



Title:

**Unmasking Potential: Exploring Teachers' Experiences of Recognising and Supporting
Autistic Girls in Mainstream Primary Schools using the Continuum of Support**

Student Name: Madeleine Dolan



*A thesis submitted to the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special
Education, Mary Immaculate College, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology (DECPsy)*

Supervised by: Dr Michele Dunleavy and Dr Therese Brophy

Submitted to Mary Immaculate College, May, 2025

Word Count: 32, 997

Abstract

There is a growing recognition of the limitations of identifying autistic girls in a timely manner (Beeger et al 2013; Kirkovski et al 2013; Rutherford et al. 2016; Happé et al. 2016). This qualitative research explores primary school teachers' perspectives and experiences in recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 primary school teachers to elucidate experiences with recognising and supporting autistic girls in the school context using the Continuum of Support. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was employed to analyse the data, with NVivo software used to support the coding and organisation of themes. The ultimate aim of this research is to discover factors apparent to teachers that contribute to successful recognition and support for autistic girls, ultimately providing timely support and improving outcomes for autistic girls in primary school. This research adopted a social constructivist paradigm. This perspective is essential for understanding autism beyond traditional, deficit-based models, focusing instead on how social and cultural factors shape the recognition and support of autistic individuals.

Findings reveal that teachers often feel they lack knowledge and confidence in understanding autistic girls, leading to significant challenges in early recognition. Teachers reported relying on observable behavioural differences, yet many autistic girls mask their difficulties, complicating the process of recognising their needs. Additionally, the study highlights barriers such as limited resources, time constraints, and systemic biases in educational practices. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated a commitment to fostering inclusive classrooms through individualised support, sensory accommodations, and collaboration with families and specialists.

This study highlights the need for professional development tailored to recognising and supporting autistic girls. Recommendations include incorporating gender-sensitive approaches into teacher professional learning and creating school-wide frameworks for early recognition and support. By amplifying teachers' voices, this research contributes to bridging the knowledge gap and enhancing the educational experiences of autistic girls in mainstream primary schools.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents entirely my own work. Where information has been obtained from other sources, this has been acknowledged within the thesis.

Name: Madeleine Dolan

Signature: 

Date: 04/05/2025

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the teachers who generously shared their time, experiences, and reflections for this research. This project would not have been possible without your meaningful input. Your insights into working with autistic girls offered me a wealth of understanding and were invaluable in shaping the heart of this thesis.

To my supervisors, Dr. Michele Dunleavy and Dr. Therese Brophy, thank you for your ongoing support, guidance, and consistently thought-provoking feedback. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to other members of the DECPsy Team and other MIC staff who were instrumental in this process. Your encouragement and expertise have been deeply appreciated throughout this journey also.

I would also like to sincerely thank the Research and Graduate School Office (RGSO) at Mary Immaculate College and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) who generously provided bursary support during my studies. A heartfelt thank you as well to my NEPS supervisors, Dr. Caitriona Martyn and Theresa Judge, for their kindness, encouragement, and understanding throughout my final placement. Your guidance and belief in me made all the difference, and I'm deeply grateful for the learning and support you provided during such a crucial stage of the programme.

To my incredible friends on the DECPsy programme, thank you for the camaraderie that made even the most challenging days manageable. A special thanks to Emma and Elle, who have journeyed with me all the way in MIC, from our undergraduate studies in B.Ed. Psychology, through our postgraduate studies in autism, and now the DECPsy programme. I feel beyond lucky to have had such steadfast support every step of the way. A particular mention must also

go to my fellow ‘Galway Girls’, Katy and Ciara. Our many road trips to and from Mary I throughout the course were filled with laughter, reflection, and friendship. Your support has been so meaningful, especially during the “pits and peaks” of this process.

To my wonderful parents, Michael and Antoinette, thank you for always encouraging me to pursue my dreams and for instilling in me the value of education. To Dad, thank you for the ‘taxi service’ to placement that gave me the rest I needed and all your other essential supports. To Mom, thank you for being an unwavering source of strength and inspiration. To my sister Anastasia, thank you for the joyful distractions like my Christmas trip to visit you and the excitement of your wedding planning. To my sister Evangeline, thank you for riding the “struggle bus” alongside me as we both tackled our final year of college together. And to my brother Albert, thank you for bringing some levity and positive distraction with not one but two elections during my course. Without you all, this would not have been possible.

To Darragh, thank you for being a constant, calming, and reassuring presence throughout this entire journey. Your unwavering support and patience, from our early days in the B.Ed programme to now has meant the world to me. Even though “school stuff” might not be your favourite topic, you always made time to listen my thesis tangents. Your belief in me never faltered and your great sense of humour was just what I needed when things were challenging. I’d also like to thank your family for their warm hospitality and for welcoming me into Mayo during my final placement. Their kindness and support truly lightened the load and made a real difference.

Sincere thanks to my extended family also, in particular to my aunt Annette for donating your monitor and standing desk when long hours at the laptop began to take a toll! Your practical

and emotional support (and always lighting a candle for me) meant so much. To my cousin Rob, thank you for being such a supportive housemate and for providing technical assistance whenever I ran into difficulties! You were always willing to help and made things that bit easier.

Lastly, to all my friends who checked in, encouraged me, and kept cheering me on -thank you. Your belief in me helped me make it to the finish line.

Dedication

To my baby sister, Therese, born with Edwards Syndrome and taken far too quickly. Though your time with us was brief, your presence has always been with me, guiding and protecting me. You will always be my little guardian angel.

To my two beloved grandmothers, Eileen and Madge, whose strength and resilience continue to inspire me. Though I sadly had to say goodbye to you both during the final semester of this course, I carried your spirit with me through every challenge. While you may not have had the same educational opportunities I was fortunate enough to receive, your quiet wisdom and unwavering support have left a lasting imprint on me.

Table of Contents

Declaration		iv
Table of Contents		ix
List of Tables		xviii
List of Figures		xix
List of Abbreviations		xxiii
1 Introduction		1
1.1 Thesis Rationale and Aims		1
1.2 Central Constructs		5
1.2.1. Terminology		5
1.2.2 Gender		6
1.2.3. Autism		6
1.2.4. Female Phenotype for Autism		7
1.2.5. Autism and Mental Health		8
1.2.6. Policy		9
1.2.7 Continuum of Support		10
1.3 Epistemological, Theoretical and Personal Perspectives		13
1.3.1. Ontology and Epistemology		13
1.3.2. Theoretical		14
1.3.3. Researcher positionality		15
1.4 Overview of Thesis Structure		17

2	Literature Review	19
2.1	Introduction.....	19
2.2	A Brief History of Autism	19
2.3	Theories of Autism.....	24
2.4	Neurodiversity and Identity.....	30
2.5	Diagnostic Criteria and Gender Bias	31
2.6	Review Aims	36
2.7	Search Strategy 1	37
2.8	Female Phenotype of Autism	37
2.8.1	Repetitive and Restricted Behaviour and Interests	38
2.8.2	Social Communication.....	38
2.8.3	Emotional and behavioural functioning	40
2.9	Review Question(s).....	41
2.10	Systematic Review.....	41
2.10.1	Search Strategy 2.	42
2.10.2	Search Results.	44
2.10.3	Critical Analysis Framework.....	49
2.10.3.1	Weight of Evidence A: Methodological quality	49
2.10.3.2	Weight of Evidence B: Methodological Relevance.....	53
2.10.3.3	Weight of Evidence C: Relevance of Evidence	56
2.10.3.4	Weight of Evidence D: Overall Weighting.....	58
2.11	Synthesis of Findings	60
2.11.1	Overview of included studies	60

2.11.1.1	Participants.....	61
2.11.1.2	Location	62
2.11.1.3	Study Design and Methodology.....	64
2.11.1.4	Measures	67
2.11.1.5	Data Analysis	69
2.12	Synthesis of Findings and Discussion	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.13	Recommendations for Future Research	77
2.14	Conclusion	79
3	Empirical Paper.....	83
3.1	Introduction.....	83
3.1.1	Research Topic	83
3.1.2	Research Aims and Objectives	84
3.2	Methodology	85
3.2.1	Research Paradigm.....	85
3.2.2	Ontology and Epistemology.	86
3.2.2	Conceptual Framework Development	87
3.2.3	Theoretical Frameworks	90
3.2.3.1	The Continuum of Support Framework.....	90
3.2.3.2	Bio-Ecological Systems Theory (EST).....	92
3.2.3.3	Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs	93
3.2.4	Research Design	96
3.2.5	Participants.....	99
3.2.6	Sampling Strategy.....	102

3.2.7	Sample Size	103
3.2.8	Interview Schedule Development	104
3.2.9	Data Collection	106
3.2.10	Data Analysis.....	107
3.2.11	Researcher reflexivity	109
3.2.12	Member Checking.....	110
3.2.13	Ethical Considerations.....	110
3.3	Results	111
3.3.1	RQ 1- Recognition - What are teachers' experiences of recognising autistic girls in mainstream primary school settings?	113
3.3.1.1	Varied experiences in recognising Autistic Girls.	113
3.3.1.2	'A Slow Journey' - Delayed Recognition and Bias.	114
3.3.1.3	Varied Presentation of Autism in Girls.	115
3.3.1.3.1	Social challenges.....	116
3.3.1.3.2	Sensory sensitivities.....	116
3.3.1.3.3	Highly focused interests.....	116
3.3.1.3.4	Rigid routines.....	116
3.3.1.3.5	Speech differences.	116
3.3.1.3.6	Masking and Emotional regulation.	117
3.3.1.3.7	Gender Differences in Autism Presentation.	117
3.3.1.4	Parental Involvement – A Double-Edged Sword.....	118
3.3.2	RQ2 – SUPPORT ‘What are teachers’ experiences of supporting autistic girls in the mainstream primary school settings using the Continuum of Support?’	119

3.3.2.1	Classroom Support (Support for All).....	120
3.3.2.1.1	Visual Timetables and Predictability.	120
3.3.2.1.2	Movement or Sensory Breaks for Regulation.....	120
3.3.2.1.3	Building Rapport and Understanding Interests.....	121
3.3.2.1.4	Strength-Based Approaches.....	122
3.3.2.1.5	Appropriate supports and differentiation.	123
3.3.2.2	School Support (Support for Some).....	123
3.3.2.2.1	Social and Emotional Wellbeing.	124
3.3.2.2.2	Collaboration with Special Needs Assistants (SNAs).	125
3.3.2.2.3	Consultation with Specialists (e.g., NEPS Psychologists).....	126
3.3.2.3	Individualised Support (Support for a Few)	126
3.3.2.3.1	One on one support.	126
3.3.2.3.2	Parental Involvement and Consistency Across Environments.	126
3.3.3	RQ 3 – FACTORS ‘What factors enable or hinder effective recognition and support, including role of EP?’	128
3.3.3.1	Collaboration with others.....	128
3.3.3.1.1	Collaboration with school staff.....	128
3.3.3.1.2	Collaboration with School Leadership.....	128
3.3.3.1.3	Collaboration using documentation.	129
3.3.3.1.4	Collaboration with other schools for transitions.	130
3.3.3.1.5	Collaboration with the psychologist.	130
3.3.3.2	Training and Continual Professional Development (CPD)	131
3.3.3.2.1	Impact of Further Education and Training.....	131

3.3.3.2.2	Tools and Resources.	133
3.3.3.3	Challenges and Limitations in the Mainstream Classroom	133
3.3.3.3.1	Resource Limitations and Systemic Constraints.....	133
3.3.3.3.2	Need for specialised training and whole school approaches.	134
3.3.3.3.3	Confusion with Referral Pathways.	134
3.3.3.3.4	Teacher's confidence.	135
3.4	Discussion.....	135
3.4.1	RQ 1- RECOGNITION- What are teachers' experiences of recognising autistic girls in mainstream primary school settings?.....	135
3.4.1.1	Challenges in Recognising Autistic Girls.	135
3.4.1.2	Delayed recognition and bias.	136
3.4.1.3	Gender differences in autism presentation.	137
3.4.1.4	Parental Involvement.	138
3.4.2	RQ2 – SUPPORT - ‘What are teachers’ experiences of supporting autistic girls in the mainstream primary school settings using the Continuum of Support?’	140
3.4.2.1	Effective Support Strategies.	140
3.4.2.2	Individualised supports.	141
3.4.2.3	Whole School Support.	142
3.4.2.4	Systemic Barriers to Support.	143
3.4.3	RQ 3 – FACTORS ‘What factors enable or hinder effective recognition and support, including role of EP?’	143
3.4.3.1	The Role of School Leadership, School Systems and Collaboration.	143
3.4.3.2	The Role of the Psychologist.	145

3.4.3.3	Teacher Professional Learning.....	146
3.4.4	Implications for Diagnostic Practices and Policy.....	149
3.4.5	Proposed framework for Recognising& Supporting Autistic Girls.....	151
3.4.6	Study Strengths and Limitations.....	153
3.4.7	Conclusion.....	154
4	Critical Review and Impact Statement.....	156
4.1	Introduction.....	156
4.2	Reflections on epistemological stance.....	156
4.2.1	Strengths of Constructivist Epistemology.....	156
4.2.2	Limitations of epistemological stance.....	157
4.2.3	Alternative epistemological stance.....	158
4.3	Reflections on the Conceptual Framework.....	159
4.3.1	Strengths of Conceptual Frameworks.....	159
4.3.2	Limitations of Conceptual Frameworks.....	161
4.3.3	Alternative Conceptual Frameworks.....	162
4.4	Methodological Strengths and Weaknesses.....	164
4.4.1	Research Design.....	164
4.4.2	Sampling Method.....	165
4.4.3	Data Collection.....	166
4.4.4	Data Analysis.....	169
4.4.5	Ethical Considerations.....	170
4.4.6	Critical Appraisal.....	171
	Section A: Are the results valid?.....	172

Section B: What are the results?	173
Section C: Will the results help locally?	174
4.5 Implications of the Research	176
4.5.1 Implications for Understanding of the Research Topic	176
4.5.2 Implications for Practice	176
4.5.2.1 Implications for School Staff.....	176
4.5.2.2 Implications for Psychologist Practice.....	178
4.5.3 Implications for Policy	179
4.5.3.1 Policy on Wellbeing.....	180
.....	182
4.5.3.2 Policy on Teacher professional learning.....	183
4.5.3.3 Policy on Diagnostic Criteria.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5.4 Implications for Research	185
4.5.5 Dissemination of Findings	188
4.6 Personal Reflection	189
4.6.1 Personal Reflection on the Research Process	189
4.6.1.1 Reflection-in-Action.....	190
4.6.1.2 Reflection-on-Action.....	190
4.7 Impact Statement	191
4.7.1 Impact Within Academia	192
4.7.2 Impact Beyond Academia	193
4.7.3 Public Engagement and Wider Societal Impact	194
References	195

Appendices..... 242

..... 276

List of Tables

Table 1. Brief History of Autism	19
Table 2. Theories of Autism	25
Table 3. Current Diagnostic Classification Systems.....	32
Table 4. Search Strategy	43
Table 5. Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria	45
Table 6. Studies selected for inclusion in the literature review	48
Table 7. Overview of WoE A Methodological Quality Criteria adapted from Hong et al.'s Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (2018).....	51
Table 8. Overall WoE B: Methodological Relevance Scores.....	55
Table 9. WoE C: Overall relevance of evidence rating scores and descriptive quality ratings....	57
Table 10. WoE D: Summary of all WoE rating scores and descriptive quality ratings	58
Table 11. Recommendations for Future Research Based on Findings	78
Table 12. Development of Conceptual Framework	88
Table 13. Participant Demographic Information	100
Table 14. Factors influencing teachers experiences of recognisingand supporting autistic girls structured within Bio-Ecological Systems Theory.	149
Table 15. Strengths and Limitations of the Research	153
Table 16. CASP Checklist for Qualitative Research	172

List of Figures

Figure 1. Research Questions	4
Figure 2. Continuum of Support	12
Figure 3. Visual Map of Thesis Layout	18
Figure 4. Reflective Box 1	36
Figure 5. PRISMA Flow Chart of Study Selection Process	47
Figure 6. Recommendations for future research	77
Figure 7. Reflective Box 2	82
Figure 8. Research Questions	85
Figure 9. Diagram of conceptual framework embedded in Bronfenbrenner’s Framework... Error!	
Bookmark not defined.	
Figure 10. Continuum of Support (DES, 2017)	91
Figure 11. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs	96
Figure 12. Phases of Hermeneutical Phenomenological Method (Adapted from Fuster (2019): Qualitative Research: Hermeneutical Phenomenological Method.)	98
Figure 13. Inclusion Criteria	103
Figure 14. Interview Protocol Refinement Framework	105
Figure 15. Six Step Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process	109
Figure 16. Ethical Procedures	111
Figure 17. Visual Representation of Themes	112
Figure 18. Reflective Box 3	119
Figure 19. Reflective Box 4	125
Figure 20. Support strategies aligned with Continuum of Support	127

Figure 21. Reflective Box 5	129
Figure 22. Reflective Box 6	131
Figure 23. Reflective Box 7	132
Figure 24. Reflective Box 8	139
Figure 25. Framework for Recognising and Supporting Autistic Girls	152
Figure 26. Whole School Approach – Four Key Areas of Wellbeing Promotion	181
Figure 27. The Lundy Model of Participation	186
Figure 28. Schön’s (1991) model of reflectivity	189
Figure 29. Excerpt from research journal	190

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Reflections on my interpretation of theories and their relevance to autistic girls along with implications for teachers	242
Appendix B: Diagnostic Criteria for Autism found in DSM-5-TR and ICD-11	243
Appendix C: Overview of Selected Studies.....	248
Appendix D: WoE A Methodological Quality Criteria adapted from Hong et al.'s Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (2018).....	252
Appendix E: Overall WoE B Methodological Relevance Scores.....	256
Appendix F: Table summarising quality judgements for WoE C Scoring Criteria and Rationale	258
Appendix G: Research Poster	260
Appendix H: Final Interview Schedule.....	261
Appendix I: Participant Information Sheet	263
Appendix J: Informed Consent Forms	266
Appendix K: Researcher Identity Memo (Maxwell, 2005)	267
Appendix L: Ethical approval from MIREC	271
Appendix M: Six-step Reflexive Thematic Analysis Procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2019).....	273
Appendix N: Support Strategies in Provision Mapping Format.....	282
Appendix O: Factors Influencing Recognition and Support Aligned with Theoretical Frameworks.....	290
Appendix P: Initial Questionnaire Drafted	294
Appendix Q: The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist for Qualitative Research (2024)	298

Appendix R: NEPS Research Brief 309

List of Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
AON	Assessment of Need
APA	American Psychological Association / American Psychiatric Association
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BPS	British Psychological Society
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
CBT	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
CDNT	Children's Network Disability Team
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CYP	Children and Young People
DCD	Developmental Coordination Disorder
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

DoH	Department of Health
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
ERIC	Education Resources Information Centre
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HSE	Health Service Executive
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
MCA	Middletown Centre for Autism
MDT	Multi-Disciplinary Team
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MIREC	Mary Immaculate Research Ethics Committee
NAS	National Autistic Society
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education

NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NICE	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
NM	Neurodiversity Movement
NP	Neurodiversity Paradigm
PCC	Population Concept Context
PCP	Primary Care Psychology
PDD	Pervasive Developmental Disorder
PDS	Progressing Disability Services
PSI	Psychological Society of Ireland
RQ	Research Question
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SET	Special Education Teacher
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
WHO	World Health Organisation
WoE	Weight of Evidence

1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the overall research area of the current thesis. Firstly, the thesis rationale and aims will be presented, situated within the Irish context. Then, the relevant literature pertinent to the research area will be outlined. The key constructs that will be examined in this thesis, namely, autism, gender differences, and the female phenotype of autism will be explained. The underpinning epistemological perspectives and conceptual framework will then be outlined. Finally, a visual map of the structure of the thesis will be presented.

1.1 Thesis Rationale and Aims

This thesis aims to explore teachers' perspectives and experiences with recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. Research suggests that autistic girls are frequently under-identified or often go undetected in mainstream classroom settings, largely due to their tendency to camouflage or mask their behaviours, which can result in their needs being overlooked or misunderstood by educators (Goodall and MacKenzie, 2019; Hebron, 2017; Moyse and Porter, 2015). Unlike autistic boys, who often display more apparent characteristics that align with traditional diagnostic criteria, from the DSM V and ICD 11, autistic girls may exhibit more subtle social and behavioural differences (Cook et al., 2021). This phenomenon, known as 'social masking' or 'camouflaging' involves consciously or unconsciously mimicking neurotypical behaviours to blend in with peers, thus making it challenging for educators to observe any obvious signs of autism in the classroom (Hull et al., 2020). Research has shown that girls who adopt camouflaging behaviours often receive their diagnosis later in life, if at all, because their coping mechanisms can mask the traits that would otherwise lead to identification (Kirkovski et al., 2013; Wassell & Burke, 2022). Evidently, these

subtle behaviours and camouflaging tendencies can make it challenging for teachers to recognise signs of autism, leading to delays in identification. As a result, autistic girls frequently miss out on early supports that are crucial for their development and educational success (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019).

Understanding teachers' experiences and perspectives is crucial in addressing this issue. Teachers play a pivotal role in the recognition of student's strengths and needs as they are often the first to observe these students in structured and social learning environments. However, many teachers report feeling ill-equipped to do so due to a lack of adequate training and resources tailored to understanding the unique presentation of autism in females (Frederickson et al., 2010; Humphrey & Symes, 2011). Without a clear understanding of how autistic girls may present differently, teachers may unknowingly contribute to the ongoing cycle of under-identification and inadequate support (Whitlock et al., 2020). By gathering the lived experiences of teachers who have encountered both successes and challenges with autistic girls in the mainstream classroom, this research aims to illuminate the gaps in current educational practices and the systemic barriers that impede effective support for autistic girls.

The research outlined in this thesis aims to fill a critical gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of primary school teachers in recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream classrooms. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews, the study seeks to gain insights into how teachers become aware of potential autistic traits in girls, as well as the strategies they use to support these students once needs have been recognised. By analysing these experiences, the study will identify key themes aligned to the Continuum of Support model (Classroom Support, School Support, Individualised Support) and how this phased approach is

being utilised by teachers to support autistic girls in current educational frameworks. The Continuum of Support, which provides a tiered framework for identifying and meeting students' needs in Irish primary schools will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

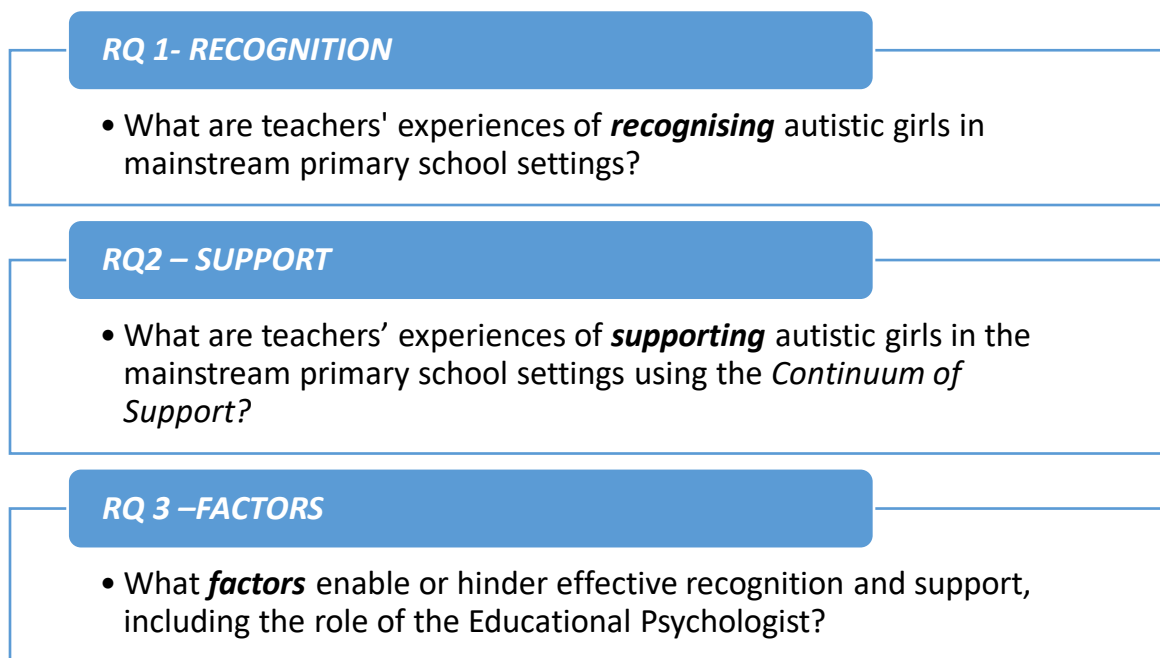
The rationale for focusing on teachers' perspectives comes from the understanding that educational environments must adapt to the diverse needs of students to promote inclusivity and equitable learning opportunities (Shevlin et al., 2009). Current evidence suggests that while educational policies advocate for inclusive practices there is often a disconnect between policy and practice especially concerning support for autistic girls (Goodall, 2018). Teachers' perspectives provide valuable insights into how these policies are implemented within the learning environment and the practical challenges they face, such as high student-teacher ratios, limited access to specialised training, and a lack of resources (O'Hagan et al., 2022). Additionally, understanding these perspectives may help inform the development of targeted training programmes that better equip teachers to recognise and support the unique needs of autistic girls. By focusing on the experiences of teachers with first-hand experience of working with autistic girls in mainstream classrooms, this study seeks to bridge the gap between research, policy, and practice, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and informed educational landscape for autistic girls.

Therefore, the following research questions were devised in order to explore how teachers currently navigate the complexities of recognising and supporting autistic girls within mainstream classrooms (Figure 1). The research questions aimed to explore the factors that influence teachers' understanding, recognition, and support of autistic girls, as well as how the Continuum of Support is used in practice to guide inclusive strategies. Additionally, this study

explores the factors that enable or hinder effective recognition of needs and support for autistic girls, including the role of the Educational Psychologist (EP).

Figure 1.

Research Questions



It is anticipated that these research questions will provide meaningful insights into more equitable and gender-sensitive approaches to autism support in education, and inform future developments in teacher professional learning, professional development, collaborative practice, and policy.

1.2 Central Constructs

1.2.1. Terminology.

This thesis adopts a neuroaffirmative approach to language, aiming to respect the preferences and dignity of the autistic community. Where possible, identity-first language (e.g. “autistic person”) is used in recognition of its growing acceptance among autistic individuals who view autism as an integral part of their identity rather than something separate or negative (AsIAm, n.d.). However, person-first language (e.g. “person with autism”) may appear in direct quotations or where it aligns with the terminology used in official documentation or participant responses. The choice of language in this thesis reflects a commitment to inclusive and respectful discourse, while also acknowledging that preferences may vary among individuals. This approach reflects the researcher’s intention to be mindful of the varying preferences within the autism community concerning terminology (Kenny et al., 2015). It also aligns with the American Psychological Association’s guidelines (APA, 2020) on using bias-free language and acknowledging the significance of group membership preferences in self-identification. Some autistic individuals, including Adam Harris, founder and CEO of AsIAm, also prefer to capitalise the ‘A’ in Autism to symbolise a strong connection to the autistic community and to distinguish themselves from non-autistic professionals involved in autism research or support. However, in academic writing, standard conventions typically favour the use of a lowercase ‘a’ (e.g., “autistic person” or “autism”), and this convention will be followed throughout this thesis. Furthermore, terms such as “recognising autism” are used intentionally to describe the role of educators in observing and responding to students' support needs, without implying a diagnostic responsibility.

1.2.2 Gender. For the purpose of this thesis, sex is understood as referring to the biological and physiological attributes such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive anatomy that are typically associated with being male or female (WHO, 2023). Gender, on the other hand, refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions, and identities of individuals, which can vary across cultures and over time (WHO, 2023). It is important to acknowledge that gender is increasingly recognised as fluid and diverse, and so too is the experience of autism. While this thesis explores traits and presentations that are more commonly associated with autistic girls, it is vital to emphasise that no two autistic individuals are the same. Just as we should never make assumptions about a person's needs based solely on their diagnosis, we must also be cautious not to make assumptions based on their gender identity (Misheva, 2024). The profiles described in this research may be more frequently observed in girls, but the insights and strategies may be relevant to any child who presents similarly, regardless of gender. This approach promotes a more inclusive, person-centred understanding of autism that honours individuality over labels.

1.2.3. Autism. Autism Spectrum Disorder is the official term used by diagnostic instruments such as the DSM-5 and ICD 11. The term "dyad of impairments" in autism, as outlined in the DSM-5, refers to the two main areas of challenge: ongoing differences with social communication and interaction, and the presence of restricted, repetitive behaviours, interests, or activities (APA, 2022). Prevalence rates of autism appear to be increasing which provides a good rationale to uncover more about the condition and understand it on a deeper level for all genders. Currently in Ireland the prevalence rates of autism are reported to be 1 in 65 (NCSE, 2016; Boilson et al., 2016; Department of Health, 2018), a figure that broadly aligns with international prevalence rates. For example, the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023)

report a prevalence of 1 in 36 children, while rates in the UK are approximately 1 in 57 (Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021). Variations across countries may reflect differences in diagnostic criteria, awareness, and access to services. Notably, these figures often underestimate prevalence among girls, whose presentations may be more easily overlooked due to camouflaging behaviours or more internalised characteristics (Loomes et al., 2017). Research suggests males are 5 times more likely to have autism (NCSE, 2016), with a current rate of 78% autistic males in Ireland (Boilson et al., 2016). A recent meta-analysis of 54 studies found a male-to-female ratio close to 3:1 (Loomes et al., 2017). This high level of variability in gender ratios between studies suggests that prevalence estimates of autistic females may be inaccurate and leads us to question gender differences in autism. On average, females receive autism diagnoses later (Giarelli et al., 2010). This suggests a possible diagnostic gender bias, placing females at risk of misdiagnosis, late diagnosis or remaining undiagnosed (Loomes et al., 2017).

1.2.4. Female Phenotype for Autism. As described above, gender-differences have been noted in relation to the prevalence of autism diagnosis and presentation in females (Giarelli et al., 2010; Begeer et al., 2013; Rutherford et al., 2016; Rabbitte et al., 2017; Ratto et al., 2018). As a result, Kirkovski et al. (2013) posits the theory that there is a female phenotype for autism which may provide an explanation. This is based on a review of 113 studies of gender differences in autism which found 78% of studies supported the existence of a different phenotype for autistic females. Lai et al. (2015) also proposed a female phenotype of autism based on the camouflaging abilities of autistic girls. The concept of camouflaging or masking is increasingly recognised as a key feature of the autistic experience, particularly among girls and women. Self-managing strategies and adaptive behaviours can be employed by some autistic individuals whereby they ‘mask’ or ‘camouflage’ their differences in order to integrate into their social environment

(Attwood, 2007). Recently, there has been an increased focus on the growing body of research on camouflaging in autism, particularly in autistic females. The concept of camouflaging is predominantly associated with autistic females, as they attempt to conceal their differences and imitate the social skills of their peers (Dworzynski et al., 2012). Camouflaging refers to the conscious or unconscious strategies used by autistic individuals to hide or minimise behaviours that may be perceived as socially atypical, such as stimming, differences in eye contact or conversational differences (Hull et al., 2017). These strategies are often employed to blend in with peers, avoid stigma, or meet external expectations in social or educational settings. While camouflaging can help individuals navigate neurotypical environments, it often comes at a significant psychological cost contributing to exhaustion, anxiety and a delayed recognition of support needs. In this thesis, the term ‘camouflaging’ is used to highlight the ways in which autistic traits may be intentionally or unintentionally masked in school settings, which can make recognition, particularly by teachers, more complex. Findings from a systematic review confirm that females exhibit higher levels of camouflaging than males across the lifespan (Cook et al., 2021). Therefore, if females exhibit higher levels of engagement in the behaviour and it is impacting on them the most, then it is vital that we further explore how this impacts teachers’ abilities to recognise and support autistic girls in the school environment.

1.2.5. Autism and Mental Health. Mental health difficulties are consistently found to be prevalent for autistic individuals across the lifespan (Lever & Geurts, 2016; Simonoff et al., 2008). They have been linked to lower social and adaptive functioning (Moss et al., 2015), employment and educational challenges (Keen et al., 2016; Lounds Taylor et al., 2015) and reduced quality of life (Adams et al., 2019). Qualitative findings continuously indicate that camouflaging has detrimental consequences for autistic people such as fatigue, burnout, anxiety,

stress, depression, and identity problems (Bargiela et al., 2016; Hull et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). Furthermore, autistic females are reported to experience increased levels of internalising symptoms such as low self-esteem and present with mental health challenges, such as depression or anxiety (Mandy et al., 2012; May et al., 2014). Similarly, Baldwin and Costley (2016) suggest that autistic females experience higher levels of co-occurring emotional difficulties despite appearing socially interested and competent. However, the question remains whether girls' more subtle traits are distinctive features of autistic females or whether they are due to other factors such as diagnostic processes, camouflaging tendencies, societal pressures, or perceptions of autistic girls. Camouflaging may be a significant factor impacting the mental health of autistic individuals and leading to vulnerability within the population.

1.2.6. Policy. Recent policy developments in the Irish context such as the 'Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice' (DES, 2018) have brought wellbeing and mental health practices to the fore in schools. In line with this, it is important that a better awareness and understanding around autistic girls' mental health and wellbeing is developed, including the factors that impact their mental health. Furthermore, NEPS recently published 'Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools' (DES, 2022) which noted gender differences in autism, thereby raising teachers' awareness. However, it provided limited information on the diverse presentation of autism in girls. To ensure more inclusive support, guidance must acknowledge the variability in autism presentations and actively challenge the male-biased perceptions that are often at play. It is important that research in this area continues to progress so we can keep adding to the growing body of literature and enhance our understanding. Recent policy advice from the NCSE (2024) advocates for the progressive realisation of a fully inclusive education system, where all students, including those with complex needs, are ultimately educated together

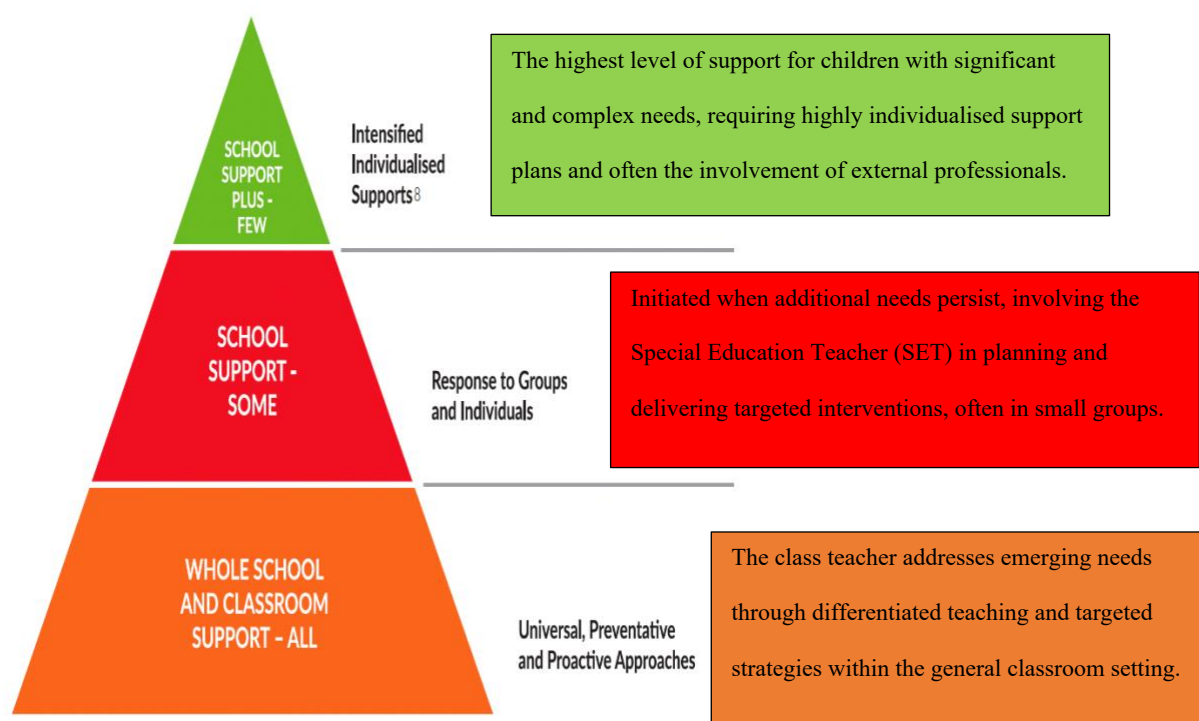
in their local schools. However, the NCSE also acknowledges the current need for a continuum of provision and supports a phased transition towards inclusion, recognising that schools require enhanced resources, training, and therapeutic supports to implement such changes effectively (NCSE, 2024). It is important to reflect on what this evolving model might mean for autistic girls, particularly those who camouflage their difficulties and may be overlooked in inclusive settings. Therefore, it is relevant in this thesis to explore where teachers currently stand in terms of recognising and supporting diverse needs in their classrooms, especially more subtle presentations, such as those often seen in autistic girls. Currently in Ireland, Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People (PDS) is underway which is an Irish national programme introduced by the Health Service Executive (HSE) to improve how disability services are delivered to children and families. It aims to ensure equity of access to services regardless of a child's diagnosis, location, or where they attend school (HSE, 2020). While this is a positive development for disability services in terms of providing equitable and family-centred practice, it appears there are a lot of issues on the ground with long waiting lists and staff shortages (HSE, 2020; Inclusion Ireland, 2022). It is important to consider the impact this may have on autistic girls, in terms of delays in diagnosis or missed opportunities for early support.

1.2.7 Continuum of Support. The Continuum of Support (COS) is a national framework developed by the Department of Education in Ireland to guide schools in recognising and responding to the varying levels of need among children with special educational needs (SEN). It recognises that SEN exist along a spectrum, from mild and transient to more complex and enduring and provides a three-tiered model of support. This tiered approach encompasses a collaborative problem-solving process that includes assessment, planning, intervention and regular review and is documented through the Student Support File. The Continuum promotes

early intervention, inclusive practice and data-informed decision-making, ensuring that children receive the right level of support at the right time, in line with their evolving needs (DE, 2024).

The COS is underpinned by a needs-based model which emphasises a flexible, responsive approach to intervention based on the level of need rather than the presence of a formal diagnosis. This is particularly significant for autistic girls, whose traits may be masked or misunderstood, often resulting in delayed or missed diagnoses. If teachers can appropriately identify and respond to their specific strengths and challenges, then supports can be implemented through the use of the COS without needing to wait for a formal assessment. This proactive model allows schools to intervene early and meaningfully, supporting autistic girls based on observed need rather than clinical labels.

In terms of educational placement, autistic students in Ireland may attend mainstream classes, special classes within mainstream schools, or special schools, depending on the complexity of their needs and in consultation with parents and relevant professionals. While many autistic girls thrive in inclusive mainstream environments with the right supports in place, others may benefit from the additional structure and flexibility offered in special classes or special school settings (DE, 2024). Figure 2 outlines the Continuum of Support Framework.

Figure 2.*Continuum of Support***1.2.8. Role of the teacher**

In the Irish education system, the teacher plays a central role in supporting the learning and development of all pupils, including those with additional needs. According to the Department of Education's *Continuum of Support* framework (NEPS, 2007), teachers are expected to recognise and respond to emerging needs within their classroom through a staged model of intervention. This begins with classroom-based support, where the teacher monitors a pupil's progress and adapts teaching strategies as required. While teachers are not responsible for

diagnosing conditions such as autism, they are often the first to observe behaviours or learning differences that may indicate a need for further support. Their role at this pre-identification stage involves gathering information, consulting with colleagues, and engaging with parents to build a clearer picture of the child's strengths and challenges. The *Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (DES, 2017) further emphasise the importance of collaborative practice, where teachers work closely with parents and school support teams to ensure timely and appropriate responses. In this context, the term 'recognising autism' is used throughout this thesis to reflect the teacher's role in noticing and responding to potential indicators of autism, rather than implying a diagnostic function.

