did not feel the

same way, and that he preferred the company of other children in the class. Another

participant reflected on her longing for a best friend throughout primary school,

secondary school, and sixth form college, without finding one. As aforementioned,

participants in the current study identified friendships as an enabling factor to their

positive school experiences, indicating that autistic girls, with or without a diagnosis,

should be supported to build friendships in their educational settings.

Participants also reflected on their experiences of being bullied at school. One

participant described having a metaphorical "target" on her back, which she

theorised may have been a result of her poor social skills and her atypical hobbies and interests. Similarly, another participant shared that she was bullied throughout school for "being a bit different", which she described as "absolutely awful". The research literature indicates that autistic children are more likely to be bullied than their neurotypical peers (Carter, 2009; Humphrey & Hebron, 2015; Rowley et al., 2012), with Heinrichs (2003) describing autistic children as the "perfect victims" due to their typically poor social skills and often niche and all-consuming special interests. Interestingly, Humphrey and Hebron (2015) found that those most at risk of being bullied are autistic children who have milder deficits in social understanding, which may have been the case for participants whose autism was not identified in childhood, perhaps as a result of their less obvious presentation of need.

4.12.3 Sensory Sensitivities

Sensory sensitivities were identified as a barrier to late-diagnosed autistic women's positive school experiences. Sensitivity to noise was highlighted by participants as a particular issue. One participant described how she struggled to cope with the noise of other children in her primary school classroom, which she later discovered was due to her experience of hyperacusis. Other participants revealed that they avoided the playground at break and lunchtimes due to the noise. Sensitivity to sound is often characteristic of autistic individuals (Stiegler & Davis, 2010), and the research literature indicates that noise sensitivity, and the sensory overwhelm often experienced in accordance with exposure to noise, can act as a significant barrier to autistic children's positive school experiences (Connor, 2000; Saggers et al., 2011).

Another participant reported that she experienced a range of sensory sensitivities which acted as a barrier to her positive school experiences. These sensitivities included temperature, food, and crowds. As a result of her sensory sensitivities, the participant made adjustments to her school day in order to avoid sensory triggers and the difficult feelings they caused. Research by Moyse and Porter (2015) similarly found that autistic girls often made adjustments to their own school days in line with their sensory needs.

4.12.4 Masking

Phase one participants identified masking as a barrier to their positive school experiences. Participants described that they masked their difficulties at school, which they felt was a possible reason that their autism was missed in childhood. Furthermore, participants reflected that one of the reasons their autism was not identified, and many of their needs went unmet, was because they masked their feelings at school and did not typically present with behaviours that challenged adults. Participants often described themselves as quiet and studious girls who wanted to please adults and do well. As a result of this presentation, which often involved masking, participants felt as though they were often overlooked by adults, and their needs sometimes went unmet as a result. Participants outlined that many of the struggles they faced were internalised, which some women reflected may have had a negative impact on their social, emotional, and mental health.

Another participant described her attempts at masking and adapting her behaviour to fit in with her peers, which she found cognitively and emotionally draining. The participant's masking behaviours were also futile, as her attempts to fit in with her

peers did not result in the development of any friendships with this group. Cook et al. (2018) found that girls often mask in school in order to fit in with peers, and although this can produce some short-term solutions, it often leads to longer-term problems, including their needs going unrecognised and unmet in school. Furthermore, in line with the experiences outlined by participants in the current study, other research indicates that masking can be exhausting, and often leads to further feelings of stress and anxiety (Jarman & Rayner, 2015; Ross et al., 2023; Sciutto et al. 2012).

However, one participant described the benefits of masking. She recalled the specific moment that she made a wilful and conscious decision to mask as she was threatened with exclusion, and she knew that masking would help her stay in school and achieve academically. In this sense, the participant viewed masking as a functional tool she could use to help her achieve her goals. The participant believed that, if she had not made the conscious decision to mask in school, she may not have gone on to study at university as she wanted to.

4.13 What Late-diagnosed Autistic Women Identified as the Impact of Their School Experiences on Their Social, Emotional, and Mental Health

4.13.1 Experiencing Poor Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health

Most participants outlined that their school experiences had a negative impact on their social, emotional, and mental health. Participants shared the ways in which their challenging school experiences, particularly their experiences of being bullied, led to feelings of anxiety. The research literature indicates that autistic girls are likely to report feelings of anxiety, which often occur as a result of their challenging social

encounters, sensory triggers, and their prolonged engagement in masking

behaviours (Cook et al., 2018; Moyse & Porter, 2015; Ross et al., 2023).

Furthermore, phase one participants experienced feelings of loneliness and social

isolation throughout their time at school which had a general negative impact on their

emotional wellbeing. Rose and Rudolph (2006) state that autistic girls may have an

increased social and emotional risk because of the isolation they experience from

being off the social radar and their need to persistently observe and judge the

nuances of social situations and adapt their own behaviour accordingly.

Another participant explained that her experience of being embarrassed in front of

her peers when she was unable to read aloud to the class led to her experiencing

low self-esteem and low self-confidence, difficulties she still experiences today.

Similarly, another participant described her school experiences as "traumatic", and

reflected on how these experiences continue to negatively impact her relationships

with others in adulthood. The long-term negative impacts of trauma on mental health

and relationships are well-documented in the research literature (Davidson &

McEwen, 2012; Dye, 2018), indicating that schools should aim to reduce the

likelihood of children's exposure to potentially traumatic experiences where possible.

4.13.2 Developing Empathy

Alongside the negative impact of participants' school experiences, one participant

also shared a positive impact of her school experiences on her development of

empathy for others. The participant described how her adverse school experiences,

especially her experience of being bullied, allowed her to better understand others'

feelings. The participant described how she would use her own challenging school

experiences to offer help and support to others who may be struggling with similar issues. The concept of autistic individuals' capacity for empathy has been discussed widely in the literature, with some earlier researchers purporting that autistic people did not experience or exercise empathy (Hobson, 1989; Kanner, 1943), and more recent research contesting these claims, instead arguing that many autistic people do experience empathy, but their social communication differences may mean they express empathy differently to non-autistic individuals (Li et al., 2023). For example, research indicates that some autistic people may exercise empathy by focusing on solutions, rather than emotions (Rieffe et al., 2021), or by sitting quietly with another person and listening to them (Crompton et al., 2020).

4.14 Phase One Conclusion

To conclude, phase one of this research explored the retrospective school experiences of late-diagnosed autistic women. The findings indicate that facilitators to autistic girls' positive school experiences include having regular and consistent access to safe spaces during unstructured periods, having trusting and positive relationships with school staff, possessing genuine and meaningful friendships, enjoyment of learning, and being able to self-manage needs. Conversely, the findings of phase one of the research indicate that barriers to autistic girls' positive educational experiences include others' understanding, or lack thereof, of autism in girls, difficult peer relationships, sensory sensitivities, and engagement in masking behaviours. The data generated from the interviews in phase one has been used to created composite vignettes (outlined further in section 5.2.4) to form the basis of the

discussions with EPs in phase two focus groups. The implications of phase one

findings will be discussed in more detail in sections 7.3 and 7.4.

CHAPTER 5: Phase Two

5.1 Phase Two Research Design

5.1.1 Aims:
- To explore and illuminate the potential role for the educational psychologist in supporting, directly or indirectly, girls with an autistic profile but no diagnosis.

- To consider the potential barriers educational psychologists may face when undertaking this work and an exploration of solutions.

5.1.2 Research Questions:

1. How do educational psychologists view their role in supporting girls with an autistic profile to cope and thrive in their educational setting?
a. What do educational psychologists perceive to be barriers to undertaking this work?
b. What do educational psychologists perceive to be facilitators to undertaking this work?

The second phase of the current research aimed to seek the views of educational psychologists on how the profession may be able to support, directly or indirectly, girls with an autistic profile to cope and thrive in their educational setting.

Focus groups were used to explore what participants perceive to be the main barriers for these girls, what are the enabling factors, and how can schools and other professionals best work to support these children and young people in their educational settings and beyond. The second phase of the research also explored what educational psychologists perceive to be some of the barriers to them undertaking this kind of work, and what they consider to be potential facilitators for

educational psychologists engaging in this work. Educational psychologists' views were captured through focus groups whereby the data generated in phase one of the current research was used to inform the questions asked to the participants.

5.2 Phase Two Methods

5.2.1 Participants

I created an information sheet that contained information about the current research and what participation would entail. This information sheet (see Appendix F) was sent out via email to Educational Psychologists (EPs) within one local authority Educational Psychology Service in the South West of England. It was decided that EPs would be recruited from the same service in line with Kitzinger's (1994) proposal that familiarity among focus group participants may lead to a more natural and open discussion of a topic within a homogenous group. See Table 6 below for information about the demographics of phase two participants, including their role, number of years qualified as an EP, and which focus group they were part of.

 Five people from within the service agreed to take part, and timings and dates were organised around each person's availability. Two focus groups were conducted online via Microsoft Teams to accommodate participants' schedules and availability.

Table 6

Demographic Information About Phase Two Participants

Participant identifier	Role	Years qualified as EP	Focus group (1 or 2)

EP1	Senior Educational Psychologist	12	1
EP2	Main grade Educational Psychologist	14	1
EP3	Main grade Educational Psychologist	9	1
EP4	Main grade Educational Psychologist	7	2
EP5	Main grade Educational Psychologist	5	2

5.2.2 Data Collection

Focus groups were selected as a tool to gather the views of phase two participants as this method allows the co-construction of knowledge through conversation and group interaction (Wilkinson, 1999). Focus groups are designed to be interactive, and the researcher should aim to create an environment in which each focus group member feels able to share their ideas, views, and experiences (Krueger, 2014). This method seemed appropriate for the current research as it provides a way of

exploring how a group of Educational Psychologists collectively understand the potential role of the profession in supporting undiagnosed autistic girls. Focus groups are also likely to elicit a wide variety of views, experiences, and ideas within the group, allowing the researcher to explore the homogeneity or disparity in individual perspectives. Though focus groups are designed to be interactive in nature, it is acknowledged that conducting focus groups online may, to some extent, limit participant interactivity, and a lack of face-to-face interaction may reduce the non-verbal communication that plays a vital role in eliciting responses (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017).