1.3 Epistemological, Theoretical and Personal Perspectives

1.3.1. *Ontology and Epistemology.* Ontology addresses the question of whether reality exists independently of human perception or is entirely shaped by human interpretation and practices. A relativist ontology suggests that there are multiple constructed realities, where what is considered 'real' and 'true' varies across different times and contexts. Thus, knowledge is shaped by the context and manner in which it is generated (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 27). Epistemology, on the other hand, involves the philosophical assumptions that underpin research, specifically concerning how knowledge is acquired and what methods are considered most valid for uncovering truth. Epistemological positions influence what is deemed possible to know and, therefore, what is considered legitimate knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This research adopts a social constructionist epistemological stance, which views reality as

subjective or something that does not have to be universally shared, yet is still independent of the individual experiencing it (Darlaston-Jones, 2007, p.19).

1.3.2. *Theoretical.* The theoretical perspective of this thesis is grounded in social constructionism, which emphasises that knowledge and meaning are constructed through social contexts, interactions, and cultural frameworks (Burr, 2015). This perspective is essential for understanding autism beyond traditional, deficit-based models, focusing instead on how social and cultural factors shape the recognition and support of autistic individuals. Additionally, neurodiversity theory reframes autism as a natural variation in human cognition, advocating for acceptance and appropriate support rather than viewing it as a disorder (Silberman, 2015). Building on this foundation, the research incorporates the bioecological model of human development proposed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) which is an evolution of the original ecological systems theory (1979). This updated model places emphasis on proximal processes such as the enduring, reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environment as the primary mechanisms driving development. In the context of this research, the microsystem, specifically the classroom setting and school environment serves as a critical space where teachers play a pivotal role in shaping autistic girls' daily experiences. Teachers' capacity to recognise subtle or masked presentations of autism in girls and to cultivate inclusive, responsive learning environments is vital for supporting their social and educational development.

In addition, this study draws upon Maslow's (1970) revised hierarchy of needs, which recognises that human needs do not always follow a fixed, sequential order but

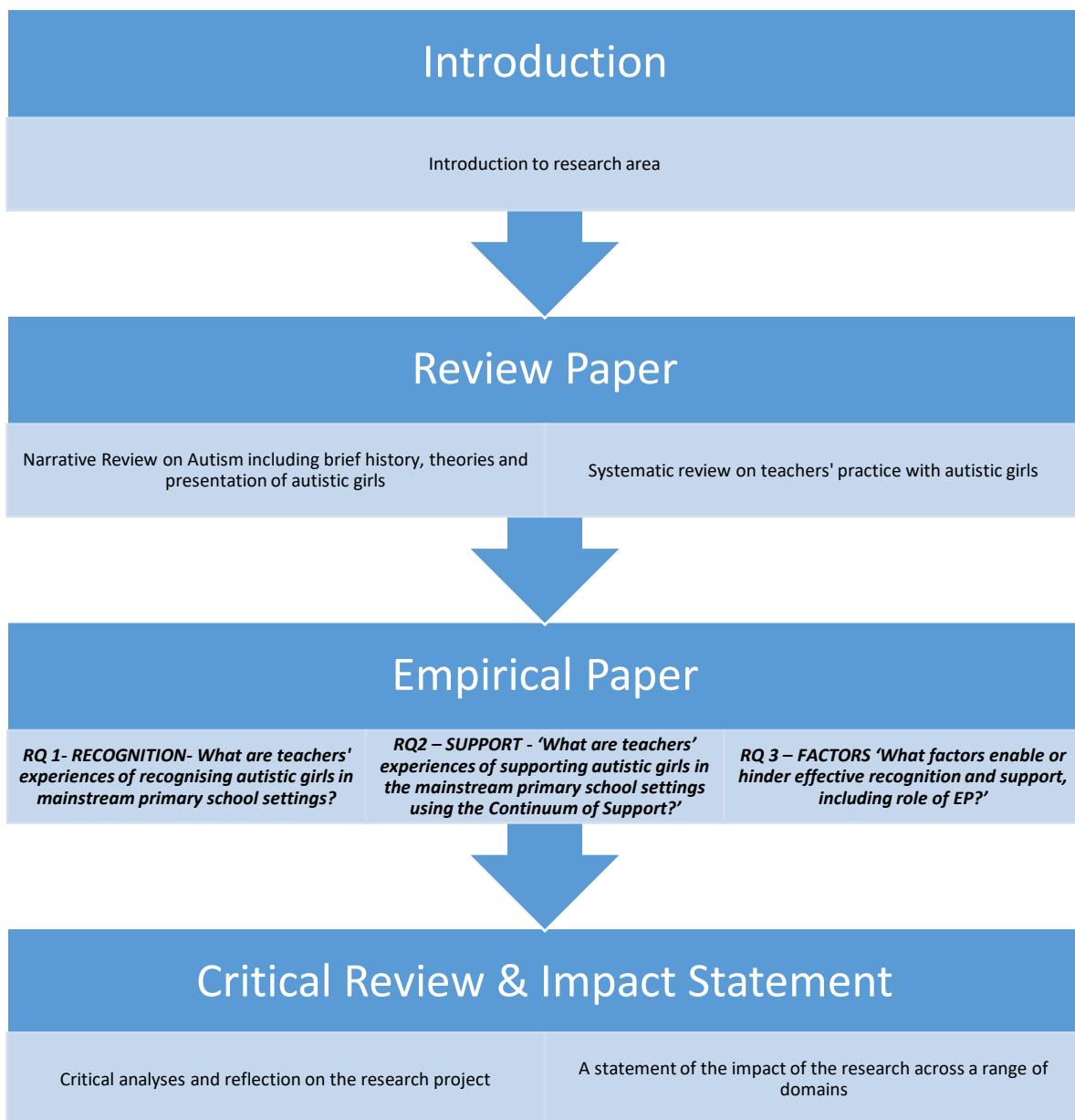
are influenced by individual and contextual variability. This framework supports the view that for autistic girls to thrive in mainstream education, their fundamental needs for safety, belonging and esteem must be actively addressed. Only then can they progress toward self-actualisation including the realisation of their personal and academic potential. Within the school environment, these needs are deeply connected to how well educators understand and respond to the diverse expressions of autism. Together these theoretical models offer a comprehensive, multidimensional framework for exploring teachers' experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls. By attending to both the systemic and interpersonal influences on development, and by prioritising inclusive practices that affirm identity and foster belonging, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how educational environments can empower autistic girls to flourish.

1.3.3. *Researcher positionality.* The researcher's positionality in this study is shaped by a unique combination of professional experience, academic background, and current training, all of which influence the approach to this research. The researcher has previously worked directly with autistic children as both a mainstream class teacher and special education teacher. Therefore, the researcher brings valuable first-hand insights into the practical challenges and complexities faced by educators in supporting neurodiverse students, aligning with research highlighting the importance of practitioner experience in shaping educational practices (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). The researcher developed an interest in the current research topic whilst engaging in reflective conversations with teachers and colleagues regarding

their challenges with recognising and supporting autistic girls in the mainstream classroom. From these experiences the researcher reflected that there was a gap in knowledge and understanding of autism among teachers, particularly about autistic girls. In addition, the researcher completed the Graduate Certificate in Autism Studies and Graduate Diploma in Autism Studies with the aim of addressing any gaps in the researcher's own knowledge and understanding of autism. From this educational experience, the researcher is informed by both theoretical frameworks and evidence-based practices, which allows for a critical examination of current educational policies and strategies (Pellicano et al., 2018). Furthermore, the researcher is now a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), who has worked with autistic girls in both educational and healthcare settings in this role and has seen first-hand the need for the current research. Through this lens, the researcher adopts a more holistic perspective that integrates psychological theory, educational practice, and a commitment to advocacy for neurodiverse students, recognising the importance of understanding both individual and systemic factors in educational settings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This evolving professional identity enables the researcher to engage with the topic deeply, drawing on personal experience while critically examining the existing structures and their impact on autistic girls in mainstream education. In light of these experiences, the researcher could be regarded as a 'partial insider researcher' (Chavez, 2008). However, the researcher remains conscious of potential biases that may arise from their background, striving to approach the study with reflexivity and critical reflection (Darlaston-Jones, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2018).

1.4 Overview of Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured in accordance with MIC guidelines and is presented into three main components: a Review Paper, an Empirical Paper, and a Critical Review and Impact Statement. The Review Paper presents a narrative review that examines the current literature on the presentation of autistic girls and a systematic review of the current research in relation to teacher's practices with autistic girls in primary schools. The Empirical Paper reports on the research conducted to address the study's research questions. Structured similarly to a traditional research article, it includes information on the methodology, a presentation of results, and a discussion of findings. The Critical Review and Impact Statement offer a reflective analysis of the research and explore its potential impact on academia and educational psychology practice. Reflective boxes, drawn from the researcher's diary are integrated throughout the thesis to offer an ongoing reflective narrative (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). A visual representation of the thesis structure is provided in Figure 3.

Figure 3.*Visual Map of Thesis Layout*

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This section provides a brief overview of the historical development of autism as a diagnosis, key theoretical frameworks used to understand it and the emergence of the neurodiversity paradigm. This background provides essential context which will then lead into a more focused review that will explore the research in relation to the female presentation of autism and the research conducted to date with educators in relation to autistic girls.

2.2 A Brief History of Autism

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviours (APA, 2022). While autism is now widely recognised and discussed in public and academic discourse, its conceptualisation has considerably evolved over time as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1.

Brief History of Autism

Brief History of Autism	
Bleuler, 1911	Swiss psychiatrist, Eugen Bleuler was the first to introduce the term 'autism' in 1911 in reference to symptoms observed in individuals with

	schizophrenia marked by withdrawal from reality and absorption in fantasy (Bleuler, 1911; Evans, 2013).
Sukhareva, 1926	Russian child psychiatrist Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva published an in-depth account of autistic traits observed in several children. She noted similarities between these children and adults with schizophrenia but highlighted a key difference: unlike adults with schizophrenia who tended to decline, the children often showed progress over time. Sukhareva referred to these observations as 'schizoid personality disorder' (Manouilenko & Bejerot, 2015).
Kanner, 1943	The conceptualisation of autism began when American psychiatrist, Leo Kanner published a paper entitled 'Autistic disturbances of affective contact' which described a group of children with "early infantile autism" characterised by social difficulties, language and aversive to change (Boucher, 2017). Kanner named the condition "autism" which was derived from the Greek word <i>autos</i> , meaning "self" because he believed these children preferred being alone and appeared most content in isolation. Kanner observed that these characteristics differed from those of childhood schizophrenia because the difficulties linked to autism were evident from birth. On the other hand, children with schizophrenia typically showed typical development initially (Kanner, 1943).
Asperger, 1944	A similar paper entitled 'Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood' was published a year later by Austrian medical student, Hans Asperger who described a similar presentation in boys with severe impairment in social

interaction, all-absorbing narrow interests, imposition of repetitive routines, good grammar and vocabulary but limited non-verbal communication (Boucher, 2017). Asperger described how these children spoke like ‘little adults’, which prompted him to refer to them as ‘little professors’ (Hartman et al., 2023). He also observed that these children demonstrated a notable lack of social connection and advanced skills in areas such as mathematics and science (Asperger, 1944). Asperger’s work was originally written in German, which meant it remained largely unnoticed in English-speaking countries for nearly 40 years until it was later translated which influenced Lorna Wing, in 1981, to propose Asperger’s as a distinct subgroup within the autism spectrum (Barahona-Corrêa & Filipe, 2016).

Rimland,
1964

In 1964, American psychologist Bernard Rimland, who was also the parent of an Autistic child, challenged the prevailing "refrigerator mother" theory by publishing *Infantile Autism: The Syndrome and Its Implications for a Neural Theory of Behaviour*. His work was pivotal in shifting perspectives away from blaming parents for autism and had a significant impact on how Autistic children were understood. While Rimland’s rejection of parental blame marked progress, his views were also controversial. He attributed autism to factors such as environmental toxins, antibiotics, and vaccines—though he did suggest a possible genetic predisposition (Kavanagh et al., 2025).

Wing and Gould, 1979	Wing and Gould conducted the first major epidemiological study on autism, revealing that it was more prevalent than previously believed (Wing & Gould, 1979). They introduced the ‘triad of impairments,’ which included challenges in social interaction, communication, and imagination—traits consistent with earlier findings by Kanner and Asperger. Additionally, Wing (1975) emphasised autism's heterogeneity by suggesting it exists on a spectrum, highlighting its varied presentation among individuals.
DSM-III (APA, 1980)	The formal inclusion of autism in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) began in 1980 (DSM-III), which later evolved over successive editions to broaden the definition. This initial definition was called ‘infantile autism’ and was categorised by four diagnostic criteria: i) Lack of responsiveness to others, ii) impaired language and communication skills, iii) bizarre responses to aspects of the environment and iv) early onset (prior to 30 months) (Boucher, 2017).
DSM-III-R (APA, 1987)	In a revised edition, the term 'infantile autism' was replaced with 'autistic disorder' (3rd ed., revised; APA, 1987), allowing for a more flexible diagnosis applicable to various ages and developmental stages (Siegel et al., 1988). Wings’ (1981) paper had influenced the direction of thought, and there was now a reduced emphasis on impaired language as it was no longer an essential requirement for diagnosis. Thus, now individuals with no concerns for language and learning but with social impairments and

	restricted interests could receive a diagnosis of ‘autistic disorder’ (Boucher, 2017).
ICD-10 (WHO, 1992)	The World Health Organisation (WHO) published the tenth edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) which broadly conceptualised autism a set of subtypes under Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs). Subtypes were named ‘Childhood Autism’, ‘Aspergers Syndrome’ and ‘Atypical autism’.
DSM-IV (APA, 1994)	DSM-IV moved from a single or unitary concept to a broader set of pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs) (Boucher, 2017). This included the following distinct subtypes: autistic disorder, Asperger disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), childhood disintegrative disorder and Rett syndrome (APA, 1994).
DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000)	A ‘Text-Revised’ edition updated the diagnostic criteria by adding in further detail in relation to behaviours that may support the identification of PDD-NOS or Asperger Disorder.
DSM-5 (APA, 2013)	This edition consolidated previously separate diagnoses (including Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder, and PDD-NOS) under a single umbrella term "Autism Spectrum Disorder". Rett Disorder and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder were also excluded from the diagnostic criteria, prompting a reconceptualisation of autism as a spectrum condition with differing levels of severity (APA, 2013; Lobar, 2016). Additionally, the diagnostic criteria were revised to focus on two core areas: i) persistent

deficits in social communication and interaction and ii) restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (APA, 2013). While this unified category reflects the heterogeneity of autistic experiences, it has also sparked debate, particularly regarding how diagnostic criteria may overlook gendered expressions of autism.

The above history clearly illustrates how autism was considered rare and largely male-specific for decades, which influenced early diagnostic tools and assumptions. All of Asperger's initial patients were boys, while Kanner's original group included eleven boys and three girls (Kanner, 1971). At the time, Asperger (1944) acknowledged the absence of girls in his cases, suggesting it might be coincidental or that autistic traits in females only become apparent after puberty, admitting, "We just do not know" (p. 85). He later recognised that girls could also exhibit similar behavioural patterns. The core features of autism identified by Kanner and Asperger in the 1940s remain significant today. While awareness of autism in females has increased substantially, it is clear that our understanding is still evolving, especially regarding how autism presents in females which emphasises the ongoing need for further research.

2.3 Theories of Autism

Numerous theories have been proposed as an explanation of autism, encompassing historical psychoanalytic perspectives, as well as behavioural, cognitive, biological, genetic and integrative theories. Table 2 explores various theories of autism, focusing specifically on how they enhance our understanding of autism in females. Further detail is provided in Appendix A outlining reflections on the researcher's interpretation of theories and their relevance to autistic girls along with implications for teachers.

Table 2.*Theories of Autism*

'Refrigerator Mother' theory (Mahler, 1952; Bettelheim, 1967)

Psychoanalysts and psychotherapists suggested that autism was a form of neurosis caused by impaired mother-child relationship or cold parenting which led to the stigmatising term 'refrigerator mother' (Boucher, 2017). This theory was later dismissed when studies discovered differences in brain structure and function of autistic individuals (Hutt et al., 1965; Rutter et al., 1967).

Central Coherence (Frith, 1989)

This theory describes how autistic individuals have difficulty seeing the "big picture"; and tend to focus on detail over global meaning (Frith, 1989). In a refinement of this theory, Happé and Frith (2006) note that this doesn't explain all features and is now seen as one element of cognitive style. This theory may help explain detailed-oriented cognitive styles in autistic girls.

Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen, 1990)

Theory of Mind (ToM), sometimes referred to as 'mind-reading' or 'mentalising', involves the capacity to understand, predict, and respond to other people's mental states, including their thoughts, emotions, beliefs, intentions, and perspectives (Milton, 2012; Martin et al., 2013; Boucher, 2017). According to this theory, autistic individuals struggle with Theory of Mind leading to difficulties in social interaction and communication (Baron-Cohen, 1990).

Nevertheless, Theory of Mind has faced significant criticism, as poor performance on false

belief tasks might stem from challenges with language comprehension or memory (Eisenmajer & Prior, 1991), or a reluctance to deceive others (DeGelder, 1987). Baron-Cohen (1989) later suggested these difficulties may reflect developmental delays rather than fixed deficits. Baron-Cohen et al. (1985) did not specify the gender breakdown of their sample, raising concerns about the generalisability of their findings across genders. Later research introduced a hierarchy of Theory of Mind skills, showing that autistic individuals can perform both first- and second-order reasoning tasks (Happé, 1994; Bowler, 1992). Further studies are needed to explore whether such delays also apply to autistic females.

Executive Functioning (Pennington & Ozonoff, 1996)

Executive functioning (EF) refers to a broad set of cognitive abilities, including planning, working memory, impulse control, flexibility, and attention regulation (Boucher, 2017). This theory suggests that autistic individuals face difficulties in the organisation and control of physical and mental activities. Studies have found varying patterns of EF impairments, suggesting significant individual differences (Hill, 2004a; Nyden et al., 1999; Ozonoff, 1997). Despite this variability, the theory is supported by more recent meta-analyses indicating that executive functioning challenges are common in autism (Demetriou et al., 2018; Lai et al., 2017). White et al. (2017) found that autistic females showed greater parent-reported difficulties in executive functioning (EF) and daily living skills than males, despite being matched on IQ, ADHD symptoms, and autism traits.

Extreme Male Brain (EMB) Theory (Baron-Cohen, 2002)

EMB theory suggests that higher levels of male-associated hormones, such as androgens, may contribute to autistic traits (Baron-Cohen, 2002). Traits like strong systemising skills and

difficulties with emotional expression are considered exaggerated forms of typical male characteristics. According to the EMB theory, lower androgen levels—more common in females—may offer protection against developing these traits (Baron-Cohen et al., 2011, 2015). Some studies link elevated androgen levels in females to increased autistic traits (Knickmeyer et al., 2006; Schwarz et al., 2011), but other research has found only a weak connection between early hormone levels and autism diagnosis (Guyatt et al., 2015).

Monotropism (Murray et al., 2005)

Monotropism, introduced by Murray et al. (2005), builds on the central coherence hypothesis and proposes that autistic individuals have a distinct cognitive and neurological processing style, particularly in how they focus and shift their attention and respond to sensory input (Murray, 2018; Murray et al., 2005). This theory helps explain the intense focus often seen in autism, suggesting that attention is more narrowly directed toward a limited number of interests.

Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012)

The Double Empathy Theory proposes that communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic individuals stem from a shared misunderstanding, rather than a deficit on one side (Milton, 2012). Research by Crompton et al. (2020) showed that autistic individuals communicated well with each other, indicating that these challenges are more prominent when people of different neurotypes interact. This highlights that both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals tend to communicate more effectively with others who share their neurotype.

Context Blindness Theory (Vermeulen, 2012)

This theory builds on elements of the Central Coherence Theory, focusing on the difficulties autistic individuals may face in using contextual information to interpret meaning. Instead of relying on broader context, they may rely more heavily on specific details when processing information (Vermeulen, 2015).

Social Motivation Theory (Chevallier et al., 2012)

The Social Motivation Theory suggests that autistic traits may stem from differences in how individuals experience social rewards, such as interest in or enjoyment of social interactions (Chevallier et al., 2012). However, this view may overgeneralise, as many autistic individuals express a strong desire for connection but have difficulty with the skills needed to engage socially (Milner et al., 2019). Furthermore, recent findings by Bagg et al. (2024) show that reduced social motivation in autism may be more closely linked to co-occurring anxiety, particularly in females. Their study found that social motivation was negatively associated with autistic traits, and this relationship was significantly influenced by anxiety levels. Interestingly, social cognition skills (like Theory of Mind and emotion recognition) did not explain this link. This suggests that anxiety, rather than a lack of social interest, may be a key factor influencing social motivation in autistic individuals, especially girls.

Female Protective Effect (Jacquemont et al., 2014; Robinson et al. 2013)

The Female Protective Effect theory suggests that females may require a higher genetic or environmental “load” to express autistic traits, which may explain why autism is less

frequently diagnosed in girls. Studies by Jacquemont et al. (2014) and Robinson et al. (2013) support this, showing that autistic girls carry more harmful mutations and their siblings show greater traits. Supporting studies show that autistic females often have more spontaneous, non-inherited genetic mutations than males (Gilman et al., 2011; Levy et al., 2011), implying a biological resilience. Additionally, it is proposed that the relatives of autistic females may carry a higher genetic load and display more autistic traits than relatives of autistic males. However, findings on this are inconsistent, with some studies showing the opposite (Ozonoff et al., 2011; Sandin et al., 2014), indicating that more research is needed to confirm this theory.

Integrative Theory/ Bayesian Brain (Niculae & Pavál, 2016)

The Integrative Theory of Autism proposes a multi-level model that connects genetic, molecular, neural, and behavioural aspects of autism into one unified explanation (Niculae & Pavál, 2016). It highlights how disruptions in retinoic acid (RA) and sex hormone signalling during development may alter brain connectivity, particularly between the cerebellum, ventral tegmental area (VTA), and prefrontal cortex which may lead to cognitive and social impairments. This theory is especially relevant for understanding autism in girls, as it accounts for sex-based differences in hormone sensitivity and genetic resilience. It offers a framework to explain why girls may present more subtly and be underdiagnosed.

2.4 Neurodiversity and Identity

The concept of neurodiversity was introduced by Judy Singer in the 1990s which frames autism as a naturally occurring variation in neurological development rather than a disorder (Singer, 1998). Singer's research was informed by her personal experiences as a woman on the autism spectrum, as well as her involvement in early online communities for autistic individuals (Singer, 1998). This perspective, known as the neurodiversity paradigm, argues that autism reflects a difference in brain functioning rather than a deficit (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Angulo-Jimenez & DeThorne, 2019). Advocates of neurodiversity seek to challenge conventional definitions of conditions like autism, ADHD and dyslexia, aiming to reduce stigma and promote acceptance. Central to this view is the belief that autism is an essential aspect of identity, deserving of recognition and support rather than correction or cure (Kapp et al., 2013; Leadbitter et al., 2021).

The neurodiversity paradigm has faced several critiques. Jaarsma and Welin (2012) argue that the concept often centres on "high functioning" autistic individuals, excluding those with higher support needs. Additionally, the movement has been criticised for its lack of racial inclusivity, as it is predominantly shaped by and reflective of white experiences. This can lead to negative consequences for people of colour, who may face systemic biases and unequal levels of recognition or acceptance. However, applying intersectionality theory which explores how systems of oppression based on race, gender, and other identities intersect can enrich the neurodiversity paradigm (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Intersectional approaches offer the potential for more inclusive, culturally sensitive supports and transformative change (Strand, 2017).

Despite these criticisms, the neurodiversity paradigm has contributed significantly to the evolving perspective on models of disability. Traditionally, autism has been viewed through the

medical model, which frames it as a disorder defined by deficits and impairments requiring correction or treatment (Hogan, 2019; APA, 2013). In contrast, the social model of disability shifts focus to societal barriers, arguing that individuals are disabled not by their impairments but by an environment that fails to accommodate their needs (Oliver, 1990). While this model marks a crucial shift, many neurodiversity advocates reject strict adherence to either the medical or social model. Instead, they propose an interactionist perspective, which sees disability as arising from a mismatch between an individual's characteristics and the expectations or structures of their environment (Kapp et al., 2013; Bailin, 2019). This middle-ground approach has been further developed in models like the social-ecological model (Chapman, 2021) and Scandinavian interactionist frameworks (Gustavsson, 2004; Tøssebro, 2004), all of which emphasise that both individual and systemic supports are needed to create meaningful change. Collaborative and strength-based approaches are becoming more widely adopted, however, continued progress is needed to ensure that support reflects the values, goals and lived experiences of autistic people and their communities. In the current study, this perspective will be relevant for reflecting on how teachers support autistic girls in the mainstream school environment.

2.5 Diagnostic Criteria and Gender Bias

Currently, professionals rely on two primary classification systems to assess and diagnose autism: the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th edition, text revision; DSM-5-TR; APA, 2022) and the *International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision* (ICD-11; WHO, 2022). Both systems define autism as a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by persistent deficits. A brief explanation of these two systems is outlined below in Table 3. The diagnostic criteria outlined in the DSM-5-TR and ICD-11 can be found in their entirety in Appendix B.

Table 3.*Current Diagnostic Classification Systems*

Current Diagnostic Classification Systems	
DSM-5 TR (APA, 2022)	<p>The DSM-5-TR (Text Revision) builds upon the DSM-5 by incorporating updated research findings and clarifying diagnostic criteria across various mental health conditions. The DSM-5-TR introduced clarifications to autism diagnostic criteria, particularly Criterion A in relation to social communication deficits (APA, 2022). To clarify diagnostic criteria, the language in DSM-5-TR now specifies that “all of the following” (three of three) must be present, correcting previous ambiguity (“as manifested by the following”) that suggested only one might be sufficient (First et al., 2022).</p> <p>According to the DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022), autism is diagnosed based on two core features: (i) "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, and (ii) "restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, interests, or activities" (APA, 2022, p. 56). These traits must appear in early development, significantly affect daily functioning, and not be better accounted for by intellectual developmental disorder. The DSM-5-TR also outlines three levels of severity, reflecting the individual's functional abilities and support requirements (APA, 2022).</p>
ICD-11 (WHO, 2022)	<p>The ICD-11 defines autism spectrum disorder as involving persistent difficulties in reciprocal social interaction and communication, alongside restricted and repetitive behaviours (WHO, 2022). Unlike the DSM-5, ICD-11 allows for a</p>

wide range of symptom combinations without specifying how many are required for diagnosis, making it more flexible but less precise. Kamp-Becker (2024) argues that this broader approach may increase the likelihood of false positives and diagnostic overlap with other conditions, leading to challenges in clinical practice and research.

ICD-11 criteria acknowledges that some autistic individual may appear to function well by exerting considerable effort to mask their difficulties throughout development. This ongoing compensation is noted to be more common among females and may negatively impact their mental health:

“Some individuals with autism spectrum disorder are capable of functioning adequately by making an exceptional effort to compensate for their symptoms during childhood, adolescence or adulthood. Such sustained effort, which may be more typical of affected females, can have a deleterious impact on mental health and well-being.” (WHO, 2022, code 6A02)

The guidelines also acknowledge that autism can overlap with other conditions such as intellectual disability or ADHD, which are sometimes the initial indicators of autism. While ICD-11 does not detail how these features specifically present in females, its recognition of such patterns is still a valuable step forward. However, critics argue that broad conceptualisations in diagnostic criteria, which emphasises subjective experiences and compensation, could blur the boundaries between autism and other disorders, particularly in individuals

with high cognitive functioning, such as late-diagnosed females (Kamp-Becker, 2024).

There is ongoing debate in the literature with regards to the applicability of the current diagnostic criteria for autistic girls. Munroe and Dunleavy (2023) suggest that a lack of clarity in how autistic girls meet current diagnostic criteria contributes to their continued under-identification. They argue that teachers often lack the knowledge to recognise autism in girls, particularly those with internalised or subtle presentations. Munroe and Dunleavy (2023) call for updates to diagnostic criteria, teacher professional learning and the inclusion of female-specific autism profiles in educational and clinical contexts to ensure early recognition and appropriate support. Similarly, Greaves-Lord et al. (2022) note that the criteria may not fully capture the subtle and internalised presentation of autism often described in females. For example, girls may meet social demands through camouflaging behaviours, which can mask core autistic traits and lead clinicians to overlook their difficulties. ICD-11's recognition that symptoms may not become evident until later developmental stages is critical for females, whose traits often emerge or intensify during adolescence. However, the lack of detailed gender-specific guidance within the diagnostic framework may still limit clinicians' ability to identify autism accurately in girls, especially those without co-occurring intellectual or behavioural difficulties (Greaves-Lord et al., 2022). In contrast to this, Cook et al. (2024) argue that the existing broad definitions in the DSM-5 can be appropriately applied to girls and women, as long as clinicians adopt a more flexible and nuanced approach in how these criteria are interpreted and operationalised during assessments. Namely Cook et al. (2024) recommend adapting the assessment process by

broadening the range of behavioural exemplars, avoiding over-reliance on standardised tools, considering camouflaging behaviours and utilising a multi-modal approach to the collection of information, as well as multidisciplinary case discussion. Overall, these insights highlight the ongoing need for more nuanced, gender-sensitive diagnostic approaches as well as pointing towards potential refinement of assessment tools that are sensitive to female presentations and the broader developmental context.

While the above frameworks provide a foundation for understanding autism more broadly, they have often failed to account for gendered expressions of autism. These systemic oversights have contributed to persistent gender disparities in diagnosis, delaying access to supports for many autistic girls. As such, it becomes crucial to explore how autism manifests differently in females and to examine the pivotal role of educators in recognising and supporting autistic girls. The following review will explore the literature on the presentation of autism in girls. This will then be followed by a systematic review on the research that has been carried out specifically with teachers to ascertain their role and understanding in this process.

Figure 4.

Reflective Box 1

Completing this review on the history and theories of autism stirred up a lot of mixed thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Truthfully, throughout this whole research process, I've found myself wrestling with an ongoing internal conflict. This inner struggle has sat quietly in the background, surfacing often during analysis and writing. On one hand, I am undeniably advocating for earlier identification and labelling. I want these autistic girls to be seen and supported, rather than slipping through the cracks only to end up in overwhelmed mental health services when it's too little, too late. In this sense, a diagnosis is invaluable and can act as a gateway to understanding, resources, and validation.

At the same time, I've also found myself resistant to an over-reliance on diagnostic labels. I value a needs-based approach that recognises the individual as a whole person rather than just a set of diagnostic criteria. The idea that support should hinge on whether someone "ticks enough boxes" doesn't sit right with me. Yet, I often hear stories both anecdotally and in the literature about the relief and clarity that can come with an autism diagnosis. For many, it brings a sense of identity, of feeling understood, and of self-compassion, which I know matters to and is part of the process.

Adding to the complexity, I've had moments of wondering: are we over-diagnosing? Are we pathologising what could simply be human variation, as different ways of being in the world shaped by context, trauma, and personality? The trauma-informed lens reminds me that behaviours often interpreted as autistic traits could just as easily be survival responses. Recent programmes like *Upfront* with Katie Hannon on RTÉ, which examined the rise in ADHD and autism diagnoses, helped me realise I am not alone in this debate. These reflections have left me unsure of where we're headed as a field and as a society.

So, I've sat in this confusion for much of the research process. And while I haven't come to a neat conclusion, I hold on to something that feels honest and respectful which is the importance of a case-by-case approach, built on thoughtful formulation and meaningful collaboration to truly understand what may be happening for an individual. Rather than asking, "Is this autism?", perhaps the better question is, "What's going on for this person, and how can we support them?" And while a diagnosis might be part of the answer, it should never be the whole story.

2.6 Review Aims

This literature review aims to explore the presentation and experiences of autistic girls and the role of the teacher in facilitating the recognition of autistic girls in primary schools. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects individuals across genders, yet it is often underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed in girls (Loomes et al., 2017). Understanding the factors that contribute to this phenomenon is crucial for early recognition and support. Recognising and supporting autistic girls in educational settings is crucial for their academic, social, and emotional well-being. The review analyses relevant studies and highlights

key research on the female phenotype of autism that can contribute to the accurate identification of autistic girls, such as knowledge about gender differences in autism and understanding the unique presentation of autism in girls.

2.7 Search Strategy 1

A search was conducted (on 25th April 2023) using the PsychINFO, PsychArticles and ERIC databases on the Ebsco platform, using the following search terms: "autis* girl*" OR "girl* with autis*" OR "autis* female*" OR "female phenotype" OR "subtle presentation of autis*" AND Teacher* OR "teaching staff" OR "learning support" OR educators or "primary school" or SENCOs or "special education teacher*" AND Identif* OR notic* OR diagnos* OR detect* OR understand* OR recogni* OR distinguish*. The initial search returned 22 results, once duplicates were removed 18 papers remained. Seven studies were then excluded as they were not relevant to current study and did not meet inclusion criteria. After screening all articles, 11 studies remained. Studies reached inclusion criteria if the subject focused on the presentation or experience of autistic girls or the role of educators in the recognition of or support of autistic girls in school. Studies were excluded if they were not a peer reviewed journal.

2.8 Female Phenotype of Autism

Key differences have been noted between autistic males and females in the literature. The female phenotype has been explored in three recent systematic reviews to collate a clear portrayal or presentation of autistic females (Lai et al., 2015; Van Wjingaarden-Kremers et al., 2014; Hull et al., 2017) This review will explore how these differences may be contributing to the diagnostic bias currently present. These will be examined in line with DSM-5 diagnostic

criteria of restrictive and repetitive behaviours and interests, social communication, as well as emotional and behavioural functioning.

2.8.1 Repetitive and Restricted Behaviour and Interests

Van Wijngaarden- Cremers et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review and meta-analyses which discovered that autistic girls exhibit less repetitive and restricted behaviours than males. Further studies in the area also came to the same conclusions (Hiller et al., 2014; May et al., 2014). Girls' interests are reported to be more subtle and less intense than boys, meaning they may be less disruptive to family life or classroom life and more difficult to detect (May et al., 2014). Hiller et al. (2015) discovered differences in functionality of restricted behaviours also. Boys were reported to engage in more non-functional restricted behaviours such as spinning wheels, while girls tended to have more 'socially acceptable' obsessional interests such as animals, people or popstars. Furthermore, teachers in this study had fewer behavioural concerns with girls than boys. This may be because girls have the ability to camouflage, meaning home and school presentations may vary drastically. Parents and teachers then may produce conflicting reports which leads to further complications and delays with identification and support (Hillard et al., 2015).

2.8.2 Social Communication

Autistic girls have been reported to be more competent socially, showing more interest in and awareness of social interactions than autistic boys (Attwood, 2007; Wang et al., 2017; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). Social skills were reported to be less of a concern for autistic girls by teachers also (Hiller et al., 2014). However, often autistic girls' strengths can overshadow

challenges whereby if they appear to have good expressive language ability then it is assumed that communication abilities in other areas are also functioning well (Clarke, 2021). This is not the case however, as research suggests autistic girls employ a skill known as ‘camouflaging’ which helps them cope with social situations by masking, observing and copying others (Attwood, 2007; Gould, 2017). ‘Camouflaging’ social communication difficulties is more common in autistic females than autistic males (Lai et al., 2017). For the purpose of this research the term camouflaging will be defined and used consistently throughout. Camouflaging is the process of changing or concealing one’s natural personality in order to “fit in”, or perhaps more specifically in order to be perceived as neurotypical (Silvertant, 2020). Autistic girls are more likely to hide their autistic traits, and instead they will imitate others, learn social scripts or techniques using their intellect to appear socially competent rather than instinctively or implicitly having social skills (Cook et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2017).

Often autistic girls are passive in their social presentation and are happier when flying under the radar or in their own company (Gould, 2017). Any difficulty or challenges that may arise with social communication for unidentified autistic girls are often labelled incorrectly as shyness or mental health (Holtmann et al., 2007). This mimicking and repression of their autistic behaviour often leads to mental and physical fatigue or burnout. Often autistic girls can camouflage at school and come home exhausted and emotionally distressed, meaning presentation varies greatly across contexts (Gould, 2017). Overall, it appears that girls present more subtly, which may be part of the problem of delayed identification. It is not surprising then that it is challenging for educators to recognise autistic girls in the classroom. Thus, teachers need to be aware of this phenomenon of ‘camouflaging’ and recognise that the social domain

may be the greatest area of need for autistic girls. This research aims to ascertain if there are gaps in knowledge in relation to this issue and find relevant solutions.

2.8.3 Emotional and behavioural functioning

Autistic girls are reported to have higher levels of internalising difficulties rather than externalising difficulties, which means these difficulties are not always apparent (Hull et al., 2017). Internalised difficulties experienced by autistic girls include low self-esteem, depression or anxiety (Mandy et al., 2012; May et al., 2014). Negative impacts of camouflaging include fatigue, burnout, anxiety, stress, depression and identity problems (Bargiela et al., 2016; Hull et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). Similarly, Baldwin and Costley (2016) found higher levels of co-occurring emotional difficulties, increasing their internalising problems. For the current research, it is important to consider how emotions or behaviours that are internalised can easily be missed in the classroom environment, whereas externalised behaviours and emotional outbursts usually receive rapid recognition and support. Autistic girls are more likely to experience depression and anxiety, in particular suicidal ideation and social anxiety (Rynkiewicz & Lucka, 2018; Hiller et al., 2014). Furthermore, there is also research suggesting that autistic girls are likely to develop eating disorders (Baren-Cohen et al., 2013; Westwood et al., 2017). Additionally, girls with autism are more likely to display passive demand avoidance, perfectionist tendencies and less hyperactivity than boys (Kopp & Gillberg, 2011; Hull et al., 2017). It is important for teachers to be aware of these subtle variations in presentation as they play a crucial role in the recognition of needs and support seeking process.

2.9 Review Question(s)

The Population Concept Context (PCC) framework was used to develop the review question (Peters et al., 2020). This framework is recommended for reviews as it aids researchers in defining inclusion and exclusion criteria, while also shaping the review question (Peters et al., 2020). In this review, the population were teachers, the concept was recognition and support strategies used and the context was mainstream education. By applying the PCC framework, the key review question became: *'What is known about teachers' experiences with autistic girls in mainstream education?'*

2.10 Systematic Review

A systematic review is a type of knowledge synthesis that addresses a specific research question (RQ) by rigorously identifying, selecting, and critically appraising relevant research on a given topic (Higgins et al., 2019). The aim of a systematic review is to provide a comprehensive summary of the available evidence, ensuring that the review is replicable and transparent (Boland et al., 2017). A systematic review was conducted to examine what is already known about autistic girls' experiences in mainstream schools, focusing on synthesising qualitative studies on this topic. Systematic reviews are particularly valuable when a precise question requires high-quality evidence to inform practice or policy decisions and when attempting to minimise bias in the selection of studies (Moher et al., 2009).

The goal of the current systematic review is to examine teachers' experiences with and understanding of autistic girls in mainstream education and identify factors that influence their educational outcomes. Specific research questions posed are:

1. What research has been conducted to ascertain teachers' understanding of autistic girls?
2. How do teachers' perceptions and practices impact the school experiences of autistic girls?
3. What support systems and teaching strategies are effective in enhancing autistic girls' engagement and success in mainstream classrooms?

2.10.1 Search Strategy 2.

An initial literature search was conducted on the 29th of January 2024, whilst a later search was conducted on the 29th of October 2024 to ensure that the systematic review included recent articles and to ensure as many relevant records as possible were identified. The following electronic databases were searched: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, British Education Index, Education Source and ERIC (EBSCO). Databases were chosen as they are relevant to the current topic and publish studies in the fields of psychology and education. The search strategy included terms pertaining to autistic girls, teachers and mainstream education to systematically identify potential literature (see Table 4). The initial search yielded 52 studies (PsycINFO: 17, PsycARTICLES: 1, British Education Index: 8, ERIC: 12, Education Source: 14). Following removal of duplicates, the electronic search resulted in 31 studies. Filters were applied using database tools to align the results of the search with inclusion criteria. The studies were filtered to limit the search to peer reviewed journals (N=24), studies published in the last 10 years (N=19), written in English language (N=18) and participants of school age (5-18 years) (N=10). One additional record was identified through lateral search techniques such as hand searching the references of papers for related articles and using Google Scholar to carry out key word searches.

Table 4.*Search Strategy*

Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
(teacher OR educator OR "school staff" OR "teacher*")	(aut* AND girl OR female OR wom*)	(mainstream school OR mainstream education OR primary school* OR post-primary school OR secondary school* OR general education OR inclusive education)

**search strings were connected by the Boolean operator "AND"*

** was used to denote all variations of that word*

2.10.2 Search Results.

A PRISMA flow diagram was used to depict the literature search process and selection procedure for this review (Figure 5). Search terms selected included both ‘autism’ and various terms related to ‘girls’ and ‘educators’ to capture studies that specifically focused on autistic girls’ experiences in educational settings. This approach aligns with the focus of the review on understanding the unique educational, social, and support needs of autistic girls in the mainstream school setting, as well as the perspectives of educators involved in their schooling. The inclusion and exclusion criteria used in the literature search are detailed in Table 5. There is limited research in this area, and after applying these criteria, six studies were selected for the current review; two quantitative, three qualitative and one mixed-methods, as outlined in Table 6. An overview of the six selected studies is detailed in Appendix C.

Table 5. Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
1. Type of Publication	Peer-reviewed journal	Material in a non-peer reviewed journal	To ensure high methodological rigour
2. Language	Article written in English	Article is not written in English	To enable the reviewer to read the information
3. Eligible study designs	Empirical study that involved the collection and analysis of primary data such a qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods designs.	The study does not contain primary empirical data	Allows the reviewer to examine the outcomes of primary data collected
4. Focus (Phenomenon of Interest)	Research that focuses on autistic girls' experiences or teacher understanding of autistic girls	Research is not specifically focusing on teachers and autistic girls	Area of interest for this review is autistic girls, who may present differently and are often under-identified
5. Setting/ context	Mainstream education settings (primary and post-primary schools).	Special education settings, clinical settings, or homeschooling contexts.	The context of mainstream education is essential for understanding teachers' perspectives in these environments and more likely

for autistic girls to go undetected.

6. Participants	Children, young people and young adults, students, teachers/educators (general or special education) in mainstream primary and post-primary (secondary) schools.	Anyone other than students or educators Or Teachers in special education schools or other non-mainstream educational settings (e.g., special classes).	To focus on the perspectives of teachers in mainstream educational settings. The EPSEN Act (2004) provides for the education of children aged under 18 years with special educational needs. However, some of the final studies were conducted at third level colleges and included older participants. These studies were included in this review if relevant to understanding the autistic girls experience of mainstream school.
7. Year of dissemination	Studies published in the last 10 years	Studies not published within the last 10 years	Ensures research is current and up to date, reflecting current educational practices and perspectives

Figure 5.

PRISMA Flow Chart of Study Selection Process

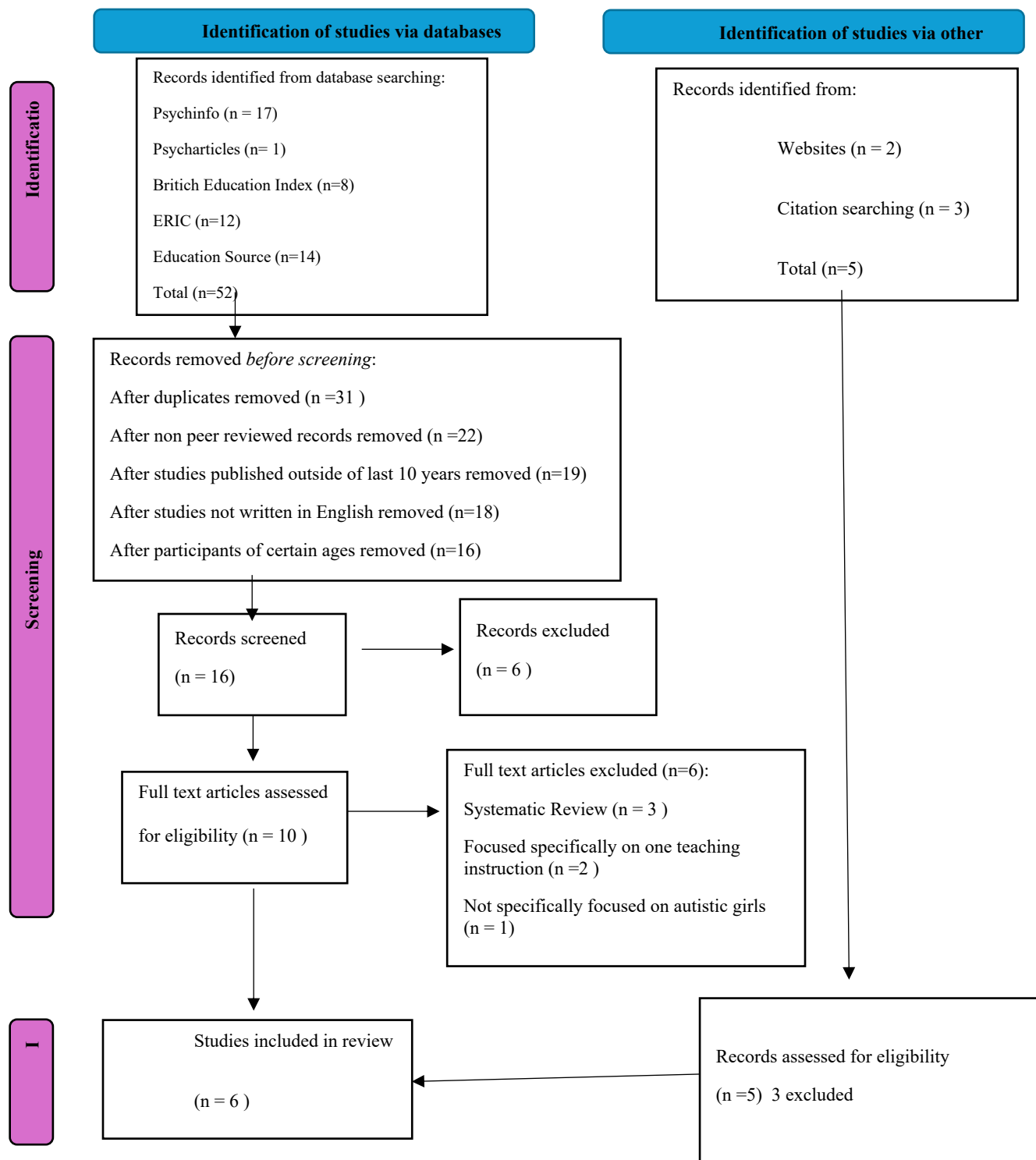


Table 6.

Studies selected for inclusion in the literature review

Included Studies
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Corscadden, P., & Casserly, A. M. (2021). Identification of autism in girls: Role of trait subtleties, social acceptance and masking. <i>REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland</i>, 34(1), 3-14. <li>2. Gray, L., Bownas, E., Hicks, L., Hutcheson-Galbraith, E., & Harrison, S. (2021). Towards a better understanding of girls on the autism spectrum: Educational support and parental perspectives. <i>Educational Psychology in Practice</i>, 37(1), 74-93. <li>3. Halsall, J., Clarke, C., & Crane, L. (2021). “Camouflaging” by adolescent autistic girls who attend both mainstream and specialist resource classes: Perspectives of girls, their mothers and their educators. <i>Autism</i>, 25(7), 2074-2086. <li>4. Jarman, B., & Rayner, C. (2015). Asperger's and girls: What teachers need to know. <i>Australasian Journal of Special Education</i>, 39(2), 128-142. <li>5. Ward, T. B., Curtis, C., & Seehagen, S. (2022). Investigating the effects of perceived student gender on primary school teachers' recognition of autism. <i>Psychology in the Schools</i>, 59(7), 1363-1376. <li>6. Whitlock, A., Fulton, K., Lai, M. C., Pellicano, E., & Mandy, W. (2020). Recognition of girls on the autism spectrum by primary school educators: An experimental study. <i>Autism Research</i>, 13(8), 1358-1372.

2.10.3 Critical Analysis Framework

Gough's Weight of Evidence (WoE) framework was chosen to critically appraise the six selected studies for review (Gough, 2007). An overview of the selected studies can be found in Appendix C. Study quality was analysed according to three different categories: (i) assessing the methodological quality of studies (WoE A), (ii) evaluating the methodological relevance of the studies in relation to the review's specific research question (WoE B), and (iii) topic relevance to the research question of the current review (WoE C). (Gough, 2007). An overall weighting score (WoE D) was then determined by averaging the three scores (WoE A, B, C) to establish the weight of evidence each study contributes to the review (Gough, 2007). This structured approach ensures a transparent and systematic evaluation of studies based on their quality, relevance, and contribution to the review question (Gough, 2007).

2.10.3.1 Weight of Evidence A: Methodological quality

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018) was utilised to assess the methodological quality of each study as a wide variety of research designs were employed in the selected studies. The MMAT is designed for use in mixed studies reviews and is suitable for use with qualitative research, randomised controlled trials, non-randomised studies, quantitative descriptive studies and mixed methods studies. The five quality criteria applied to studies using the MMAT vary according to study design. Using the MMAT, the methodological quality of each study was assessed based on its design. The MMAT (Hong et al., 2018) indicated that three of the selected studies should be assessed using the qualitative methodological quality criteria,

one should be assessed using the mixed-methods criteria and the remaining two studies should be assessed in accordance with the quantitative descriptive methodological quality criteria.

Qualitative studies were evaluated for appropriateness in answering the research question, data collection adequacy, derivation of findings, substantiation of interpretation, and coherence across data sources (Hong et al., 2018). Quantitative descriptive studies were evaluated on sampling strategy, representativeness, measurement appropriateness, non-response bias, and adequacy of statistical analysis (Hong et al., 2018). While mixed methods studies were assessed for rationale, integration of components, interpretation of integrated data, handling of inconsistencies, and adherence to quality criteria. Outcomes for each criterion are defined as ‘yes’ meets criteria, ‘no’ does not meet criteria, or ‘can't tell’ where appropriate information was not reported (Hong et al., 2018). The presence or absence of methodological criterion, guided by the coding protocol in Table 7, were identified and scored (Yes = 1, No = 0). Subsequently, a quality score was calculated as a percentage [(No. of ‘Yes’ responses divided by the five relevant criteria) × 100] and converted into WoE Quality Rating Scores and WoE Descriptive Quality Ratings (Table 7). This WoE A analysis, based on MMAT, highlights the methodological strengths and limitations of each study, providing a clear basis for assessing their contributions to understanding educators understandings and perspectives on autistic girls. Further information on quality assessment can be found in Appendix D.

Table 7.

Overview of WoE A Methodological Quality Criteria adapted from Hong et al.'s Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (2018)

	Corscad den & Casserly (2021)	Gray et al. (2021)	Halsall et al. (2021)	Jarman & Rayner (2015)	Ward et al. (2022)	Whitlock et al. (2020)
<i>Quantitative descriptive studies</i>						
1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?	X	Yes	X	X	Yes	Yes
2. Is the sample representative of the target population?	X	Yes	X	X	Yes	Yes
3. Are the measurements appropriate?	X	Yes	X	X	Yes	Yes
4. Is the risk of non-response bias low?	X	Yes	X	X	No	No
5. Are the statistical analyses appropriate to answer the research question?	X	Yes	X	X	Yes	Yes

Qualitative studies

1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	X	X
2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	X	X
3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	X	X
4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	X	X
5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	X	X
WoE Quality Score as a Percentage (% of 'Yes' Responses)	100%	100%	100%	60%	80%	80%
WoE A Quality Rating Score	3	3	3	2	3	3
WoE A Descriptive Quality Rating	High	High	High	Medium	High	High

2.10.3.2 Weight of Evidence B: Methodological Relevance

The WoE B evaluates the appropriateness of each study's design relevant to the review question. Gough (2007) stated that WoE B is a review-specific judgement which helps determine the suitability of research methodologies. The Muir Gray Matrix (1996) was utilised to critically analyse the methodological relevance of each study within this review. Petticrew and Roberts (2003) suggest that this matrix-based approach highlights the importance of aligning the research question with the research design. Furthermore, using typologies rather than a strict “hierarchy of evidence” may aid our understanding of the strengths and limitations of different methodological approaches, enhancing the organisation and appraisal process.

As the current review sought to investigate teachers’ perspectives on autistic girls, particularly regarding issues such as recognition, support needs, and camouflaging behaviours, the research question falls into the category of contextual and descriptive research. This focus examines how educators’ awareness, biases, and practices impact the school experiences of autistic girls. According to Petticrew and Roberts (2003), both qualitative studies and survey research designs are suitable for this type of question, as they provide insights into complex social interactions and capture diverse perspectives. Survey studies allow data collection from a larger sample size, facilitating generalisable findings on teachers’ attitudes and practices (Mertens, 2015). Meanwhile, qualitative interviews enable a deeper exploration of individual educators’ experiences and perceptions (Barker et al., 2015). Given that the research designs used in each of the selected studies were appropriate to address these aspects, emphasis was placed on the nature and quality of the survey or interview methods used, as well as how well they captured relevant factors about information pertinent to educators and autistic girls. Studies

were assigned a score of 1 (low), 2 (medium), or 3 (high) based on their methodological relevance as outlined in Table 8. Studies that received a high rating used strong and relevant designs (e.g., mixed methods, qualitative or quantitative descriptive) and effectively addressed the review's research question. Studies that received a medium rating used relevant designs, but some limitations were evident (e.g., small sample size, limited depth of integration). No studies in the current review received a low rating as all had methodologies that aligned well with the research question. For further information on the scoring criteria and rationale, please see Appendix E.

Table 8.

WoE B	WoE B	Study	Rationale
Rating	Descriptive		
Score	Quality		
	Rating		
2	Medium	Corscadden & Casserly (2021)	Qualitative design but limited sample size, affecting generalisability.
3	High	Gray et al. (2021)	Mixed methods design was used to integrate qualitative and quantitative perspectives effectively.
3	High	Halsall et al. (2021)	Qualitative design captured multiple perspectives (girls, mothers, educators) with strong relevance.
2	Medium	Jarman & Rayner (2015)	Survey design to ascertain what parents and autistic girls wish teachers knew in relation to recognition and support.
3	High	Ward et al. (2022)	Quantitative descriptive design effectively addressed gender biases in autism recognition.
3	High	Whitlock et al. (2020)	Quantitative descriptive design focused on educator perspectives with a well-representative sample.

Overall WoE B: Methodological Relevance Scores

2.10.3.3 Weight of Evidence C: Relevance of Evidence

The WoE C is also review specific, measuring the degree to which the evidence provided in the selected studies and their findings are relevant to answering the current systematic review question (Gough, 2007). As the present review aimed to explore what is known about teachers' understanding and perspectives on autistic girls in educational settings, the following criteria were devised by the reviewer in the WoE C: focus on teacher understanding/perspective, recognition/support of autistic girls, school setting relevance and appropriate measures for capturing insights on autism and gender bias. Table 9 below outlines WoE C criteria and scoring. These criteria were created in line with the stipulated inclusion and exclusion criteria. The relevance of evidence was rated on a scale of 1 (low), 2 (medium), or 3 (high), depending on the study's focus on teachers or educators and the depth of exploration of issues pertinent to autistic girls' in mainstream school contexts. For further information on the scoring criteria and rationale, please see Appendix F.

Table 9.

WoE C: Overall relevance of evidence rating scores and descriptive quality ratings.

	Corscadden & Casserly (2021)	Gray et al. (2021)	Halsall et al. (2021)	Jarman & Rayner (2015)	Ward et al. (2022)	Whitlock et al. (2020)
Population (Focus on Teachers)	2	3	3	1	3	3
Phenomenon of Interest (Recognition/Support of autistic girls)	2	3	2	2	3	3
School setting relevance	2	3	3	2	3	3
Appropriate measure	2	3	3	3	3	3
Total	8	12	11	8	12	12
Total WoE C rating score (mean score of criteria)	2	3	2.75	2	3	3
Total WoE C descriptive quality rating	Medium	High	High	Medium	High	High

2.10.3.4 Weight of Evidence D: Overall Weighting

A WoE D score is calculated in order to ascertain an overall weighting score for each study which allows for analysis of the degree to which the study provides relevant evidence addressing the review question (Gough, 2007). The average ratings of Methodological Quality (WoE A), Methodological Relevance (WoE B) and Relevance of Evidence (WoE C) for each study are combined and averaged in order to achieve an overall score reflecting the studies' overall weight of evidence. For further information of WoE D Overall Weighting Scores please see Table 10.

Table 10.

WoE D: Summary of all WoE rating scores and descriptive quality ratings

Study	WoE A (Methodological Quality)	WoE B (Methodological Relevance)	WoE C (Relevance to Review Question)	WoE D (Overall Weighting)
Corscadden & Casserly (2021): Identification of autism in girls: Role of trait subtleties, social acceptance and masking	High (3)	Medium (2)	Medium (2)	Medium (2.33)
Gray et al. (2021): Towards a better understanding of girls on the autism spectrum:	High (3)	High (3)	High (3)	High (3.00)

Study	WoE A (Methodological Quality)	WoE B (Methodological Relevance)	WoE C (Relevance to Review Question)	WoE D (Overall Weighting)
Educational support and parental perspectives				
Halsall et al (2021): “Camouflaging” by adolescent autistic girls: Perspectives of girls, mothers, and educators	High (3)	High (3)	High (2.75)	High (2.91)
Jarman & Rayner (2015): Asperger's and girls: What teachers need to know	Medium (2)	Medium (2)	Medium (2)	Medium (2.00)
Ward et al. (2022): Effects of perceived student gender on teachers' recognition of autism	High (3)	High (3)	High (3)	High (3.00)
Whitlock et al. (2020): Recognition of girls on the autism spectrum by primary school educators	High (3)	High (3)	High (3)	High (3.00)

**Scores of 2.5 and over are allocated a 'high' descriptive quality rating, whilst scores of 1.5 – 2.4 are considered 'medium' and between 1 – 1.4 are assigned a 'low' descriptive quality rating*

2.11 Synthesis of Findings

2.11.1 Overview of included studies

A total of six studies were included in this systematic review, selected after a thorough screening process based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Boland et al., 2017). Details of the included studies are provided in Appendix C. The studies explored various aspects of teachers' perspectives on autistic girls, focusing on themes such as teacher understanding, identification and support of autistic girls, and gender-specific considerations in educational settings. Of the six studies, two employed qualitative interviews (e.g., Halsall et al., 2021; Corscadden & Casserly, 2021;), one used qualitative surveys (Jarman & Rayner, 2015), one used mixed-methods of a questionnaire for teachers and group interview for parents (Gray et al., 2021) and two utilised quantitative descriptive designs (Ward et al., 2022; Whitlock et al., 2020). The majority of the studies ($n = 5$) had a specific focus on teacher understanding or perspectives, while others provided broader insights involving parents' and students' beliefs and opinions on what teachers should be aware of in relation to autistic girls (Jarman & Rayner, 2015). All studies demonstrated strong alignment with the review question, particularly in addressing the challenges and opportunities for educators in supporting autistic girls in mainstream school settings. Although the overall quality of the included studies was robust, several methodological limitations were identified, such as small sample sizes in qualitative studies and potential biases in survey designs. Limitations will be discussed further in the synthesis of findings and implications for future research.

2.11.1.1 Participants

Teachers and educators formed the primary participant group across all six studies included in this systematic review. In total, 601 teachers were included across the studies. Sample sizes of teacher participants ranged from $N = 4$ (Corcadden & Casserly, 2021) to $N = 289$ (Whitlock et al., 2020), reflecting considerable variation in study scope and scale. While teachers were the central focus, some studies also included additional participant groups such as autistic girls, parents, and caregivers. The diversity in participant types and sample sizes influenced the studies' ratings for Weight of Evidence B (appropriateness of design) and C (relevance to the review question), particularly where non-teacher perspectives were included to supplement or triangulate findings.

Autistic girls were directly involved in studies such as Halsall et al. (2021), while other studies explored teacher perspectives on recognising or supporting autistic girls solely. Studies with larger and more representative samples were afforded higher WoE B scores due to the enhanced potential generalisability of their findings. For example, Whitlock et al. (2020) and Ward et al. (2022) included 120 and 89 participants, respectively, predominantly educators, which allowed for a broader understanding of teacher perspectives on autism and gender bias. The large sample sizes in these studies supported higher WoE B ratings, as they increased the reliability and representativeness of the findings. In contrast, Corcadden & Casserly (2021) and Halsall et al. (2021) included smaller samples of educators ($N = 4$ and $N = 6$, respectively), which, while enabling detailed qualitative exploration, limited generalisability and negatively impacted their WoE B scores.

The diversity of participant roles and relevance to the research focus also influenced WoE C ratings. For example, Gray et al. (2021) specifically targeted SENCos (Special

Educational Needs Coordinators) across Early Years, Primary, and Secondary settings, ensuring their data was highly relevant to the review's aim of understanding educational practices for autistic girls. Similarly, Halsall et al. (2021) included teachers and educators with direct experience of working with autistic girls, enhancing their WoE C ratings due to the alignment of participants with the review's research question. In contrast, studies such as Corscadden & Casserly (2021), which involved a limited sample of educators with narrower focus areas, were afforded lower WoE C ratings.

Participant recruitment methods further influenced WoE B and WoE C scores. Studies employing systematic or stratified sampling, such as Ward et al. (2022), scored higher for WoE B due to the reduction in sampling bias and improved representativeness. However, convenience sampling methods, as used in Gray et al. (2021) and Corscadden & Casserly (2021), impacted generalisability and subsequently lowered WoE B ratings. Participants' ages were not uniformly reported across all studies, though those that involved autistic girls focused on school-aged children and adolescents, while teacher participants represented a range of career stages and professional experience. Studies like Whitlock et al. (2020), which integrated demographic data to contextualise findings, were rated higher in WoE C for their ability to provide insights into the perspectives of teachers across different contexts and roles. This balance of strengths and limitations was reflected in the assignment of WoE scores.

2.11.1.2 Location

The six studies included in this systematic review varied in location, which influenced the generalisability and cultural applicability of the findings. Three studies were conducted in the United Kingdom (Gray et al., 2021; Halsall et al., 2021; Whitlock et al., 2020), a context similar

to many Western education systems, which contributed positively to their WoE C scores due to the relevance of the findings to educational practices in similar cultural settings. Another study, Corscadden & Casserly (2021), was conducted in Ireland, directly aligning with the context of the review and therefore achieving the highest WoE C score for location, as the findings were deemed to be highly applicable to Irish schools.

Jarman & Rayner (2020) and Ward et al. (2022) were conducted in Australia and New Zealand, respectively. Even though these countries are situated in the Eastern Hemisphere, they are considered Western countries due to their historical ties to the British Commonwealth, shared English-speaking traditions, and educational systems influenced by European standards that prioritise inclusivity and standardised curricula (Thrupp & White, 2013). Although some cultural differences may exist, the focus on teacher perspectives and the use of internationally recognised diagnostic criteria, such as the DSM-5, enhanced the applicability of these studies to other Western contexts. However, minor cultural nuances and differences in teacher professional learning systems may slightly limit the direct transferability of the findings, impacting their WoE C ratings slightly.

The variability in educational systems and cultural norms within these geographical contexts is an important consideration. Studies conducted in Western settings, such as the UK, Ireland, and New Zealand, were afforded higher WoE C scores due to their similarities to the review's target context. This alignment enhances the likelihood that the findings will be relevant and transferable to mainstream educational practices in comparable cultural settings. Conversely, none of the studies were conducted in non-Western or substantially different cultural contexts, which may limit the diversity of perspectives included in this review.

In terms of settings, all six studies focused on school-based contexts, enhancing their relevance to educational psychology and contributing positively to WoE C scores. Studies like Gray et al. (2021) and Halsall et al. (2021) explored Early Years, Primary, and Secondary educational settings, providing insights across a broad spectrum of school environments. These choices in location and setting further support the applicability of the findings to educational practices aimed at supporting autistic girls in mainstream schools. Overall, the alignment of study locations with Western educational systems contributed positively to the generalisability and relevance of the findings within this review.

2.11.1.3 Study Design and Methodology

The six studies included in this systematic review were critically assessed in terms of their design, sampling techniques, and methodological rigour. Studies with clearly articulated methodologies achieved higher ratings across WoE A and WoE B (Gough 2007). This review focused on studies exploring teachers' perspectives and practices in supporting autistic girls in mainstream educational settings. The six studies included in this systematic review utilised a range of methodologies, reflecting the diversity of research approaches required to explore the topic.

Three studies employed qualitative methodologies (Corcadden & Casserly, 2021; Halsall et al., 2021; Jarman & Rayner, 2015), and one used a mixed-methods design (Gray et al., 2021). Qualitative studies, such as those by Halsall et al. (2021) and Corcadden & Casserly (2021), conducted semi-structured interviews and utilised thematic analysis to explore teachers' experiences and understanding of autistic girls. These studies provided rich contextual data, particularly on complex phenomena like camouflaging behaviours. The focus of these studies

were slightly different as Corscadden & Casserly tended to focus on trait subtleties, social acceptance, and masking in primary and secondary mainstream schools while Halsall et al. (2021) focused on camouflaging by adolescent autistic girls in post-primary settings. The use of individual interviews in these studies enhanced the depth and authenticity of the data collected. Guest et al. (2017) posits that individual interviews are more effective than focus groups and serve to enhance authenticity and quality of data collection. Triangulation was carried out in both qualitative research studies thus ensuring comprehensive data collection and increased validity (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). However, their small sample sizes of educators (N = 4, N = 6) may limit the generalisability of findings.

Two studies relied on open-ended surveys or online questionnaires to capture insights from educators, and in some cases, autistic girls themselves (e.g., Jarman & Rayner, 2015; Gray et al., 2021). One study (Gray et al., 2021) employed a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of teacher and parent perspectives. Gray et al. (2021) administered questionnaires to SENCO's to investigate their understanding of autistic girls using a variety of approaches. Qualitative methodologies offered nuanced perspectives and in-depth insights into educators' attitudes, knowledge, and practices, while the mixed-methods approach enhanced the comprehensiveness of findings by triangulating qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study adhered well to MMAT criteria for mixed methods by clearly articulating its rationale for combining methods, integrating data effectively, and addressing inconsistencies between qualitative and quantitative findings. Consequently, this study received higher WoE A ratings for its methodological rigor and alignment with the research question. However, it is important to consider potential

limitations such as interviewer bias, response authenticity, and reliance on self-reported data (Mertens, 2015).

The remaining two studies (Ward et al., 2022; Whitlock et al., 2020) utilised quantitative descriptive methodologies, employing structured cross-sectional survey designs to measure educators' perceptions and biases in recognising autism in girls. Both Ward et al. (2022) and Whitlock et al. (2020) included a large and diverse sample of educators, increasing the generalisability of findings compared to the smaller, in-depth qualitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Cross-sectional surveys are effective for capturing data from large samples within a relatively short time frame and can highlight associations and trends in attitudes and practices (Levin, 2006). However, criticism of cross-sectional survey designs is well-documented in the methodological literature as these designs are limited in their ability to infer causation or explore changes over time (Setia, 2016; Spector, 2019). However, these studies were still deemed appropriate for the review as the research question aimed to explore teacher perspectives and recognition of autism traits at a specific point in time, rather than examine causal pathways. While these designs allowed for efficient data collection from large samples, limitations such as potential non-response biases were not consistently addressed, impacting their WoE A ratings.

The diversity in study design reflects the complexity of the research question, with qualitative studies providing rich, contextualised data, while quantitative and mixed-methods designs allowed for broader generalisability and triangulation of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This variety enhances the robustness of the evidence base, though methodological limitations such as small sample sizes in some qualitative studies or potential response biases in

survey-based research should be considered when interpreting the findings (Mertens, 2015). Overall, the methodological diversity of the selected studies contributes to a comprehensive understanding of teacher perspectives on supporting autistic girls in education.

2.11.1.4 Measures

The measures used across the six studies included in this systematic review varied in their focus and comprehensiveness, directly influencing their WoE ratings. Studies that employed validated and reliable measures to assess multiple relevant constructs, such as teacher perspectives, gender biases, and autism-specific traits, were afforded higher WoE scores due to their methodological rigor and relevance to the review question. For instance, Whitlock et al. (2020) and Ward et al. (2022) utilised carefully developed vignettes to measure teachers' abilities to identify autism traits in children of different genders. These vignettes were designed to reflect DSM-5 diagnostic criteria and were rigorously tested for consistency and neutrality, enhancing their credibility. Both studies also included Likert scales to measure teachers' levels of concern and confidence in their identification choices, providing a nuanced understanding of educator decision-making.

Gray et al. (2021) developed a bespoke questionnaire informed by the National Autistic Society's training on autism in girls. The questionnaire captured various aspects of teacher knowledge and practices through a combination of binary tick boxes, rating scales, and open-ended questions, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of teacher perspectives (Rattray & Jones, 2007). However, while the measure was tailored to the research context, its lack of standardisation and prior validation impacted its reliability and generalisability, slightly lowering

its WoE A rating. Further limitations include self-reported data in survey-based studies and potential participant dropout in online methods.

In the qualitative studies, data collection methods were designed to elicit in-depth insights into teachers' experiences and perceptions. For example, Halsall et al. (2021) developed interview questions informed by existing literature on camouflaging behaviours in autistic girls (Cook et al., 2017; Moyse & Porter, 2015). The interviews were structured into four sections: (1) girls' involvement in class-based learning and camouflaging skills, (2) relationships and camouflaging, (3) experiences across different contexts (e.g., mainstream classes, resource base classes, home), and (4) the positive and negative impacts of camouflaging. Prompts were used to deepen discussions, ensuring the collection of rich, detailed data. Reflexive thematic analysis was then used to identify key patterns and themes in the data, contributing to a nuanced understanding of educators' roles in recognising and addressing camouflaging behaviours. Similarly, Corscadden & Casserly (2021) employed semi-structured interviews to explore educators' understanding of subtle traits in autistic girls. While semi-structured interviews are a valuable method for eliciting detailed and context-specific data, the lack of transparency in how the interview schedule was developed represents a significant limitation. The study does not provide details on the theoretical or empirical basis for the design of the interview questions, nor does it clarify whether the questions were informed by existing literature, frameworks, or evidence-based guidelines relevant to autism or education. Although the study mentions that pilot interviews were conducted, there is no further discussion of whether or how the pilot feedback was incorporated into refining the interview schedule. Additionally, there is no indication of whether the interview questions were adapted for different participant groups (e.g., teachers versus parents) to account for their unique perspectives and expertise. This lack of

specificity undermines the methodological rigor and transparency of the data collection process affecting this study's WoE ratings.

2.11.1.5 Data Analysis

The studies included in this review employed a variety of data analysis methods appropriate to their respective research designs. Higher WoE B ratings were afforded to studies that employed rigorous and transparent analytical techniques, particularly those that integrated multiple forms of analysis or provided a clear rationale for their chosen methods. For example, Whitlock et al. (2020) and Ward et al. (2022), utilised vignette-based surveys and analysed their data using descriptive and inferential statistics, including Likert scale analyses, rankings, and comparisons of teacher responses across gender conditions. These studies demonstrated strong alignment between their data analysis methods and research aims, though the lack of reporting on effect sizes and confidence intervals limited the interpretability of findings, preventing higher WoE B scores.

Qualitative studies, such as Halsall et al. (2021) and Corscadden & Casserly (2021), used thematic analysis to interpret interview data, allowing for the identification of key themes and patterns in teachers' and parents' perspectives. Halsall et al. (2021) employed reflexive thematic analysis, which offered a robust framework for systematically coding data and identifying nuanced insights into camouflaging behaviours in autistic girls. However, Corscadden & Casserly (2021) provided limited detail regarding their thematic analysis process, such as how codes were generated or themes validated, which negatively impacted their WoE A ratings due to concerns about transparency and replicability.

Mixed-methods analysis, as employed in Gray et al. (2021), integrated thematic analysis for qualitative data with descriptive statistics for quantitative survey responses. Gray et al (2021) adopted a methodical and transparent approach to data analysis which strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings. The use of double-coding and consensus-building ensured consistency and reduced researcher bias, while the inclusion of an "Other" category allowed for greater flexibility and depth in identifying emergent themes (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002; Gale et al., 2013). These practices contributed positively to the study's WoE A and WoE B ratings, as they demonstrated a clear alignment between the research aims and the analytical methods employed (Hill et al., 1997). However, the lack of specific detail regarding how final themes were operationalised or contextualised in relation to broader frameworks slightly limited the replicability of the study.

2.12 Systematic Literature Review Findings

This systematic literature review synthesises evidence from six peer-reviewed studies that explore the recognition and support of autistic girls in mainstream educational settings. The findings are organised in relation to the three guiding research questions:

(1) What research has been conducted to ascertain teachers' understanding of autistic girls?

(2) How do teachers' perceptions and practices impact the school experiences of autistic girls?

(3) What support systems and teaching strategies are effective in enhancing autistic girls' engagement and success in mainstream classrooms?

Findings Related to Research Question 1 - What research has been conducted to ascertain teachers' understanding of autistic girls?

Research examining teachers' understanding of autistic girls consistently demonstrates significant limitations in professional knowledge and awareness. A central issue identified across the literature is that teachers' conceptualisations of autism remain closely aligned with male-centric diagnostic criteria and behavioural profiles. Corscadden and Casserly (2021), for example, found that teachers tended to describe autistic girls using broad and socially positive language, such as “pleasant,” “mature,” or “chatty.” These descriptions often masked the presence of underlying social communication difficulties and contributed to delayed recognition of needs. Traits more typical of girls' autistic presentations such as internalised distress, restricted interests aligned with gender norms or quietness were frequently misinterpreted as personality quirks or shyness, rather than indicators of neurodivergence. Further evidence of gender bias was provided by Whitlock et al. (2020), who found that teachers were significantly more likely to associate identical autistic traits with boys than with girls. In their vignette study, educators more readily identified autism when presented with male characters or descriptions aligned with the traditional male autism phenotype. Gray et al. (2021) also found that while most Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) recognised differences in the presentation of autism across genders, the majority expressed only moderate or low confidence in their ability to recognise autism in girls specifically. Similar themes emerged in Jarman and Rayner's (2015) work, where adult women and parents of autistic girls reported that teachers often dismissed or disbelieved autism diagnoses when the individual did not conform to a more disruptive or male-typical presentation. In contrast to this, Ward et al. (2022) conducted a vignette-based study and findings indicated that there were no significant gender bias in teachers' explicit recognition of

autism. Interestingly, they did report that teachers with higher qualifications demonstrated lower levels of confidence in identifying autism. This finding suggests a deeper awareness of the complexities involved in recognising autism in girls, and potentially reflects a critical stance toward simplified diagnostic heuristics. Collectively, these findings suggest that although awareness of gendered differences is increasing, the translation of this awareness into confident and timely recognition remains inconsistent across educational professionals.

Findings Related to Research Question 2 - How do teachers' perceptions and practices impact the school experiences of autistic girls?

Teachers' perceptions and assumptions have a direct and often detrimental impact on the school experiences of autistic girls. Several studies in this review demonstrated that autistic girls frequently engage in camouflaging or masking behaviours, particularly in classroom environments in order to meet social expectations and avoid drawing attention to their difficulties. These behaviours, while superficially effective, often lead to significant under-recognition of support needs by educators. Corscadden and Casserly (2021) and Gray et al. (2021) both emphasised that traits such as perfectionism, overcompliance, and apparent sociability can result in girls being perceived as well-adjusted, even when they are experiencing considerable internal distress. Jarman and Rayner (2015) found that parents' attempts to communicate concerns about their daughters' behaviour and well-being were sometimes met with resistance or disbelief from teachers. This pattern of dismissal not only delayed access to appropriate supports but also contributed to parental stress and frustration. Similarly, Whitlock et al. (2020) provided experimental evidence showing that teachers were more likely to recognise autism in boys and more likely to seek additional support for them, even when girls displayed

identical behaviours. These biases in recognition and referral pathways may partially explain why girls are often identified later than boys, or not at all, despite having similar levels of need. Halsall et al. (2021) offered further insight into the consequences of these perceptions. In their study of autistic girls in mainstream and resource base settings, it was reported that girls often worked hard to camouflage their challenges in school but would “unmask” at home or in safe environments. This meant that teachers were unaware of the emotional and psychological toll being experienced by the child. The internalisation of stress and the consistent effort to meet neurotypical expectations frequently resulted in exhaustion, anxiety, and academic underperformance, even among those perceived as high-achieving. These findings confirm that surface-level success in social or academic contexts should not be assumed to reflect genuine well-being, particularly in the case of autistic girls.

Findings Related to Research Question 3 - What support systems and teaching strategies are effective in enhancing autistic girls’ engagement and success in mainstream classrooms?

Across the reviewed studies, several support strategies and systemic approaches were identified as effective in addressing the specific needs of autistic girls in mainstream classrooms. One of the most consistently recommended strategies was the provision of targeted, gender-sensitive professional development for teachers. Gray et al. (2021) found that teachers who had received training that explicitly addressed the female autism phenotype demonstrated greater confidence and flexibility in their teaching practices. However, the same study noted that such training opportunities were relatively rare, and often not embedded into standard teacher education programmes. Individualised and relationship-based approaches also emerged as central

to effective support. In particular, Halsall et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of trusted adult relationships in facilitating both emotional regulation and learning. Autistic girls in their study benefited from consistent support by teaching assistants or special education staff, who often acted as interpreters between the girls and the wider school environment. These adults were frequently more attuned to subtle signs of distress or overload which might not be recognised by general classroom teachers in busy classroom environments. Several studies emphasised the need for educators to understand and respond to camouflaging behaviours. Whitlock et al. (2020) noted that failure to recognise camouflaging can result in missed opportunities for early intervention, while Jarman and Rayner (2015) reported that girls often faced punitive responses for behaviours that were misunderstood as defiance or laziness. Recognising masking as an adaptive response to overwhelming environments reframes it as a signal for support, rather than a justification for inaction.

In addition to classroom strategies, parental collaboration was identified as a key component of successful support. When schools engaged openly and respectfully with families, girls were more likely to receive timely and appropriate adjustments to their learning environment. Furthermore, several studies, including those by Corscadden and Casserly (2021) and Halsall et al. (2021), recommended the provision of psychologically safe spaces within the school, such as resource bases or calm classrooms. These spaces were not only beneficial in reducing anxiety but also provided opportunities for students to engage in authentic social interaction and self-regulation without fear of judgement or exclusion.

2.13 Systematic Literature Review Discussion

The findings of this review collectively reveal that autistic girls are consistently under-recognised and under-supported in mainstream educational settings. Despite a growing body of research acknowledging gendered differences in the presentation of autism, educational practice and teacher professional learning have yet to adequately reflect this complexity. Teachers' understandings of autism continue to be shaped by male-centric stereotypes, leading to the difficulty in recognising subtle traits in autistic girls that do not conform to these expectations. This lack of recognition is further compounded by the effects of camouflaging, a phenomenon that enables girls to superficially meet social and academic demands while internally struggling with stress, sensory overwhelm, and social disconnection. The implications of these findings are significant. Teachers often play a central role in raising initial concerns and initiating the referral process for further assessment. However, if teachers are not equipped to recognise the nuanced and often subtle traits associated with autism in girls, then early intervention is unlikely to occur. This delay not only impacts access to services but may also affect girls' mental health, identity development and long-term educational outcomes.