In the context of the current research, focus groups were used to capture the views of Educational Psychologists regarding the barriers and facilitators experienced by autistic girls and the potential role of the Educational Psychologist in supporting these children. The focus groups used vignettes created from phase one data as prompts to facilitate answers to accompanying questions. Questions were designed to be open-ended to allow for broad and varied answers from participants. Focus groups were selected as the method for data collection in phase two of the current research as the format encourages interactive discussion which explores consensus and diversity among the participants' ideas, views, and experiences (Morgan, 1996).

5.2.3 Developing the Interview Schedule

As in phase one, the semi-structured interview schedule used in phase two of the current research was developed in accordance with the guidance proposed by Galletta (2013), who advised that each question should be "clearly connected to the purpose of the research, and its placement within the protocol should reflect the researcher's deliberate progression toward a fully in-depth exploration of the

phenomenon under study" (p.45). The questions used in phase two were linked to the vignettes (outlined in further detail below but centred around three main areas: how EPs view their role in supporting autistic girls, what EPs perceive as potential barriers to their engagement in this kind of work, and what EPs perceive as potential facilitators to their engagement in this kind of work. The interview schedule for phase two focus groups is included in appendix G.

5.2.4 Vignettes

Vignettes refer to stimuli, including text, to which research participants are invited to respond (Hughes & Huby, 2004). In this research, vignettes were selected as they allowed for the presentation of phase one participants' real experiences in a concise and narrative format to elicit responses from phase two participants. In the current research, vignettes were created using data generated from participant interviews in phase one of the research and used as stimuli for discussions in the phase two focus groups. Considering the sensitive and personal nature of participants' stories, participants' experiences were developed into composite vignettes, whereby the experiences of multiple participants are combined and presented in a single vignette, a form of creative non-fiction (Smith et al., 2015). Furthermore, response from piloting whereby vignettes were created for each phase one participant indicated that this was too much information for participants to keep in mind and that the content of many of the vignettes were very similar. As such, two composite vignettes encapsulating the experiences of phase one participants were created (see appendices H and I). The vignettes were developed using the overarching themes derived from the analysis of the shared accounts of phase one participants to create meaningful and intricate character stories which would form the basis for focus group discussions (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Participants' direct stories and phrases were

merged together to ensure the vignettes accurately reflected the real lived experiences of autistic women. Each of the vignettes offered a synthesised narrative combining the experiences of multiple participants to create a concise yet meaningful presentation of the topic (Smith et al., 2015). Both characters described in the composite vignettes were given a name so that focus group participants could easily distinguish between each vignette and easily refer to each character's experiences throughout the discussion.

5.2.5 Piloting

As recommended by Bearman (2019), the phase two interview schedule was piloted prior to data collection. The pilot was completed with two other trainee educational psychologists. The pilot consisted of five vignettes which were created based on the experiences of each phase one participant, followed by some prompting questions. Feedback following the pilot indicated that, though vignettes were useful in terms of prompting discussion, there were too many of them and the content of most vignettes was very similar, meaning that some of the participants' answers to questions were repetitive. Following feedback from pilot participants, two composite vignettes were created to present the combined experiences of phase one participants.

5.2.6 Procedure

Two focus groups were carried out online via Microsoft Teams. The first focus group consisted of three Educational Psychologists from the same Educational Psychology Service in the South West of England. The second focus group also consisted of three Educational Psychologists, two from the same Educational Psychology

Service, and another from a different service, also located in the South West of England.

Prior to conducting the focus groups, all participants were sent an informed consent form which they were required to read, sign, and return to ensure they understood what participation in the current research would entail. Participants were also sent a copy of the vignettes via email which they were encouraged to read before attending the focus group. At the start of each focus group, information about the study was reiterated, and participants were reminded about issues regarding confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the research. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions relating to the study before the focus group began. Participants were notified when recording of the focus group started.

During the focus groups, the vignettes were read aloud by me, and I then asked the corresponding questions (as detailed in Appendix G) to gather participants' views and responses. Due to the small size of the focus groups as well as the pre-existing inter-participant familiarity, I felt that all participants were able to freely share their views and responses to the vignettes and questions. However, in the few instances where a participant had not provided a response to a question or engaged in the discussion, I explicitly asked the participant whether they had an opinion to share to ensure everyone's views were heard. As the researcher, I refrained from sharing my own views as part of the focus group discussions to avoid influencing participants' responses, and instead adopted the role of facilitator in accordance with the guidance provided by Smithson (2008) relating to the role of the interviewer in focus groups, for example by outlining the procedure, asking questions, and time keeping.

At the end of each focus group, participants were given the opportunity to debrief and ask questions before I delivered the closing statements and thanked them for their time. The focus groups were recorded via Microsoft Teams and transcribed using Microsoft Word. Microsoft Teams automatically generated a transcription of the recordings, which was then exported and downloaded into a Microsoft Word document. However, the transcriptions were not always accurate, so it was necessary to edit the raw transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected what was said by the participants.

5.3 Phase Two Ethics

Phase two participants were provided with an information sheet, containing details of what participation would entail, alongside a consent form, which they were required to sign and return before the focus groups were carried out. The resources provided to the participants were checked for readability using a digital program called Readable.

At the start of each focus group, participants were reminded about issues regarding confidentiality and anonymity and reminded of their right to withdraw. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions or raise any concerns regarding the research. Participants were asked again whether they were still happy to take part in the research, and all participants were informed before the recording of the focus groups began. At the end of each focus group, a member check was conducted, and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions.

Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were protected by allocating each participant a pseudonym. The document containing links between the participants'

actual names and their pseudonyms was produced and is not accessible to any person other than the researcher.

5.4 Analysis

The focus groups were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Completing the thematic analysis involved following the same six-stage process used in phase one of the current research, outlined below:

1. Transcription and repeated reading of the transcripts to promote familiarisation with the dataset.
2. Generating initial codes and beginning to map out key themes.
3. Repeated examination of the dataset to determine key themes.
4. Review and refinement of key themes.
5. Finalising and naming identified key themes.
6. Reporting the findings.

As in phase one, the data was coded in Microsoft Word, using the tracked changes function to make comments on highlighted areas of text. Initial coding was based on phase two research questions, but further codes and themes arose throughout the process. See appendix C for an example of the coding process.

5.6 Phase 2 Findings

This section will outline the key findings from the focus groups carried out in phase two of the current research with educational psychologists.

The reflexive thematic analysis used produced key themes relating to the phase two research questions.

Research Question 1: How do educational psychologists view their role in supporting girls with an autistic profile to cope and thrive in their educational setting?

Table 7

Themes and Sub-themes for Research Question 1

Themes	Sub-themes
Sharing knowledge and expertise with school staff	Raising awareness about the different presentation of autism in girls and boys
	Sharing evidence-based interventions
Direct work with children and young people	Supporting girls to develop strategies to manage their emotions in school
	Capturing the child or young person's voice to better understand their feelings about school
Working with parents	Supporting parents to support their daughters at home

5.7 How Educational Psychologists View Their Role in Supporting Autistic Girls in Their Educational Setting

5.7.1 Sharing Knowledge and Expertise with School Staff

Sharing of knowledge and expertise with school staff was identified by phase two participants as a potential role for the EP in supporting autistic girls in school.

Participants considered that school staff may benefit from specific training about how autism presents differently in girls compared to boys. Phase two participants also considered that they could share their knowledge and expertise about identifying needs and ensuring reasonable adjustments are made in line with the identified need.

EP1: *And so I guess I can see a role for EPs in terms of education. So it might be about training, awareness-raising and so that could be done in so many ways in terms of, yeah, I suppose talking about girls and who potentially have social communication difficulties.*

Phase two participants also considered their role in supporting schools to identify girls who may go unnoticed due to their internalised presentation of need.

EP4: *So, I think maybe the first way is raising their profile and kind of drawing attention to their underlying needs. The first case, Ella, maybe because she's not very visible in terms of what's the things that she's struggling with. So, I guess an EP could help there by, kind of making that a bit clearer for school staff so that they can see that she is struggling with a few things, and she does have difficulty in relation to anxiety and social communication.*

EP1: *It's crucial if they're not presenting in such an obvious way. What do we look out for in those who are really struggling but go under the radar? What do we need to be looking at so that those needs can be highlighted, and reasonable strategies and arrangements are in place?*

EP5: *I think sometimes schools can be supported to recognise anxiety and what it can look like in different forms and the anxiety can be kind of something that bubbles*

away quietly underneath, and I think the thing that EPs can do is to help think about pressure valve points throughout the day…even though school aren't seeing issues.

Participants also felt there may be a role for EPs in helping school staff to unpick girls' behaviours to better understand their underlying needs.

EP2: *There's something, isn't there, about trying to reframe their thinking about the behaviours that you know the outward behaviours that they're seeing.*

Additionally, participants considered how EPs might share knowledge and expertise with school staff regarding appropriate interventions for autistic girls.

EP5: *(Ella needs) the release to talk about her feelings at school or to have a calming routine before she goes and just times throughout the day when she can release a bit of that anxiety so that it doesn't all have to come out at home because she clearly finds it a difficult environment, doesn't she?*

Participants across both focus groups identified Cognitive Behavioural Therapy-based approaches as a potential intervention which may support autistic girls manage their feelings of anxiety.

EP4: *I was also thinking about building their own strengths and coping strategies and they're both really able, aren't they? So, I was thinking that they might benefit from understanding some of cognitive behavioural type approaches. So, understanding helpful and unhelpful thinking patterns, like fear of mistakes and thinking about those catastrophizing thinking patterns or a black and white approach. There's some lovely resources, that make those quite concrete. And I think if you can kind of understand those, and the psychology behind it, that can be quite powerful and helping you think about and identify how they can sort of rationalise that or help themselves to not worry so much about it.*

Other participants considered the importance of supporting autistic girls to develop positive friendships.

EP5: *Maybe some sort of buddy system at school. If she's spending a lot of break and lunch times with adults and away from the peer group, maybe she needs some structured activity to go and do so it's a bit more purposeful.*

EP5: *I think that's really important, finding your people or your crew, you don't feel so isolated. So yeah, thinking about those you mentioned as Ella, who's interested in music and individuals that want don't want to be out on the field… is there something more structured that they can do that's actually gonna help them feel good about themselves and give them a sense of self-esteem and link them with other people maybe in a way that's a bit more structured that doesn't just focus on conversation at lunch and break time, but you're still sort of doing something joint together, so you're still linking and connecting with others, but maybe in a slightly less intimidating kind of way, or that requires less skill…If you were taking part in an orchestra, for example, you've got a clear role. You're working towards something jointly together, but it's a bit more structured, maybe a bit kind of safer.*

When asked about who might deliver the suggested interventions, participants reflected that an EP (or another kind of psychologist) would be ideal, but that due to time and capacity constraints, it would likely be a staff member who delivered the named interventions.

EP4: *I think it be about schools delivering, wouldn't it 'cause we very rarely have the time to do, I think it would be lovely piece of work for an EP to do that we very rarely have the sort of time to do that so.*

EP5: *I think it should be an EP (delivering interventions) or some sort of psychologist really that does that work. But in terms of who would end up doing it, I think it would be school staff.*

Based on Rebecca's vignette, one participant suggested that EPs might support schools to implement a relational approach to their support of autistic girls.

EP5: *It's also about relation relationship-building. I think for me would be the first thing to do because she probably she feels that everybody's treating her unfairly. And I can imagine how staff are feeling towards her based on the vignette. So, I think it would be starting there, wouldn't it?*

5.7.2 Direct Work with Children and Young People

Phase two participants also identified a potential role for EPs in completing direct work with autistic girls. Some participants suggested that EPs could work with autistic girls to capture their voice so that schools can support them more effectively.

EP 2: *what's missing is the young person's voice, and I think that that would be a really important role for the EP in terms of what direct work with the young person to, you know, explore some of those things a bit further and be able to advocate for them in some ways.*

EP5: *But also, the child's voice…working with them and finding out how they feel. I think that for children or young people on the spectrum that can be really important that we add in their view on it.*

Phase two participants also considered a potential role for EPs in working directly with autistic girls to deliver interventions to help them manage some of their feelings of anxiety.

EP 3: *I think some work to help her identify those anxious thoughts and feelings and start to have tools to be able to manage that.*

EP4: *I was also thinking about building their own strengths and coping strategies…So I was thinking that they might benefit from understanding some of those cognitive behavioural type approaches. So, understanding helpful and unhelpful thinking patterns… I think if you can kind of understand the psychology behind it, that can be quite powerful.*

However, participants also acknowledged that EPs are unlikely to engage in this kind of work regularly due to time and capacity constraints.

Another potential role for the EP in terms of direct work with CYP, was to deliver some information directly to groups of CYP (both autistic and neurotypical) about autism. One participant considered that perhaps there should be less of a focus on teaching an autistic person to develop their social skills to communicate in a way which is understood by neurotypical individuals, and more of a focus on educating others about the communication styles of autistic people.

EP3: *I would maybe be thinking about how we could help those that are working with Rebecca and the people who are friends with her and that want to be friends with her. How can we help them to understand that sometimes she communicates in a different way that might appear to be rude or bossy, but actually that might not be her intention?*

5.7.3 Working with Parents

Phase two participants identified a role for EPs in working directly with parents of autistic girls. Participants reflected on the experiences of the girls described in the vignettes who masked their needs at school and experienced emotional

dysregulation at home. They considered that EPs might work to provide parents with support to manage their own wellbeing in relation to their daughters' presentation of need at home, and that EPs could facilitate consultation with parents of autistic girls to gather a more holistic picture of girls' needs and put into place some helpful support and strategies.

EP 1: *it might be consultation work with parents where strategies and actions can be agreed. [Ella, from vignette 1] she's really, really struggling at home and it's parents needing support. She's sort of holding it together and in school, but then, what happens after school?*

EP5: *I think I'd be talking to mum and dad about normalising home being a safe space…I think I would always talk to parents about not necessarily leaving children on their own, even if they're opting to do that. I think it's that kind of unpicking whether the alone time is actually helping, or whether the alone time is a protective response to experiencing overload. But actually an adult kind of would be able to join her in that space to help her regulate, because I guess it's seeing the dysregulation as the learning opportunity, isn't it? So actually, if you can join your child and that moment, I think it can be more helpful.*

Participants reflected on the importance of parents receiving some support to help manage their daughters' feelings and behaviours at home, with the hope and assumption that this will positively impact their school experiences too.

EP 1: *Parents can be supported as well. And so, I think EPs definitely have a role in that. It's still educational psychology because it impacts on education, but it's actually working with parents. And actually, I suppose that then shifts to schools. I guess it comes down to education, doesn't it? And perhaps sharing with the schools through*

training, that yes, things on the surface can seem to be getting really well at school,

but how do we start to bring in the voice of the parents and the voice of that young

person to be really heard, even if things seem to be going on OK at school? I

suppose it's looking at how you present that.

Research Question 1a: What do educational psychologists perceive to be barriers to undertaking this work?

Themes	Sub-themes
School not viewing work as a priority	Staff understanding of female autism
	Other CYP who present with externalising behaviours prioritised
Schools' entrenched systems, routines, and policies	Strict or punitive behaviour management policies
	Lack of flexibility to make reasonable adjustments for CYP with different or additional needs

5.8 Perceived Barriers to Educational Psychologists' Engagement in Supporting Autistic Girls in Their Educational Settings

5.8.1 School Priorities

Phase two participants identified schools' prioritisation of EPs' work with CYP as a

potential barrier to their work in supporting autistic girls.

EP4: *I guess identification might be one because they might not be being identified by the school, so they might just not be brought to our attention.*

EP5: *We need to see what the school's priorities are for cases at the moment, because if it's not on their priority list… this probably wouldn't come up from a school necessarily. So yeah, use of time, I guess. Use of our time. And what would be prioritised would definitely be a key barrier for me as well.*

When participants were asked about why autistic girls are often not seemingly prioritised by schools for EP involvement, participants considered that school staff may prioritise CYP who present with externalised behaviours or behaviours that challenge adults.

EP1: *I guess well, if you're doing traded work with a school, seeing this type of work is priority prior to enough to to actually give it the time. Especially if you've got other young people who're demonstrating a high level of need.*

EP 3*: And in terms of that prioritizing, because I absolutely agree, that's definitely for me the biggest barrier to this work would be school seeing this as a priority when they've got other kids that are maybe engaging in behaviour that is really externalizing and causing them a huge headache.*

Another participant considered that schools may not prioritise autistic girls for EP involvement because they do not have an understanding of female autism.

EP5: *I think some of the barriers around this, if we're thinking specifically about girls who are autistic, are the kind of like stereotypes of autism and what it looks like and how it presents... It's something you're probably gonna need to approach at times with staff who might not think that it's a valid need for females on the spectrum.*

5.8.2 Schools' Entrenched Systems, Routines, and Policies

In both focus groups, participants identified that schools' entrenched systems, routines, and policies may act as a barrier to EPs working effectively to support autistic girls. Some participants reflected that some school staff may not make adjustments or accommodations for children with additional needs, especially when their school utilises a strict or punitive behaviour management policy. Participants considered that school staff may not feel empowered to make changes to a school-wide behaviour management policy due to their position in the school, or that they lack appropriate knowledge or skills to be able to make the necessary adjustments to the behaviour management policy in line with a child's individual needs.

EP2: *One of the things that immediately comes to mind is thinking about reasonable adjustments for these young people. And you know, thinking certainly about Rebecca, and what seems like quite frequent use of the school's isolation room and actually looking a bit more about actually, what's her understanding of why she's being sent there? And is there an alternative? … I don't see those reasonable adjustments.*

What do educational psychologists perceive to be facilitators to undertaking this work?

Themes	Sub-themes
Consultation with school leaders	Asking careful questions
	Gaining holistic view of CYP needs

Implementing policy at local authority level	
Psychoeducation	Raising awareness of sex differences in autism

5.9 Identified Facilitators to Educational Psychologists' Role in Supporting Autistic Girls in Their Educational Setting

5.9.1 Consultation with School Leaders

Phase two participants considered that one of the facilitators to EPs being able to effectively support autistic girls was through thorough and meaningful consultation with school leaders. Participants reflected that autistic girls often go unnoticed by school staff, especially if they do not present with behaviours that challenge and therefore their needs may go unmet. However, participants felt it is important to engage in consultation with SENCos (or other staff members in leadership roles) to consider how autistic girls' needs might manifest in the future if they do not receive adequate support in school.

EP3: O*ne of the things that I've done consistently with schools is kind of emphasizing that those students who are sort of internalizing it will get it almost inevitably will get to the point where it will cause you a headache.*

One EP suggested that they might be more pro-active in asking "careful questions" during whole school consultation or planning meetings to ensure autistic girls, or girls with an autistic profile, are more likely to be identified by school staff.

EP4: *I'm not sure if it's a prompt on our whole school consultation meeting planning things… but I guess it could be something that we're a little bit more proactive in raising…as we kind of said, it's not very visible group, but I would maybe be asking about children that mask in school and parents who are reporting meltdowns at home so maybe that would be one way to overcome the barrier as we could just ask some more careful questions to sort of prompt schools to think about that.*

5.9.2 Implementation of Policy at Local Authority Level

Another way phase two participants identified that they may navigate barriers to their work with autistic girls is through the implementation of policy at a local authority level. One participant shared that they felt things were unlikely to change in schools with regard to providing adequate support for autistic girls until it became mandatory.

EP1: *I guess it needs to come from local authority strategy. It needs to be supported at that level and then filtered down to potential policy training if you're really going to shift something like that, then ideally it would be supported in that way.*

Similarly, another participant considered that schools may be more likely to prioritise the needs of autistic girls when they are reminded of their statutory responsibilities.

EP2: *Reminding schools about the legal aspects of disability discrimination can sometimes, you know, raise awareness quite quickly in terms of how they're responding.*

However, the same participant also reflected that this may be more difficult when discussing a child without a formal diagnosis of autism.

5.9.3 Psychoeducation

Finally, phase two participants considered that one facilitator of their work in supporting autistic girls was psychoeducation. Participants reflected throughout both focus groups that school staff often do not appear to have an in-depth knowledge of how autism presents differently in boys and girls, and what the implications of this may be.