Equally concerning is the evidence that even when teachers are aware of differences in presentation, many lack the training or confidence to act upon this knowledge. The studies reviewed here suggest that professional development, when it includes gender-informed content and strategies, can meaningfully enhance teacher capacity. However, these opportunities are currently inconsistent and often reliant on individual initiative rather than systemic provision. Effective support for autistic girls requires a multifaceted approach that includes early recognition, relationship-based teaching, the creation of safe spaces within the school, and the

valuing of parental insights. Crucially, it also involves a shift away from deficit-based models of autism toward more neuroaffirmative perspectives that recognise autistic traits as differences rather than pathologies. Until such approaches are embedded across policy, practice, and training, the educational experiences of autistic girls will continue to be characterised by misunderstanding, misidentification, and missed opportunities for support.

2.14 Limitations of the current review

While the systematic literature review followed a rigorous and structured process, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The search terms, while carefully chosen to capture relevant literature on autism, gender, and teacher experiences, may have inadvertently excluded studies that used alternative terminology or conceptual frameworks. For example, the search strategy may have inadvertently excluded relevant literature due to regional variations in educational terminology such as studies conducted in the United States that frequently use terms such as “elementary school” or “grade school” in place of “primary school.” These variations were not always captured in the selected search terms, which may have limited the scope of international research retrieved. Future reviews would benefit from a more comprehensive inclusion of culturally specific terminology to ensure broader geographical representation and a more nuanced understanding of international approaches to recognising and supporting autistic girls in school settings. Additionally, the inclusion criteria limited the review to English-language, peer-reviewed articles, potentially omitting valuable insights from grey literature or non-English studies. These limitations may have influenced the breadth and representativeness of the review's findings.

2.15 Recommendations for Future Research

The recommendations for future research, informed by the findings and limitations of the current systematic review, are summarised in Figure 6 and Table 11. These recommendations aim to address critical gaps in the literature and improve understanding of how educators perceive and support autistic girls in educational settings. By addressing these gaps, researchers can provide stronger evidence to inform practice and policy, contributing to the development of more inclusive and supportive educational environments for autistic girls.

Figure 6.

Recommendations for future research

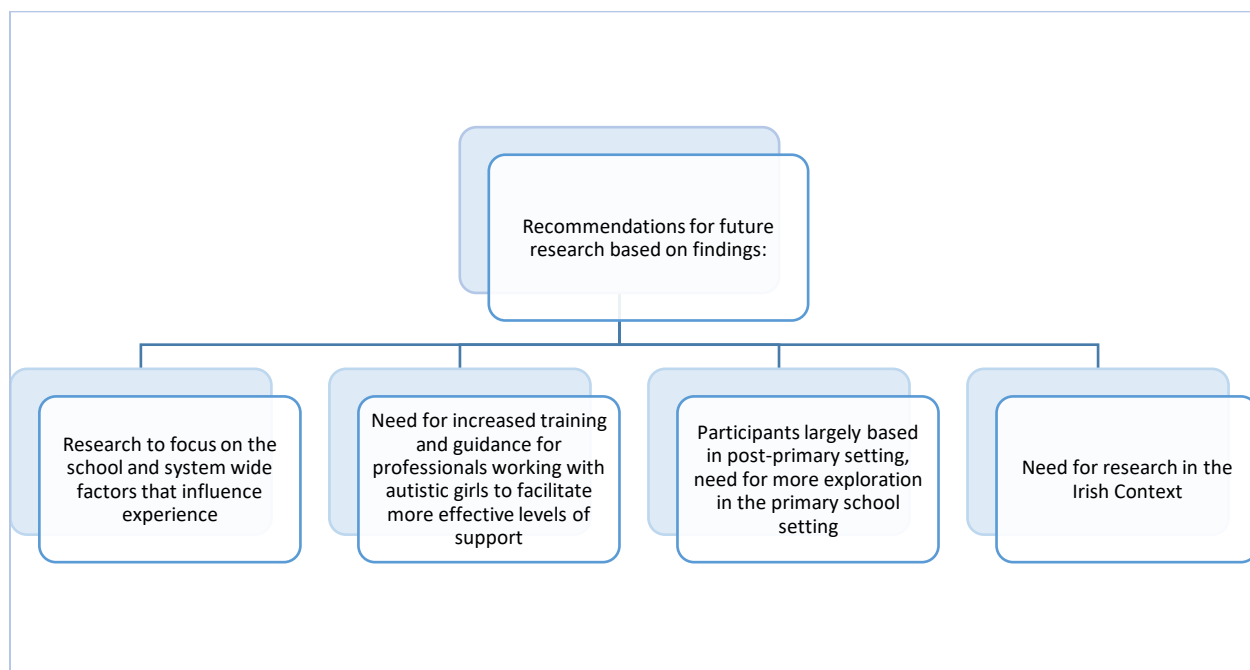


Table 11.*Recommendations for Future Research Based on Findings*

Recommendation	Description	Rationale
Focus on school and system-wide factors	Future research should explore broader systemic influences, such as school policies, staff training programmes, and organisational culture, to understand how these factors shape educators' ability to support autistic girls.	Research has predominantly focused on classroom-level dynamics, overlooking systemic factors that may enable or hinder effective support for autistic girls. Understanding these influences can inform changes at the organisational and policy level.
Increased training and guidance for professionals	Studies should focus on identifying effective training approaches and resources that equip teachers to recognise subtle autistic traits in girls and respond with tailored support strategies.	Teachers often report a lack of confidence in recognising autistic traits in girls due to their more subtle presentations. Evidence-based training can bridge this gap, leading to improved identification and support practices.
Expand research to primary school settings	While many studies in this review focused on post-primary settings, future research should investigate the experiences of autistic girls in primary	The developmental needs and challenges faced by autistic girls in primary schools remain underexplored. Early

Recommendation	Description	Rationale
	schools to capture developmental and contextual differences.	identification and support are critical to improving outcomes as girls progress through the education system.
Research in the Irish context	There is a need for more research into the experiences of autistic girls and educators in Ireland, where cultural and educational norms may differ from those of other Western countries, to inform context-specific supports.	Limited research has been conducted in Ireland, and studies from other countries may not fully generalise to the Irish educational and cultural context. Context-specific insights can guide supports that are culturally and locally appropriate.

2.16 Conclusion

The findings of this systematic review highlight the significant challenges and opportunities faced by educators in recognising and supporting autistic girls within mainstream and specialist educational settings. The studies reviewed demonstrate that teacher perspectives and practices are often influenced by gender biases, with autistic girls frequently being overlooked due to the more subtle presentation of their traits (Whitlock et al., 2020; Ward et al., 2022). However, qualitative insights revealed the importance of targeted, context-specific

support and the role of educators in fostering inclusive school environments (Halsall et al., 2021; Corscadden & Casserly, 2021; Gray et al., 2021). Mixed-methods approaches also emphasise the need for collaboration between schools, families, and external professionals to address the barriers faced by autistic girls in accessing appropriate educational and social support.

While this review provides valuable insights, several methodological shortcomings across the studies must be acknowledged. Limitations such as small sample sizes, reliance on self-reported data in vignette-based research and the cross-sectional nature of most quantitative studies restricted the generalisability and depth of the findings. Moreover, while the data analysis methods were generally appropriate and aligned with study designs, some studies lacked transparency in reporting analytical procedures. This absence of detailed reporting on reliability, validity, and analytical processes in some studies impacted their WoE A and WoE B ratings as methodological rigor and replicability were not consistently upheld. This reflects a need for more rigorous and transparent methodologies in future research. Overall, while semi-structured interviews are an appropriate choice for exploring nuanced perspectives on autism, the insufficient reporting of the development and design of the interview schedule weakens the credibility and methodological rigor of certain studies. Future research should provide a clearer description of how interview schedules are informed and developed, ensuring alignment with the study's aims and increasing transparency for replication. Future research should provide clearer and more detailed descriptions of data analysis processes, including efforts to ensure validity, reliability, and transparency to enhance the quality and reliability.

Despite these limitations, the findings hold significant implications for practice. Future research should seek to learn more about the recognition and support of autistic girls in the

school context. Teacher professional learning programmes should prioritise increasing awareness of the gendered presentation of autism, equipping educators with the skills to recognise subtle traits and provide tailored support in order to foster inclusive educational environments. The evidence suggests that fostering understanding and inclusivity within school systems can positively influence the experiences and outcomes of autistic girls, ensuring they are not marginalised in educational settings. Additionally, educators must be provided with practical tools and strategies to recognise and address the unique needs of autistic girls, ensuring that they are not overlooked in mainstream settings. Furthermore, the role of systemic collaboration between teachers, families, and external agencies is critical in addressing the specific needs of this population. These findings contribute to the growing recognition of the role educators play in addressing disparities in autism recognition and support, emphasising the importance of ongoing research in this area.

Figure 7.*Reflective Box 2****Reflective Box 2: Starting the Research Journey and Getting Clear on my 'Why'***

Ultimately all the literature highlights that autistic girls are under-recognised by teachers and often do not receive a timely diagnosis or adequate support. Therefore, I want to determine how we can support teachers to learn more in this area. I want to know where the gaps in teacher knowledge around autistic girls presentations are? What have been their experiences with recognising and supporting autistic girls? What factors are contributing to this phenomenon and what are the challenges that are faced? Most importantly, I want to know how we can empower teachers in relation to this.

We already know that this is a well-documented problem and there has been lots of research highlighting the barriers, but I want to now look for the solutions. I am interested in hearing from teachers who are already demonstrating best practice - those who have had success in recognising and supporting autistic girls in their classrooms. I have always taken a strength-based approach in my work with students, so it feels natural and makes sense for me to bring that same approach to my research. It aligns with my core values as a researcher, advocate and as a scientist-practitioner who believes in possibility, in progress, and in learning from what's working or going well.

3 Empirical Paper

3.1 Introduction

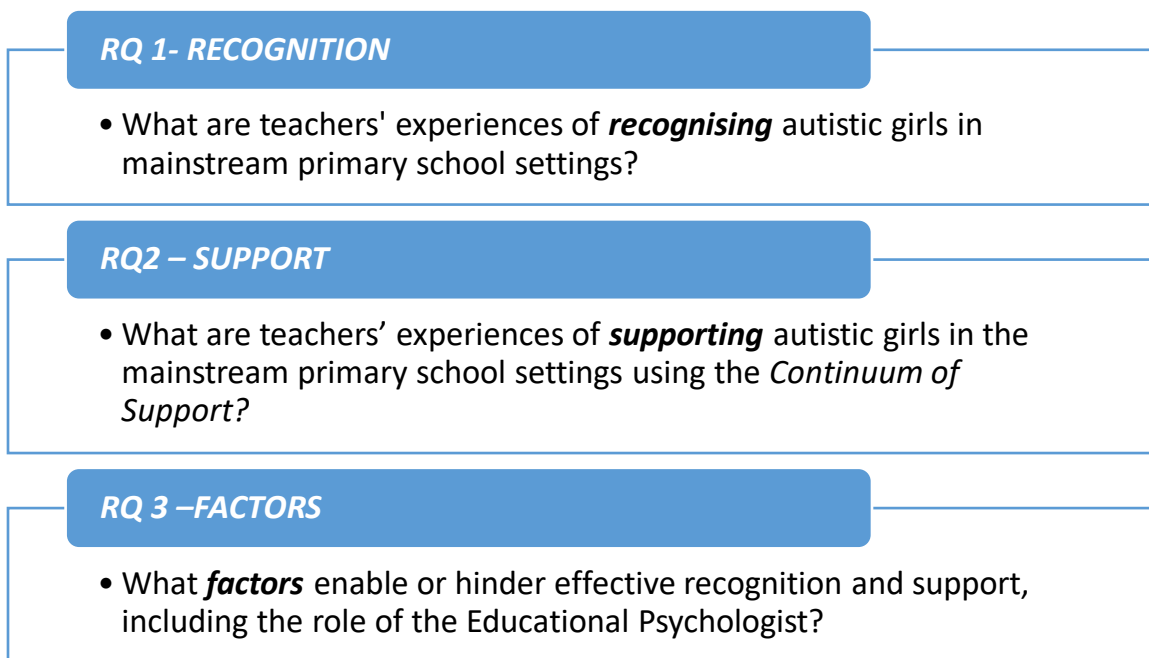
This chapter presents a report on the research conducted and its findings, structured under the following headings: introduction, method, results, and discussion. Additional details are provided in the appendices where necessary.

3.1.1 Research Topic

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in social communication, alongside restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (APA, 2013). For decades, autism has been widely perceived as a condition predominantly affecting males which is a view reinforced by historical research samples and diagnostic criteria built around male presentations (Kanner, 1943; Asperger, 1944; Estrin et al., 2021). As a result, girls and women have often been underrepresented in both research and clinical contexts, leading to a gendered bias in identification, support and understanding (Moore et al., 2022; Kirkovski et al., 2013). This discrepancy is particularly concerning given that autistic girls may display a markedly different profile to their male counterparts. Their characteristics are often more internalised in nature, which contributes to delays in recognition, diagnosis and access to appropriate supports (Loomes et al, 2017; Munroe & Dunleavy, 2023). In educational contexts, this results in significant gaps in understanding and provision, as teachers may be less likely to refer girls for assessment if they do not exhibit the more stereotypical traits (Whitlock et al., 2020; Gray et al., 2021). Moreover, when autistic girls are not appropriately identified or supported, they are at greater risk of adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression and low self-esteem (Tomlinson et al, 2020).

3.1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

The findings of the above literature and systematic review papers offer valuable insights into current research on the topic and highlights the direction future research should take. Findings collectively highlight significant challenges and opportunities in the recognition and support of autistic girls in educational settings. Across both phases, a recurring theme emerged: the under-recognition of autistic girls due to gendered expectations and the subtlety of their presentation, often resulting in delayed or missed identification. The review also emphasised the critical role that educators play in shaping the experiences of autistic girls and the potential impact of teacher professional learning, school culture and systemic supports. While there is growing awareness of the female autism phenotype, there remains a notable gap in understanding how educators practically apply this knowledge in the classroom, particularly within the Irish context and at the primary level. Furthermore, findings point to the need for more robust understanding of the impact of collaboration among teachers, families and external professionals, including Educational Psychologists (EPs), who may serve as key facilitators in improving recognition and tailoring supports. These insights inform the rationale for this study, which seeks to explore how teachers experience the process of recognising and supporting autistic girls within mainstream primary schools, and how the Continuum of Support is utilised as part of this process. The following research questions in Figure 8 arose as a result of the above review:

Figure 8.*Research Questions***3.2 Methodology****3.2.1 Research Paradigm.**

This study is grounded in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm through which the researcher endeavours to develop an understanding of the subjective experiences of individuals (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This paradigm recognises that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is generated by each individual through interactions and interpretations of experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012). This approach is multifaceted, emphasising subjective interpretation and the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). By employing this paradigm, this study is positioned to generate insights that are not only meaningful but also reflective of the complex, socially situated realities

of the participants. These perspectives were not subjected to critical interpretation to establish an objective truth (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012). This approach differs from positivist or post-positivist paradigms, which assume the existence of a single, objective reality (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012).

3.2.2 Ontology and Epistemology.

The chosen paradigm assumes a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It is consistent with the ontological assumption that reality is constructed through experience and the epistemological stance that knowledge is co-created through dialogue and reflection (Creswell, 2007; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Ontology refers to the nature of reality, whether it is solely determined by human interpretation and perception or exists independently of this. A relativist ontology assumes that multiple realities exist, shaped by individuals' experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2007). These realities can be explored and understood through interactions between the researcher and the participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Epistemology refers to the philosophical underpinnings of research, specifically concerning the acquisition of knowledge and the methodology best suited to determining the truth (Mertens, 2015). A subjectivist epistemology assumes that the researcher interprets data by applying their own cognitive processes and thought, shaped by interactions with participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It recognises that knowledge is socially constructed, influenced by the researcher's personal experiences and engagement with real-life contexts within the natural settings under investigation (Punch, 2005). It emphasises the importance of understanding participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations within their specific contexts (Crotty, 1998).

3.2.2 Conceptual Framework Development

A conceptual framework provides a structured representation of interconnected concepts, offering a clear depiction of how key ideas within a study relate to one another (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The Continuum of Support model presents a tiered approach to the provision of interventions and supports, guiding how schools respond to students with a range of learning, emotional and behavioural needs in mainstream settings (DES, 2017). This research is underpinned by two key theoretical perspectives: the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and the revised Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1970). These models were chosen to guide both the design and interpretation of the study, particularly in relation to the Continuum of Support. The integration of these frameworks provided a multidimensional lens through which to examine teachers' experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls in primary education. Bronfenbrenner and Morris's model (2006) facilitated a systemic understanding of how contextual layers, ranging from classroom practices to broader policy environments, influence student outcomes. Concurrently, Maslow's (1970) expanded theory emphasised the importance of meeting foundational needs such as belonging, safety and esteem in order to support autistic girls' engagement and learning. Table 12 further delineates how key concepts from each theory are mapped onto the educational context of this study.

Table 12.*Development of Conceptual Framework*

Theories/Models	Conceptual Framework
Continuum of Support Model (DES, 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Classroom support, school support, school support plus - Collaborative practice - Flexibility and adaptability for individual needs
Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) model highlights dynamic interactions between the learner and their environments over time. - <i>Microsystem</i>: Direct teacher-student interactions and peer relationships. - <i>Mesosystem</i>: Communication and collaboration between teachers, parents, and support staff. - <i>Exosystem</i>: Influence of school policies, resourcing, and staff training. - <i>Macrosystem</i>: Wider societal attitudes, inclusion discourse, and national education policies. - <i>Chronosystem</i>: The influence of developmental changes and experiences over time.

Hierarchy of Needs Theory

(Maslow, 1970)

- *Physiological Needs*: Access to food, water, rest, sensory-regulating environments.
 - *Safety Needs*: Consistency, predictability, emotional security.
 - *Belongingness and Love*: Acceptance, inclusion, and relational connection with peers and teachers.
 - *Esteem Needs*: Support for autonomy, confidence, and achievement.
 - *Cognitive Needs*: Opportunities to explore, learn, and make sense of the world.
 - *Aesthetic Needs*: Access to nature, beauty, calm, and balance in the learning environment.
 - *Self-Actualisation*: Support for personal growth and authentic self-expression.
 - *Transcendence*: Opportunities to contribute to others and feel purposeful within the classroom community.
-

3.2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

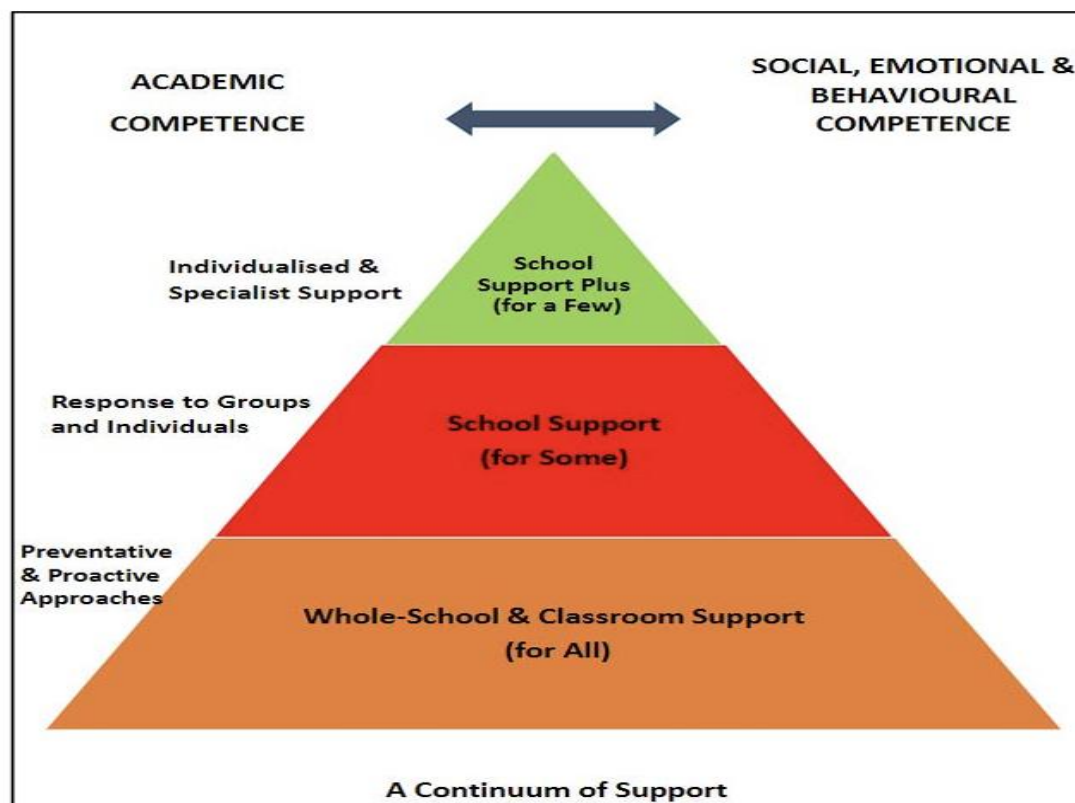
3.2.3.1 The Continuum of Support Framework.

The Continuum of Support framework was introduced by NEPS in 2007 and later Guidelines and Circular were published by the Department in 2017 to provide assistance to schools in effectively recognising and responding to pupils' needs (DES, 2017; O'Brien, 2018). The Continuum of Support framework is a staged model of support ranging from mild to severe, that consists of three distinct tiers: Classroom Support, School Support, and School Support Plus (NEPS, 2017). This framework recognises that pupils' needs change over time, and they may require different levels of support depending on their identified educational needs (Rose et al., 2015). This framework adopts an incremental approach to support moving from class-based supports to more individualised, specific support to be monitored carefully over time (DES, 2017). 'Classroom Support' or 'Support for All' considers what supports the teacher can put in place in the classroom, aiming to be preventative and proactive (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011). 'School Support' or 'Support for Some' is completed collaboratively by the special education teacher and class teacher which may encompass group supports or further support that can be offered (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011; NEPS, 2007). 'School Support Plus' or 'Support for a Few', involves individualised and specialised support (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011; NEPS, 2007). This three-tiered framework promotes the establishment of special education support teams in primary schools, where special education teachers collaborate with class teachers to plan and implement special education supports (Tiernan & Casserly, 2018). The Continuum of Support framework is further closely aligned with the Response to Intervention model of service delivery and is an effective process for building capacity in the school system (NEPS, 2007, 2010a; Tiernan & Casserly, 2018). Within the Irish context, NEPS practice is informed by the biopsychosocial

model (NEPS, 2007, 2010a). This model helps examine the interactions between biological, psychological and social factors when using the problem-solving framework with casework. The problem-solving process is also informed by the information gathered by school staff during their engagement with the Continuum of Support model (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011; NEPS, 2007). Guidance on initiating the problem-solving process for the recognition of needs, development of supports and monitoring student's response to intervention can be found in The Continuum of Support Guidelines (NEPS, 2010; 2007) and Guidelines for Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs (DES, 2017). Please see the illustrated Continuum of Support below in Figure 9.

Figure 9.

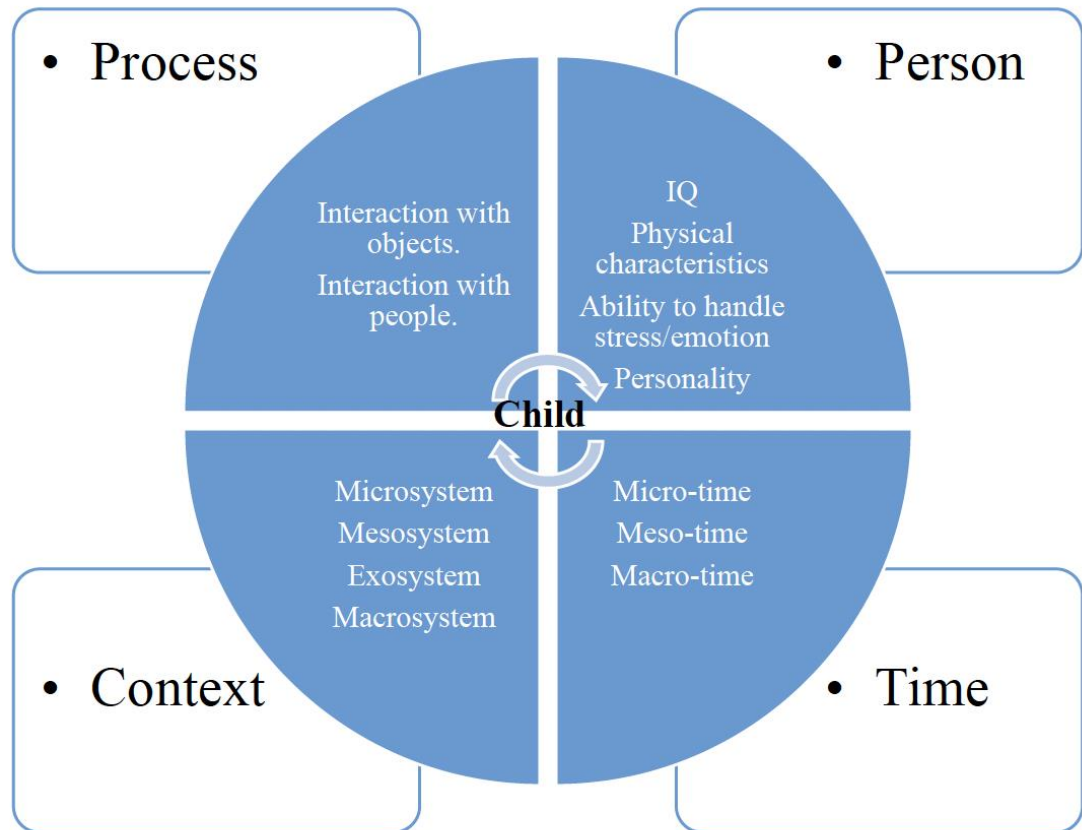
Continuum of Support (DES, 2017)



3.2.3.2 Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Bio-ecological Model

The present study adopts Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological model of human development, also known as the Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) model. This theory was considered suitable due to its usage in previous literature to examine the multifaceted and interconnected influences shaping educational experiences (Tong & An, 2024). This updated framework moves beyond the earlier emphasis on static environmental contexts by highlighting the dynamic interactions between individuals and their surroundings, with particular attention to proximal processes such as the everyday, reciprocal interactions that shape development over time (Tong & An, 2024). Bronfenbrenner later critiqued his original ecological model for lacking developmental focus, referring to it as “context without development” (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 996). In response, the PPCT model incorporates not only the influence of contextual systems, but also the individual characteristics of the developing person, and how these evolve through time. In the context of this research, the model offers a valuable lens through which to explore how teachers' daily interactions with autistic girls, alongside various factors such as beliefs, knowledge and school environments may impact recognition and support practices. Rather than viewing autism as an internal deficit, the bioecological model frames it as an evolving interaction between the child and their environment (White et al., 2023). This perspective aligns with the neurodiversity-affirming stance of this study, positioning teacher practices within a broader ecological and developmental framework. As such, the PPCT model supports a comprehensive analysis of how individual, relational and systemic factors intersect in shaping the educational experiences of autistic girls in mainstream settings.

Figure 10. PPCT Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)



Note. Adapted from Tong and An (2024)

3.2.3.3 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's revised hierarchy of needs (1970) extends his original theory of human motivation by recognising the non-linear and dynamic nature of how needs are experienced and fulfilled. Maslow's foundational model outlined five tiers which included physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. Maslow's original five-tier model (1943,

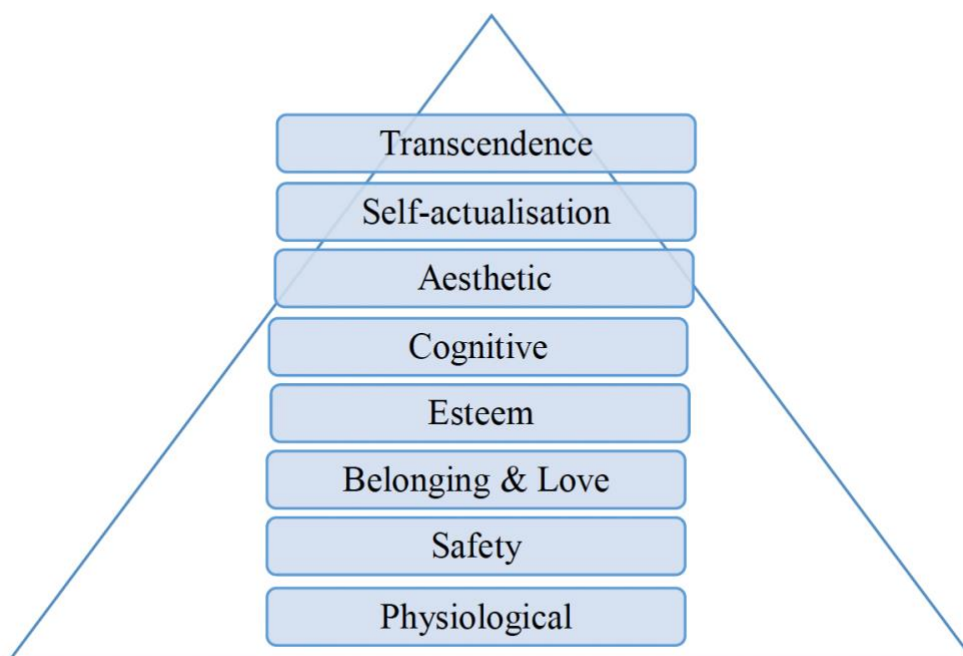
1954) was later revised to incorporate additional dimensions, including cognitive and aesthetic needs (Maslow, 1970a), and subsequently, transcendence needs (Maslow, 1970b). The updated framework acknowledges that individuals may pursue multiple needs simultaneously, and that contextual or cultural factors influence how these needs are prioritised (Maslow, 1970; Kenrick et al., 2010). In this revised view, Maslow also introduced self-transcendence as a potential higher level of development, referring to the pursuit of meaning and purpose beyond the self. This evolution of the theory makes it particularly relevant to contemporary educational research, including the present study, which explores teachers' experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. Maslow's theory is pertinent to this study as it provides a framework which enables us to reflect on and understand both the needs of autistic girls in mainstream primary schools and the role of teachers in meeting these needs. Many autistic girls navigate unmet needs across various levels, ranging from basic safety and sensory regulation to social belonging and identity affirmation (Tomlinson et al., 2020). Maslow's model offers a useful framework for examining how the educational environment can support or hinder the fulfilment of these needs, particularly when intersected with the Continuum of Support. Thus, Maslow's revised hierarchy provides a holistic lens through which to examine the recognition and support of autistic girls in education.

Students with special educational needs (SEN) often face challenges in inclusive educational settings that significantly impact their self-concept, social behaviour, and academic achievement (Hofman & Kilimo, 2014). These challenges can lead to feelings of unhappiness, low self-esteem, and a lack of motivation to learn. Furthermore, The EPSEN Act (GOI, 2004) refers to potential barriers to participation and success in education. This includes any differences observed in the learner such as physical, emotional, sensory and learning needs.

Flood (2013) recommends that additional supports are implemented to breakdown these barriers to learning and promote equity within education. Research indicates autistic girls often experience social isolation and perceived bullying, leading to increased loneliness and mental health issues (Tomlinson et al., 2020). Findings indicate that the teacher-student relationship is a factor that promotes a sense of school belonging (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Neel & Fuligni, 2013). However, previous research suggests that teachers have encountered challenges in building relationships with autistic girls as they lack confidence in meeting their needs (Moyses & Porter, 2015b). Therefore, to address these challenges in the Irish context, it is essential to explore educators' support practices using the Continuum of Support at primary school level, elucidating strategies that foster positive self-concept, social inclusion, and academic engagement among autistic girls. Utilising concepts from Maslow's theory will help examine how the Continuum of Support helps address students' basic (e.g., safety, physiological) and higher-level (e.g., belonging, self-actualisation) needs, emphasising how teachers play a role in meeting these needs in inclusive classrooms. This framework will also be used to reflect on the needs of the teacher, such as teacher self-efficacy and professional growth, and how this impacts their capacity to support students. Please see a depiction of this framework in Figure 11.

Figure 9.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970)



3.2.4 Research Design

This study explored primary school teachers' experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls in a mainstream school setting using the Continuum of Support framework.

Hermeneutical phenomenology was identified as the most appropriate methodology for this study, aligning with the interpretivist paradigm (Van Manen, 1997; Mertens, 2015).

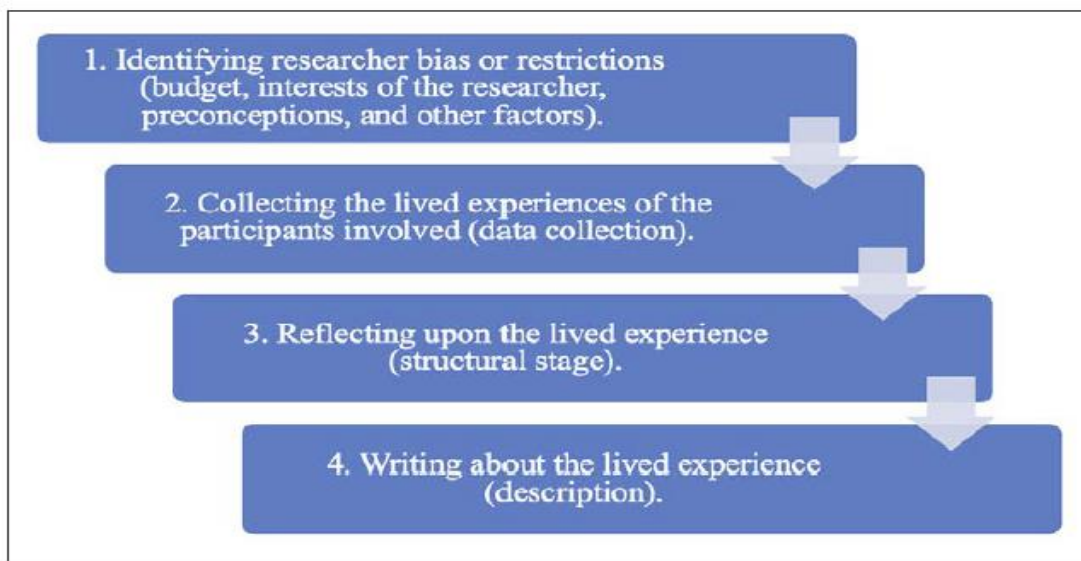
Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on exploring and understanding individuals' lived experiences (Adams & van Manen, 2017). It is particularly well-suited to research that seeks to uncover the subjective and contextual meanings participants attribute to their experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Hopkins et al., 2016). This approach allowed

flexibility in exploring participants' first-hand experiences, delving into key topics of interest while also facilitating further expression and elaboration of related thoughts and feelings (Neubauer et al., 2019). Figure 12 illustrates the staged approach of hermeneutical phenomenology (Van Manen, 1997).

Figure 10.

Phases of Hermeneutical Phenomenological Method (Adapted from Fuster (2019):

Qualitative Research: Hermeneutical Phenomenological Method.)



In the context of this study, phenomenology facilitated a detailed examination of teachers' perspectives and experiences in recognising and supporting autistic girls within mainstream primary schools. Phenomenology facilitated the exploration of participants' lived experience and helped to uncover meaning through the collection of rich, detailed, and contextually grounded data (Carpenter, 2013). This methodology highlighted the interconnectedness of individuals and their environments, enabling an interpretation of how teachers' perceptions are shaped by their interactions with students, colleagues and systemic structures (van Manen, 1997). Moreover, phenomenological inquiry allows for a nuanced understanding of the dynamic ways in which teachers navigate their professional responsibilities (Creely, 2016). This was particularly helpful in addressing and understanding the complexities of gender-based differences in autism.

3.2.5 *Participants*

A total of 12 participants were recruited for the purpose of this study. All participants had experience of teaching an autistic girl in mainstream primary school who was diagnosed with autism on the basis of their referral. The rationale for this inclusion criteria was to elicit further information on the factors at play in successfully recognising and supporting an autistic girl and how the continuum of support was used as part of this process. Teachers from various primary schools were recruited for the study, representing a range of experiences, school types, and geographical locations. Demographic information of participants is presented in the Table 13. Of the 12 teachers that took part in the study, the majority were female ($n = 10$). The majority of participants (66.6%, $n = 8$) reported a Level 9 degree as their highest level of education, while 25% ($n = 3$) had completed post-graduate studies specifically in the area of autism. Majority of teachers in the study had been working for 5-10 years in mainstream primary schools ($n=8$) while some worked for 10-15 year ($n=1$) or 15-20 ($n=2$).

Table 13.*Participant Demographic Information*

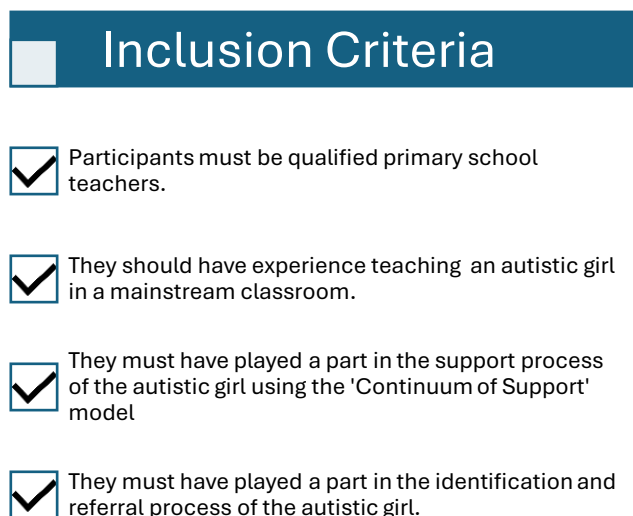
Teacher (Gender)	Age Range	School Type	Current Role	Years Teaching	Age of pupil discussed	Highest Level of Education
T1 (F)	20-30	Urban girls school	Mainstream Infant Class Teacher	5-10 years	5 years old	PG Diploma in Autism (Level 9)
T2 (M)	20-30	Urban girls school	Mainstream Class Teacher	5-10years	12 years old	B. Ed with a specialism in SEN (Level 8)
T3 (F)	20-30	Urban girls school	Mainstream Infant Class Teacher, Assistant Principal	5-10years	5 years old	PG Diploma in Autism (Level 9)
T4 (F)	20-30	Rural mixed school	Special Education Teacher	5-10years	11 years old	PG Cert in Autism (Level 9)
T5 (F)	30-40	Urban mixed Non-DEIS school	Mainstream Class Teacher, Acting Assistant Principal	10-15 years	6 years old	Masters (Level 9)

T6 (F)	30-40	Rural mixed Non-DEIS school	Mainstream Infant Class Teacher	5-10 years	5 years old	B. Ed (Level 8)
T7 (M)	30-40	Urban mixed Non-DEIS school	Mainstream Class Teacher	5-10 years	11 years old	B. Ed (Level 8)
T8 (F)	40-50	Urban girls school	Special Education Teacher	15-20 years	6 years old	Masters (Level 9)
T9 (F)	20-30	Urban girls school	Mainstream Infant Class Teacher/ AP2	5-10 years	6 years old	PG Diploma (Level 9)
T10 (F)	20-30	Urban DEIS mixed school	Special Education Teacher	5-10 years	6 years old	PG Diploma (Level 9)
T11 (F)	50+	Rural mixed Non-DEIS school	Special Education Teacher	25-30 years	8 years old	B. Ed (Level 8)
T12 (F)	40-50	Rural mixed Non-DEIS school	Mainstream Infant Class Teacher	15-20 years	6 years old	Masters (Level 9)

3.2.6 *Sampling Strategy*

Participants for this study were recruited through a combination of purposive, convenience and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants whereby the researcher intentionally invited participants who have relevant experience and knowledge related to the phenomenon in question (Gill, 2020). An invitation to participate, including an information sheet and consent form, was distributed via professional teaching networks and through direct contact with school principals and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs).