EP5: *if we're thinking specifically about girls who are autistic, or the kind of like stereotypes of autism and what it looks like and how it presents… I think it's about psychoeducation, kind of dispelling some of the myths around that, but I think it's also like the neurodiversity lens, isn't it? Kind of just seeing everybody as an individual with different features.*

EP1: *I guess I can see a role for EPs in terms of education. So it might be about training, awareness raising and so that could be done in so many ways in terms of, yeah, I suppose talking about girls who potentially have social communication difficulties.*

5.10 Phase Two Discussion

Phase two findings will now be discussed in accordance with the research questions and in relation to the research literature in the area. The primary aim of phase two of this study was to explore how educational psychologists view their role in supporting girls with an autistic profile to cope and thrive in their educational setting. It also

aimed to explore EPs' views about potential barriers and facilitators to their engagement in this type of work.

5.11 How Educational Psychologists View Their Role in Supporting Girls with an Autistic Profile to Cope and Thrive in Their Educational Setting

Phase two participants' views about their role in supporting autistic girls in their educational setting largely encompassed three broad areas: sharing knowledge and expertise with school staff, direct work with parents, and direct work with CYP.

5.11.1 Sharing Knowledge and Expertise with School Staff

Participants discussed the importance of sharing their skills, knowledge, and expertise with school staff regarding how best to support autistic girls. In this sense, the EP role in supporting autistic girls (or girls with an autistic profile but no diagnosis) could be a systemic one. Research by Boyle and MacKay (2007) highlights that EPs' involvement in systemic work with schools is of "central importance", indicating that this may be an effective way for EPs to work. In terms of the nature of systemic work, participants discussed the importance of psychoeducation, particularly around the sex differences in autism presentation with a focus on female autism. This is consistent with the research literature, which indicates that autism is less likely to be identified in autistic girls by teachers, perhaps due to their engagement in masking or camouflaging behaviours (Dean et al., 2017; Lai et al., 2017).

Participants also considered how their role could encompass sharing what works for autistic CYP in terms of interventions and reasonable adjustments or accommodations. Historically, there has been a belief that evidence-based practice is the cornerstone of providing professional services to the public (Fox, 2003).

118

However, in the UK, research suggests that EPs view the value of their practice as more important than an established evidence base (Burnham, 2012), and whilst EPs believe there are benefits to their practice being evidence-based, Burnham (2012) found that EPs are pragmatic in the development and implementation of individualised solutions which best reflect an individual's or organisation's specific needs, rather than solely focusing on the evidence base.

One evidence-based intervention which was suggested by two participants was the use of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) informed interventions to support autistic girls to manage their feelings of anxiety. The research literature indicates that CBT approaches can be useful in supporting autistic children manage their feelings of anxiety (Danial & Wood, 2013), although this may be dependent on the child or young person possessing the necessary emotional literacy skills for maximum effectiveness (Lickel et al., 2012). MacKay (2007) argues that EPs are a key therapeutic resource for CYP, particularly within educational contexts such as schools, and argues for a renewed focus on therapy within educational psychology practice. However, due to increasing statutory demands, EPs are often prevented from engaging in the delivery of therapeutic interventions (Atkinson et al., 2011), and interventions are more often delivered by teaching assistants, youth workers, and private sector staff (Pugh, 2010).

Phase two participants also observed that interventions based on the development of friendships were important. Interventions suggested by participants included a buddy system, the facilitation of a structured club based on a child or young person's interests, and a "circle of friends" approach. The role of meaningful friendships in promoting autistic girls' emotional wellbeing is well-established in the research literature (Foggo & Webster, 2017; Petrina et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2021; Tierney et

al., 2016) suggesting that girls may benefit from support in establishing friendships at school.

5.11.2 Direct Work with Children and Young People

Phase two participants also identified a potential role for EPs in the form of direct work with CYP. In particular, participants noted that the EP could play a vital role in effectively capturing the CYP's voice so that their views are at the centre of any support put in place. Capturing the views of CYP with special educational needs has increasingly been recognised as a core component of policy initiatives internationally (Porter, 2014; United Nations, 2006), but there continues to be a gap between policy and practice (Porter, 2014). A study by Adams et al. (2017) found that only 58% of parents and young people who went through the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process felt as though effort had been made to listen to the CYP and understand their views. This suggests that EPs must find ways to capture a child's views effectively and meaningfully in their work so that the child feels understood and involved in their own education and support.

Participants also felt as though EPs would be best placed to deliver many of the interventions outlined above. However, participants recognised that this is not always possible due to capacity and time constraints, and that recommended interventions are most often facilitated by school staff.

Interestingly, one participant considered a potential role for EPs in working with non-autistic CYP to raise their awareness of autism with the hopes that this may facilitate inclusion of autistic CYP. The participant considered that perhaps there should be less emphasis on changing or "training" an autistic CYP to behave or communicate in a way which is consistent with the behavioural or communication styles of

neurotypical children, and instead a greater focus on promoting diversity, understanding, and acceptance. Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) is one such intervention which has been historically used to change or develop an individual's behaviour or communication skills (Trump et al., 2018), with early practitioners claiming that many children who received this intervention became "indistinguishable from other children" (Lovaas, 1987, p.8). However, recent research indicates that ABA is often delivered without the consent of autistic children and can have a detrimental impact on their mental health (Anderson, 2023). Furthermore, and in line with the views expressed by participants in this study, autistic advocates argue in the favour of neurodiversity, and it is suggested that autism is a variation of human cognition that should be celebrated, not cured (Armstrong, 2017; Kapp et al., 2013), thus reinforcing the idea of the participant in the current study regarding education and acceptance of neurodiverse individuals.

5.11.3 Working with Parents

Participants considered that EPs may have a role in working with the parents of autistic girls. Ella, the girl from vignette 1, masked in school but experienced significant periods of emotional dysregulation or "meltdowns" at home. In response to this, participants identified that parents may benefit from support in managing and helping their daughters during these difficult periods. Participants considered that if girls were supported at home, this would likely have a knock-on effect to support their wellbeing at school. However, the research literature indicates that EPs rarely work with parents and families beyond the school or educational setting and that opportunities for intervention within family systems was typically limited (McGuiggan, 2021). Furthermore, there appears to be some discrepancy between the perceived role of the EP within the profession itself; some EPs feel it is not an EP's role to be

involved within a CYP's family system and express caution about crossing boundaries, whereas other EPs suggest that work with families is an important part of practicing as a "holistic" educational psychologist (McGuiggan, 2021).

In terms of the nature of work with parents, one participant suggested educating parents about the possible role of co-regulation with their daughters. Research indicates that co-regulation may be useful in supporting the emotional regulation of autistic children (Gulsrud et al., 2010; Ting & Weiss, 2017), though most studies in this area use a predominantly male sample and focus on younger children rather than adolescents, indicating that this may be a potential direction for future research.

5.12 Identified Barriers to Educational Psychologists' Role in Supporting Autistic Girls in Their Educational Settings

5.12.1 Schools' Prioritisation of EP Work

Phase two participants identified schools' prioritisation of EP work as a potential barrier to their involvement in supporting autistic girls. Many educational psychology services now use a traded model of service delivery, which means that schools need to buy in EP time which has resulted in some issues regarding equality of access to services (Lee & Woods, 2017), particularly for autistic girls who internalise their needs and often follow school rules which means they are often not referred to EP services until they begin to display extreme behaviours such as emotionally based school avoidance (O'Hagan & Bond, 2019). Similarly, participants in the current research reflected that school leaders are often less likely to prioritise CYP who present with internalised needs, and instead often prioritise CYP who present with externalised needs or behaviours that challenge adults. One participant considered that autistic girls are likely to go under the radar because they may mask their needs

in school and therefore may not be recognised as needing support by school staff. This is consistent with the research literature which indicates that autistic girls are likely to engage in masking or camouflaging behaviours in school and are also likely to make adjustments in line with their needs to help them cope in their educational setting (Cook et al., 2018; Moyse & Porter, 2015). Additionally, a study by Whitlock et al. (2020) found that school staff were less likely to recognise autism in autistic girls than they were in autistic boys, further emphasising the importance of psychoeducation for teachers and other members of school staff.

Furthermore, participants considered that a potential barrier to their engagement in systemic work, such as the delivery of training regarding female autism, may be schools' general preference for using EP time for casework with individual CYP. This was reflected in a study by Bell and McKenzie (2013) who found that schools' demands for assessment services tended to limit the development of systemic and preventative practices in the work of school psychologists. Moreover, Ashton and Roberts (2007) found that SENCOs valued traditional EP roles like individual casework and statutory work and did not view systemic work as a key feature of the EP role.

5.12.2 Schools' Entrenched Systems, Routines, and Policies

Another factor participants identified which may act as a barrier to EPs' supporting autistic girls in their educational setting was schools' entrenched systems, routines, and policies. For example, two participants mentioned that school staff typically find it more difficult to make reasonable adjustments or accommodations for CYP with different or additional needs when the school implements a strict or punitive behaviour management policy. Consistent with this consideration, research has

suggested that teachers often feel unable to manage autistic students' behaviour that challenges adults (Westling, 2010), which may lead to their use of reactive rather than proactive behaviour management strategies (Brede et al., 2017; Lindsay et al., 2014). Studies indicate that autistic children benefit from a relational approach to behaviour management, with positive student-staff relationships often cited as a key factor in autistic children's positive school experiences (Dillon et al., 2016; Makin et al., 2017).

Other phase two participants considered that school-wide break and lunchtime routines may act as a barrier to the implementation of EP recommendations which may support autistic girls in their educational setting. Participants considered that CYP are often made to spend break and lunchtimes outside with potentially hundreds of other children, an environment which may be sensorily and socially overwhelming to autistic children. One EP suggested that autistic girls may face immense pressure to socialise without having adequate skills to do so. Instead, it was suggested that autistic girls may benefit from the facilitation of structured activities during break and lunchtimes where they can build relationships with their peers through joint engagement in a shared activity. The participant commented that using an activity to promote interaction provides a clear prompt for conversation and may foster relationships through shared goals. This is reflected in the research literature which indicates that autistic children are more likely to engage in social interaction and initiate interaction with peers during structured activities based on their interests (Koegel et al., 2012; Koegel et al., 2013).

5.13 What Educational Psychologists Perceive to be Facilitators to Undertaking This Work

5.13.1 Consultation with School Leaders

Phase two participants identified consultation with school leaders as a possible facilitator to their potential role in supporting autistic girls to cope and thrive in their educational setting. One participant considered that they might ask "careful questions" during consultation meetings to help identify autistic girls needing support at the start of the academic year during a planning meeting. Wagner (2000) defines consultation as being a "collaborative and recursive process that combines joint problem exploration, assessment, intervention, and review" (p.11), and is largely viewed as a key element of the EP role (Kennedy et al., 2009). An important part of consultation includes gathering the perspective of parents and school staff to give the EP a more holistic view of the child, which is particularly important when working with autistic girls whose needs may be difficult to ascertain through observation and assessment alone (O'Hagan & Bond, 2019).

5.13.2 Implementing Policy at Local Authority Level

Participants also identified the implementation of policy at local authority level as a potential facilitator in their role in supporting autistic girls to cope and thrive in their educational setting. One participant considered that one method for drawing attention to the needs of autistic girls (diagnosed or undiagnosed) may be through the delivery of mandatory training, implemented at a local authority level. Similarly, another participant suggested that EPs might remind school staff of their legal responsibilities in terms of disability discrimination, although they also acknowledged that this may be less relevant or impactful when a CYP does not have an official diagnosis. In this sense, autistic girls may be at risk of missing any support they may require at school as autistic girls are less likely to receive a childhood diagnosis than

their male counterparts (Zener, 2019), further illuminating the importance of raising awareness of female autism.

5.13.3 Psychoeducation

Finally, phase two participants identified psychoeducation as a possible facilitator to their potential role in supporting autistic girls to cope and thrive in their educational setting. Psychoeducation is generally considered any psychological information or resources provided to school staff, families, students, communities, or organisations by psychologists or mental health professionals to educate them about psychological phenomena (Brown et al., 2020). As aforementioned, school staff are less likely to recognise autism in autistic girls compared to autistic boys (Whitlock et al., 2020), and it is likely that training would improve teachers' recognition of autism in girls so that timely identification can mitigate risks and promote the wellbeing of autistic girls (Bargiela et al., 2016). This indicates that psychoeducation around sex differences in autism may be a useful tool to raise the profile of autistic girls and therefore pave the way for EP involvement with these CYP.

5.14 Phase Two Conclusion

To conclude, phase two explored the views of EPs regarding their role in supporting autistic girls, directly or indirectly, to cope and thrive in their educational setting. EP views were gathered in two focus groups and composite vignettes, generated using interview data from phase one, were used as the main prompt for discussion. Phase two participants suggested that EPs may support autistic girls in schools by engaging in more effective and meaningful consultation with school leaders, by sharing knowledge and expertise with parents and school staff, and by engaging in

direct work with children and young people. The implications of these findings for

EPs will be discussed in further detail in section 7.3.

CHAPTER 6: Overall Discussion

Phase one of the current research explores the retrospective school experiences of five late-diagnosed autistic women, with a focus on the barriers and facilitators to their positive school experiences. Phase two of the research focused on the potential role of the EP in supporting autistic girls to cope and thrive in their educational settings. This section will consider the overall findings and possible implications of the current research.

6.1 The School Experiences of Late-Diagnosed Autistic Women

Reflexive thematic analysis of the phase one data suggested that enabling factors to late-diagnosed autistic women's positive school experiences included: access to safe spaces, positive relationships with school staff, positive friendships, the pursuit of hobbies or interests, self-management of needs, and overall enjoyment of learning. The following factors were identified as barriers to late-diagnosed autistic women's positive school experiences: others' (lack of) understanding of autism, difficult peer relationships, sensory sensitivities, and masking.

The current research suggests that access to safe spaces is an important facilitator of autistic girls' positive school experiences. Participants noted that being in "safe spaces", like the library or music rooms, provided a refuge where they could escape the sensory overwhelm and social challenges they otherwise faced at break and lunchtimes. Furthermore, safe spaces served as areas they could pursue their hobbies and talk to school staff. These findings are consistent with the research literature which suggests that safe spaces can help promote emotional regulation and support autistic children to manage their feelings of anxiety (Cunningham,

2022). Furthermore, participants identified that positive relationships with school staff acted as an enabling factor in their positive school experiences. In line with the research literature (Orsmond & Kuo, 2011) most participants in this study reported that they preferred the company of adults and would often seek out adults during their free time at school. Participants benefited from adult company and reported that their close relationships with school staff allowed them a space to discuss their feelings which they did not always feel able to do with peers or family members. Similarly, positive friendships were identified as an enabling factor in autistic girls' positive school experiences. Though most participants experienced difficulties with some aspects of friendships, all participants stated that they eventually found positive friendships which they identified as a positive factor in their school experiences. Research suggests that autistic girls show similar social motivation and friendship quality to non-autistic girls (Sedgewick et al., 2016), further indicating that friendships are likely to form an important part of autistic girls' positive school experiences.

Additionally, the pursuit of hobbies and/or interests in school was identified as an enabling factor to participants' positive school experiences. Participants reported a range of benefits that came from the opportunity to pursue their hobbies and interests, including enjoying the activity, meeting like-minded people which provided an opportunity to make social connections, and escaping from the other challenges they faced at school. These findings are consistent with the research literature which indicates that being able to pursue a special interest has been identified as an important factor in autistic people's wellbeing (Grove et al., 2018) and that autistic people benefit from the engagement in shared interests to build friendships (Ryan et al., 2021). Interestingly, participants identified self-management of their needs as an

enabling factor to their positive school experiences. Participants shared that they often made small, largely imperceptible adjustments to their school days to maintain their own wellbeing. For example, one participant reported that she would bring headphones to school and listen to music at the end of each day to help her feel calm ahead of the transition between school and home. Another participant would volunteer to do jobs for teachers so that she could stay inside at break and lunchtimes as a means of avoiding the busy playground. Other studies indicate that autistic girls are often required to make adjustments in school to manage their own needs in response to their needs going unnoticed and unmet by adults (Moyse & Porter, 2015). Finally, participants identified their enjoyment of learning as an enabling factor in their positive school experiences. Most participants reported that they enjoyed at least one school subject which gave them something to look forward to and enjoy in the school day. Many participants reported being academically able and felt that their academic achievements made school feel worthwhile. However, participants also reflected that their academic profile was perhaps a contributing factor to their needs going unnoticed or unmet by school staff. Other participants enjoyed the structure and routine of learning and the sense of predictability this provided. This is consistent with the research literature which suggests that autistic children often benefit from highly structured and routine-based learning environments (Cunningham, 2022).

Conversely, participants identified a range of factors that acted as a barrier to their positive school experiences. One of the factors which was most widely discussed by participants was others' understanding, or lack thereof, of autism. Participants shared that teachers and other members of school staff often appeared to misinterpret their presentation of need, for example, by labelling their social

communication differences as rudeness or defiance. In accordance with the findings of the current research, Jarman and Rayner's (2015) study found that teachers' lack of understanding of autistic girls' needs led to reduced flexibility and a reluctance to make adjustments to their practice, further highlighting the importance of promoting school staff's understanding of autism. Furthermore, participants' difficult peer relationships were identified as a barrier to their positive school experiences. Most participants described their difficulties initiating and maintaining friendships, and others described their experiences of being bullied. Autistic children's friendship difficulties are well documented within the research literature (Ryan et al., 2021; Sedgewick et al., 2016), with some studies indicating that autistic children are more likely to experience bullying than their neurotypical peers (Carter, 2009; Humphrey & Hebron, 2015; Rowley et al., 2012).

Furthermore, sensory sensitivities were identified by most participants as a barrier to their positive school experiences. Participants identified noise, temperature, and smells as particular sensory challenges, and commented that their sensory sensitivities sometimes made it difficult for them to engage in certain aspects of school life. Sensory sensitivities, especially a heightened sensitivity to noise, are frequently experienced by autistic individuals (Stiegler & Davis, 2010), and research indicates that autistic girls often make adjustments to their school days to avoid their sensory triggers (Moyse & Porter, 2015). The final factor participants identified as a barrier to their positive school experiences was their engagement in masking or camouflaging behaviours. Participants reported that they masked in order to fit in with their peers and in an attempt to form friendships. However, participants felt that their prolonged engagement in masking behaviours ultimately did not work and had

a general negative impact on their mental wellbeing. These findings are consistent with the research literature which indicates that autistic individuals' engagement in masking behaviours can lead to feelings of anxiety and exhaustion (Jarman & Rayner, 2015; Ross et al., 2023; Sciutto et al. 2012), with this research also finding that masking was often futile and did not lead to the formation of friendships as was often the primary intention of participants' engagement in masking behaviours.

Phase one participants also discussed the impact of their school experiences on their social, emotional, and mental health. Participants reflected that many of their school experiences had a negative impact on their mental health, and some participants shared that the effects of their school experiences were long-lasting and continued to affect their mental health and their relationships with others in adulthood. There currently exists little research into the long-term effects of autistic children's school experiences, indicating that this could be an area for future research. Alternatively, some participants discussed the positive impact of their school experiences. One participant shared that her experience of being bullied allowed her to develop a sense of empathy. Historically, the research literature suggested that autistic individuals struggled to feel and express empathy (Hobson, 1989; Kanner, 1943), but more recent research suggests that autistic people can and do experience empathy, but their social communication differences mean that their feelings of empathy may be expressed differently (Li et al., 2023), as reported by participants in the current research.

6.2 How Educational Psychologists Perceive Their Role in Supporting Autistic Girls to Cope and Thrive in Their Educational Setting

Phase two participants' views about their role in supporting autistic girls in their educational setting largely encompassed three broad areas: sharing knowledge and expertise with school staff, direct work with parents, and direct work with CYP.