Qualitative researchers commonly employ purposive sampling as it denotes a systematic strategy for the selection of participants in alignment with the research questions which often enables the collection of rich data from well-informed participants on a certain topic (Palinkas et al., 2015; Barker et al., 2015; Patton, 2014). Snowball or Network sampling was also used whereby current participants recommended suitable teachers who fit the research criteria (Gill, 2020). The researcher also contacted teachers known to her and enquired if they may know any other teachers who meet the relevant criteria or if they would circulate the research poster among other colleagues (see Appendix G). A variety of primary schools were contacted in order to capture a broad range of perspectives, including schools in urban and rural areas, as well as single-sex (girls) and mixed-gender settings. This approach was designed to ensure diversity of context and to explore how factors such as school setting or student cohort might influence teachers' experiences. The inclusion criteria required that participants be qualified primary school teachers currently working in mainstream schools in Ireland and have experience supporting at least one autistic girl in their classroom. This targeted approach ensured that the participants were able to provide informed insights into the research questions. Inclusion criteria is illustrated in Figure 13. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached.

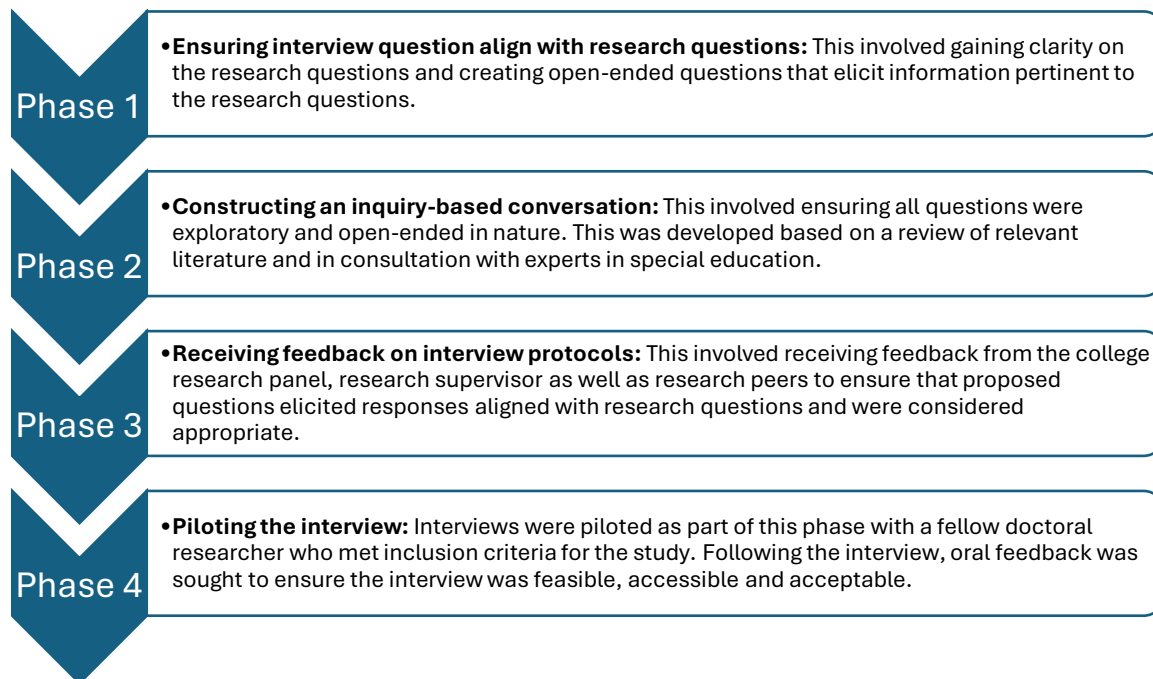
Figure 11.*Inclusion Criteria***3.2.7 Sample Size**

Determining sufficient sample size in qualitative research has been a subject of wide debate, with scholars noting both the advantages and limitations of establishing sample sizes a priori (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Sim et al., 2018). Guest et al. (2006) found that thematic data saturation is typically achieved with 6 to 12 participant interviews, and more recently, Ando et al. (2014) recommended that 12 interviews should adequately generate codes for thematic analysis. While these sources relate more broadly to qualitative research, phenomenological methodology specifically supports the use of small, information-rich samples that allow for deep engagement with participants' lived experiences (Bartholomew et al., 2021). Giorgi (2009) emphasise the need to preserve the integrity of individual consciousness through detailed, idiographic exploration rather than generalisation. Moreover, Bartholomew et al. (2021), in a

systematic review of 200 phenomenological studies, found that smaller samples that were aligned with a clear phenomenological variant tended to yield higher quality outcomes. Based on these principles, this study interviewed twelve primary school teachers, ensuring data collection continued until saturation was reached and individual voices were adequately represented in line with phenomenological best practice.

3.2.8 Interview Schedule Development

The Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework was utilised in this study to ensure that the interview schedule aligned well with the research aims (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The researcher also conducted a pilot interview with a fellow doctoral researcher who met inclusion criteria for the study in April 2024 to ascertain the usefulness of the interview schedule and ensure the current study's credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). By following the IPR Framework, the interview schedule was systematically refined to enhance clarity, consistency, and the depth of responses, contributing to the overall credibility and rigor of the qualitative research process (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The IPR framework comprises four-phases: Phase 1) Ensuring interview questions align with research questions, 2) Constructing an inquiry-based conversation, 3) Receiving feedback on interview protocols and 4) Piloting the interview. The four-phase approach is detailed in Figure 14 below which led to the development of the final interview schedule (see Appendix H).

Figure 12.*Interview Protocol Refinement Framework*

Having completed the above process, the finalised interview schedule included a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about the teachers' experiences.

Key areas explored in the interviews included:

- Experiences in recognising autistic girls needs in mainstream classrooms
- Challenges faced in the recognition of needs and referral process
- Strategies and resources used to support autistic girls in line with the Continuum of Support model (Classroom Support, School Support, School Support Plus)
- Reflections on key systemic factors influencing recognition and support for autistic girls
- Perceptions of training and professional development needs

3.2.9 Data Collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were utilised for the purpose of collecting data for this study. This approach was considered most appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the study which aimed to ascertain participants' experiences and perspectives on the complex phenomena of recognising and supporting autistic girls. Moreover, this form of data collection is largely considered the most beneficial in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013; Lauterbach, 2018).

Braun and Clarke (2013) posit that semi-structured interviews allow flexibility which enables the interviewer to probe deeper and uncover meaningful experiences. The interview schedule was used to guide discussions, however, interviews often moved in a fluid and flexible manner between topics as participants shared their stories. This approach led to the emergence of views and opinions that may not have been anticipated (Barker et al., 2012). Interviewing resulted in the collection of rich data that provided unique insights to the nuances surrounding the current topic.

Data collection took place over five months between May and September 2024. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft teams and typically lasted between 30-45 minutes, depending on the amount of information the participant wished to share. Once prospective participants expressed interest, they were contacted by the researcher and informed about the study using the 'Information Sheet' (see Appendix I). Once participants agreed to participate in the study and prior to commencing the interview, a consent form was completed and participants were reminded of their rights during the research process, such as the right to withdraw and the right to confidentiality (see Appendix J). Participants were assigned an ID number to ensure anonymity. Participants were also reminded to respect their school's confidentiality and not to

mention any identifiable information during interviews, such as the name of the student, school or other teachers. With participants' permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams for data analysis purposes. All data was stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher had custody of this personal laptop and participants were informed that access to data on this laptop would not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisor. Notes were also taken during the interviews to record non-verbal cues and initial reflections. Following the interviews, the transcriptions were downloaded and cross checked by the researcher to ensure the accuracy of the data collected.

The online format of the study allowed the researcher to overcome geographic limitations in participant recruitment, enabling access to a broader pool of teachers and enhancing the sample size's representativeness across the country (Carpenter et al., 2019). Conducting interviews online also provided greater flexibility in scheduling and improved cost and time efficiency. However, online interviews present challenges, including a reduced ability to observe non-verbal cues and the potential for technical issues, such as unstable internet connections which may hamper rapport with the interviewee (Tomás & Bidet, 2023).

3.2.10 Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analysed using Reflective Thematic Analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to capture complex patterns within qualitative data, as well as enabling rigorous, high-quality analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2017). As previously outlined, the research questions for this study were explored within an interpretivist and constructivist paradigmatic framework (Barker et al., 2015). Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a hybrid approach was adopted, using both inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Xu &

Zammit, 2020). Initially, an inductive or “bottom-up” approach was used which allowed themes to emerge directly from the data without preconceived categories (Braun & Clarke, 2017; Byrne, 2022). In contrast, the deductive or “top-down” approach was informed by the theoretical framework underpinning the study, which included Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006) bioecological model, Maslow’s Revised Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and the Continuum of Support model. This combination ensured a comprehensive analysis, capturing themes grounded in the data while reflecting the theoretical foundations of the research (Roberts et al., 2019). Furthermore, the researcher considered several questions to help with the process of capturing and refining themes (Braun & Clark, 2022, p. 99):

Can I identify boundaries of this theme?

Are there enough (meaningful) data to evidence this theme?

Are the data contained within each theme too diverse and wide-ranging?

Does this theme convey something important?

NVivo 12 software was also employed by the researcher during data analysis. The six-step recursive process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke (2022) was followed as illustrated in Figure 15.

Figure 13.*Six Step Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process***3.2.11 Researcher reflexivity**

Researcher's position, also known as reflexivity, is the "process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). To ensure reflexivity throughout the research process, the researcher engaged in critical self-reflection by writing a 'researcher identity memo' (Maxwell, 2005) and a 'researcher relationships memo' (Maxwell, 2012) prior to conducting interviews. These memos facilitated an exploration of the researcher's background, biases, beliefs, that may impact the nature of the interviews (Maxwell, 2012) (Appendix K).

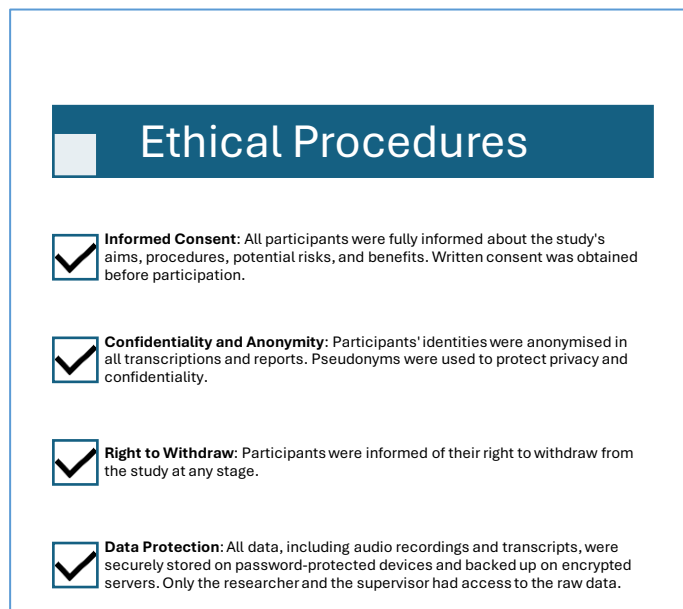
Additionally, a reflective journal was used to document any relevant thoughts or reflections on biases in relation to the research process to enhance reflexivity and transparency (Nowell et al., 2017). This also helped to reflect on any biases or assumptions the researcher may have. Samples from the reflective journal can be found in reflective boxes throughout the thesis. To further enhance the reliability of the research process, peer reviews were conducted with research panels, colleagues and the research supervisor.

3.2.12 Member Checking

Respondent validation, also known as member checking, was employed to enhance internal validity. Some participants were provided with a summary of the findings to verify the accuracy and resonance of the themes with their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). This strategy was utilised as it is considered helpful for avoiding misinterpretations of the data as well as reflecting on one's biases (Thomas, 2017).

3.2.13 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed to ensure the integrity of the research process and the protection of participants. The study received ethical approval from Mary Immaculate Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) in March 2024, prior to data collection (Appendix L). The research also adhered to the Professional Code of Ethics (Psychological Society of Ireland, 2019) and the Data Protection Act (EU, 2018). Measures taken to ensure ethical procedures are illustrated in Figure 16 below.

Figure 14.*Ethical Procedures***3.3 Results**

This section presents the research findings which provide an insight into teachers' experiences in recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary school settings in Ireland. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was utilised whereby the researcher engaged in the coding process using NVivo software which led to the development of relevant themes. Appendix M provides a thorough documentation of the six-step reflexive thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2019) used to examine the information gained from the twelve semi-structured interviews conducted for this study. When referring to the participant who responded, anonymised ID numbers (e.g. P1-P12) are used to maintain confidentiality. Figure 17 provides a visual representation of the themes and codes that arose from the investigation. Key findings

highlight the challenges of recognition, the role of parental involvement, and the systemic barriers within educational frameworks that may be inadvertently leading to the delayed diagnosis of autistic females. The findings also outline effective strategies that teachers employ to support autistic girls in mainstream classrooms using the Continuum of Support. The following sections detail the key findings, providing insight into the experiences and best practices of educators for creating an inclusive environment for autistic girls.

Figure 15.

Visual Representation of Themes



3.3.1 RQ 1- Recognition - What are teachers' experiences of recognising autistic girls in mainstream primary school settings?

3.3.1.1 Varied experiences in recognising autistic girls' needs.

Teachers relayed their varied experiences of recognising autistic girls' needs within mainstream primary schools. In some cases, needs were recognised early in Junior Infants, facilitated by rigorous teacher observations and structured screening processes implemented recently by the new Special Education Teacher in the school who had completed a Masters in SEN:

P3: Initially we do like a screening process for the incoming junior infants in August at the end of the year. So, they would have come in and then there would be like five or six teachers in the room with so many kids, and we'd note down if we kind of noticed anything. And then when they came into school in September, we just obviously were observing a bit more and taking notes. And then the SET teacher also came in as like a second pair of eyes to do some teacher observations for an hour or so, maybe two or three days.

Similarly, structured observations used by Participant 2 helped identify the student's strengths (art, music, and dance) and challenges (group work, core subject engagement) which informed their approach to recognition and support. However, for others, needs were not recognised until the later years of primary school, leaving teachers to reflect on missed signs and opportunities for early intervention.

P6: I suppose that the example I gave you of that student not getting diagnosed until 5th class was the perfect example of a girl who slipped through the cracks and like as a teacher I feel it's important to not let that happen as we know the power of early intervention, but I think for the

most part we felt like, I suppose essentially it was too little, too late within her primary school days.

Similarly, another teacher reflected on their retrospective realisation, stating:

P5: Looking back, now that I have learned more about autism, I can see that there were girls that I've taught in the past that I now think maybe they were autistic, and as a teacher I didn't identify that as I would have just thought that they were struggling with maybe learning needs or emotional needs, but I just wouldn't have ever used the descriptor of autism or I wouldn't have thought of that as an explanation for what I was seeing in girls.

Inconsistencies in recognition highlight the challenges faced by educators in recognising autism in girls, particularly due to masking behaviours and subtle presentations that do not align with traditional diagnostic expectations.

3.3.1.2 'A Slow Journey' - Delayed Recognition and Bias.

Teachers reported difficulties in recognising autistic girls due to the subtle nature of their traits. Many teachers initially misinterpreted behaviours as general learning difficulties or emotional struggles rather than signs of autism. The student's presentation, such as daydreaming, differences in eye contact and a preference for creative and individual activities, were initially not recognised as potential indicators of autism. P2 noted, "*She was in her own world a lot, totally engrossed in her brain...she wasn't absorbing information, but I never thought this could be autism.*" Many teachers reported that they largely associated autism with males as they had not had that many autistic girls, with P3 stating "*I would have associated autism with boys mostly, you know, and it's kind of concerning since I now know a lot of girls have it, but they're masking it*"

A significant finding was that teacher professional learning had primarily focused on how autism presents in boys, leading to a gap in awareness of gender differences:

P2: When I was doing the specialism in Special Ed in my undergrad like a lot of the examples were boys even when it came to autism, say if you were doing a case study, it's say for example like a 9 year old boy who is presenting with X, Y, Z traits, you know a lot of it was kind of gender-biased towards males.

Consequently, some teachers reflected that they had unknowingly overlooked autistic girls in their previous years of teaching. One participant noted, *"I didn't even know that autism might present differently in girls. I guess like even as I say it now, it's like that was obviously such an internal bias that I had, that I was really just seeing autism as something that exists for boys and I just didn't really know any better."* (P5). This highlights the systemic bias in teacher's perceptions of autism, with girls often being overlooked.

3.3.1.3 Varied Presentation of Autism in Girls.

Autistic girls often displayed strong academic abilities while having social differences. Teachers observed that many autistic girls masked their difficulties at school, presenting as compliant and well-behaved, while experiencing significant emotional distress at home.

"She was our model student—organised, polite, and engaged in class. But her mother was telling me that at home, she was having extreme meltdowns and refusing to do homework. I never saw any of that in school" (P7).

Common traits observed are outlined below:

3.3.1.3.1 *Social challenges.*

Teachers reflected that they observed selective friendships, staying on the periphery of groups and difficulty engaging in large peer groups rather than overt social difficulties. "She had two very close friends and refused to interact with anyone else. If one of them was absent, she would just stay silent all day" (P4).

3.3.1.3.2 *Sensory sensitivities.*

Discomfort with noise, clothing textures, and unexpected routine changes. "She refused to wear her own clothes on non-uniform day and insisted on wearing her school uniform because it felt 'right' to her" (P9).

3.3.1.3.3 *Highly focused interests.*

Intense engagement with specific topics such as animals, fairies, or history. "Her entire world revolved around cats. Every drawing, every story, every conversation had to include cats" (P10).

3.3.1.3.4 *Rigid routines.*

Resistance to transitions and difficulty adapting to unstructured activities. "If the daily schedule changed, even slightly, she would become extremely anxious and upset" (P8).

3.3.1.3.5 *Speech differences.*

Teachers noted significant traits such as lack of speech, repetitive speech patterns, lack of eye contact, and minimal social interaction as clear identifiers. For example: "*Both girls had very little speech, and one would just repeat back what was said.*", as well as "*They couldn't keep eye contact or engage in back-and-forth conversation.*"

3.3.1.3.6 Masking and Emotional regulation.

P2 highlighted how the student's late diagnosis in fifth class hindered earlier supports as the student's ability to mimic neurotypical behaviour made it difficult for teachers to recognise her neurodivergence. They reflected, *"She was good at masking it...teachers didn't pick up on the signs earlier,"* emphasising how camouflaging behaviours often delayed recognition of autism in girls. The teacher discussed the concept of "after school restraint collapse" where students may suppress their stress at school and release it at home, describing how this was reflected in her students: *"At home she would have really big meltdowns...a different child than to what I was seeing in the classroom,"* indicating the importance of recognising less overt signs of distress. Another teacher described emotional regulation difficulties or 'emotional meltdown' during a transition in class, *"And then yeah, so when everyone was closing their books, then I remember one day, so she was obviously holding it together for a while. That masking I suppose. And then one day, there was what I would probably call a meltdown."*

3.3.1.3.7 Gender Differences in Autism Presentation.

Many teachers reflected on any gender differences they observed in relation to autism. Findings highlighted that autistic girls often present differently from boys. P1 mentioned, *"What I learned...really kind of broadened my lens in terms of autism and girls,"* referencing her understanding of phenomena like "social masking," where girls may hide or mask their autistic traits, making them harder to identify. Teachers observed that autistic boys exhibited more 'meltdowns' while girls internalised challenges: *"The boys had more physical meltdowns, while the girls were calmer but struggled internally." (P6).* Similarly, another teacher reflected on the differing presentations that she had witnessed in the classroom, *"The one difference I noticed was the level of externalising behaviours I suppose, most of the boys I have had would usually*

kick, throw objects etc. whereas both of the girls were much calmer and much easier to manage in the classroom, she would kind of really do everything internally I found” (P2).

3.3.1.4 Parental Involvement – A Double-Edged Sword

Teachers reflected on the critical role of engaging parents in the referral process reflecting how some parents were open and shared observations from home, aiding recognition. Participant 3 shared that it was easier to broach the subject with some parents *“bringing it up with them this year was much easier than last year’s because they came to the school and said they were aware that speech and language is a major issue and that different things that they noticed themselves”* (P3). This indicates that parental awareness and openness was a factor in successful recognition. Others resisted, due to concerns about stigma or previous negative experiences with the support system, creating barriers to timely support. *“Her parents refused an assessment because their older son had a diagnosis, and they felt it hadn’t helped him. They didn’t want to go through it again”* (P10). Schools that facilitated early supports through parental collaboration were more successful in securing timely assessments and accommodations. One teacher reflected, *“Some parents knew something was different and pushed for assessments early, but others were in denial. They would say, ‘She’s just shy,’ or ‘She’s just a bit different,’ and resist any referral”* (P9). Some parents’ denial of challenges delayed supports: *“Parents’ reluctance made it harder to implement the support.”*

Figure 16.*Reflective Box 3***Reflective Box 3: Parental Perspectives**

I was surprised to hear that, according to the teachers, some parents were not seeing the same challenges at home or were perceived as hesitant to advocate for support. In my previous experiences, and within my own conceptualisation of autistic girls, I have often encountered narratives where the child appears to cope or mask in school but then struggles to decompress at home. Hearing the teachers' view that some parents were in denial or reluctant to acknowledge their child's needs challenged this assumption. However, it's important to acknowledge that this interpretation reflects the teachers' perspective, and the parents' own understanding of their child's needs may differ or be shaped by a range of factors. On reflection, I recognise that I may have held a somewhat idealised view that parents will always want to advocate for their child and accept them fully as they are. This has prompted me to think more critically about the complexities of parental response, and how different stakeholders may interpret the same behaviours through different lenses.

3.3.2 RQ2 – SUPPORT ‘What are teachers’ experiences of supporting autistic girls in the mainstream primary school settings using the Continuum of Support?’

The following themes are organised according to the Continuum of Support framework, which is a model used in educational settings to provide a graduated response to a student's needs. The subthemes include support strategies that were utilised by teachers at each level of the

continuum of support and their experience of tailoring these supports to suit their student's needs.

3.3.2.1 Classroom Support (Support for All).

At the Classroom Support level, teachers emphasised universal strategies that benefit all students but are particularly supportive of autistic girls. Several inclusive practices were highlighted as follows.

3.3.2.1.1 Visual Timetables and Predictability.

The teacher described the use of visual aids as an effective strategy, noting, "I would make efforts to...really just build in consistent routines in the classroom to increase predictability," (P4) and mentioned employing visual timetables and sensory spaces to help autistic girls regulate and feel more secure in the classroom environment. P7 reflected how her student developed autonomy in managing her own visual timetable, "The visual schedule worked really well. She'd check it daily and even set it up herself when I forgot." Many teachers tailored the visual timetables to incorporate the child's interest to increase motivation "And she loved Barbie, so I had put little images of Barbie on each corner of it, and that really motivated her then to go check her schedule and kind of kept her regulated through the day." (P1) Another teacher noted that she found it useful to "break it down into smaller chunks" so that they could understand "On her desk, I just had the first three things (first, next, then chart) in the morning and then I would change it in the middle of the day," (P7) noting that this approach was less overwhelming for autistic students compared to seeing the entire day's schedule at once.

3.3.2.1.2 Movement or Sensory Breaks for Regulation.

Recognising the need for regulation, the teacher incorporated movement breaks for the whole class, such as "GoNoodle" activities or quick physical exercises like "jumping jacks." She

stated, "I definitely would have been doing at least once a day" showing the importance of these breaks to help all children. Teachers also noted the observable benefits of movement breaks "Even when I do a whole class movement break, the difference in terms of their focus and motivation afterwards, it's huge". Some teachers spoke about scheduling them in consistently during the day, so the student knew when to expect it "And then she got two movement breaks in the day. So, we scheduled those and they seem to work really well with that predictability." (P2) Other teachers spoke about providing movement breaks as requested and helping autistic girls to develop self-advocacy skills in the classroom. One teacher described how a student initially lacked confidence in requesting movement breaks or additional support, stating, "she started getting a little bit more confident in knowing that it was OK to need movement breaks and to need a little bit of extra support." To address this, a laminated card system was introduced, enabling the student to "tap her hand on the card when she felt that she needed a movement break or needed help." This approach provided a non-verbal communication tool that reduced anxiety around seeking help. Over time, the teacher noted that "we gradually encouraged her to start moving away from the card," helping her transition to more independent communication strategies, such as "putting up her hand or start coming over to me or coming over to the SNA and saying that she needed a break." This example demonstrates how gradual and structured supports can help autistic girls gain confidence in self-regulation and advocacy within the classroom setting. Teachers also highlighted the value sensory resources as well as movement breaks, "The sensory room and sensory walkway were particularly helpful for regulation."

3.3.2.1.3 Building Rapport and Understanding Interests.

Teachers prioritised relationship-building as a foundation for support noting that "Building rapport is the first thing that I would do with all the kids," (P6) which included

understanding each child's interests. One teacher described how incorporating a student's special interests into academic tasks helped create a connection and motivation to learn: *"you're able to do reading comprehensions based off, you know, maybe it might be a celebrity that she might have an interest in. I think it was Ariana Grande at the time. She was a bit of an interest for her in terms of music, so even to do reading comprehension based off her helped get her engaged..."*

This interest-based approach allowed the student to feel more engaged and confident in her learning, demonstrating how tailoring activities to individual preferences can support both academic and social development.

3.3.2.1.4 Strength-Based Approaches.

Teachers demonstrated a great awareness of their student's strengths and were readily able to identify numerous positive characteristics such as their creativity and reading ability, *"Both girls were exceptionally artistic and reading at a higher level."* Participant 2 shared *"I was trying to think of things that I could do within the classroom that would, you know, what would be of benefit to her and things that would cater to her strengths"* (P2) highlighting a shift from deficit-based to strength-based perspectives. Teachers highlighted the importance of understanding students' strengths to build confidence and engagement in learning. Rather than focusing solely on challenges, educators found that recognising and nurturing a student's abilities led to more positive outcomes. Another teacher spoke about ensuring opportunities for students to flourish in their subject areas of strength *"just making sure I was consistent as well with art, music and drama within the classroom because they were subjects that she had particular strengths in, so it was important to try and get those boxes ticked as much as possible throughout the week"* (P8). Focusing on areas of personal strength supported autistic girls to engage meaningfully, experience success in school and develop a sense of achievement.

Teachers noted that this strength-based approach also fostered a positive self-identity, helping students to see their unique skills as assets and reach their true potential. Participant 8 noted: *“And also like you know, as a teacher, you really care about the kids as well and want to make sure that they get through school OK and they reach their potential and they're not going to reach their potential unless they're fully sure what their background is and understand themselves.”* (p2)

3.3.2.1.5 Appropriate supports and differentiation.

Teachers noted that group work proved challenging for autistic girls, therefore, flexible group work arrangements were employed. Recognising the student’s discomfort in large groups, P2 often used paired activities instead of larger group work, stating, *“Pair work was most beneficial for her...she could contribute without feeling overwhelmed.”* P2 implemented differentiated tasks discussing how *“Her workload was reduced”*, as well as adjusted expectations for her output, ensuring she wasn’t overwhelmed. They stated, *“She was given more time and fewer tasks to complete...this reduced her stress.”* In contrast, teachers also spoke about ensuring work was sufficiently challenging in areas where student’s excelled *‘in terms of art as well, just trying to make sure she was challenged within art as well, because she was quite good at it. So, I just had to make sure that she wasn't getting bored and finding it too easy’.* (P11)

3.3.2.2 School Support (Support for Some).

At the School Support level, the teacher described targeted strategies for students who require additional support beyond classroom support. These strategies often involved collaboration with other staff members.

3.3.2.2.1 *Social and Emotional Wellbeing.*

For students needing more specific support, most teachers organised emotional regulation groups with the Special Education Teacher (SET). Participant 5 mentioned, "*She [the autistic girl] was going out...probably twice a week...for about 15 to 20 minutes,*" where they focused on social skills, understanding emotions, and developing strategies for self-regulation. P6 expressed concerns about the student's ability to adapt to the increased autonomy and group work required in secondary school, reflecting, "*She always needed assistance...giving her responsibilities in primary school was my way of preparing her for the future.*" Another teacher reflected on their practice noting how the student received individual support for literacy and numeracy, but questioned whether this approach adequately addressed her broader needs, particularly her social-emotional needs, "*Looking back, she could have benefited from social groups...I've seen their success in my current school but that just wasn't the practice in the school I was in at the time.*" Teachers emphasised the importance of structured social supports. As girls progressed through school, their social difficulties became more pronounced, particularly in maintaining friendships. "*By 6th class, she was really struggling to keep up with her peers socially. They were maturing, but she was stuck in an earlier stage of social development*" (P7).

Figure 17.*Reflective Box 4****Reflective Box 4: Reflection on social skills groups***

During the interviews, I was struck by the range of perspectives teachers held regarding social skills groups. One teacher expressed embarrassment upon reflection, having previously implemented social skills groups but now feeling conflicted in light of more recent understandings of neuro-affirmative practices. This prompted my own reflection on my stance toward such supports, especially considering the complexities of masking among autistic girls, who are often known to script social interactions. I began to question whether social skills groups, while well-intentioned, may inadvertently reinforce normative expectations around social behaviour and thus contribute to masking. Conversely, I also wondered whether providing social scripts might alleviate anxiety and support peer relationships by offering a sense of predictability. These reflections have highlighted the need for me to explore this area further, so that I can offer more informed and balanced guidance to teachers in the future.

3.3.2.2.2 Collaboration with Special Needs Assistants (SNAs).

The teacher worked closely with SNAs to provide targeted support. She described how they used "movement breaks" to help regulate students who showed signs of distress or sensory overload, explaining, "*If the SNA was popping into the classroom...I would send her out,*" indicating a responsive approach to support based on the student's needs throughout the day.

3.3.2.2.3 Consultation with Specialists (e.g., NEPS Psychologists).

The teacher sought informal consultations with NEPS psychologists to gain insights and strategies for supporting specific students. She explained, "*The NEPS psychologist...guided me to some of the resources...things like the timetables, the first-then charts,*" demonstrating how expert input was used to refine and enhance classroom strategies.

3.3.2.3 Individualised Support (Support for a Few)

For students with more complex needs, Individualised Support was provided. This involved personalised plans and supports.

3.3.2.3.1 One on one support.

Teachers emphasised the importance of tailoring support strategies to meet the specific needs of autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. One teacher highlighted how a student initially struggled in group settings, noting, "*I think she could have gone out in group settings before and she wasn't, you know, participating well in the group setting either.*" This then led to educators adjusting their approach and providing one on one support as "*she was more productive in a one-to-one setting.*" This example illustrates how individualised support such as providing structured one-to-one learning opportunities can help autistic girls feel more comfortable and engaged, ultimately enhancing their participation and learning outcomes.

3.3.2.3.2 Parental Involvement and Consistency Across Environments.

The teacher worked closely with parents to ensure consistency between home and school, particularly in implementing strategies like visual timetables. She reflected, "*I got a timetable up and running with the parents at home...she was more regulated coming into school when she had those supports in both places,*" emphasising the value of a cohesive, holistic approach to support. This demonstrates how positive parent-teacher relationships facilitated smoother

recognition and support processes. P2 observed a potential gap in parental understanding of autism, stating, *“I’m not sure how much the parents knew or were educated on how to support her at home.”*

The support strategies identified in this study are illustrated below in Figure 20 using a colour-coded provision mapping technique, organised according to the continuum of support (Support for All, Some, and Few). This visual framework highlights the tiered nature of supports used by teachers in Irish primary schools to accommodate needs of autistic girls. A more detailed breakdown of these strategies, including illustrative quotes, is provided in Appendix N.

Figure 18.

Support strategies aligned with Continuum of Support

- Individualised supports e.g laminated break card
 - Individualised sensory box
 - Now, Next, Then visual schedule on desk
 - Environmental accommodations e.g quieter space in class
 - Sensory supports e.g ear defenders
 - Individualised movement breaks
 - Low Arousal Technique
 - Sensory breaks with SET/SNA
 - Use of interest-based materials
 - Supporting using special interest
 - Carefully assigned roles in group work
 - Adjusting expectations e.g not demanding eye contact
 - Social stories
 - Therapy dog support (e.g with transitions)
 - Parental involvement – ensuring consistency across environments e.g visual schedule
 - Collaboration with SLT/OT/Psychologist/Art therapist/Play therapist
 - External assessments
 - Mindset of ‘supporting’ not ‘fixing’
 - Proactive v reactive approach
 - Summer provision programme
 - Teacher handover insights
 - Clear communication (especially around change)
- Emotional regulation groups
 - Social groups using ‘Fun Friends’ and ‘Friends for life’
 - Social groups with games of interest e.g Lego club, chess club
 - Collaboration with SNA’s (group movement breaks/ knowing needs)
 - Collaboration with SET
 - Indirect and unnamed consultations with NEPS psychologists
 - Use of sensory tools and calm corner with weighted blanket
- Whole class visual timetables and consistent routines
 - Consistency with calming preferred subjects (art, music, drama)
 - Whole class movement breaks for regulation
 - Extension activities for early finishers
 - Supporting interests using thematic content
 - Building rapport with all students
 - Strengths-based teaching approaches
 - Neurodiversity movement – creating an accepting environment e.g LEANS curriculum, As I Am supports, Middletown Centre for Autism.
 - Wellbeing practices e.g breathing, positive self talk etc.
 - Whole school initiatives e.g Friends for Life, Zones of Regulation
 - Quiet Zone on yard
 - Fostering culture of inclusion and acceptance
 - Minding Buddies initiatives

3.3.3 RQ 3 – FACTORS ‘What factors enable or hinder effective recognition and support, including role of EP?’

In response to Research Question 3, the enablers to recognising and supporting autistic girls will be presented first, followed by the barriers identified by participants.

3.3.3.1 Collaboration with others.

3.3.3.1.1 Collaboration with school staff.

Input from the school’s Special Education Teacher (SET), SNA’s and previous class teacher provided continuity of support and recognition of the student’s challenges. As a newly qualified teacher (NQT), P2 relied on experienced colleagues for guidance, stating, “The more senior teachers advised me on what had worked for her before.” This highlights the dependence on institutional knowledge for recognising less overt cases of autism. Participant 1 shared that when they were unsure about how to proceed with a suspected case of autism, they sought support from more experienced colleagues. She shared, “I was kind of relying on my colleagues with more experience then to get information around...where to get the application forms,” which illustrates the importance of mentorship and collaboration in the school setting.

3.3.3.1.2 Collaboration with School Leadership.

Many teachers reflected on the supportive school environment and in particular support and advice from school leaders. P2 credited the principal and senior staff with cultivating a culture of care, stating, “*They showed us how to cater for every child as best as possible*”. Participant 3 reflected how strong support from school leadership facilitated timely assessments: “*The principal used school funds for private assessments to ensure timely support and to get her a place in the autism class that was opening in our school.*” Effective recognition and support were more prevalent in schools with strong leadership and a culture of collaboration. Schools

that integrated autism awareness into staff training and encouraged communication between teachers, SETs and SNAs were better equipped to support autistic girls. *"Having an autism class in our school meant that every teacher had some level of understanding. It made a huge difference in how we approached support"* (P4).

Figure 19.

Reflective Box 5

Reflective Box 5: The Need for Diagnostic Labels

Reflecting on our current needs-led model in schools, particularly through the lens of the Continuum of Support, I have often heard the view that a formal diagnosis is not necessary for a child to access appropriate supports. However, this interview challenged that perspective. In this case, an autism diagnosis was urgently sought not simply for understanding the child's needs, but as a prerequisite to secure a place in an autism class, where the school believed they could best support her. This highlighted a tension between the ideals of a needs-based approach and the practical realities of resource allocation, where diagnostic labels still play a critical role in gatekeeping access to specialised provisions.

3.3.3.1.3 Collaboration using documentation.

Access to the student's educational records and prior teacher insights facilitated a basic understanding of student's needs. Student Support Plans facilitated teacher collaboration and the monitoring of student's progress. Participant 7 described the process of starting with a Classroom Support Plan and progressing to a School Support Plan when needed: *"We reviewed the Classroom Support Plan after 12 weeks...there were still some difficulties, and that's when the*

SET got involved,” indicating a structured approach to implementing support based on ongoing assessment and review. This approach aligns well with the Continuum of Support framework, demonstrating a comprehensive, tiered approach to supporting autistic girls in a mainstream classroom.

3.3.3.1.4 Collaboration with other schools for transitions.

P2 worked closely with the secondary school to ensure the student’s needs were communicated and her social connections maintained. They stated, *“We arranged for her friends to be in the same class group...this was important to avoid isolation.”*

3.3.3.1.5 Collaboration with the psychologist.

Consultation with NEPS psychologists provided valuable guidance with participant 1 explaining, *“She [the psychologist] just really validated my concerns...that gave me the confidence then...to chat to the parents,”* underlining the importance of professional validation in shaping teachers’ approach. Additionally, NEPS psychologists were noted as essential in offering professional guidance, though their limited availability often delayed support. Teachers valued recommendations from the NEPS psychologist, describing the experience as *“very supportive and collaborative.”* Participant 5 reflected how her approach to supporting the child changed after her consultation with the psychologist *“Our NEPS psychologist was instrumental. After observing her, she said, ‘You need to start supporting her as if she has autism, even before the official diagnosis’”* (P5).

Figure 20.*Reflective Box 6****Reflective Box: ‘Reflecting on the Role of the EP: The Power of Support and Understanding’***

Engaging in these interviews really made me realise the power and positive influence we can have on a child's educational trajectory as an Educational Psychologist. Simply by completing one observation of the child and a consultation with staff helped to change the teachers' lens on the child and start implementing new supports. I used to feel a sense of frustration around the perceived limitations of NEPS service provision, particularly when it came to diagnostic capacity. At times, it seemed that the focus was primarily on recognising learning needs such as dyslexia, and this perspective was often echoed by schools who questioned why autism assessments couldn't also be addressed more readily within the same framework. However, hearing this story shifted my outlook. It gave me a renewed sense of hope for my future role as an educational psychologist and reminded me of the meaningful impact I can have—not only through assessment, but by empowering school staff to better understand and support the diverse needs of their students.

3.3.3.2 Training and Continual Professional Development (CPD)***3.3.3.2.1 Impact of Further Education and Training.***

Participant 3 completed a postgraduate certificate in autism, which she described as transformative, stating, “The course was hugely beneficial...It taught me to change my perception of things, to kind of look beyond the behaviour and look at the function behind it.”

This shows how further education can enhance understanding and equip teachers with more tools to identify and support autistic students. Courses that specialise in autism were instrumental in

enhancing teacher confidence: "GCAS was very practical, teaching strategies like visual schedules and gave me great confidence in supporting students." Another participant also highlighted the value of additional learning, stating, *"I've since read up actually Middletown Centre for Autism... So I feel like I really had to put in the work I suppose on my end to try and gain that knowledge that I didn't have."*

Figure 21.

Reflective Box 7

Reflective Box: Teacher Confidence, Referral Pathways and Training

I am feeling extremely motivated and reassured after conducting interview with this participant. It was so interesting to hear about her experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls in the mainstream classroom. One thing that struck me is how this teacher's confidence levels and knowledge developed over time due to her own motivation to research and learn more but also through engaging with other professionals. This included the SNA, SET, school principal, NEPS psychologist as well as discussions with parents. It was so interesting to learn of all the factors that were at play in the successful recognition and support of this autistic girl. This interview confirmed my own thoughts that there is a gap in initial teacher education around what exactly teachers should do if they have concerns for a child and in particular around referral pathways. I was surprised to hear the school principal was also not sure of how to advise this teacher about referral pathways. However, on reflection this teacher was fortunate to have input from NEPS as it sounded like the psychologist played a vital role in validating teachers concerns, signposting referral pathways and resources, as well as advising on the classroom support plan.

3.3.3.2.2 *Tools and Resources.*

Teachers emphasised that access to reliable resources and effective signposting played a crucial role in their ability to support autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. One participant noted the importance of sourcing accurate information stating, *"I feel like there's a lot of misinformation online, I suppose, about autism. So it's really important where you get that information from as well that it's kind of reliable."* (P1) To ensure they were using evidence-based strategies, teachers frequently referred to trusted resources such as the 'As I Am' website, *Autism Good Practice Guidelines*, *NCSE documents*, and the *Autistica website*. Further resources, such as the *Middletown Centre for Autism*, were also referenced as valuable tools in enhancing educators' understanding and application of autism-friendly strategies. Participant 3 shared how she learned about DSM – 5 (APA, 2013) on the autism course and used this tool to support their observations: *"I knew to refer to the DSM-5 and tick off characteristics I was seeing."* This proactive engagement with professional guidelines and research-backed materials ensured that teachers were not only equipped with practical strategies but also had the confidence to advocate for appropriate support structures within their schools. The ability to signpost parents and colleagues towards trusted sources of information further enhanced collaboration, creating a more supportive environment for autistic girls. These findings highlight the critical role of continuous professional learning and the use of evidence-based resources in effectively recognising and supporting autistic girls.

3.3.3.3 **Challenges and Limitations in the Mainstream Classroom**

3.3.3.3.1 *Resource Limitations and Systemic Constraints.*

The teacher spoke about the challenge of limited resources, such as the availability of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), and high pupil-teacher ratios, stating, *"It's really hard when*

you're 1 teacher and there is...between 20 to 30 children in front of you," indicating systemic challenges in providing individualised support. Lack of sufficient SNAs affected support: *"The school has only three SNAs for 540 children."*

A significant barrier referred to by teachers was the lengthy wait times for public assessments and the difficulty of prioritising needs within limited resources, reflecting broader systemic issues that affect timely support. Limited availability of NEPS psychologists and external therapies hindered the process: *"We had to rely on private assessments due to long waiting times for public services."* Long waiting times for public assessments and inconsistent external support: *"We waited a full year for an inconclusive public assessment."* Teachers noted that families who pursued private assessments often received faster diagnoses, but financial constraints made this inaccessible for many. *"By the time we got her diagnosis, she was in second class. We had suspected it since junior infants, but the waitlists were just too long"* (P6).

3.3.3.3.2 Need for specialised training and whole school approaches.

Additionally, a lack of teacher professional learning on recognising autism in girls contributed to delays in recognition and support. P2 acknowledged a lack of training tailored to recognising autism in girls, stating, *"Most examples in my training were male-centred...girls slip through the cracks."* Participant 9 highlighted the lack of CPD opportunities in school saying, *"We never had any like whole school or...whole staff training or anything like that,"* and advocated for more training opportunities, particularly around the unique presentation of autism in girls.

3.3.3.3.3 Confusion with Referral Pathways.

Another teacher described the recognition and support seeking process as being challenging due to a lack of adequate training, particularly in relation to referral pathways or how

to access further support for an assessment. She stated, *“I really felt ill-equipped in that sense...I really didn't know anything about the referral process,”* emphasising how she had to depend on colleagues for information regarding assessment and referral pathways. She also shared her realisation that initial teacher professional learning did not sufficiently cover the recognition of autism, especially in girls.

3.3.3.3.4 Teacher's confidence.

She reflected on her own feelings of uncertainty, saying, *“I was like, oh well, I'm just a teacher, I'm not qualified to say if I think it might be autism,”* capturing the emotional challenges faced by educators who feel ill-prepared to navigate these complex situations. *“Some teachers are afraid to say anything because they're not sure if they're just picking out small things.”*

3.4 Discussion

The following section presents a discussion on the key findings from this research, in relation to the three research questions posed and in the context of existing literature in the field. The strengths, limitations and implications of the current study will also be outlined.

3.4.1 RQ 1- RECOGNITION- What are teachers' experiences of recognising autistic girls in mainstream primary school settings?

3.4.1.1 Challenges in Recognising Autistic Girls.

A key finding of this study was the delayed recognition of autism in girls due to gendered biases and a lack of teacher professional learning on gender differences in autism presentation. Consistent with prior research (Hull et al., 2020; Mandy et al., 2012), teachers reported that autistic girls often exhibit more subtle traits compared to boys, leading to frequent misinterpretations of their struggles as general learning difficulties or emotional regulation

issues. The teachers' reflections align with theories of "masking" (Dean et al., 2017), wherein autistic girls consciously or unconsciously camouflage their difficulties to fit in socially, further complicating recognition. Teacher alluded to those 'compensatory behaviours' as described by Dean et al. (2017) appearing social by remaining in close proximity to the group and weaving in and out of activities, which appeared to mask their social challenges.

3.4.1.2 Delayed recognition and bias.

Research investigating the discrepancy in autism diagnosis between males and females has highlighted a bias against recognising autism in females (Lai et al., 2015). Findings from the current study provide further evidence of this bias, as several teachers acknowledged having an unconscious bias that led them to overlook autistic traits in girls. Many teachers reflected that they had previously associated autism with more "stereotypical" male presentations and, as a result, did not initially recognise autistic traits in their female students. This concurs with findings from vignette-based study by Whitlock et al. (2020) where primary school educational staff were more likely to identify autism in males than females and were more sensitive to the male phenotype. Although diagnostic bias against autistic females has been acknowledged in existing literature, the mechanisms underlying this bias have remained unclear. Previous qualitative research with late-diagnosed autistic women suggested that bias may occur at the point of referral, leading to delayed or missed diagnoses (Bargiela et al., 2016). The current study reinforces this finding, as teachers reflected that their initial assumptions about autism influenced how they perceive needs and influenced their support seeking or referral processes. Some educators noted that they had not considered certain students as potentially autistic until much later in their school years, realising in hindsight that they had overlooked key indicators. This bias may stem from expectancy bias, wherein professionals are influenced by prevailing

stereotypes as research suggests that when a condition is more frequently diagnosed in one gender, professionals may unconsciously develop gendered expectations regarding its presentation (Kreiser & White, 2014). The well-documented higher prevalence rates of autism in males, along with theories such as the 'Extreme Male Brain' hypothesis (Baron-Cohen, 2002), may have reinforced the misconception that autism is primarily a male condition. Consequently, teachers' perceptions of autism were shaped by these stereotypes, leading them to overlook girls who did not fit the traditional male-centred profile of autism.

3.4.1.3 Gender differences in autism presentation.

The study revealed that autistic girls often excel in certain areas in the classroom environment while facing significant social and sensory challenges in other areas. This echoes previous research indicating that autistic girls may appear highly capable in structured classroom environments but struggle with peer relationships, unstructured social settings, and sensory sensitivities (Rynkiewicz & Lucka, 2015). Teachers described girls who formed intense, selective friendships and exhibited high levels of distress when routines were disrupted. These findings suggest that standard diagnostic criteria, which emphasise overt social communication difficulties, may not fully capture the experiences of autistic girls, leading to their underdiagnosis (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). Additionally, teachers observed a pattern of "internalised distress," where girls who appeared well-adjusted in school exhibited significant emotional dysregulation at home, or as one teacher referred to 'After School Restraint Collapse'. This aligns with research highlighting the discrepancy between school and home behaviours in autistic children (Sedgewick et al., 2016). The findings emphasise the need for multi-informant assessments, incorporating parental insights alongside school observations to ensure a more holistic understanding of autistic girls' experiences.

3.4.1.4 Parental Involvement.

The role of parental involvement in early recognition was also emphasised. Existing studies have explored parental roles in autism diagnosis (Sheldrick et al., 2017), however the current study specifically highlights the variability in parental involvement which ranges from proactive advocacy to reluctance due to fear of stigma or past negative experiences. In cases where parents actively pursued assessments, early supports were more feasible. However, some parents hesitated due to concerns about labelling or scepticism about post-diagnostic supports. These findings reinforce the existing discourse on the double-edged nature of parental involvement in autism identification (Cridland et al., 2014). Notably, schools that encouraged open communication with parents were more successful in securing early support for autistic girls, suggesting that parental collaboration is a crucial aspect of effective identification. This nuanced perspective adds depth to our understanding of how family dynamics shape autism recognition and support.

Donohue and Tynan (2025) further illuminate this complexity through their systematic review on parent-coaching interventions, which found a notable underrepresentation of fathers in early autism support strategies. Despite evidence showing the potential benefits of paternal engagement such as improved child communication outcomes and reduced maternal stress, fathers remain largely absent from intervention research and practice. This gap highlights the need for more inclusive participation of both parents, in particular fathers, in supporting young autistic children. Furthermore, findings resonate with recent research on the importance of inclusive and collaborative approaches across the broader ecosystem of support for autistic

children. Both sets of findings suggest that effective support is most impactful when all adults linked to the child are involved and informed.

Figure 22.

Reflective Box 8

Reflective Box 8: Reflecting on theme of parental involvement

In my study, teachers often spoke about parental reluctance or hesitancy when it came to pursuing assessments or accepting support. Reading Donohue and Tynan's (2025) paper really opened my eyes to the specific experiences of fathers of autistic children which was something I hadn't fully considered before. Their review highlighted how fathers are often underrepresented in early intervention research and practice, despite their potential to play a valuable role in supporting autistic children. It also made me reflect more personally on my own teaching experience. I now realise that I often defaulted to communicating primarily with mothers, rarely engaging fathers or considering their perspectives in any meaningful way. Looking back, I don't think I ever actively involved fathers in learning the strategies I was using in school with the child to support the generalisation of skills at home which now seems like an obvious gap in the support process. In hindsight, I can see that I probably carried an unconscious bias around fathers' parenting capabilities and roles. This paper has challenged those assumptions and reminded me of the importance of inclusive practice. I'm wondering if they may have valuable perspectives on autistic girls that they may not feeling confident or comfortable in voicing to professionals. It's definitely something I'll carry with me in my future role as a psychologist and I will be

more aware of ensuring that both parents feel equally seen, heard, and empowered in supporting their child.

3.4.2 RQ2 – SUPPORT - ‘What are teachers’ experiences of supporting autistic girls in the mainstream primary school settings using the Continuum of Support?’

3.4.2.1 Effective Support Strategies.

This study identified several effective strategies for supporting autistic girls, including structured classroom supports, emotional regulation programs, and appropriate accommodations in the classroom environment. Visual schedules, sensory-friendly environments, and tailored supports were particularly beneficial. Teachers reported that providing predictability through structured routines helped reduce anxiety, consistent with research on the benefits of structured learning environments for autistic students (McCurdy & Cole, 2014). These findings align closely with those of Tynan and Davy (2021), who found that visual schedules were one of the most widely used and valued supports in mainstream classrooms, not only for autistic pupils but for all learners, highlighting the benefits of UDL approaches. Their study also emphasised the importance of the temporal environment, highlighting how routine and predictability can help mitigate anxiety and support task engagement. Social supports, such as social stories and small-group emotional regulation training, were highlighted as essential for addressing friendship challenges and supporting wellbeing. This finding aligns with work by Dean et al. (2017), who argue that explicit social support is crucial for autistic girls, as they may not naturally develop social coping strategies in the same way as their neurotypical peers. However, teachers also noted that by the later years of primary school, autistic girls experienced further challenges with

‘keeping up with their peers’ as the social landscape became increasingly complex, highlighting the need for continued support beyond the initial primary school years.

3.4.2.2 Individualised supports.

Several strategies tailored to individual needs were identified, including providing a clear daily structure, managing transitions, and using clear language. These approaches align with existing literature on effective support for autistic pupils (Leach & Duffy, 2009; Tynan & Davy, 2021). Techniques such as priming (ensuring a child is familiar with a task before it is introduced) and the use of visual cues to support working memory were particularly beneficial (Cook & Ogden, 2021). These strategies resonate with the current findings, which emphasise the importance of structured routines and clear communication in supporting autistic girls in educational settings. Findings of this research also indicate that teachers took great care and pride in getting to know the profile of their student, their preferences and interests which then supported them in adopting strengths-based approaches. Previous research has emphasised the importance of schools recognising students as individuals with unique needs rather than making assumptions about the type and level of support required (Hebron, 2017). Furthermore, Tomlinson et al. (2022) notes the importance of individualising support strategies in collaboration with autistic girls, encompassing the voice of the child, ensuring that supports are tailored to their specific needs, such as psychotherapeutic support and structured friendship programmes. This highlights the necessity of personalised approaches in supporting autistic girls, ensuring supports are tailored to their specific strengths and challenges rather than relying on generalised strategies.

3.4.2.3 Whole School Support.

Findings from the current study highlight the need for whole-school awareness and approaches to ensure autistic girls receive appropriate and effective supports. Teachers noted challenges when collaborating with colleagues who lacked autism awareness, which reinforces the need for a whole-school approach. Roberts and Webster (2020) propose that a comprehensive whole school approach is essential to strengthen the capacity of school leaders and staff in fostering autism-friendly environments, implementing evidence-based strategies, and enhancing outcomes for autistic students. Effective support requires the involvement of all school stakeholders, ensuring consistent implementation of structured environments and adaptations across both classroom and general school settings (Robert & Webster, 2020). A shared foundation of knowledge about autism, along with a positive and inclusive staff mindset, is essential for meaningful collaboration and successful inclusion (Tomlinson et al., 2019). Current findings suggest that a lack of autism awareness among some staff creates barriers to collaboration and consistency in support. To address this, schools must prioritise whole-school training, ensuring all staff are equipped with a shared understanding of strategies needed to implement and uphold the essence of the Continuum of Support effectively.

Findings also indicate that whole-school collaboration is essential to enhance the educational experience and well-being of autistic girls. Whole-school models such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Response to Intervention (RTI), and Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) align with the Continuum of Support by promoting a multi-tiered system of support (Batsche, 2014; Leach, 2018). Importantly, these approaches recognise that high-quality, flexible and proactive teaching strategies at the school-wide level benefit all students, including autistic learners. While restorative practice was not explicitly referenced by teachers in this

study, the emphasis placed on relational approaches, whole-school collaboration, and reflective teaching strongly echoes the principles underpinning restorative education. Moran et al. (2024) emphasise that successful implementation of restorative practice requires a cultural shift that focuses on connection, trust, and mutual respect between teachers and students. Similarly, this study highlights that teachers who felt supported and embedded in collaborative environments were more confident in recognising and responding to the needs of autistic students, particularly girls. The findings align with Moran et al.'s (2024) call for a re-evaluation of the teacher's role, placing value not only on academic outcomes but also on building inclusive, empathetic school communities.

3.4.2.4 Systemic Barriers to Support.

Findings also highlights the systemic challenges that impact effective support for autistic students and the emotional toll on educators. There is a clear need for systemic improvements to ensure equitable and effective support for autistic girls in education settings. Long waitlists for autism assessments delayed formal diagnoses and access to accommodations. These delays disproportionately affected families with limited financial resources, as private assessments were often the only means of securing timely recognition. This finding reflects broader concerns about inequities in autism diagnosis and support access (Pellicano et al., 2014). Teachers face numerous challenges in supporting autistic pupils, especially within large, diverse classrooms, where meeting the needs of all learners can be demanding.

3.4.3 RQ 3 – FACTORS ‘What factors enable or hinder effective recognition and support, including role of EP?’

3.4.3.1 The Role of School Leadership, School Systems and Collaboration.

This study evidenced the importance of strong school leadership and a culture of collaboration in providing effective support. These findings appear to align with the underlying principles of restorative culture such as inclusive leadership, relational understanding of behaviour, and collaborative school environments. Moran et al. (2025) highlight how school leaders play a pivotal role in fostering a restorative culture by modelling relational values, promoting reflective dialogue and encouraging a shift in mindset around behaviour and inclusion. In a similar vein, the current findings show that when schools create space for collaboration, teacher confidence grows and supports for autistic students become more targeted and effective. Therefore, this research echoes calls for systemic, relational approaches to inclusion, reinforcing the potential value of embedding restorative principles more broadly within school culture.

In addition, schools with dedicated autism awareness training and close collaboration between mainstream teachers, SETs, SNAs and psychologists demonstrated better outcomes in recognising and supporting autistic girls. Teachers in these schools felt more supported, more confident in adapting their strategies and advocating for early supports. This finding is consistent with studies emphasising the role of inclusive leadership in supporting neurodivergent students (Roberts & Simpson, 2016). Furthermore, findings from this study highlight that structured observations, collaboration among school staff, and proactive screening processes contribute to better recognition, advocacy, and timely referrals for students, particularly those with autism. In alignment with these findings, O'Brien (2010) demonstrated that reflective teamwork models where teachers and SNAs engage in joint planning, role clarification and structured communication significantly improved working relationships, clarity of roles, and the quality of support provided to students. Similarly, Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) highlight the

importance of teacher collaboration in fostering inclusive education, however, while teachers recognised the benefits of collaboration in improving student outcomes, challenges such as time constraints, inconsistent planning, and limited professional development hindered its effective implementation. Addressing these challenges through better planning and professional training could enhance inclusive teaching and support systems in schools.

3.4.3.2 The Role of the Psychologist.

The findings of this study highlight the important role of Educational Psychologists (EPs) in supporting teachers to identify and respond to the needs of autistic girls. Many teachers reported that consultations with an EP were instrumental in shaping their approach to students, particularly when exploring if there was any underlying issues. These discussions provided teachers with validation and reassurance, helping them to process the subtle signs they observed and determine whether further action was needed. This aligns with O'Farrell and Kinsella (2018) in the Irish context, who found that consultation can enhance teacher confidence and build capacity in both educators and parents. Given that consultation is a fundamental skill for educational psychologists, they are ideally positioned to develop effective partnerships with school staff and collaborate in supporting autistic learners (BPS, 2023; SEED, 2002). Mitchell and Sutherland (2020) conceptualise EP consultations as a process that empowers teachers, positioning them as the "leader of the orchestra" rather than working in isolation. This collaborative model reduces the professional isolation that can sometimes arise in education settings, ensuring teachers feel supported and confident in their decision-making when working with autistic girls. Teachers also emphasised the value of EP input on the Continuum of Support and Student Support Plans, which helped them structure supports more effectively. This guidance ensured that support was appropriately tiered, from whole-school strategies to targeted

and individualised supports. These findings suggest that regular and structured consultations with EPs can enhance teacher knowledge, increase confidence in recognising autism, and ultimately lead to earlier and more appropriate support for autistic girls in schools.

3.4.3.3 Role of the Teacher

The findings indicate that teachers play a vital role in the pre-identification stage, where subtle or context-specific needs first become apparent. Through their close, daily interactions with students, teachers are well-placed to observe differences in social engagement, communication and sensory processing that may not yet have been formally recognised. Upon recognising needs that may be characteristic of autism, the teacher's role includes opening a dialogue with relevant stakeholders, primarily within the school team and with parents or caregivers. This early collaboration is essential to ensure that the child's strengths and challenges are understood in context and that any necessary supports can be put in place promptly. Equally important is the teacher's role in actively listening to parents' concerns, which may offer valuable insight into the child's behaviours and needs across home and school environments.

3.4.3.4 Teacher Professional Learning (TPL).

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for increased training and awareness among educators to recognise the diverse ways autism presents in girls and foster inclusive support systems. While this research is situated within the Irish education context, studies from other jurisdictions highlight similar challenges faced by teachers in recognising and supporting autistic girls. In the UK, teachers have expressed uncertainty around identifying autistic traits in girls due to differences in social presentation and

coping strategies (Cook et al., 2021). In Australia, research by Dean et al. (2017) highlights the importance of teacher professional learning on gender differences in autism, noting that a lack of awareness can delay access to appropriate supports. Similarly, U.S.-based studies have pointed to the need for gender-informed approaches in teacher professional development (Allely, 2019). These international findings echo the issues identified in the Irish context, suggesting a global need to better equip teachers to recognise and respond to the nuanced presentations of autism in girls.

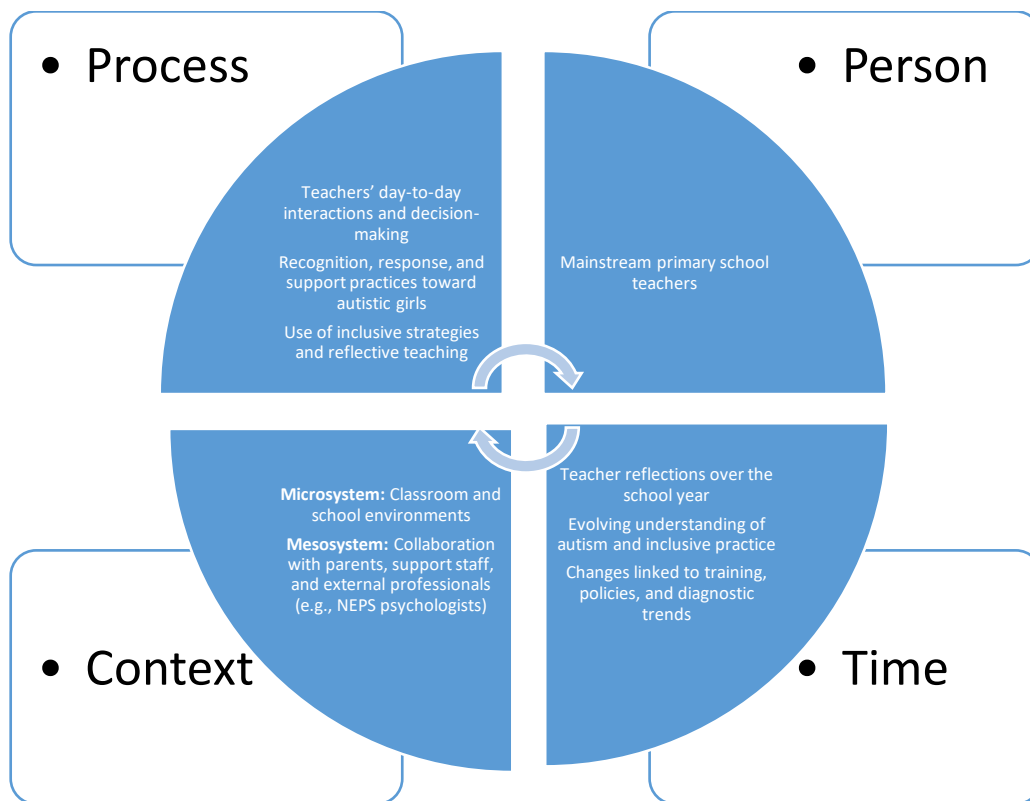
In the Irish education system, there is a strong emphasis on inclusion and ensuring that autistic pupils have access to appropriate supports within mainstream school settings. Therefore, it is essential that all teachers have a clear understanding of what inclusion means in practice within their school and that they receive adequate training and resources to support autistic pupils effectively (Howe & Griffin, 2021). These findings highlight the need for further development of inclusive strategies, particularly regarding the recognition and support of autistic girls whose needs may be overlooked due to differences in how they present. Moreover, inconsistent teacher professional learning on autism in girls was a major limitation. Many teachers expressed that their initial professional development had focused primarily on male presentations of autism, leaving them ill-equipped to recognise more subtle, gendered manifestations. This echoes prior calls for educational policy reforms that integrate gender-specific autism training into teacher education (Loomes et al., 2017). Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) consists of meaningful activities that support teachers in reflecting on and improving their practice (Rawdon et al., 2020). In Ireland, TPL is self-directed rather than compulsory, allowing teachers to take responsibility for their own professional development. Many of the teachers in the current study were highly motivated and sought additional training in

areas where they lacked confidence. The Teaching Council plays a key role in promoting and researching Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and TPL and has developed Cosán, a national framework outlining professional standards for teachers in Ireland (Teaching Council, 2015). Providing comprehensive professional learning opportunities for all would not only enhance teachers' confidence and self-efficacy but also contribute to more inclusive and supportive school environments for autistic girls in Irish primary education.

Table 14 below presents the findings from the study on the factors that influence teachers' experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls structured within the PPCT Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Please see Appendix O for further information on reflections in relation to factors influencing recognition and support aligned with theoretical frameworks.

Table 14.

Factors influencing teachers experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls structured within the PPCT model.



3.4.4 Implications for Diagnostic Practices and Policy.

Findings from the current research have significant implications for diagnostic practices, particularly in recognising camouflaging or masking behaviours in autistic girls. Many teachers reported that while autistic girls appeared to be somewhat engaged and sociable in class, they

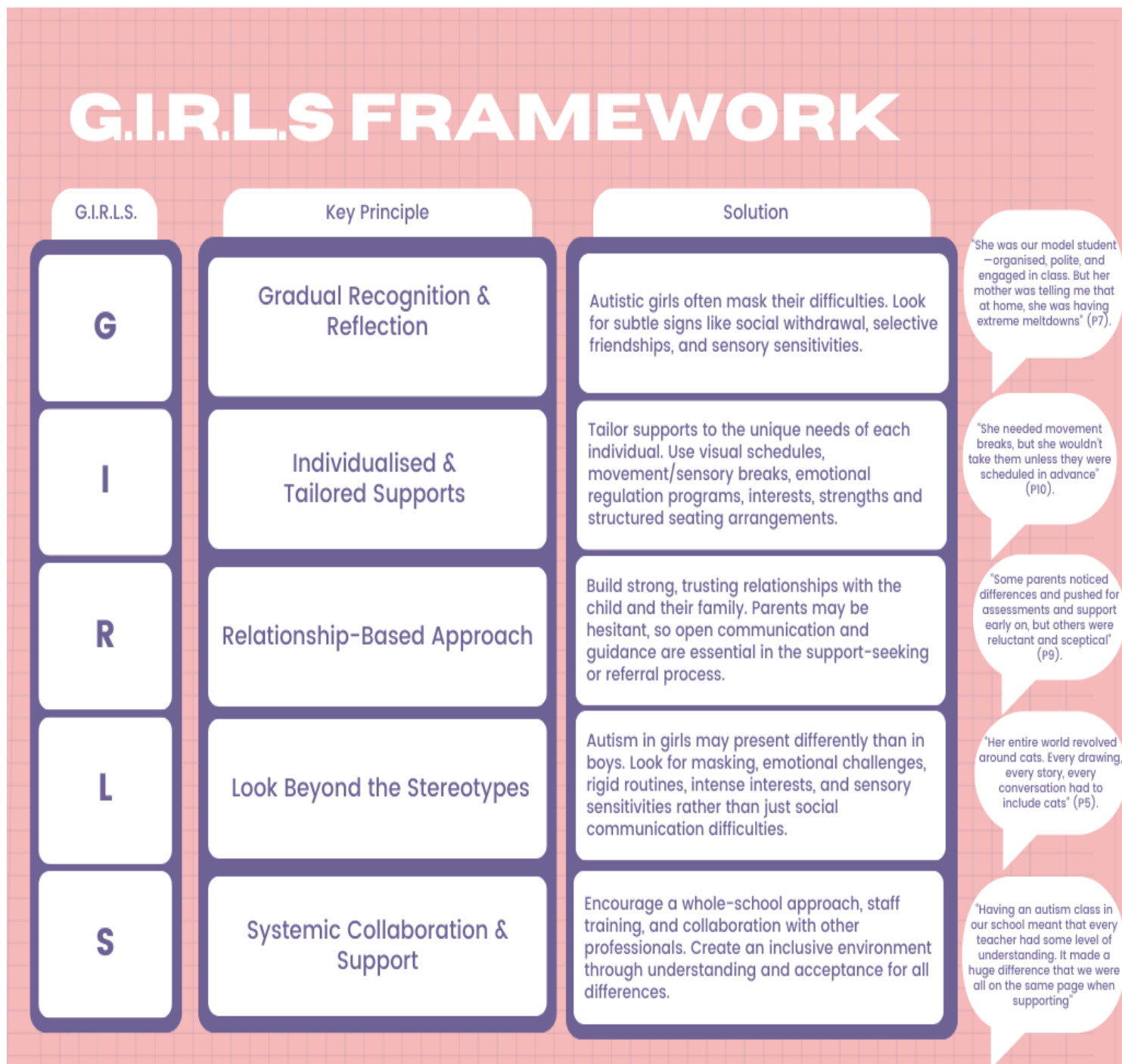
later learned from parents that these students were experiencing severe emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and distress at home. Camouflaging, a complex coping mechanism allows autistic individuals to compensate for social difficulties and conceal autistic traits in structured environments such as school (Attwood, 2007). However, while masking may help them blend in socially, it also has various negative consequences, including increased mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. Despite its significant impact, current diagnostic frameworks do not adequately account for camouflaging behaviours in autism identification. The DSM-5 criteria require "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts" and "restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities." However, findings from this research suggest that many autistic girls do not exhibit these traits consistently across different settings due to masking. As a result, teachers may not observe overt social difficulties, leading to delayed recognition and potential misdiagnosis. Additionally, some autistic girls reported camouflaging their interests, making their restricted or repetitive behaviours less apparent, further complicating the diagnostic process. Given these challenges, there is a need for greater awareness of mental health as a key diagnostic factor, particularly for autistic girls. Early identification is crucial in ensuring that students receive timely support. Teachers' insights highlight the importance of understanding the hidden struggles of autistic girls, advocating for more nuanced diagnostic criteria that acknowledge masking behaviours and their mental health implications. Similarly, review findings from Munroe and Dunleavy (2023) call for the revision of diagnostic tools in response to new understandings of how autism presents differently in females. These findings emphasise the need for teacher professional learning on recognising camouflaging and for diagnostic professionals to consider emotional and behavioural

regulation across different environments rather than relying solely on observable traits in structured settings.

3.4.5 Proposed framework for Recognising & Supporting Autistic Girls

Based on the findings from this research, the G.I.R.L.S. Framework was developed as a practical tool for educators to provide a structured approach, emphasising gradual recognition, individualised supports, relationship-building, avoiding stereotypes and systemic collaboration. This practical acronym aims to empower educators with key strategies for recognising and supporting autistic girls (see Figure 25).

Figure 23.

Framework for Recognising and Supporting Autistic Girls

3.4.6 Study Strengths and Limitations.

This study has a number of strengths and limitations that should be taken into account. A summary is provided in Table 15, with a more in-depth analysis available in the Critical Review Paper.

Table 15.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

Strengths	Limitations
Rich Qualitative Data: The use of reflexive thematic analysis allowed for deep exploration of teachers' lived experiences and reflections.	Small Sample Size: The findings are based on a limited number of participants, which may affect generalisability.
Focus on Under-Researched Area: The study addresses a significant gap by focusing on teachers' experiences with autistic girls in mainstream primary settings in Irish context.	Geographical Limitation: Data may be context-specific to particular school environments or regions.
Robust Conceptual Framework: Incorporating the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and the Continuum of Support model provided a multidimensional lens.	Potential selection bias: As purposive sampling is non-random and participation was voluntary, participants may have had a stronger interest in autism-related education, potentially influencing the diversity of perspectives.

<p>Insight into Real-World Practice: Teachers provided practical, first-hand accounts of recognition and support strategies.</p>	<p>Potential Response Bias: Participants may have given socially desirable responses or underreported challenges.</p>
<p>Emphasis on Gendered Presentation: The study adds valuable insights into how autism manifests differently in girls, challenging existing norms.</p>	<p>Retrospective Reflections: Some insights are based on teachers' retrospective realisations, which may be subject to memory bias.</p>
<p>Highlights Role of Collaboration: Strong emphasis on the impact of whole-school culture, leadership, and inter-professional collaboration.</p>	<p>Lack of Student Voice: The perspectives of autistic girls themselves were not included, limiting the depth of understanding.</p>
<p>Practical Implications: Offers specific, actionable strategies that can inform teacher professional learning and school practices.</p>	<p>No Longitudinal Data: The study captures a snapshot in time without tracking changes or outcomes over time.</p>

3.4.7 Conclusion.

The findings of this study highlight the complexities surrounding the recognition and support of autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. Teachers face significant challenges in recognising autism in girls due to subtle and often masked traits, systemic biases in diagnostic frameworks and gaps in professional training. Moreover, the effectiveness of school-based support is influenced by factors such as limited training, parental involvement, school leadership, and systemic barriers in accessing timely assessments. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature emphasising the gendered differences in autism presentation and the need for

more inclusive and responsive educational strategies. Strengthening teacher education, encouraging parental collaboration and improving systemic support structures are essential steps toward ensuring that autistic girls receive the recognition and support they need to thrive in educational settings.

4 Critical Review and Impact Statement

4.1 Introduction

This chapter critically analyses the research and its implications for the field of educational psychology. It includes a reflection on the epistemological stance and theoretical perspectives adopted by the researcher, followed by a discussion of the rationale behind the chosen methodology. Strengths, limitations and possible alternative approaches are evaluated, along with a critical appraisal. A personal reflection on the research process highlights new insights and shifts in perspective. To conclude an impact statement is presented, considering the study's contributions to academic research and the professional practice of educational psychologists.

4.2 Reflections on epistemological stance

4.2.1 Strengths of Constructivist Epistemology.

This research is based on a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand individuals' subjective experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This epistemological stance is particularly valuable as it recognises that knowledge can be individually constructed or co-constructed with others (Barger et al., 2018). Furthermore, it assumes that reality is socially constructed, with meaning shaped by individuals through their interactions and interpretations of experiences (Scotland, 2012). This paradigm rejects the notion of a single objective truth, instead embracing a relativist perspective that assumes the existence of multiple, equally valid realities (Mertens, 2015). The study recognised that mainstream primary school teachers had distinct and varied perspectives and experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls using the

Continuum of Support framework, shaped by their personal experiences within their schools (Lodico et al., 2010).

Another advantage of the constructivist paradigm is the active involvement of the researcher, making it a powerful learning framework (Nugroho & Wulandari, 2017). Constructivism emphasises the significance of interaction between the researcher and participants (Ponterotto, 2005). Consequently, the researcher played an active role in ensuring that participants' perspectives were accurately understood (Lodico et al., 2010). The research findings emerged collaboratively through interaction and interpretation between the researcher and participants (Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist researcher employs a qualitative approach, which provides flexibility in research design, allowing for adaptability throughout the study (Ataro, 2020). Furthermore, adopting a social constructivist perspective aligned well with the study's conceptual framework. Both Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006) and Maslow (1970) theories reinforce the idea that knowledge and personal growth are shaped by social and environmental factors, aligning with the social constructivist perspective. This interconnected approach allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals construct meaning within their lived experiences.

4.2.2 Limitations of epistemological stance.

The lack of a universally agreed-upon definition of constructivism and variation in its interpretation is a possible weakness (Ültanir, 2012; Young & Collin, 2004). To address this, the researcher explicitly outlined the fundamental assumptions of this paradigm in both the introduction (see Section 1.3) and the methodology section (see Section 3.2.1). Another critique of the constructivist approach is its rejection of a singular objective reality (Mertens, 2005). Instead, it aims to explore multiple socially constructed realities (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017;

Mertens, 2005). As a result, research questions may evolve throughout the study rather than being firmly established beforehand, necessitating the inclusion of diverse perspectives (Mertens, 2015). Additionally, the constructivist paradigm has been criticised for blending with other paradigms, such as the transformative paradigm (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mertens, 2015). In response to this, the researcher in the present study explicitly identified as a constructivist while also acknowledging the influence of other paradigms on the research (Mertens, 2015).

4.2.3 Alternative epistemological stance.

An alternative epistemological stance the researcher could have adopted is the critical realist paradigm, a relatively new research approach that contrasts with the constructivist paradigm (Haigh et al., 2019). Critical realists maintain that reality is both socially constructed and objectively real (Chan, 2015). Critical realists argue that research should only be replicated when findings can be generalised across different research methods, samples, and populations (Mir & Watson, 2001). A key strength of this paradigm is its aim to understand and explain the complexity of the social world (Haigh et al., 2019). It embraces multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives, ensuring that research is not confined to a single disciplinary lens (Haigh et al., 2019). Unlike constructivism, the critical realist paradigm does not prescribe a specific methodology; instead, researchers are encouraged to use a variety of approaches, with mixed methods being particularly favoured (Sorrell, 2018; Wynn & Williams, 2012).

Although critical realism is increasingly being adopted across disciplines, there remains limited guidance regarding the appropriate research methods to employ (Schiller, 2016; Miller & Tsang, 2011). A notable challenge within this paradigm is the lack of clear protocols for handling contradictory data (Rolfe, 2006). This challenge arose for the researcher when teachers

expressed contrasting perspectives and experiences. Another criticism of this perspective is its assertion that our understanding of reality is inherently biased and that the quality of knowledge is dependent on theoretical frameworks (Sorrell, 2018). Additionally, critical realism posits that individuals can only perceive a limited portion of reality and that knowledge of this reality may be fallible (Wynn & Williams, 2012).

Given these limitations, the critical realist paradigm was rejected as an epistemological position in favour of the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism, unlike critical realism, asserts that multiple realities exist and are shaped by individual experiences and interpretations (Sorrell, 2018). This paradigm recognises that participants construct their understanding of the world by engaging with and reflecting on their lived experiences (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). In this sense, individuals are active creators of their own knowledge, continuously exploring, assessing, and reshaping their understanding based on prior knowledge and new experiences (Bada & Olusegun, 2015).

4.3 Reflections on the Conceptual Framework

4.3.1 Strengths of Conceptual Frameworks.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological model of human development, also known as the PPCT (Process–Person–Context–Time) model, was adopted in this research as it provides a dynamic and multidimensional framework for understanding the multiple influences on teachers' experiences in recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. Unlike Bronfenbrenner's earlier ecological systems theory, which emphasised environmental context, the updated model integrates the significance of proximal processes including the recurring, meaningful interactions between individuals and their environments over time that play a part in

development (Tong & An, 2024). This framework enabled the research to explore key processes such as classroom interactions, collaborative relationships with staff and families and reflective professional practices, while also considering individual teacher characteristics, school-level contexts, systemic barriers, and evolving educational policies. It also supported the analysis of how teachers' actions are shaped not only by models of support (e.g., the Continuum of Support and NEPS guidance) but also by personal factors such as beliefs, motivation, and professional identity, situated within nested environmental systems and changing over time.

In conjunction, Maslow's revised hierarchy of needs (1970) was integrated to examine how both teachers' and autistic students' capacity to engage, support, and thrive are influenced by the fulfilment of psychological, emotional, and social needs. The updated model expands beyond Maslow's earlier five-tier structure to include cognitive, aesthetic and transcendence needs, and moves away from a strictly linear hierarchy, instead recognising that needs may be met in a flexible and overlapping manner depending on context. This theory was especially valuable in highlighting how teachers' ability to recognise and support autistic girls may be compromised if their own needs, such as a sense of professional competence, emotional well-being and collegial support are unmet. Similarly, for autistic girls, classroom inclusion requires attention to fundamental needs for safety, predictability, social belonging and respect, before academic engagement and self-actualisation can be meaningfully supported.

Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive and holistic lens through which to interpret the complexities of inclusive education. The PPCT model emphasises the developmental processes within and across systems, while Maslow's theory provides insight into the motivational and emotional underpinnings of those processes. Moreover, both frameworks align

with the epistemological stance of social constructivism, which posits that knowledge and understanding are constructed through interaction with others and the surrounding environment (Barger et al., 2018). This perspective resonates with Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the reciprocal nature of developmental systems and with Maslow's assertion that individual growth depends on fulfilling relational and psychological needs. In educational contexts, this theoretical alignment supports the view that learning and inclusive practice are shaped by the interplay of context, identity, support and motivation, reinforcing the value of these frameworks in understanding and enhancing teacher and student experiences.