Phase two participants reflected that though they sometimes work with autistic girls, their work tends to be reactive rather than proactive, and they are often asked to work with these CYP when the situation has become desperate, and these girls are experiencing significant challenges with aspects of their mental health. Therefore, a large part of the discussion around the EP role in supporting autistic girls in their educational setting was focused on raising awareness of autism in girls and supporting schools to identify and accommodate their needs. Consistent with the views of phase one participants, phase two participants felt that school staff are likely to miss or misinterpret the needs of autistic girls and that their awareness of sex differences in autism is limited. Therefore, many phase two participants suggested that EPs could work at a systems level with schools to share knowledge and expertise about female autism with a specific focus on evidence-based interventions and reasonable adjustments.

Another way in which EPs viewed their potential role in supporting autistic girls was through direct work with CYP, with a focus on capturing their voices. Ingram (2013) argues that EPs are well placed to elicit and communicate CYP's voice, although there also exists criticism that EPs may be prone to distorting CYP's views through inaccurate interpretation and their own judgements (Billington, 2006). Though EPs may be well-placed to capture and communicate CYP's voice (Ingram, 2013), it is suggested that the voices of autistic children are not always captured effectively (Ellis, 2017), especially when the tools used to elicit CYP's views require verbal communication and emotional literacy skills (Billington, 2006). Therefore, EPs must

ensure they have the appropriate skills and resources required to successfully encapsulate and communicate the views of autistic children. Research by Ellis (2017) suggests that effectively capturing the voice of autistic CYP should be a mixed method approach, in which adult-centred methods (observations and interviews) and child-centred methods (including student-led tasks) are used to gather a holistic view of what is important to the child.

In accordance with the research literature which suggests that autistic girls are likely to mask at school but experience meltdowns at home (Anderson et al., 2020), phase two participants also suggested that a potential role for EPs could be working directly with parents. Participants suggested that EPs might work directly with parents in consultation and joint problem-solving to consider strategies to support their daughters at home, which would in turn support them at school. In this sense, it could be argued that EPs' views of their role in supporting autistic girls fit into Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory, which supposes that children and young people's development are a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of their environment, including their family relationships and school setting. The concept of EPs working at an ecological systems level is supported within policy; the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) code of practice (2015) promotes a holistic approach to take into consideration many of the different factors and contexts which may influence a CYP's development. Additionally, Woolfson's (2008) integrated framework which was developed to support EPs with assessment and intervention draws upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to promote an understanding of a CYP across multiple contexts. Furthermore, Cameron (2006) argues that EPs who employ an ecological

systems approach to their work may possess a multi-faceted understanding of a situation, therefore reducing the likelihood of stereotyping and bias.

In phase two of the current research, participants, who were qualified EPs, were also asked to consider barriers and facilitators to EPs working to support autistic girls to cope and thrive in their educational setting. One barrier which was discussed at length was schools' prioritisation of EPs' casework. Many participants reflected that schools often prioritised CYP whose behaviour challenged adults, and therefore autistic girls, whose needs are often masked or internalised, go unnoticed until they begin to present with significant needs which must be attended to (O'Hagan & Bond, 2019). Participants considered that a potential facilitator to changing staff views about the prioritisation of autistic girls was psychoeducation, with a particular focus on autistic girls' needs and the typical trajectory of need which often results in significant mental health challenges and EBSA. Participants also reinforced the need for thorough consultation with school leaders and parents to ensure they capture a holistic view of CYP and their needs and can work together to put into place appropriate actions in line with their needs.

Another identified barrier to EPs being able to effectively work to support autistic girls in their educational setting was the entrenched systems, routines, and policies employed by many schools, especially secondary schools. Participants considered that many schools enforce strict or punitive behaviour policies which intend to apply equality for all CYP, but often are not suitable for children with different or additional needs, including autism. Participants suggested that EPs may work with schools to adjust behaviour management policies and other school routines which may be unsuitable for autistic CYP, with a particular focus on building relational-based approaches to behaviour management, as is consistent with the research literature

about what works for autistic children (Dillon et al., 2016; Makin et al., 2017). Some

participants also considered that schools may be more likely to make reasonable

adjustments for autistic CYP when they are reminded of their legal responsibilities

with regard to disability discrimination. However, participants also acknowledged that

this may not be so effective or appropriate for girls without an official diagnosis of

autism, further highlighting the notion that autistic girls are "twice excluded", once

from the neurotypical female community, and once from the ASD community,

especially when we consider that autistic girls and women typically receive their

diagnosis later in life compared to autistic males (Shefcyk, 2015). These findings

suggest that attention must be given to creating better methods for early

identification of autism in females so that they can access the support they may need

in school and beyond.

CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

7.1 Strengths of the Current Research

One of the primary strengths of this research is my own reflexivity. Finlay (2002) asserts that researchers should expose and acknowledge their personal biases and perspectives relating to the subject matter and demonstrate that these have been taken into account throughout the research. Throughout both phases of the study, I was mindful about how my own experiences and opinions may have coloured my interpretation of the data. For example, I noted when phase one participants' school experiences closely reflected my own school experiences, and considered how my feelings may have impacted my analysis and interpretation of their stories. Similarly, my role as a trainee Educational Psychologist (EP) has meant that I have developed my own ideas about how EPs might work to support autistic girls in their educational settings, so I was mindful not to ask leading questions which may have led EPs to answer in a way which reflected my own ideas about EP practice.

Another strength of the current research is its authenticity. According to Fade (2003), qualitative research studies can demonstrate their authenticity by quoting significant blocks of raw narrative from the original data, which is often referred to as being "rich" or "thick" (p.144). It is argued that researchers should include enough raw narrative to paint a clear picture which supports each of the points the researcher is making in their analysis.

7.2 Limitations of the Current Research

The primary limitation of the current research is its small sample size in both phases of the study. The findings need to be replicated with a larger sample of participants in order to generate generalisable results. The current research is also limited by the homogenous characteristics of participants. For example, all phase one participants in the current study attended mainstream schools, and participants were of a similar age with only a twelve year age gap between the eldest and youngest participant, meaning that participants likely attended school over the same cultural and political era. In order to fully explore the educational experiences of autistic girls, it would be useful to explore the experiences of autistic girls and women across a broader age range and who attended a diverse range of educational provisions. Furthermore, phase one participants were recruited purposively, meaning that these were individuals who felt comfortable or able to share their school experiences for the purposes of the current research. It is possible that other autistic women who did not volunteer to take part in the current research had different school experiences which they did not feel able to share. Similarly, phase two participants were recruited purposively, meaning that EPs who elected to take part in the research may hold particularly strong views about the research topic or be especially knowledgeable about the research topic, which may have created some level of bias within the data.

Finally, although attempts have been made throughout the research to be reflexive, it is possible that my own experiences and opinions about the research topic. However, it is also acknowledged that this research adopts a constructionist approach which accepts that research is often affected by an individual's experiences, beliefs, and values (Given, 2008).

7.3 Implications for EP Practice

The current study adds to the limited research on the school experiences of late-diagnosed autistic women. The findings of this research have important implications for the role of EPs who may have a central role in working with schools to provide support for autistic girls. These implications will now be discussed.

The current research demonstrates the need to capture the voices of autistic girls so that their needs are heard and understood within their educational setting. EPs may be well-placed to capture these views and communicate them with school leaders (Ingram, 2013), though it is essential they possess the necessary psychological tools to elicit and interpret their views correctly (Billington, 2006; Norwich et al., 2006).

This research indicates that there may be some scope for EPs to work directly with autistic girls in the delivery of therapeutic interventions. In line with the research literature which indicates that autistic women and girls are likely to experience anxiety (Mandy et al., 2012), participants in the current study indicated that they also faced periods of anxiety throughout their school experiences. Phase two participants considered that autistic girls who experience anxiety may benefit from psychological intervention, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, which they felt EPs would be well-equipped to deliver. However, participants noted that EPs' time and capacity limitations often mean that they are unable to engage in this kind of direct work with CYP and that interventions are often delivered by members of school staff.

Furthermore, the current study illuminates the value of EPs working systemically with schools to provide psychoeducation and raise awareness about female autism. In line with the current research literature, the findings of this study indicate that school staff may not possess sufficient understanding of autism in girls (Whitlock et al.,

2020), which may impact the support autistic girls are offered at school. Phase two participants suggested that EPs may have an important role in sharing knowledge about female autism so that school staff are better equipped to support autistic girls in their educational setting.

7.4 Implications for the Support of Autistic Girls in Schools

Based on the findings from both phases of the current research, recommendations for support for autistic girls in their educational settings will now be discussed.

7.4.1 Opportunities to Access Safe Spaces During Unstructured Times

Findings from the current research suggest that autistic girls may benefit from regular and consistent access to safe spaces during unstructured periods of the school day, such as break and lunchtimes. "Safe" spaces listed by participants in phase one of this research mainly consisted of quiet locations which were mostly unoccupied by large groups of other children, and whereby pressure to socialise with other children was reduced. A commonly listed safe space in the current research was the school library. Participants reported feeling distressed when no safe space was available to them, highlighting the importance of a space being consistently available to autistic children in schools. The importance of having access to safe social spaces for autistic children is well-documented in the research literature, (e.g. Connor, 2000; Cunningham, 2022; Dedridge, 2007), further highlighting the need for schools to implement this provision for their autistic children and young people.

7.4.2 Opportunities to Develop Positive Relationships with School Staff

The current research indicates that autistic girls may benefit from the opportunity to build positive relationships with members of school staff. Participants felt that they

benefited from the support and guidance offered by trusted adults in school, and that their positive relationships with staff members had a positive impact on their emotional wellbeing. Conversely, participants shared that their negative relationships with staff members led to unfavourable outcomes such as feeling misunderstood or disliked, their needs going unmet, and not feeling able to express themselves openly. Research indicates that positive student-teacher relationships are correlated with a host of positive outcomes, including improved academic achievement, less disruptive behaviour, and a reduced risk of non-attendance (Kincade et al., 2020), and that effective practices for building positive student-teacher relationships include one-to-one time, frequent check-ins throughout the school day, and engagement in child-led activities. It is therefore recommended that schools prioritise the development of these positive student-teacher relationships in their provision for autistic girls using the practices outlined above.

7.4.3 Opportunities to Develop Friendships

Findings from the current research suggests that autistic girls benefitted from having close and meaningful friendships throughout school. Participants enjoyed feeling accepted by friends and reported that their genuine friendships had an overall positive impact on their school experiences. In contrast, participants who did not experience meaningful friendships in school reported feelings of loneliness and social isolation. In line with research by Ryan et al. (2021), which indicates that autistic children often benefit from shared interests to develop friendships, participants in the current study suggested that they were most likely to make friends at school when they were engaged in a hobby or interest they enjoyed. It is therefore recommended that schools facilitate opportunities for autistic girls to participate in

extracurricular activities based around a special interest to support their development of positive friendships which may contribute to more positive school experiences.

7.4.4 Opportunities to Pursue Hobbies and Interests

Another implication from the current research is the opportunity for autistic girls to pursue their hobbies and interests at school as a means of promoting positive wellbeing and meeting others who share similar interests with the possibility of forming positive social connections (as outlined above). Special interests are part of the diagnostic criteria for ASD (Nowell et al., 2021), and research indicates being able to pursue a special interest has been identified as an important factor in autistic people's wellbeing (Grove et al., 2018). It is therefore suggested that, where possible and appropriate, schools facilitate opportunities for autistic girls to engage in their hobbies or interests. It is also possible that autistic girls' engagement in their hobbies or interest could be done in conjunction with other children with shared interests to foster the development of friendships, or alongside a staff member to support the development of a trusted relationship with an adult in school.

7.4.5 Supporting School Staff to Explore and Understand Behaviour in Greater Depth

An important finding of the current research is that school staff may not consistently or adequately seek to understand the behaviour of autistic girls in greater depth, particularly when their behaviours do not challenge adults, and so may require additional support to do so effectively. For example, phase one participants shared that they often spent their lunch and break times away from other children, in areas such as the school library, which was largely accepted by adults who did not question or seek to explore the motivations for these behaviours. This idea was also

reflected by phase two participants, who shared that, in their professional experience, autistic girls may often go under the radar, and they are rarely prioritised by school staff for EP involvement, particularly when their behaviour does not challenge adults. Therefore, it is important that schools are supported to better understand the behaviour of autistic girls, perhaps through "careful questioning" by EPs during consultation or planning meetings to help school staff identify children who may otherwise go unrecognised, leading to subsequent support where necessary. The EP may remind staff that all behaviours should be viewed as communication, and support school staff to ask autistic girls reflective questions to unpick their behaviours, even when these behaviours are subtle and do not pose a challenge to others. As a result, it is likely that school staff will gain a greater understanding of autistic girls' needs and therefore be able to provide the support they require to have more positive school experiences.

7.5 Directions for Future Research

Many of the implications of the current research concerned the practice of school staff. However, due to the scope of this thesis, it was not possible to seek school staff views on the matter. Future research could explore school staff member's own understanding of their role in supporting autistic girls in school and perhaps highlight further areas for staff development and training.

Additionally, the current research explored the school experiences of late-diagnosed autistic women who were educated in mainstream schools. Future research may explore the experiences of autistic females educated in alternative provisions, for

example, Pupil Referral Units, to gain a more varied perspective of the educational experiences of autistic individuals.

Finally, future research may add to the findings of the current study by exploring the experiences of late-diagnosed autistic males. This may provide valuable insight into appropriate support for undiagnosed autistic boys in their educational settings. It may also be useful to replicate the current study using a control group of neurotypical women to compare the school experiences of autistic and non-autistic girls to consider to what extent the findings of the current study are exclusive to autistic girls.

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9. Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster for Phase One Participants

Are you a late-diagnosed Autistic woman?
If so, you may be interested in taking part in my research!

What is the research about?
I am exploring the school experiences of late-diagnosed Autistic women. I hope to add the voice of Autistic women who did not have a diagnosis when they were at school so that we can better understand how to support girls who have an Autistic profile (but no diagnosis) in their educational setting.

What would taking part involve?
Taking part would involve completing an online interview with the researcher (me) to explore your school experiences as an Autistic girl with no formal diagnosis of Autism.

Hello! My name is Lily and I'm a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter.

If you would like to take part in this study, or would like more information, please email me at

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

Appendix B: Phase One Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

"A Retrospective Exploration of the School Experiences of Late-diagnosed Autistic Women and the Role of the Educational Psychologist in Helping Girls Who Present with an Autistic Profile but no Diagnosis Cope and Thrive in their School Setting."

Before you decide to take part in this study 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 and discuss it with others if you wish. The researcher can be contacted if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Purpose of the study

This study has been designed to capture late-diagnosed autistic women's experiences of school and the role of Educational Psychologists.

Who can take part?

We are looking for people who meet all the following criteria:

• You are an autistic woman aged over 18

• You received your diagnosis of autism after you left school, and aged 18 or over

• You would feel comfortable to reflect on and share your experiences of school

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation in this study is voluntary.

If I agree to take part, what will I have to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be required to participate in one interview lasting no more than one hour. The interview will take place online via Microsoft Teams.

You will be asked questions about your school experiences.

The interviews will be recorded and will be stored securely. The data will only be used for the purposes of this study and will be destroyed at the end of the study.

Participant data will be pseudo-anonymised throughout this research.

What if I want to withdraw from the research project?

You can withdraw from the study up until the point your data has been analysed, pseudo-anonymised and incorporated into the research findings. If you choose to withdraw before this point, your data will be destroyed and will not feature in the project.

There are no penalties for withdrawing and you will not be asked to provide a reason for your withdrawal.

Are there possible disadvantages and/or risks in taking part?

There is a risk that you might experience distress or discomfort due to the personal nature of the topic being discussed. You have the right to pause or stop the interview at any time. All participants will be provided with information for further support if needed.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of the research project will be published in the summer of 2023. You can request a summary of the findings.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is being carried out by Lily Mazzotta and is being supervised by two staff members from the University of Exeter.

Ethical review of the study

The project has been reviewed by the University of Exeter Ethics Committee.

If I would like to take part in this study, what should I do next?

If you would like to participate in this study, please read, sign and return the consent form to █████████████ by 23rd December 2022.

Further contact information

Researcher name and contact details: Lily Mazzotta (██████████████████)

Supervisor name(s) and contact details: Dr █████████████████████████████ and Dr █████████████████████████████

Research Ethics Committee email address: ssis-ethics@exeter.ac.uk

University Research Ethics & Governance cgr-reg@exeter.ac.uk

Appendix C: Example of Initial Coding of Interview Transcript

Researcher: How would you describe yourself when you were at school?

Participant: I was quite shy and conscientious, this is the things that are written on my report, and I was very, very, very, very, very, very well behaved, as in like, I was absolutely terrified of doing anything wrong. And I still am, and it came from school. Like I never forgot my PE kit. I never didn't have a pen. I never, ever got into trouble. Ever. And very kind of academic and high attaining, very like focused and hard working and kind of always going above and beyond. I got really kind of high grades until I was in sixth form when I was really ill. And then my grades then started slipping a little bit, but until then I did really well. Quite like, yeah, like pleasing people. I had kind of small groups of friends. But they changed throughout school primary school. I didn't have very many friends, really. And so can you school by about year and nine year 10 I did have umm a group of friends are quite a strong group of friends, but it took that long, really in secondary schools to get there. Yeah. And I can't make anything else, yeah.

Researcher: OK, great. Thank you. What, if anything did you enjoy about school?

Participant: I enjoyed the kind of performing arts side of things, so music and drama, that's kind of what I've gone into. I spent a lot of time in the music department, so that kind of most lunch times I was in the music department rather than being out and about, which I now kind of understand a little bit and it was to do with food. It was to do with being outside in the cold cause I'm really super sensitive to temperature. It was to do with like business and crowds and socializing and also because I love music and so yeah, that was a bit I enjoyed like the music and drama and the productions, probably more than anything else.

Researcher: And what things did you find most challenging about school?

Participant: Uh. Primary school. Wow, so all the way through the fear of doing something wrong. Just that slight, the overriding thing and, and like the consequences of that and not following the rules or not understanding the rules enough and like getting it wrong without meaning to. In primary school, well and into secondary school, probably up again until about year nine I never really felt safe. And. Like, I don't know, anxiety probably, but. And part of it was like I'm like, really squeamish and super sensitive. So I was always worried about kind of people's health conditions and things and that. There was someone going to be ill and I never felt safe in that sense, but then I was. I was really kind of obsessive about certain things to do with food and drink and going to the

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Comments (right margin):

Lily Mazzotta
Viewed by staff as introverted
Reply

Lily Mazzotta
Academically able
23 August 2023, 16:15
Reply

Lily Mazzotta
Difficulty making or maintaining friendships
Reply

Lily Mazzotta
Enjoyment of some aspects of school
Reply

Lily Mazzotta
Avoidance of being outside at lunchtime
Reply

Lily Mazzotta
Sensory sensitivities made being outside at break and lunchtimes difficult
Reply

176

Appendix D: Example of Amendments to Phase One Interview Schedule Following Pilot

1. ~~How would you describe your school experiences?~~ Tell me about your school experiences.

2. What, if anything, did you enjoy about school?

3. What, if anything, did you find difficult about school?

4. How would you describe your ~~friendships~~ relationships with other children at school?

5. What support, if any, did you receive at school?

    a. If none, ask: what support, if any, do you think you may have benefitted from at school?

6. How would you describe your relationships with teachers or other staff members at school?

7. How did you typically spend your ~~free time~~ break and lunchtimes at school?

8. What, if any, was the impact of your school experiences on your mental health or well-being?

9. How do you think your school experiences have ~~shaped~~ impacted ~~who you are today~~ you?

Appendix E: Phase 1 – Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Introduction

- Thank participant for time
- Ask whether they have any questions/anything that wasn't covered on information sheet
- Clarify that interview about experiences/no right or wrong answers
- Can take break at any point
- Anonymity/confidentiality
- Terminology; I have used autism but discuss their preferred terminology
- Define "school" boundaries
- RECORD – let participant know when you are going to start recording

School experiences

- Tell me about your school experiences (both primary and secondary).
  - **Prompts:**
  - How would you describe yourself when you were at school?
  - What, if anything, did you enjoy about school?
  - What, if anything, did you find challenging about school?
  - How would you describe your social relationships at school?
  - How would you describe your relationships with teachers or other staff members at school?
  - How did you typically spend your break and lunchtimes in school?
  - What support, if any, did you receive in school?
  - What kind of support, if any, would you like to have received in school?
  - What impact, if any, did your school experiences have on your mental health and wellbeing?
  - How were your primary and secondary school experiences similar or different? Or separate to two questions/prompts?
  - Why do you think your autism might have been undiagnosed when you were at school?
  - How do you think receiving a diagnosis while at school might have changed your school experiences?
  - In what ways do you think your school experiences have influenced who you are today?