4.3.2 Limitations of Conceptual Frameworks.

While Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological model and Maslow's (1970) revised hierarchy of needs offer valuable and multidimensional perspectives on human development and motivation, both frameworks present certain limitations when applied to the study of teachers' experiences in recognising and supporting autistic girls. One noted challenge of the bioecological model is its conceptual complexity, particularly the difficulty in empirically isolating and measuring the influence of proximal processes in interaction with person characteristics, context, and time (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Furthermore, despite the model's inclusion of the "Person" component, some scholars argue that the framework can still underrepresent the individual's agency, especially in contexts where system-level influences appear dominant (Tudge et al., 2009). In this research, these critiques were addressed by focusing on teachers' personal narratives, reflective practice, and professional decision-making, thereby acknowledging their active role within nested systems of influence.

Similarly, although Maslow's revised model overcomes some criticisms of the original hierarchy by allowing for fluidity and overlap between needs, it can still risk oversimplifying complex, lived experiences, particularly in educational contexts where competing personal, institutional, and social pressures exist. Critics argue that Maslow's model may not fully capture the intersectional and contextual nature of needs (Kenrick et al., 2010), especially for neurodivergent individuals whose needs may manifest in different ways. In this study, the model was therefore used as a reflective guide rather than a rigid framework, recognising that both teachers and autistic girls may simultaneously navigate needs related to safety, belonging, esteem and growth, depending on individual and environmental factors.

In light of these limitations, both frameworks were adapted and applied critically, serving as flexible conceptual tools to scaffold interpretation rather than prescriptive models. This approach allowed for a more nuanced and contextualised exploration of how support is shaped within and across systems and how motivation, identity and inclusion are influenced by the dynamic interplay of personal and environmental factors in mainstream education.

4.3.3 Alternative Conceptual Frameworks.

Several alternative conceptual frameworks were initially considered for this study. Engel's (1977) biopsychosocial model was initially considered as an alternative theoretical framework, particularly given that it aligns with the Continuum of Support and Problem-Solving Process employed by NEPS. Engel's Biopsychosocial Model (1977) examines the interaction between biological, psychological, and social factors in shaping human experiences. While it is a useful model that aligns with the Continuum of Support, it was not adopted as it does not sufficiently account for environmental and systemic influences, which are important factors in

understanding teachers' experiences of supporting autistic girls (Saad et al., 2017). Furthermore, Kranzler et al. (2020) contends that frameworks which look beyond the biopsychosocial factors to integrate and consider further elements offers valuable insight. Therefore, it was determined that EST provided a more comprehensive perspective on how multiple systems interact to shape teachers' experiences.

Another alternative framework was Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which highlights the role of social interaction and cultural tools in learning and development. However, this theory primarily focuses on cognitive development in learners rather than the broader ecological and psychological factors that may be at play (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Ultimately, the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) was chosen for its comprehensive view of proximal processes, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was selected for its focus on psychological well-being, both of which provided a well-rounded lens for exploring the complexities of the current topic.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was also initially considered as a potential conceptual framework for this study, given its holistic, strengths-based, and collaborative approach (Waters & White, 2015). AI focuses on identifying and building upon existing strengths within individuals and organisations rather than highlighting challenges or deficits. It has been widely applied in educational research to facilitate positive change through its 5-D cycle: Definition, Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Sandars & Eaton, 2017). AI assumes that all organisations have elements that function effectively, and that meaningful change can be achieved by amplifying what works well (Hammond, 2013). AI was particularly appealing as the research aimed to collect cases of best practice from teachers who had successfully identified and supported autistic girls and to explore the factors that contributed to this success. However, one

of the key critiques of AI is its overemphasis on the positive, which may lead to overlooking critical obstacles (Grant & Humphries, 2006). Additionally, AI allows greater autonomy for participants in shaping the research focus (Waters & White, 2015), which risked omitting significant areas of inquiry relevant to the study's aims (Dewar & MacBride, 2017). The framework was ultimately rejected as it was recognised that even in cases of best practice, teachers may have encountered challenges. Understanding these difficulties was deemed crucial for informing future progress and shaping policy and practice.

4.4 Methodological Strengths and Weaknesses.

4.4.1 Research Design.

This study adopted a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to studies grounded in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, as it seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning through their lived experiences and interactions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). By employing a qualitative approach, the researcher was able to gather rich, in-depth data, allowing for a deeper understanding of the research questions through direct engagement with participants (Mwita, 2022).

An alternative approach that was considered was a mixed-methods design, which could have incorporated quantitative data to complement the qualitative findings. Employing a mixed-methods strategy, such as an explanatory sequential design, could have enhanced data triangulation and improved the external validity of the study (McGrath, 1981). For example, an initial questionnaire could have been used to assess teachers' awareness of referral pathways and the Continuum of Support, followed by qualitative interviews to explore these practices in

greater depth. This was considered and a questionnaire drafted (see Appendix P). However, this approach was not pursued, as the primary aim of the research was to achieve a deep, interpretative understanding of teachers' perspectives rather than to generalise findings through quantitative measures.

Focus groups were also considered as an alternative approach to individual semi-structured interviews but were not pursued due to practical constraints, as arranging a suitable time and platform for multiple teachers to participate would have been challenging within the scope of this research. Coordinating discussions among teachers with differing schedules and commitments may have also limited participation. However, focus groups could have provided valuable insights, as the group dynamic can encourage discussion, reflection, and the exchange of ideas, potentially leading to a deeper exploration of the topic (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

4.4.2 Sampling Method.

Purposive and snowball/networking sampling was used for the recruitment of primary school teachers with direct experience in teaching and supporting autistic girls in mainstream settings. Purposive sampling allowed for the targeted recruitment of participants with relevant knowledge who could provide rich, experience-based insights relevant to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2014). This ensures that participants are best positioned to discuss the topic which enhances depth and relevance of the findings (Barker et al., 2015). Additionally, current participants were asked to recommend other suitable teachers, and the researcher reached out to teachers within her professional network to aid in recruitment which is referred to as snowball sampling (Gill, 2020). This enabled the researcher to increase recruitment efficiency and access a broader range of perspectives (Gill, 2020).

While this targeted approach ensured data quality and relevance, it also had certain limitations. As purposive sampling is non-random and participation was voluntary, there is a risk of selection bias, as participants who chose to take part may have had a greater interest in autism-related education, potentially influencing the diversity of perspectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). Additionally, snowball sampling relies on existing networks, which may have narrowed the participant pool or led to homogeneity in the sample. A potential limitation of this sampling strategy is that it may lead to the recruitment of like-minded participants who share similar viewpoints or schools, therefore, it is important the researcher is mindful of potential biases in the achieved sample (Barker et al., 2015). To mitigate these limitations, the researcher sought to capture a range of perspectives by including teachers from different schools and backgrounds. However, as participation was voluntary, there is still the possibility that some voices, particularly those of teachers who may have less confidence or knowledge in supporting autistic girls, were underrepresented. Overall, while the sampling strategy effectively captured valuable insights, future research could consider a broader recruitment strategy to enhance the representativeness of the findings.

4.4.3 Data Collection.

This study utilised semi-structured interviews with teachers to explore their experiences in recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. Semi-structured interviews were valuable as they allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, capturing rich, detailed accounts of their experiences, challenges, and insights (Brönnimann, 2022). Furthermore, this method provided the researcher with flexibility to explore participants' responses in greater depth by asking follow-up and unplanned questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

This approach led to the emergence of views and opinions that may not have been anticipated (Barker et al., 2015).

However, as with any methodology, this approach is not without its flaws. As with any interview-based research, self-report bias was a concern, as teachers may have provided socially desirable responses rather than fully candid accounts of their experiences (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). This was particularly relevant when discussing inclusion practices and support for autistic pupils, as there may have been pressure to present their approaches as more aligned with current best practices. To mitigate this, the researcher prioritised building rapport with participants and emphasised confidentiality to encourage honest responses (Brown & Danaher, 2019).

To enhance the dependability and confirmability of the data collection process, a rigorous interview schedule was developed following the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework, which ensured that the interview schedule was well-aligned with the research aims (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). To further enhance the credibility and reliability, a pilot interview was conducted to refine the wording, structure, and timing of questions, ensuring clarity and relevance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The systematic refinement process guided by the IPR Framework helped to improve the clarity, consistency, and depth of responses, ultimately strengthening the rigour of the qualitative research (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Additionally, field testing provided an opportunity to assess the practical aspects of conducting interviews, including technological reliability and participant engagement.

Conducting interviews online comes with both strengths and challenges, however, Brown and Danaher (2019) highlight that, regardless of whether interviews are conducted face-to-face or virtually, it is essential for the researcher to build rapport with participants to facilitate open and meaningful discussions. While virtual interviews do not fully replicate in-person

interactions, communication remained effective and engaging, ensuring that participants could share their experiences freely. The online format of the study allowed the researcher to overcome geographic limitations in participant recruitment, enabling access to a broader pool of teachers and enhancing the sample size's representativeness across the country (Carpenter et al., 2019). Conducting interviews online also provided greater flexibility in scheduling and improved cost and time efficiency. However, online interviews present challenges, including a reduced ability to observe non-verbal cues and the potential for technical issues, such as unstable internet connections which may hamper rapport with the interviewee (Tomás & Bidet, 2024).

Another limitation was that questions relating to teaching and support practices may have assumed familiarity and memory of how the Continuum of Support was used throughout the process. In cases where teachers lacked awareness or could not recall exact details related to using this framework, broader questions were used to explore their general methods of supporting autistic girls. Additionally, while interviews provided depth of insight, they lacked quantitative data that could have broadened the findings. A mixed-methods approach was considered, potentially incorporating vignettes, similar to the approach utilised by Whitlock et al (2020). Vignettes can be effective in eliciting context-specific responses and exploring participants' perceptions and decision-making processes (Peabody et al., 2004). Vignettes have high internal validity given that stimuli and conditions remain constant for all participants which reduces variability, thus responses are attributable to the teacher alone (Norcini, 2004). However, this approach was deemed inappropriate for the study due to concerns about authenticity and applicability (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010). Vignettes present hypothetical scenarios, which may not fully capture the complexity and individuality of real-life teaching experiences, limiting the depth of insight into how teachers identify and support autistic girls. Additionally,

there was a risk that participants might respond hypothetically, for example, responding may be more idealistic and perceptive than in real-life practice (Norcini, 2004). Given these limitations, semi-structured interviews were selected as they allowed for richer, more authentic accounts of teachers' experiences in mainstream primary schools, while allowing flexibility and depth in exploring key themes.

4.4.4 Data Analysis.

Reflexive thematic analysis was selected to analyse the data from the qualitative interviews due to its flexibility and alignment with the social constructivist approach adopted in this study. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of how teachers construct and interpret their experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. Reflexive thematic analysis enabled the researcher to identify patterns of meaning while recognising that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions and reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The use of reflexive thematic analysis was a key strength of this research, as it allowed for a nuanced and contextualised understanding of teachers' perspectives, acknowledging the multiple realities that exist within educational settings. Another strength of the current study was the use of NVivo which is widely recognised for enhancing the organisation, efficiency, and transparency of qualitative data analysis, particularly in large and complex datasets (Zamawe, 2015). The software facilitated systematic coding and retrieval of themes, ensuring a rigorous and structured approach to thematic analysis.

An alternative method of analysis considered was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which could have provided a detailed, idiographic exploration of individual teachers' experiences (Smith, 1996). However, IPA has been criticised for its strong focus on language, which may have posed challenges in interpreting concise or less detailed responses

from participants (Noon, 2018). Given these considerations, reflexive thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate approach, ensuring that the findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences and the broader social contexts in which they operate.

4.4.5 Ethical Considerations.

As previously outlined in Section 3.2.13, ethical approval for this research study was granted by Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) in March 2024. A number of ethical considerations were taken into account before conducting this research. Punch (2005) highlights the importance of ensuring that research is meaningful for all involved, not just the researcher. In this study, careful consideration was given to ensuring that participation was valuable for teachers while avoiding any potential for marginalisation or disempowerment in discussions surrounding the recognition and support of autistic girls. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the qualitative interviews took place, ensuring they fully understood the purpose, process, and potential implications of the study (Creswell, 2003).

In accordance with the PSI Code of Professional Ethics (2019) and the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021), strict measures were taken to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection throughout the study. Participants were explicitly reminded to avoid disclosing any identifiable information, such as the names of children, schools, or colleagues, during the interviews. This measure was implemented to uphold confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring that all data collected remained non-identifiable and in accordance with ethical guidelines. Where necessary, any inadvertently mentioned identifying details were removed during transcription to further safeguard participant and institutional privacy (BPS, 2021; PSI, 2019). Given that teachers were sharing insights into their schools' approaches to recognising and supporting autistic girls, ethical considerations also included evaluating the need for additional

permissions from school leadership. However, individual teachers participated voluntarily, and all necessary precautions were taken to ensure their confidentiality and autonomy in contributing to the research (BPS, 2021; PSI, 2019).

The study also acknowledged the time constraints faced by teachers, ensuring that interviews were scheduled at convenient times to minimise disruption to their workload. Conducting qualitative interviews is increasingly seen as a moral inquiry (Kvale, 2007), and as such, the research process was designed to be respectful, non-intrusive, and sensitive to participants' experiences. Steps were taken to ensure that teachers felt comfortable sharing their views, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Finally, ethical considerations extended to language use, with the research adopting a strengths-based approach that aligned with inclusive and respectful terminology when discussing autism and neurodiversity (Hartman et al., 2023). This ensured that the study was conducted in a manner that was both ethical and aligned with current best practices in autism research and education.

4.4.6 Critical Appraisal.

The methodological quality of the current study was assessed by using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist for Qualitative Research (2024). The checklist evaluates key aspects of qualitative research, ensuring rigour and credibility in the findings. A detailed assessment of the study against CASP criteria is outlined in Table 16, and further details can be seen in Appendix Q.

Table 16.*CASP Checklist for Qualitative Research*

Section A: Are the results valid?

Clear statement of aims

The study had a well-defined research aim, which was to explore teachers' experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools. The importance and relevance of the research were justified, particularly in relation to the underrepresentation of autistic girls in research and education policy.

Appropriateness of qualitative methodology

Given the study's focus on teachers' lived experiences and socially constructed understandings, qualitative research was an appropriate methodological choice. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm supported an exploration of subjective experiences and contextual influences, aligning well with the use of semi-structured interviews.

Research design suitability

The research design was clearly justified. Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow for depth and flexibility, enabling participants to discuss their experiences in rich detail while allowing the researcher to probe for further insights. The decision to employ reflexive thematic analysis aligned with the interpretivist approach, ensuring that patterns of meaning and shared understandings could be identified.

Recruitment strategy

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to ensure participants had relevant experience

in working with autistic girls in mainstream settings. This strategy enhanced the credibility of the findings by ensuring the inclusion of teachers with first-hand insights. However, self-selection bias may have influenced the sample, as teachers most interested or confident in discussing autism may have been more likely to participate.

Data collection methods

The study clearly explained the semi-structured interview process, including the use of the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework to ensure question clarity and alignment with research aims. Interviews were conducted virtually, which provided flexibility and accessibility, but also presented limitations such as reduced ability to observe non-verbal cues.

Researcher-participant relationship

The researcher acknowledged their active role in the study and the potential for bias in interpretation, a key consideration within the constructivist paradigm. Reflexivity was maintained through memo-writing and reflective journaling, ensuring that pre-existing assumptions were critically examined.

Section B: What are the results?

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained, and the study adhered to ethical guidelines, including informed consent, confidentiality, and participant anonymity. The researcher also considered potential distress by ensuring that participants could withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Rigour of data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was clearly described, with a transparent coding process supported by NVivo software. Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of patterns in teachers' experiences, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the data. The researcher demonstrated critical engagement by acknowledging contradictory data and ensuring a balance of perspectives in the analysis.

Clarity of findings

Findings were presented clearly and systematically, with direct quotes from participants to support interpretations. The discussion section linked findings to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, enhancing the credibility and transferability of the results.

Section C: Will the results help locally?

Value of the research

The study contributes valuable insights into an under-researched area, providing implications for teacher professional learning, policy development, and classroom support strategies for autistic girls. The researcher also identified gaps for future research, ensuring that the study builds upon existing knowledge.

Appraisal Summary

Strengths:

- Clearly articulated research aim and qualitative approach aligned with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm.

Limitations:

- Self-selection bias may have influenced the sample, potentially limiting diversity of perspectives.

- Reflexive thematic analysis provided a rigorous and transparent method for identifying key themes.
- Use of NVivo software enhanced the organisation and systematic analysis of data.
- Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, ensuring participant welfare and data integrity
- Virtual interviews may have reduced non-verbal communication cues, affecting depth of interaction.
- Snowball sampling may have led to homogeneity in participant experiences, as teachers within similar networks may share comparable views.

4.5 Implications of the Research.

4.5.1 Implications for Understanding of the Research Topic.

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of how teachers identify and support autistic girls in mainstream primary schools, addressing a critical gap in existing research. Findings are particularly significant within the Irish primary school context, where existing literature on this topic is limited. As highlighted in the systematic review, the study addresses a research gap by eliciting teacher voice on the topic. The data collected that explores teachers' experiences provides valuable insights into the challenges and facilitators that influence the recognition and support of autistic girls in the mainstream classroom. This sheds a light on how gendered expectations and masking behaviours influence recognition. These insights have important implications for educational psychology, as they emphasise the need for greater awareness, training and policy development to ensure autistic girls receive appropriate support at an earlier stage. However, while increasing teacher awareness of autistic girls presentation is essential, focusing solely on the individual's presentations risks amplifying 'within-child' factors. A shift in perspective is required to focus on the environmental factors that impact the student in order to create a truly inclusive school culture for neurodivergent learners and ensure 'goodness of fit' between autistic children and their environment (Leadbitter et al., 2021).

4.5.2 Implications for Practice.

4.5.2.1 Implications for School Staff.

This study highlights the critical role of teachers in recognising and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools, but also the collaboration with others when dealing with subtle cases. While some teachers reported using inclusive and strengths-based approaches, there was variability in confidence and knowledge regarding the female autism phenotype, but more

specifically broaching the subject with parents and knowledge of referral pathways. This suggests a pressing need for further support for school staff to increase awareness, confidence and self-efficacy in recognising and supporting autistic girls. Furthermore, findings suggest that school staff would benefit from more guidance and support. Many of the teachers in this study engaged in informal discussions, however this could be a space where more formal, structured processes are needed. The use of supervision process for teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) working with autistic girls could address many challenges in educational settings. Supervision is well established in health services but less common in schools, despite its potential to provide staff with time and space to reflect on their attitudes, teaching methods and support strategies. A key benefit of supervision is that it offers a safe space for problem-solving while reducing the isolation often felt by staff without sufficient support. According to O'Shea (2023) some schools in Ireland fund their own supervision services, delivered by psychologists and education specialists. However, schools should not have to rely on limited budgets to access such a vital resource. A consistent, nationwide supervision service led by neurodiverse and qualified professionals could help remove barriers in education for autistic girls while supporting the wellbeing of both staff and students.

Teacher observation plays a crucial role in recognising the needs of young children, particularly during play in infant classes. Play-based learning provides valuable insights into a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development, allowing teachers to recognise potential challenges early on (Kelly, 2022). Findings indicate that schools implementing structured observations by multiple staff members, both before infants begin school and throughout the year, adopted a more proactive approach. This collaborative system ensures that concerns are identified promptly, enabling timely and tailored support. By embedding structured observation

into practice, schools can better meet the diverse needs of young children and foster a more inclusive learning environment.

4.5.2.2 Implications for Psychologist Practice.

This study has significant implications for the role of educational psychologists (EPs) in supporting autistic girls within mainstream primary schools. The findings highlight the need for EPs to play a more active role in raising awareness among teachers regarding the gendered presentation of autism. EPs are well-positioned to address any gaps in this area by providing bespoke training and professional development for teachers. Given that gender stereotypes in education may impact teacher perceptions and responses to autistic pupils, EPs can play a key role in challenging these biases through consultation and systemic collaboration. This could include developing gender-inclusive and neuro-affirmative approaches to recognition of needs and support strategies, as well as working with schools to create more inclusive learning environments that accommodate the diverse needs of autistic girls. One way EPs can contribute is by promoting Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which aims to create inclusive classroom environments that accommodate diverse learning profiles (Rao et al., 2023). Additionally, EPs can support teachers in embedding the voices and experiences of autistic pupils into School Self-Evaluation (SSE) processes, ensuring that school policies and supports reflect the needs of autistic girls (Department of Education, 2022). Promoting guidance frameworks such as the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education, 2019) can also help ensure that support systems are responsive, evidence-based, and tailored to meet the needs of autistic pupils more effectively.

A key aspect of the educational psychologist's (EP) role is to support teachers in identifying effective approaches and strategies to enhance learning experiences for all students,

including autistic girls. This involves considering the social, emotional and cognitive factors that influence learning and applying psychological research to inform best practices in schools (Farrell, 2010). Therefore, building school capacity in the area of screening and assessment tools to implement and monitor timely support is another consideration. EPs have played a key role in developing schools' capacity in academic areas such as literacy screening and assessment such as WIAT training. A similar focus is now needed to ensure that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and tools to address students' social and emotional needs. Findings from this study also highlight the important role of EPs in guiding teachers through the referral process and helping them navigate appropriate referral pathways, as many teachers reported encountering uncertainty in this area. This reiterates the importance of EPs promoting early recognition and support through collaboration and consultation with teachers, special education staff and parents. EPs can help ensure that autistic girls receive appropriate support at an earlier stage, reducing the risk of misdiagnoses or delayed supports.

4.5.3 Implications for Policy.

The findings of this study highlight the need for policy changes to ensure that autistic girls receive timely support in mainstream primary schools. Given the impact of exosystem and macrosystem factors on the findings of this study (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), there are significant policy implications for various governmental departments in Ireland. These include the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, the Department of Education and Youth, the Department of Health and the Department of Social Protection, all of which play a role in shaping policies that influence the recognition and support of any child with additional needs in mainstream primary schools. Teacher professional learning, school self-evaluation processes

and wellbeing policies must be adapted to ensure that autistic girls receive appropriate recognition and support within an inclusive educational framework.

4.5.3.1 Policy on Wellbeing.

The findings of this study have important implications for autistic girls' wellbeing. Findings indicated that some may go unrecognised and a missed or delayed diagnosis can have significant consequences for an individual's wellbeing, academic experience and access to appropriate support, increasing the likelihood of experiencing mental health difficulties and social challenges. Nohilly et al. (2023) conducted a systematic literature review on wellbeing in education which offers valuable insights that resonate strongly with the themes emerging from this thesis on autistic girls. The review highlights the importance of fostering a positive school climate, promoting pupil voice and embedding social and emotional learning (SEL) across the curriculum, all of which are particularly relevant for autistic girls. The Wellbeing Policy and Framework for Practice (DES, 2019) defines wellbeing as a state in which a person realises their potential, has a sense of purpose and feels connected to a wider community (NCCA, 2017). Nohilly and Tynan (2022) discuss how wellbeing is a central theme in national curriculum reform yet still remains a complex and often ambiguously defined concept. Their paper emphasises the necessity of moving towards an interdisciplinary and whole-school approach to wellbeing that is embedded not just in curriculum documents but also in everyday interactions, school culture and teacher–student relationships. However, the experiences of autistic girls, particularly those who mask their difficulties, may not be fully captured by existing school wellbeing initiatives. Nohilly and Tynan's (2022) critique of fragmented programme overload in schools resonates with concerns around the risk of superficial responses to complex neurodevelopmental needs. The School Self-Evaluation (SSE) Wellbeing Promotion Process

(DES, 2021) provides an opportunity for schools to assess and improve their practices, but without a clear understanding of how autism presents in girls, schools may struggle to identify and address gaps in support. Findings from this research can inform ways in which to organise resources and support for autistic girls under the four key areas of wellbeing promotion. The four key areas of culture, curriculum, relationships & partnerships and policy & planning are essential in ensuring the wellbeing and inclusion of autistic girls in mainstream schools (see Figure 26).

Figure 24.

Whole School Approach – Four Key Areas of Wellbeing Promotion



Culture & Environment: The mission, ethos, and classroom climate significantly impact how well autistic girls fit within their school environment. Many schools prioritise interactive, fast-paced learning strategies that may be more suited to neurotypical students, placing additional challenges on autistic girls, particularly those who mask their difficulties to fit in. Without recognition of these barriers, inequities may emerge, leading to increased stress and disengagement. Schools must acknowledge participation inequities and find a balance between different learning styles to ensure that autistic girls can engage meaningfully without pressure to conform to neurotypical expectations. Furthermore, findings from this research highlighted the need for whole-school approaches to autism support, as it was noted that inconsistencies led to frustrations in encouraging colleagues to adopt neuro-affirmative practices, creating barriers to effective support for autistic pupils. A whole-school approach would ensure that all staff, including teaching and non-teaching personnel, receive consistent training and guidance on autism, creating a shared understanding and more inclusive practices across the school community. In order to cultivate a genuinely inclusive environment, schools should embed neurodiversity education into their policies and practices. Free resources such as Learning About Neurodiversity at School (*LEANS*) programme (Alcorn et al., 2022) which provides a curriculum-based approach to teaching neurodiversity, and the *Belonging in Schools project* (Alcorn et al., 2023), which offers guidance on developing inclusive policies, can support schools in creating a culture of acceptance and belonging. By implementing such initiatives, schools can better support not just autistic girls but all neurodivergent learners.

Curriculum: Effective planning, supports, and monitoring are crucial to ensuring that the needs of autistic girls are met consistently. Teachers must recognise that the strengths and abilities of autistic students should be nurtured. This includes adjusting teaching techniques, tailoring to the student's interest and offering flexible learning environments, so that all pupils can fully engage with the curriculum in ways that align with their strengths.

Policy & Planning: School Self-Evaluation (SSE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) are critical in shaping a more inclusive school environment. Initial teacher training and ongoing CPD should include comprehensive education on autism in girls, ensuring that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and strategies to provide appropriate support. Furthermore, this must incorporate evidence-based strategies for recognising and supporting autistic girls, addressing the lack of confidence many teachers reported in this study. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a framework for addressing student diverse learning needs by promoting inclusive and flexible teaching practices (Flood & Banks, 2021). UDL encourages multiple means of engagement, representation and expression allowing autistic girls to demonstrate their understanding and engage in ways that suit their strengths (Lowrey et al., 2017). While UDL is gaining some recognition in Irish education policy (Flood & Banks, 2021), it remains optional in teacher training and underutilised in CPD. It is a positive step to see UDL practice encouraged in the recent NCSE *Relate* document (NCSE, 2025). However, it is imperative that teachers are given ample opportunity to adopt this approach and reflect on it with colleagues. Embedding UDL principles more systematically in educator training and school policies will help ensure that autistic girls are supported in a way that recognises their unique learning needs. Additionally, embedding student support teams in primary school is another implementable action from this research. There has been evidence of the success of student support teams at the post-primary level in providing structured assistance to both students and teachers. These teams play a vital role in identifying needs, coordinating interventions, and ensuring students receive appropriate support. Findings suggest a similar need at the primary level, where formal student support teams could offer teachers a structured platform to address student challenges effectively. This would likely enhance early supports, improve outcomes, and provide teachers with essential guidance in supporting diverse student needs.

Relationships & Partnerships: Positive teacher-student relationships play a key role in student wellbeing. Building rapport, trust, and respect with autistic students requires a deeper understanding of their experiences in the classroom and the barriers they may face. Many misconceptions about autistic girls, such as being disengaged, passive, or less capable, can lead to misinterpretations of their needs. Ensuring that teachers, educational psychologists, and school staff are well-informed about the diverse presentations of autism in girls will help challenge these stereotypes and create a more supportive school culture.

4.5.3.2 Policy on Teacher Professional Learning.

This study reinforces the call for systemic changes in teacher professional learning (TPL) to ensure that educators receive mandatory and appropriate training on autism and neuro-affirmative practices, particularly on how autism presents in girls (Delimata & Byrne, 2023). Many teachers in this study expressed a lack of confidence in recognising autism in girls, and a desire and interest on learning more on the topic. The Joint Committee on Autism's Final Report recommended that the Department of Education and Youth update TPL programmes to ensure that education professionals, including teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) receive comprehensive autism training. Additionally, CPD initiatives should involve autistic voices and advocacy groups to ensure that training is socially valid and informed by lived experiences (Delimata & Byrne, 2023). Given the evolving nature of best practices in autism education, schools and educational bodies should provide ongoing training opportunities to help teachers stay up to date with research-informed strategies. Recent announcements by Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee regarding mandatory special education placements represent a positive step forward in initial teacher education. These placements aim to address current gaps in initial teacher education by providing student teachers with essential, hands-on experience working with pupils with additional needs. This development is particularly promising in strengthening teachers' ability to recognise autism in girls, as time spent in specialised settings can help trainee teachers identify traits that may be more commonly observed in autistic girls. Placing a greater emphasis on special education will likely increase teacher's confidence in this area and enhance early recognition and support.

As mentioned above, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CoRC) has called for greater efforts to incorporate the voice of the child (UN, 2023). Teachers will require additional training and support on children's right to be heard and the implementation of child and youth participation strategies in education (UN, 2023). The findings of this study align with these recommendations, as they highlight the need for greater teacher awareness of autism in girls and the importance of listening to autistic pupils' perspectives when shaping support systems.

4.5.3.3 Diagnostic Practices

This study highlights the importance of screening and assessment protocols that take gender differences into account, reducing the risk of diagnostic bias and delayed support. There is a need for greater awareness of the varied presentation of autism within diagnostic criteria, to ensure accurate identification and support. As previously discussed in chapter 2, while the DSM-5 criteria is broad, its application to the female autism profile may be limited by professionals' knowledge. Expertise in recognising autism in girls and moving beyond male-centred diagnostic tools is crucial. Measures that encompass the impact of camouflaging on the individual such as the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q) are also being developed to support assessment, however, camouflaging is not reflected in the diagnostic criteria (Hull et al., 2018). Further clarity is needed on how autistic girls' characteristics align with diagnostic criteria, and emerging research should inform updates to screening methods.

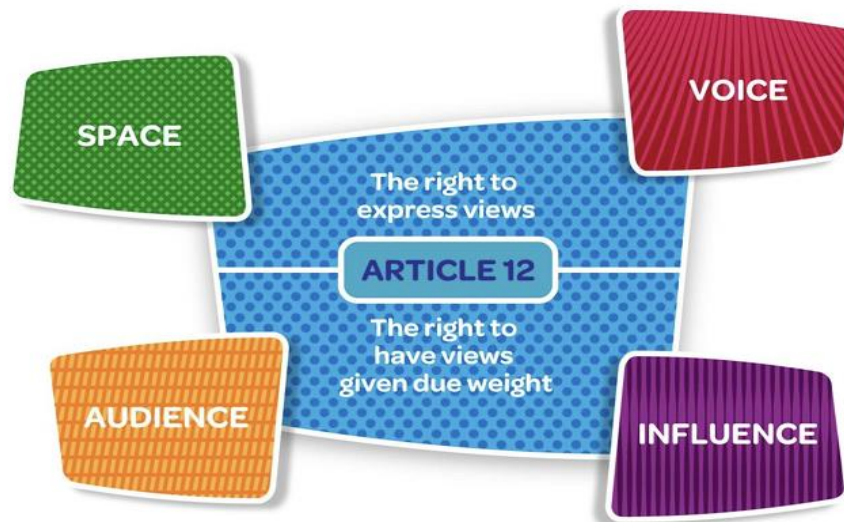
4.5.4 Implications for Research

Future research should endeavour to elicit the voice of the child, or indeed how teacher's approach eliciting child's voice in relation to implementing targets and devising support plans when using the Continuum of Support. This research would align with findings from AsIAM's "What We Wish You Knew" report, which advocates for the further inclusion of autistic voices in school policies in order to create truly inclusive education systems. Autistic pupils should be actively involved in decision-making processes regarding school policies and practices, as outlined in Ireland's National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCEDIY, n.d.), which promotes 'participation with purpose' based on the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007). Moreover, given that SSE is an evidence-based process involving collaboration between all stakeholders (DES, 2021), schools should ensure that autistic pupils are meaningfully included in decision-making about their educational experience, in line with Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN, 1989) and Conventions of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The Looking at Our School (LAOS) Quality Framework (DES, 2022) further supports this process, helping schools evaluate whether their existing strategies for recognising needs and providing support are effective. Engaging autistic students, alongside parents and educators, in co-designing policies would help ensure that supports and recognition processes are informed by lived experience rather than solely professional expertise. Practices when using the Continuum of Support Model should be adapted to ensure that children's views on their learning targets, their feelings about their support, and their preferences are actively considered. Using the Lundy Model of Participation, this approach would provide space, voice, audience, and influence for autistic

pupils, ensuring that their perspectives shape their individual support plans in a meaningful and child-centred way.

Figure 25.

The Lundy Model of Participation



This model provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC which is intended to focus educational decision-makers on the distinct, albeit interrelated, elements of the provision. The four elements have a rational chronological order:

- **SPACE:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view
- **VOICE:** Children must be facilitated to express their view
- **AUDIENCE:** The view must be listened to.
- **INFLUENCE:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Future research could build on these findings by exploring longitudinal perspectives on teacher professional learning and the effectiveness of early support strategies for neurodivergent pupils. This research also provides a foundation for further studies, particularly in exploring how teacher professional learning programmes and school policies can be adapted to improve the recognition process. Future research could investigate the long-term impact of training programmes and examine cross-cultural perspectives on supporting autistic girls in education. By addressing these gaps, the study contributes to the

ongoing evolution of inclusive education practices and informs the development of evidence-based strategies for supporting autistic pupils in mainstream settings.

Future research should extend this study to include other key professionals in the community involved in the recognition and support of autistic girls, such as general practitioners (GPs) and speech and language therapists (SLTs). Investigating these groups would provide further insight into whether gender-related biases in recognising needs in autistic girls extend beyond primary school settings. Understanding the perspectives and practices of other healthcare professionals could help determine whether similar barriers to diagnosis and support exist across different contexts.

Future research could apply a similar methodology to explore teachers' experiences of recognising and supporting girls with ADHD, as a similar pattern of under-recognition exists (Agnew-Blaise, 2024). Given the gender disparities in ADHD diagnosis, with girls often presenting differently from boys and being misdiagnosed or overlooked, investigating teacher awareness and practices for recognising needs could provide valuable insights. Understanding whether educators face similar challenges in recognising ADHD in girls would help inform teacher professional learning and support systems in mainstream schools.

Future research could explore the experiences of autistic girls during the transition from primary to secondary school, as this appears to be a particularly challenging period where many difficulties emerge. Investigating how autistic girls navigate changes in environment, academic expectations, and social dynamics could provide valuable insights into the barriers and supports that influence their wellbeing and educational engagement. Such research could inform targeted supports and transition planning strategies to ensure that autistic girls receive the necessary accommodations to thrive in secondary education.

4.5.5 Dissemination of Findings.

The researcher has considered dissemination plans to ensure the findings of this research contribute to professional practice and policy development. Given the under-researched nature of autism identification in girls, it is essential that the insights gained from this study reach educators, psychologists, and multidisciplinary professionals involved in autism support and assessment. As part of early dissemination efforts, the research has already been shared at both local and national level, including MIC Research Methods Presentation in December 2022, MIC Christmas Research Day in December 2023, the PSI Annual Conference in November 2024. The researcher also contributed to a research brief within the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) by completing a book review on autistic girls (see Appendix R). This contribution was in response to an identified knowledge gap and a priority for continuing professional development (CPD), as discussed at a recent regional NEPS meeting. If the opportunity arises, I plan to share the findings of this research with NEPS colleagues, developing further awareness on the research area. Additionally, presenting the research to a local multidisciplinary team (MDT) involved in autism assessments has been requested. This will provide an opportunity to discuss the implications of the study for clinical practice, particularly in ensuring assessment processes account for gender differences in autism presentation. Moreover, as the researcher is a student representative on the board for Graduate Certificate in Autism Studies with Middletown Centre for Autism and MIC, there will be opportunities to disseminate findings with board members and advocate for enhanced training on the recognition and support of autistic girls within the centre's professional development courses. Further dissemination will be pursued through presenting at relevant conferences in Ireland. Potential conferences include The AsIAM National Autism Conference (Autism Europe Congress) to be held in September 2025, The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) Annual Conference, Ireland International

Conference on Education and Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Conference. In addition to conference presentations, the researcher intends to submit the literature review and empirical papers from this thesis for publication in academic journals focusing on educational psychology and autism research, such as *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *International Journal of Educational Research*, *Irish Educational Studies*, and *Good Autism Practice*. By engaging in both academic and professional dissemination, this research aims to inform policy, enhance teacher professional learning, and contribute to the evolving understanding of autism in girls within the Irish education system.

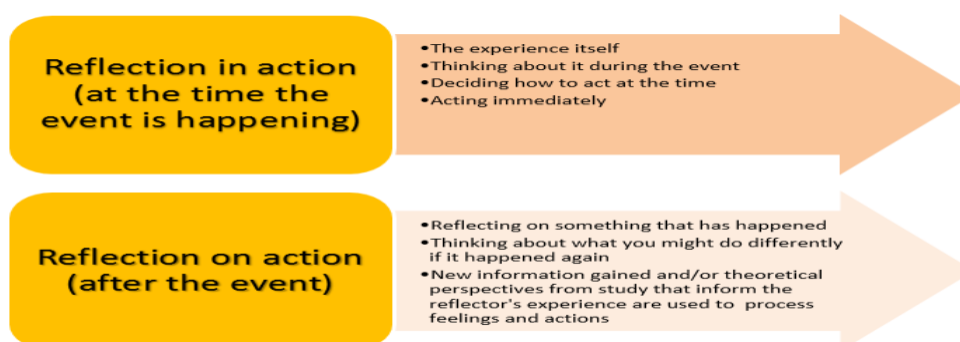
4.6 Personal Reflection.

4.6.1 *Personal Reflection on the Research Process.*

Schön's (1991) model of reflectivity provides a useful framework for reflecting on my research journey (Figure 28). Reflection-in-action (thinking during the research process) and reflection-on-action (reflecting on the experience as a whole) were particularly beneficial to my reflexivity as a researcher. This study has been a deeply engaging and insightful process, not only in terms of contributing to the research field but also in shaping my own professional development as a future educational psychologist (EP).

Figure 26.

Schön's (1991) model of reflectivity



4.6.1.1 Reflection-in-Action.

Throughout the research process, I engaged in ongoing critical reflection, captured in my reflexive journal. The following is an excerpt written in February 2023 on my rationale for choosing the topic.

Figure 27.

Excerpt from research journal

Reflective Journal Entry

Coming from a teaching background, I feel confident navigating the school environment and understanding the practical realities of classroom life, which I believe will help me to approach the topic with relevance and sensitivity. Having witnessed first-hand during my teaching career several experienced teachers who struggled to recognise and support autistic girls in mainstream schools, this initially sparked my interest and made me realise that there was a pressing need for someone to hear these stories. This led me to complete my systematic review in the first semester of the programme entitled “Exploring camouflaging tendencies in autistic girls and the impact on mental health”. Findings from this review made me feel sad seeing the detrimental effects on mental health as a result of a lack of identification and support. This made me think about ways in which I could find out more about the phenomenon and understand what factors are perpetuating the problem. I started to feel passionate about promoting early identification and support, hence my rationale for interviewing primary school teachers. As I develop my research proposal, I am excited by this opportunity to uncover insights into how in my future role as an EP I can support teachers to support autistic girls in mainstream schools.

4.6.1.2 Reflection-on-Action

Looking back on the research journey, one of the most significant realisations I had was the extent to which autistic girls remain under-identified in schools. My first-hand experience as a teacher had exposed me to this issue, but conducting this research solidified my understanding of the systemic barriers contributing to it. This study has deepened my appreciation for the complexities teachers face, particularly limited training, time constraints and the challenge of recognising more subtle presentations of autism.

However, as I conducted interviews with teachers, I became increasingly aware of the diversity of school systems and approaches to autism recognition and support. Teachers shared insightful first-hand experiences, some of which reinforced my existing knowledge, while others challenged my assumptions and broadened my perspective. I found myself adjusting my interview approach dynamically, ensuring that I was truly listening to and engaging with participants' perspectives, rather than focusing solely on pre-determined research objectives.