Ending/debrief

- Before we finish, is there anything you would like to add that you have not had the chance to mention so far?
- Do you have any questions you'd like to ask me about the research?
- Remind what will happen to data.
- Signpost if necessary.
- Thank again for time and sharing experiences.

Appendix F: Phase Two Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

A Retrospective Exploration of the School Experiences of Late-diagnosed Autistic Women And The Role Of The Educational Psychologist In Helping Girls Who Present With An Autistic Profile But No Diagnosis Cope And Thrive In Their School Setting.

Before you decide to take part in this study 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 and discuss it with others if you wish. The researcher can be contacted if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Purpose of the study

This study has been designed to capture late-diagnosed autistic women's experiences of school, and the role of Educational Psychologists in supporting girls with an autistic profile but who do not have a diagnosis so they can cope and thrive in their educational setting.

Data for this project will be collected between January and June 2023.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been approached to take part in this study because you are an Educational Psychologist who might be able to share your views about how EPs can best support girls who present with an autistic profile in their educational settings.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and refusal or withdrawal will involve no penalty or loss, now or in the future.

If I agree to take part, what will I have to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be required to participate in one focus group with other educational psychologists. The total number of participants per focus group will be no more than five.

You will be presented with a range of questions and prompts which have been created based on the data generated in phase one of the research project.

The focus groups will take place online using Microsoft Teams. You will be given the option to use a pseudonym on screen and you will not be required to turn your

camera on if you would like to protect your identity from other focus group participants. The focus groups will be audio recorded and audio data will be stored securely. Data will only be used for the purposes of this study and will be destroyed at the end of the study. Participants will be asked not to use the names or other identifying characteristics of any person referred to within the focus group discussions.

Participant data will be pseudo-anonymised throughout this research. Your workplace and name will be replaced with a number or letter, e.g. "EP 2", "Service A".

Are there possible disadvantages and/or risks in taking part?

There is a risk that you might experience distress or discomfort due to the sensitive nature of the topic being discussed in the focus groups. You have the right to pause the discussion at any point if you experience discomfort or distress and resume after a break, or you can leave the discussion completely without returning. You will also be encouraged to have a break immediately after the interview before you return to work. All participants will be provided with contact information for relevant support networks should further support be required.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of the research project will be published in late 2023. If you opt in, you will receive a summary of the results of the research project. If any individual data are presented, the data will be pseudo-anonymised, as outlined above.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is being carried out by the researcher (Lily Mazzotta) and is being supervised by two staff members from the University of Exeter.

Ethical review of the study

The project has been reviewed by the University of Exeter Ethics Committee.

If I would like to take part in this study, what should I do next?

If, after reading this carefully, you would like to participate in this study, please read the informed consent document also attached to this email. Please ensure you read this document carefully. If you agree with the statements outlined on the consent form, please sign and return to ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ *prior to participation.*

Contact for further information

If you would like further information about this study, please email the researcher at ████████████████

Further contact information

Researcher email: ██████████████████

Researcher name: Lily Mazzotta

Supervisor name(s) and contact details: Dr █████████ ████████████████) and Dr ████████████████████████████)

Research Ethics Committee email address: ssis-ethics@exeter.ac.uk

University Research Ethics & Governance cgr-reg@exeter.ac.uk

Appendix G: Phase Two Focus Group Interview Schedule

Introduction

- Thank participants for their time
- Ask whether they have any questions/anything that wasn't covered on information sheet
- Clarify that interview about experiences/no right or wrong answers
- Can take break at any point
- Anonymity/confidentiality
- RECORD – let participant know when you are going to start recording

Procedure:

- Read vignette number one
- Ask initial question
- Read vignette number two
- Ask initial question
- Continue with other prompt questions
- Ask participants whether they have any questions/comments
- Thank participants for time
- Remind participants that they can contact me via email to provide feedback or to ask questions/comment

Prompt questions:

1. What are your initial reactions to Ella?
2. How do you think an EP might work to support Ella in her school setting?
3. What do you think may be some of the barriers to engaging in this work?
4. What do you think may enable EPs to engage in this work?
5. What are your initial reactions to Rebecca?
6. How do you think an EP might work to support Rebecca in her school setting?
7. What do you think may be some of the barriers to engaging in this kind of work?
8. What do you think may enable EPs to engage in this work?
9. Any other questions/comments?

Appendix H: Composite Vignette 1

Vignette 1: Ella

Ella is a fourteen-year-old girl who attends a mainstream secondary school. Ella lives at home with her parents and younger sister. Ella has positive relationships with her immediate and extended family members, and she has not experienced any significant childhood trauma. Ella loves animals, music, and reading.

Ella is academically able and has good attendance. She has never been in trouble at school, and her teachers describe her as a quiet and studious girl. However, Ella often comes home and experiences significant periods of emotional dysregulation which her parents refer to as a "meltdown". When her parents ask Ella what's wrong, Ella tells them she doesn't know. During these "meltdowns", Ella often screams, cries, and shuts herself in her bedroom. Ella doesn't like to be spoken to during her meltdowns and sometimes needs over an hour of alone time in her bedroom to calm down.

Ella has two or three friends, but Ella often feels like the "add-on" in the friendship group, and she realises that her friends often hang out without inviting her. Ella finds it difficult to socialise in big groups and is often reliant on her friends to "do the talking" in group situations. Ella spends most of her break and lunchtimes in the library or the music rooms, either sitting alone or speaking to a member of staff. Ella says that she prefers the company of adults because she always knows where she stands with them. Ella likes to be given a job by the teachers, especially at lunchtime so that she doesn't have to go outside onto the field. Ella also doesn't like going into the canteen and prefers to eat her lunch alone, away from the other children.

Ella is worried about getting into trouble. At home, she spends hours completing her homework assignments and often doesn't get to sleep until after midnight. When Ella makes a mistake in her work, she becomes very upset and finds it difficult to accept constructive criticism.

Appendix I: Composite Vignette 2

Vignette 2: Rebecca

Rebecca is an eleven-year-old girl who attends a mainstream secondary school. Rebecca lives at home with her mum and two older brothers. Rebecca loves her family, and they do lots of fun activities together, including swimming and camping. Rebecca has not experienced any significant childhood trauma. Rebecca loves football and playing video games.

Rebecca is academically able but is easily distracted and struggles to focus, especially when it is loud in the classroom. This means that Rebecca's work does not always reflect her abilities. Rebecca's teachers sometimes tell her she is being rude, but she doesn't understand why. This can get Rebecca into trouble, and she is often sent to the school's isolation room in accordance with the school's Ready to Learn behaviour management policy. Rebecca has difficult relationships with school staff. Rebecca always tells her teachers the truth, but this sometimes gets her or her peers into trouble. Rebecca feels like most teachers don't like her.

Rebecca does not have one best friend, and many of her friendships seem to be fleeting and insecure. In primary school, Rebecca was desperate for a best friend. She tried hard to make friends with other girls in her class and tried to talk about the things they liked to talk about. Rebecca would often latch on to one child and refer to her as her best friend, even though the other girl did not feel the same way.

Now that she is in secondary school, Rebecca has some friends but they fall out regularly. The fallouts usually occur because Rebecca's friends tell her she is bossy or rude. Rebecca likes to play football at break and lunchtime, but the other children don't like her joining in with the game because of her extreme reactions to losing.

Rebecca is often provoked by older children in the school because they know that Rebecca will display an extreme reaction which gets her into trouble. Rebecca does not always understand the intentions of others and cannot work out when others are making fun of her.

Appendix J: Ethics Approval Decision Letter

Research Ethics Committee Review Outcome Decision

Dear LILY MAZZOTTA

Ethics Application ID: 530551

Title: A retrospective exploration of the school experiences of late-diagnosed Autistic women and the role of the Educational Psychologist in helping girls who present with an Autistic profile but no diagnosis cope and thrive in their school setting.

(Version: 1.0)

Proposed Project Duration: 13 Jan 2023 - 31 Aug 2023

Your research study ethics application submitted above on 22 Nov 2022, 09:00 has been reviewed by the FHASS Social Sciences and International Studies Ethics Committee.

Outcome decision by Research Ethics committee: **Favourable Opinion**

Subject to the following conditions *(if applicable):*

Ethics Committee Comment:

Dear Lily
Your study is now approved and from your start date, you are free to commence research. Please be aware that any significant changes to the study should be reviewed by proposing an amendment for review and receiving a favourable opinion prior to implementation.

If during the research process you encounter issues or events that significantly change the level of anticipated risks of the research, you should contact the Research Ethics Committee for advice. Please also remain aware of any UK government guidance or advice that might affect your research.

You can download a copy of your decision letter (including the reference number) from within Worktribe. Click the link below below and scroll down to the 'Top Tip's section. https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/SSISResearchEthicsCommittee/SitePages/Guide-to-using-Worktribe.aspx

Feel free to get in touch if you have any queries. Best wishes for a successful study.
Regards

███████

Research Ethics Officer
PS: Please *do not* mark your application complete until you actually complete your research project.

Decision Date: 13 Jan 2023, 16:16*

Research Ethics Committee Approval End Date: 31 Aug 2023

*You can only start your research once you have received a Favourable Opinion outcome decision. *The start date of your research will be no sooner than the Ethics Committee Approval decision date above.*

Please be aware that any significant changes to the study should be reviewed by proposing an amendment for review and receiving a favourable opinion prior to implementation.

If during the research process you encounter issues or events that significantly change the level of anticipated risks of the research, you should contact the Research Ethics Committee for advice. Please also remain aware of any UK government guidance or advice that might affect your research.

Regards,

FHASS Social Sciences and International Studies Ethics Committee