Furthermore, this experience has strengthened my motivation to support teachers in my future role as an EP. I now feel better equipped to facilitate discussions, provide training and collaborate with school staff to improve recognition and support for autistic girls. The process of conducting interviews has also enhanced my communication and clarification skills with teachers, which will be invaluable in my professional practice.

Overall, this research has not only contributed to the academic literature but has also shaped my own professional growth. I have gained a deeper understanding of school systems, teacher perspectives and the real-world application of educational psychology principles. Moving forward, I hope to use this knowledge to advocate for evidence-based, inclusive practices and contribute to meaningful change in how autistic girls are identified and supported in schools.

4.7 Impact Statement.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature examining the disparity in autism diagnoses between males and females, as well as support for autistic girls in the school environment. Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that impacts an individual's social communication and sensory processing. Autistic girls may face significant challenges if their needs are not recognised early, including difficulty accessing appropriate support,

heightened anxiety and adverse long-term mental health outcomes. The exploration of teachers' experiences in recognising and supporting autistic girls, revealed key challenges such as masking behaviours, gendered diagnostic biases and gaps in professional training which has implications for educational policy, teacher professional learning and professional practice. The findings provide practical recommendations for educators, psychologists, policymakers and researchers, fostering improved recognition and support for autistic girls.

4.7.1 Impact Within Academia.

Within educational and child psychology, this research adds to existing literature on the gender disparities in autism diagnosis and supports. It offers empirical insights into how expectancy biases and stereotypically male-centred diagnostic frameworks contribute to delayed recognition. The research findings can contribute to academic knowledge and guide future studies on exploring the various factors at play when recognising autism, particularly with a focus on gender differences. Furthermore, the findings of this study can help shape future research into creating more inclusive diagnostic criteria that better identify autism in girls as well as boys. Additionally the study's insights can influence teacher professional learning programmes, ensuring that educators receive better training on recognising autism in girls and providing appropriate support in the classroom.

Furthermore, this study highlights the role of educators in the support seeking process. Findings indicate that unconscious bias among teachers may lead to lower recognition of autism in girls, impacting early assessment and access to support. The research findings can inform future studies on gender-inclusive diagnostic criteria, as well as teacher professional learning programmes that focus on recognising diverse autism presentations. Additionally, this study has methodological implications, particularly in the use of qualitative approaches to explore autism-related biases. Future research could expand on these findings by

investigating biases among other professionals involved in autism diagnosis, such as psychologists, speech and language therapists and GPs.

Furthermore, this work has implications for curriculum development within educational psychology training programmes. The findings support the need for enhanced professional development on autism in girls, ensuring that future educational psychologists, teachers and support staff are equipped with the knowledge to recognise and address gendered differences in autism presentation.

4.7.2 Impact Beyond Academia.

Beyond academia, this research has direct implications for professional practice and service delivery. By highlighting the role of teacher professional learning and professional awareness, the study emphasises the need for continuous professional development (CPD) programmes that include raising awareness of how autism presents in girls. Schools, local education authorities and professional development bodies could integrate these findings into training materials, enhancing educators' ability to recognise autistic traits beyond stereotypical presentations.

From a policy perspective, this study advocates for greater inclusion of gender-sensitive diagnostic considerations in special education policies and autism assessment frameworks. Policymakers and advisory bodies, such as the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), can use these insights to inform guidelines and training programmes for teachers and educational psychologists. Additionally, findings could be disseminated through policy briefs to government agencies, school boards and advocacy groups working towards more inclusive educational practices. The study also has clinical utility, as it emphasises the importance of early recognition and support for autistic girls. Professionals in educational

psychology, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy may benefit from the research's insights, ensuring more targeted and timely supports.

4.7.3 Public Engagement and Wider Societal Impact

At a community level, this research has the potential to inform public discourse and social awareness on gender differences in autism. Parent groups, advocacy organisations and autism networks can use these findings to educate families, caregivers and professionals on the challenges autistic girls face. The study could be disseminated through mainstream media, blogs and specialist publications to increase public understanding of autism in girls.

On a national and international level, this research aligns with global discussions on gender inclusivity in autism research. It has the potential to influence educational reform and contribute to international policy dialogues on autism assessment and support practices.

References

- Adams, C., & van Manen, M. A. (2017). Teaching phenomenological research and writing. *Qualitative Health Research*, 27(6), 780–791. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732317698960>
- Adams, D., Clark, M., & Keen, D. (2019). Using self-report to explore the relationship between anxiety and quality of life in children on the autism spectrum. *Autism Research*, 12(10), 1505–1515. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2155>.
- Agnew-Blais, J. C. (2024). Hidden in plain sight: Delayed ADHD diagnosis among girls and women – a commentary on skoglund et al. (2023). *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 65(10), 1398-1400. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.14023>
- American Psychiatric Association. (1980). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (3rd ed.).
- American Psychiatric Association. (1987). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. (3rd ed., text rev.).
- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*. (4th ed., text rev.).
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787>
- American Psychological Association. (2019). *Bias-free language: Disability*. <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/disability>

Ando, H., Cousins, R., & Young, C. (2014). Achieving saturation in thematic analysis: Development and refinement of a codebook. *Comprehensive Psychology, 3*, Article 03.CP.

<https://doi.org/10.2466/03.CP.3.4>

Angulo-Jiménez, H., & DeThorne, L. (2019). Narratives about autism: An analysis of YouTube videos by individuals who self-identify as autistic. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, 28*(2), 569–590. https://doi.org/10.1044/2018_AJSLP-18-0045

Asperger, H. (1944). Die “Autistischen Psychopathen” im Kindesalter. *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten, 117*(1), 76–136.

Ataro, G. (2020). Methods, methodological challenges and lesson learned from phenomenological study about OSCE experience: Overview of paradigm-driven qualitative approach in medical education. *Annals of Medicine and Surgery, 49*, 19-23.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amsu.2019.11.013>

Attwood, T. (2007). *The complete guide to Asperger's syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley Publishing.

Attwood, T. (2015). *The complete guide to Asperger's syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bada, S. O., & Olusegun, S. (2015). Constructivism learning theory: A paradigm for teaching and learning. *Journal of Research and Method in Education, 5*(6), 66-70.

<https://doi.org/10.9790/7388-05616670>

Bagg, E., Pickard, H., Tan, M., Smith, T. J., Simonoff, E., Pickles, A., Carter Leno, V., & Bedford, R. (2023). Testing the social motivation theory of autism: The role of co-occurring anxiety. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. Advance online publication.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13925>

- Bailin, A. (2019, June 6). Clearing up some misconceptions about neurodiversity. *Scientific American*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/clearing-up-some-misconceptions-about-neurodiversity/>
- Baldwin, S., & Costley, D. (2016). The experiences and needs of female adults with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder. *Autism, 20*(4), 483–495.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315590805>
- Barahona-Corrêa, J. B., & Filipe, C. N. (2016). A Concise History of Asperger Syndrome: The Short Reign of a Troublesome Diagnosis. *Frontiers in psychology, 6*, 2024.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.02024>
- Barger, M. M., Perez, T., Canelas, D. A., & Linnenbrink-Garcia, L. (2018). Constructivism and personal epistemology development in undergraduate chemistry students. *Learning and Individual Differences, 63*, 89-101.
- Bargiela, S., Steward, R., & Mandy, W. (2016). The experiences of late-diagnosed women with autism Spectrum conditions: An investigation of the female autism phenotype. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 46*(10), 3281–3294. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2872-8>.
- Barker, C., Pistrang, N., & Elliott, R. (2015). *Research methods in clinical psychology: An introduction for students and practitioners* (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Baron-Cohen, S. (1990). Autism: A specific cognitive disorder of "mindblindness." *International Review of Psychiatry, 2*(1), 81–90. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09540269009028274>
- Baron-Cohen, S. (2002). The extreme male brain theory of autism. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 6*(6), 248–254. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1364-6613\(02\)01904-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1364-6613(02)01904-6)

- Baron-Cohen, S., Auyeung, B., Nørgaard-Pedersen, B., Hougaard, D. M., Abdallah, M. W., Melgaard, L., et al. (2015). Elevated fetal steroidogenic activity in autism. *Molecular Psychiatry*, *20*(3), 369–376. <https://doi.org/10.1038/mp.2014.48>
- Baron-Cohen, S., Lombardo, M. V., Auyeung, B., Ashwin, E., Chakrabarti, B., & Knickmeyer, R. (2011). Why are autism spectrum conditions more prevalent in males? *PLoS Biology*, *9*(6), e1001081. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.1001081>
- Bartholomew, T. T., Joy, E. E., Kang, E., & Brown, J. (2021). A choir or cacophony? Sample sizes and quality of conveying participants' voices in phenomenological research. *Methodological Innovations*, *14*(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/205979912111040063>
- Batsche, G. (2014). Multi-tiered system of support for inclusive schools. In J. McLeskey, G. Batsche, N. L. Waldron, F. Spooner, & B. Algozzine (Eds.), *Handbook of effective inclusive schools: Research and practice* (pp. 183–196). Routledge.
- Becerra-Culqui, T. A., Lynch, F. L., Owen-Smith, A. A., Spitzer, J., & Croen, L. A. (2018). Parental first concerns and timing of autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *48*, 3367–3376. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3598-6>
- Beck, J. S., Lundwall, R. A., Gabrielsen, T., Cox, J. C., & South, M. (2020). Looking good but feeling bad: “Camouflaging” behaviors and mental health in women with autistic traits. *Autism*, *24*(4), 809–821. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320912147>
- Begeer, S., Mandell, D., Wijnker-Holmes, B., Venderbosch, S., Rem, D., Stekelenburg, F., & Koot, H. M. (2013). Sex differences in the timing of identification among children and adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *43*(5), 1151–1156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-012-1656-z>

- Bekhet, A. K., & Zauszniewski, J. A. (2012). Methodological triangulation: An approach to understanding data. *Nurse Researcher*, *20*(2), 40–43.
<https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2012.11.20.2.40.c9442>
- Beresford, B., Tozer, R., Rabiee, P., & Sloper, P. (2004). Developing an approach to involving children with autistic spectrum disorder in a social care research project. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *32*(4), 180–185. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-3156.2004.00318.x>
- Bergen, N., & Labonté, R. (2020). "Everything Is Perfect, and We Have No Problems": Detecting and Limiting Social Desirability Bias in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative health research*, *30*(5), 783–792. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319889354>
- Bernardin, C. J., Lewis, T., Bell, D., & Kanne, S. (2021). Associations between social camouflaging and internalizing symptoms in autistic and non-autistic adolescents. *Autism*, *25*(6), 1580–1591. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613219972>
- Bettelheim, B. (1967). *The empty fortress: infantile autism and the birth of the self*. Free Press of Glencoe.
- Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation? *Qualitative Health Research*, *26*(13), 1802–1811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870>
- Bleuler, E. (1911). *Dementia praecox or the group of schizophrenias*. International Universities Press. (Original work published in German)
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Allyn & Bacon.
- Boilson, A. M., Staines, A., Ramirez, A., Posada, M., & Sweeney, M. (2016). Operationalisation of the European Protocol for Autism Prevalence (EPAP) for autism spectrum disorder

prevalence measurement in Ireland. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 46(9), 3054–3067. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2837-y>

Boland, A., Cherry, M. G., & Dickson, R. (Eds.). (2017). *Doing a systematic review: A student's guide* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Boucher, J. (2017). *The autism spectrum: Characteristics, causes and practical issues* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Bowler, D. M. (1992). “Theory of mind” in Asperger’s syndrome. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 33(5), 877–893. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1992.tb01962.x>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597

British Psychological Society. (2023). *Standards for the accreditation of Doctoral programmes in educational psychology: England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. <https://www.bps.org.uk>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Annals of Child Development* (Vol. 6, pp. 187–249). JAI Press.

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. Sage.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (6th ed., Vol. 1, pp. 793–828). Wiley.
- Brönnimann, A. (2021). How to phrase critical realist interview questions in applied social science research. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 21(1), 1–24.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2021.1966719>
- Brown, A., & Danaher, P. A. (2017). CHE Principles: facilitating authentic and dialogical semi-structured interviews in educational research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 42(1), 76–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2017.1379987>
- Burr, V. (2015). *Social constructionism* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315715421>
- Burr, V., & Dick, P. (2017). Social constructionism. In B. Gough (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Social Psychology* (pp. 59–80). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke’s approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity*, 56, 1391–1412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>
- Chapman, R. (2021). Neurodiversity and the Social Ecology of Mental Functions. *Perspectives on psychological science : a journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 16(6), 1360–1372. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620959833>
- Carpenter, C. (2013). Phenomenology and rehabilitation research. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Research methods in health: Foundations for evidence-based practice* (2nd ed., pp. 115–131). Oxford University Press.

- Carpenter, B., Happé, F., & Egerton, J. (Eds.). (2019). *Girls and Autism: Educational, Family and Personal Perspectives* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351234429>
- Carpenter, T. P., Pogacar, R., Pullig, C., Kouril, M., Aguilar, S., LaBouff, J., & Chakroff, A. (2019). Survey-software implicit association tests: A methodological and empirical analysis. *Behavior Research Methods*, *51*, 2194–2208. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-019-01293-3>
- Cassidy, S. A., Gould, K., Townsend, E., Pelton, M., Robertson, A. E., & Rodgers, J. (2020). Is camouflaging autistic traits associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviours? Expanding the interpersonal psychological theory of suicide in an undergraduate student sample. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *50*(10), 3638–3648. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04323-3>
- Castillo-Montoya, M. (2016). Preparing for Interview Research: The Interview Protocol Refinement Framework. *The Qualitative Report*, *21*(5), 811-831. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2337>
- Chan, F. F. Y. (2015). A critical realist and multimethodology framework for product placement research. *Journal of Promotion Management*, *21*, 279-295.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2015.1021502>
- Chavez, C. (2008). Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality. *The Qualitative Report*, *13*(3), 474-494. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1589>
- Chevallier, C., Kohls, G., Troiani, V., Brodtkin, E. S., & Schultz, R. T. (2012). The social motivation theory of autism. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *16*(4), 231–239.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2012.02.007>

- Chilisa, B., & Kawulich, B. (2012). Selecting a research approach: Paradigm, methodology and methods. In C. Wagner, B. Kawulich, & M. Garner (Eds.), *Doing social research: A global context* (pp. 51–61). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Clarke, H. (2021). *Supporting spectacular girls: A practical guide to developing autistic girls' wellbeing and self-esteem*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Cook, A., & Ogden, J. (2021). Challenges, strategies and self-efficacy of teachers supporting autistic pupils in contrasting school settings: a qualitative study. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 37(3), 371–385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1878659>
- Cook, A., Ogden, J., & Winstone, N. (2020). The experiences of learning, friendship and bullying of boys with autism in mainstream and special settings: A qualitative study. *British Journal of Special Education*, 47(3), 329–349. DOI:[10.1111/1467-8578.12143](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12143)
- Cook, J., Hull, L., & Mandy, W. (2024). Improving Diagnostic Procedures in Autism for Girls and Women: A Narrative Review. *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 20, 505–514. <https://doi.org/10.2147/NDT.S372723>
- Cook, J., Hull, L., Crane, L., & Mandy, W. (2021). Camouflaging in autism: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 89, 102080. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2021.102080>
- Corscadden, P., & Casserly, A. M. (2021). Identification of Autism in Girls: Role of Trait Subtleties, Social Acceptance and Masking. *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*, 34(1). Retrieved from <https://reachjournal.ie/index.php/reach/article/view/313>
- Council of Europe. (n.d.). Sex and gender. Retrieved April 22, 2025, from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/sex-and-gender#:~:text=Gender%20refers%20to%20%22the%20socially,society%20and%20can%20be%20changed.>

- Creely, E. (2016). 'Understanding things from within'. A Husserlian phenomenological approach to doing educational research and inquiring about learning. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 41(1), 104–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2016.1182482>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), Article 8. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Cridland, E. K., Jones, S. C., Caputi, P., & Magee, C. A. (2014). Being a girl in a boys' world: Investigating the experiences of girls with autism spectrum disorders during adolescence. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(6), 1261–1274. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1985-6>
- Critical Appraisal Skills Programme. (2018). *CASP qualitative checklist*. <https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/>
- Crompton, C. J., Ropar, D., Evans-Williams, C. V., Flynn, E. G., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020). Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective. *Autism : the international*

journal of research and practice, 24(7), 1704–1712.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320919286>

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage.

Darlaston-Jones, D. (2007). Making connections: The relationship between epistemology and methodology. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 19(1), 19–27.

Dean, M., Harwood, R., & Kasari, C. (2017). The art of camouflage: Gender differences in the social behavior of girls and boys with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 21(6), 678–689.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316671845>

de Gelder, B. (1987). On not having a theory of mind. *Cognition*, 27(3), 285–

290. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0010-0277\(87\)80013-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0010-0277(87)80013-6)

Delimata, N., & Byrne, D. (2023). *Exploring the school experiences of autistic children and young people*. AsIAM.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374847572_Exploring_the_School_Experiences_of_Autistic_Children_and_Young_People

Demetriou, E. A., Lampit, A., Quintana, D. S., Naismith, S. L., Song, Y. J. C., Pye, J. E., Hickie, I., & Guastella, A. J. (2018). Autism spectrum disorders: A meta-analysis of executive function. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 23(5), 1198–1204. <https://doi.org/10.1038/mp.2017.75>

Department of Education and Skills. (2013). *Anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools*. Government of Ireland.

Department of Education and Skills. (2017). *Guidelines for primary schools: Supporting students with special educational needs in mainstream schools*. Government of Ireland.

Department of Education and Skills. (2018). *The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023)*. Government of Ireland.

Department of Education and Skills. (DES) (2017). *Guidelines for primary schools: Supporting pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools*.

<https://assets.gov.ie/86911/e2ab0e65-f360-45a4-8075-37a4123838c3.pdf>

Department of Education. (2020, May 29). *Education provision for learners with autism spectrum disorder in special classes attached to mainstream schools in Ireland*. Government of

Ireland. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c466e-education-provision-for-learners-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-in-special-classes-attached-to-mainstream-schools-in-ireland/>

Department of Health. (2018). *Estimating prevalence of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the Irish population: A review of data sources and epidemiological studies*. Government of

Ireland. Retrieved from:

<https://assets.gov.ie/10707/ce1ca48714424c0ba4bb4c0ae2e510b2.pdf>

Department of Education. (DE) (2022). *Autism good practice guidance for schools: Supporting children and young people*. Government of Ireland. Retrieved from:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/>

Department of Education (DE) (2024). *Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes*. Government of Ireland. Retrieved from:

<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/304621/9970967f-60c6-48f5-95f0-5d5b42f0450d.pdf#page=null>

Dewar, B., & MacBride, T. (2017). Developing caring conversations in care homes: an appreciative inquiry. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 25(4), 1375-1386.

- Dolan, M. (2024). A systematic review on the effectiveness of group cognitive behavioural therapy (G-CBT) on improving anxiety outcomes for school-aged autistic children in the community context. *Middletown Centre for Autism Research Journal*, 1(2), 62–84. Retrieved from <https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/research-journals/>
- Donohue, C., & Tynan, F. (2025). The Inclusion of Fathers in Parent Coaching Interventions for Young Autistic Children: A Systematic Review. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 10.1007/s10803-025-06820-0. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-025-06820-0>
- Dworzynski, K., Ronald, A., Bolton, P., & Happé, F. (2012). How different are girls and boys above and below the diagnostic threshold for autism spectrum disorders? *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 51(8), 788–797. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2012.05.018>
- Eisenmajer, R., & Prior, M. (1991). Cognitive linguistic correlates of “theory of mind” ability in autistic children. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 9(3), 351–364.
- Engel, G. L. (1977). The need for a new medical model: A challenge for biomedicine. *Science*, 196(4286), 129–136. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.847460>
- Estrin, G. L., Milner, V., Spain, D., Happé, F., & Colvert, E. (2021). Barriers to autism spectrum disorder diagnosis for young women and girls: A systematic review. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 8(4), 454–470. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-020-00225-8>
- European Union (EU). (2018). General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Retrieved 21 August 2021, from <https://gdpr-info.eu/>

Evans, B. (2013). How autism became autism: The radical transformation of a central concept in child development. *History of the Human Sciences*, 26(3), 3–31.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695113484320>

Farrell, P. (2010). School psychology: Learning lessons from history and moving forward. *School Psychology International*, 31(6), 581–598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034310386533>

First, M. B., Yousif, L. H., Clarke, D. E., Wang, P. S., Gogtay, N., & Appelbaum, P. S. (2022). DSM-5-TR: overview of what's new and what's changed. *World psychiatry : official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, 21(2), 218–219.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20989>

Flood, E. (2013). *Assisting children with special needs: An Irish perspective*. Gill & Macmillan.

Fombonne, E. (1999). Epidemiology of autism: A review. *Psychological Medicine*, 29(4), 769–786.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291799008508>

Fombonne, E. (2005). The changing epidemiology of autism. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 18(4), 281–294. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-3148.2005.00266.x>

Fombonne, E. (2009). Epidemiology of pervasive developmental disorders. *Pediatric Research*, 65(6), 591–598. <https://doi.org/10.1203/PDR.0b013e31819e7203>

Frederickson, N., Jones, A. P., & Lang, J. (2010). Inclusive provision options for pupils on the autistic spectrum. *British Journal of Special Education*, 37(3), 123–129.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-3802.2010.01145.x>

Frith U. (1989). A new look at language and communication in autism. *The British journal of disorders of communication*, 24(2), 123–150. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13682828909011952>

Furrer, C., & Skinner, E. (2003). Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(1), 148–162.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.95.1.148>

Fuster, D. Hermeneutical (2019). Qualitative Phenomenological Research: Method. Propósitos y Representaciones, 7(1), 201-229. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20511/pyr2019.v7n1.267>

Gale, N. K., Heath, G., Cameron, E., Rashid, S., & Redwood, S. (2013). Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 13*, Article 117.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-13-117>

Giarelli, E., Wiggins, L. D., & Rice, C. E. (2010). Sex differences in the evaluation and diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders among children. *Disability and Health Journal, 3*(2), 107–116.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2009.07.001>

Gill, S. L. (2020). Qualitative sampling methods. *Journal of Human Lactation, 36*(4), 579–581.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0890334420949218>

Gilman, S. R., Iossifov, I., Levy, D., Ronemus, M., Wigler, M., & Vitkup, D. (2011). Rare de novo variants associated with autism implicate a large functional network of genes involved in formation and function of synapses. *Neuron, 70*(5), 898–907.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2011.05.021>

Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Duquesne University Press.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2017). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.

- Goodall, C., & MacKenzie, A. (2018). Title: what about my voice? Autistic young girls' experiences of mainstream school. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 34*(4), 499–513.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2018.1553138>
- Goodall, C. (2018). Inclusion is a feeling, not a place: a qualitative study exploring autistic young people's conceptualisations of inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24*(12), 1285–1310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1523475>
- Gough, D. (2007). Weight of evidence: A framework for the appraisal of the quality and relevance of evidence. *Research Papers in Education, 22*(2), 213–228.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520701296189>
- Gould, J., & Ashton-Smith, J. (2011). Missed diagnosis or misdiagnosis? Girls and women on the autism spectrum. *Good Autism Practice, 12*(1), 34–41.
- Government of Ireland (GOI) (2004). *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act*. The Stationery Office.
- Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your “House.” *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research, 4*(2), 12–26.
- Grant, S., & Humphries, M. (2006). Critical evaluation of appreciative inquiry. *Action Research, 4*(4), 401–418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750306070103>
- Gray, L., Bownas, E., Hicks, L., Hutcheson-Galbraith, E., & Harrison, S. (2021). Towards a better understanding of girls on the autism spectrum: Educational support and parental perspectives. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 37*(1), 74–93.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2020.1863188>
- Gray, M. (1996). *Evidence-based healthcare*. Churchill Livingstone.

- Greaves-Lord, K., Skuse, D., & Mandy, W. (2022). Innovations of the ICD-11 in the Field of Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Psychological Approach. *Clinical psychology in Europe*, 4(Spec Issue), e10005. <https://doi.org/10.32872/cpe.10005>
- Griffin, S., & Shevlin, M. (2011). *Responding to special educational needs: An Irish perspective*. Gill & Macmillan.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). What is this constructivist paradigm anyway? In *Fourth Generation Evaluation* (pp. 79–90). Sage.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). Sage.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Guest, G., Namey, E., Taylor, J., Eley, N., & McKenna, K. (2017). Comparing focus groups and individual interviews: Findings from a randomized study. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(6), 693–708. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2017.1281601>
- Gustavsson, A. (2004). The role of theory in disability research -springboard or strait-jacket? *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 6(1), 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017410409512639>
- Guyatt, A. L., Heron, J., Knight, B. L. C., Golding, J., & Rai, D. (2015). Digit ratio and autism spectrum disorders in the Avon longitudinal study of parents and children: A birth cohort study. *BMJ Open*, 5(8), e007433. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2014-007433>

- Haigh, F., Kemp, L., Bazeley, P., & Haigh, N. (2019). Developing a critical realist informed framework to explain how the human rights and social determinants of health relationship works. *BMC Public Health*, *19*(1571), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7760-7>
- Halsall, J., Clarke, C., & Crane, L. (2021). “Camouflaging” by adolescent autistic girls who attend both mainstream and specialist resource classes: Perspectives of girls, their mothers and their educators. *Autism*, *25*(7), 2074–2086. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136236132110128>
- Hammond, S. A. (2013). *The thin book of appreciative inquiry* (3rd ed.). Thin Book Publishing Co.
- Hannah, E. F., & Topping, K. J. (2012). Anxiety levels in students with autism spectrum disorder making the transition from primary to secondary school. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, *47*(2), 198-209.
- Happé, F., & Frith, U. (2020). Annual research review: Looking back to look forward – Changes in the concept of autism and implications for future research. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *61*(3), 218–232. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13176>
- Hartman, D., O'Donnell-Killen, T., Doyle, J. K., Kavanagh, M., Day, A., & Azevedo, J. (2023). *The adult autism assessment handbook: A neurodiversity affirmative approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Health Service Executive (HSE). (2020). *Progressing towards outcomes-focused family-centred practice – An operational framework*. Author.
- Health Service Executive (HSE), & Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. (2018). *Working together to support children & young people with a disability and their families – National conference report*. The Institute for Action Research.

- Health Service Executive (HSE). (2021). *Progressing disability services for children and young people – National guidance for children’s disability network teams on individual family support plans*. Author.
- Hebron, J. (2017). The transition from primary to secondary school for students with autism spectrum conditions. In *Supporting social inclusion for students with autism spectrum disorders* (pp. 84–99). Routledge.
- Higgins, J. P. T., Thomas, J., Chandler, J., Cumpston, M., Li, T., Page, M. J., & Welch, V. A. (Eds.). (2019). *Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119536604>
- Hill, E. L. (2004). Evaluating the theory of executive dysfunction in autism. *Developmental Review*, 24(2), 189–223. DOI:[10.1016/j.dr.2004.01.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2004.01.001)
- Hiller, R. M., Young, R. L., & Weber, N. (2014). Sex differences in autism spectrum disorder based on DSM-5 criteria: Evidence from clinician and teacher reporting. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 42(8), 1381-1393. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-014-9881-x>
- Hodges, H., Fealko, C., & Soares, N. (2020). Autism spectrum disorder: Definition, epidemiology, causes, and clinical evaluation. *Translational Pediatrics*, 9(Suppl 1), S55–S65. <https://doi.org/10.21037/tp.2019.09.09>
- Hofman, R. H., & Kilimo, J. S. (2014). Teachers’ Attitudes and Self-Efficacy Towards Inclusion of Pupils with Disabilities in Tanzanian Schools. *Journal of Education and Training*, 1(2), 177-198. <https://doi.org/10.5296/jet.v1i2.5760>

- Hogan A. J. (2019). Social and medical models of disability and mental health: evolution and renewal. *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association journal = journal de l'Association medicale canadienne*, 191(1), E16–E18. <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.181008>
- Holtmann, M., Bölte, S., & Poustka, F. (2007). Autism spectrum disorders: sex differences in autistic behaviour domains and coexisting psychopathology. *Developmental medicine and child neurology*, 49(5), 361–366. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8749.2007.00361.x>
- Hong, Q. N., Fàbregues, S., Bartlett, G., Boardman, F., Cargo, M., Dagenais, P., Gagnon, M.-P., Griffiths, F., Nicolau, B., O’Cathain, A., Rousseau, M.-C., Vedel, I., & Pluye, P. (2018). The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 for information professionals and researchers. *Education for Information*, 34(4), 285–291. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-180221>
- Hopkins, R. M., Regehr, G., & Pratt, D. D. (2016). A framework for negotiating positionality in phenomenological research. *Medical Teacher*, 39(1), 20–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2017.1245854>
- Howe, C., & Griffin, C. (2021). Is Ireland at a Crossroads of Inclusive Education?. *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*, 33(1), 44–56. Retrieved from <https://reachjournal.ie/index.php/reach/article/view/8>
- Hull, L., Mandy, W., & Petrides, K. V. (2017). “Putting on my best normal”: Social camouflaging in adults with autism spectrum conditions. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(8), 2519–2534. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3166-5>
- Hull, L., Levy, L., Lai, M.-C., Petrides, K. V., Baron-Cohen, S., Allison, C., ... & Mandy, W. (2021). Is social camouflaging associated with anxiety and depression in autistic adults? *Molecular Autism*, 12(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-021-00421-1>

- Hull, L., Petrides, K. V., & Mandy, W. (2020). Cognitive predictors of self-reported camouflaging in autistic adolescents. *Autism Research, 13*(10), 1679–1689. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2407>
- Hull, L., Mandy, W., Lai, M.-C., Baron-Cohen, S., Allison, C., Smith, P., & Petrides, K. V. (2019). Development and validation of the camouflaging autistic traits questionnaire (CAT-Q). *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 49*(3), 819–833. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3792-6>
- Humphrey, N., & Symes, W. (2011). Peer interaction patterns among adolescents with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) in mainstream school settings. *Autism : the international journal of research and practice, 15*(4), 397–419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361310387804>
- Hutt, S. J., Hutt, C., Lee, D., & Ounsted, C. (1965). A behavioural and electroencephalographic study of autistic children. *Journal of Psychiatric Research, 3*(3), 181–197. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3956\(65\)90028-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3956(65)90028-2)
- Inclusion Ireland. (2022). *Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People: Parent experience survey report (February 2022)*. <https://inclusionireland.ie/publication/progressing-disability-services-for-children-and-young-people/>
- Irish Society for Autism. (2020). *Autism prevalence and education in Ireland*. Irish Society for Autism. <https://autism.ie>
- Izu zuno-Garcia, A. K., McNeel, M. M., & Fein, R. H. (2023). Neurodiversity in promoting the well-being of children on the autism spectrum. *Child Care in Practice, 29*(1), 54–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2022.2126436>

- Jaarsma, P., & Welin, S. (2012). Autism as a natural human variation: Reflections on the claims of the neurodiversity movement. *Health Care Analysis, 20*(1), 20–30.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-011-0169-9>
- Jacquemont, S., Coe, B. P., Hersch, M., Duyzend, M. H., Krumm, N., Bergmann, S., Beckmann, J. S., Rosenfeld, J. A., & Eichler, E. E. (2014). A higher mutational burden in females supports a “female protective model” in neurodevelopmental disorders. *The American Journal of Human Genetics, 94*(3), 415–425. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajhg.2014.02.001>
- Jarman, B., & Rayner, C. (2015). Asperger’s and Girls: What Teachers Need to Know. *Australasian Journal of Special Education, 39*(2), 128–142. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jse.2015.7>
- John-Steiner, V., & Mahn, H. (1996). Sociocultural approaches to learning and development: A Vygotskian framework. *Educational Psychologist, 31*(3-4), 191–206. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3103&4_4
- Kamenopoulou, L. (2016). Ecological systems theory: A valuable framework for research on inclusion and special educational needs/disabilities. *Педагогика, 88*(4), 515–527.
<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10136431/>
- Kamp-Becker I. (2024). Autism spectrum disorder in ICD-11-a critical reflection of its possible impact on clinical practice and research. *Molecular psychiatry, 29*(3), 633–638.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-023-02354-y>
- Kanner, L. (1943). Autistic disturbances of affective contact. *Nervous Child, 2*(3), 217–250.
- Kanner, L. (1971). Follow-up study of eleven autistic children originally reported in 1943. *Journal of Autism & Childhood Schizophrenia, 1*(2), 119–145. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01537953>

Kapp, S. K., Gillespie-Lynch, K., Sherman, L. E., & Hutman, T. (2013). Deficit, difference, or both? Autism and neurodiversity. *Developmental Psychology, 49*(1), 59–71.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028353>

Kavanagh, M., Day, A., Hartman, D., O'Donnell-Killen, T., & Doyle, J. K. (2025). *The neurodiversity affirmative child autism assessment handbook*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Keen, D., Webster, A., & Ridley, G. (2016). How well are children with autism spectrum disorder doing academically at school? An overview of the literature. *Autism, 20*(3), 276–294.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315580962>

Kelly, K. (2022). *Playing for learning*. Lettertec.

Kenny, L., Hattersley, C., Molins, B., Buckley, C., Povey, C., & Pellicano, E. (2016). Which terms should be used to describe autism? Perspectives from the UK autism community. *Autism : the international journal of research and practice, 20*(4), 442–462.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315588200>

Kivunja, C., & Kuyini, A. B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education, 6*(5), 26-41.

<https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n5p26>

Kirkovski, M., Enticott, P. G., & Fitzgerald, P. B. (2013). A review of the role of female gender in autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 43*(11), 2584–2603. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1811-1>

Knickmeyer, R., Baron-Cohen, S., Fane, B. A., Wheelwright, S., Mathews, G. A., Conway, G. S., Brook, C. G., & Hines, M. (2006). Androgens and autistic traits: A study of individuals with congenital adrenal hyperplasia. *Hormones and behavior, 50*(1), 148–153.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yhbeh.2006.02.006>

- Kopp, S., & Gillberg, C. (2011). The Autism Spectrum Screening Questionnaire (ASSQ)-Revised Extended Version (ASSQ-REV): An instrument for better capturing the autism phenotype in girls? A preliminary study involving 191 clinical cases and community controls. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 32*(6), 2875–2888. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2011.05.017>
- Kranzler, J. H., Floyd, R. G., Bray, M. A., & Demaray, M. K. (2020). Past, present, and future of research in school psychology: The biopsychosocial ecological model as an overarching framework. *School psychology (Washington, D.C.), 35*(6), 419–427. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000401>
- Kreiser, N. L., & White, S. W. (2014). ASD in females: Are we overstating the gender difference in diagnosis? *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 17*(1), 67–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-013-0148-9>
- Krosnick, J. A. (1999). Survey research. *Annual Review of Psychology, 50*, 537–567. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.50.1.537>
- Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208963>
- Lai, C. L. E., Lau, Z., Lui, S. S. Y., Lok, E., Tam, V., Chan, Q., Cheng, K. M., Lam, S. M., & Cheung, E. F. C. (2017). Meta-analysis of neuropsychological measures of executive functioning in children and adolescents with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder. *Autism Research, 10*(5), 911–939. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.1723>
- Lai, M. C., Lombardo, M. V., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2014). Autism. *Lancet (London, England), 383*(9920), 896–910. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(13\)61539-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)61539-1)
- Lai, M.-C., Lombardo, M. V., Auyeung, B., Chakrabarti, B., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2015). Sex/gender differences and autism: Setting the scene for future research. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 54*(1), 11–24. [10.1016/j.jaac.2014.10.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2014.10.003)

- Lai, M.-C., Lombardo, M. V., Ruigrok, A. N. V., Chakrabarti, B., Auyeung, B., Szatmari, P., Happé, F., Baron-Cohen, S., & MRC AIMS Consortium. (2017). Quantifying and exploring camouflaging in men and women with autism. *Autism*, *21*(6), 690–702.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316671012>
- Lauterbach, A. A. (2018). Hermeneutic Phenomenological Interviewing: Going Beyond Semi-Structured Formats to Help Participants Revisit Experience. *The Qualitative Report*, *23*(11), 2883-2898. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3464>
- Leach, D. (2018). Using multi-tiered systems of support for students with autism spectrum disorders in inclusive classrooms. *DADD Online Journal*, *5*(1), 6–17.
- Leach, D., & Duffy, M. L. (2009). Supporting Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders in Inclusive Settings. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *45*(1), 31-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451209338395>
- Leadbitter, K., Buckle, K. L., Ellis, C., & Dekker, M. (2021). Autistic self-advocacy and the neurodiversity movement: Implications for autism early intervention research and practice. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 782. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.635690>
- Leedham, A., Thompson, A. R., Smith, R., & Freeth, M. (2020). “I was exhausted trying to figure it out”: The experiences of females receiving an autism diagnosis in middle to late adulthood. *Autism*, *24*(1), 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319853442>
- Lever, A. G., & Geurts, H. M. (2016). Psychiatric co-occurring symptoms and disorders in young, middle-aged, and older adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *46*(6), 1916–1930. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2722-8>
- Levin, K. A. (2006). Study design III: Cross-sectional studies. *Evidence-Based Dentistry*, *7*(1), 24–25. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.ebd.6400375>

- Levy, D., Ronemus, M., Yamrom, B., Lee, Y.-H., Leotta, A., Kendall, J., Marks, S., Lakshmi, B., Pai, D., Ye, K., Buja, A., & Wigler, M. (2011). Rare de novo and transmitted copy-number variation in autistic spectrum disorders. *Neuron*, *70*(5), 886–897.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2011.05.015>
- Lindsay, S., Proulx, M., Scott, H., & Thomson, N. (2014). Exploring teachers' strategies for including children with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream classrooms. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *18*(2), 101–122.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.758320>
- Loades, M. E., & Mastroyannopoulou, K. (2010). Teachers' Recognition of Children's Mental Health Problems. *Child and adolescent mental health*, *15*(3), 150–156.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-3588.2009.00551.x>
- Lobar, S. L. (2016). DSM-V Changes for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Implications for diagnosis, management, and care coordination for children with ASDs. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, *30*(4), 359-365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedhc.2015.09.005>
- Lodico, M. G., Spaulding, D. T., & Voegtle, K. H. (2010). *Methods in educational research: From theory to practice*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Loomes, R., Hull, L., & Mandy, W. P. L. (2017). What is the male-to-female ratio in autism spectrum disorder? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *56*(6), 466–474.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2017.03.013>
- Lounds Taylor, J., Henninger, N. A., & Mailick, M. R. (2015). Longitudinal patterns of employment and postsecondary education for adults with autism and average-range IQ. *Autism*, *19*(7), 785–793. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315585643>

- Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>
- Mahler, M. S. (1952). On child psychosis and schizophrenia: autistic and symbiotic infantile psychoses. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 7, 286–305.
- Mandy, W., & Lai, M. C. (2017). Towards sex- and gender-informed autism research. *Autism*, 21(6), 643–645. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361317706904>
- Mandy, W., Chilvers, R., Chowdhury, U., Salter, G., Seigal, A., & Skuse, D. (2012). Sex differences in autism spectrum disorder: evidence from a large sample of children and adolescents. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 42(7), 1304–1313. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-011-1356-0>
- Manouilenko, I., & Bejerot, S. (2015). Sukhareva--Prior to Asperger and Kanner. *Nordic journal of psychiatry*, 69(6), 479–482. <https://doi.org/10.3109/08039488.2015.1005022>
- Martin, G., Carlson, N., & Buskist, W. (2013). *Psychology* (5th ed.). Pearson.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (2nd ed.). Harper & Row.
- Maslow, A. H. (1981). *Motivation and personality*. Prabhat Prakashan.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach: An interactive approach*. sage.
- May, T., Cornish, K., & Rinehart, N. (2014). Does gender matter? A one year follow-up of autistic, attention and anxiety symptoms in high-functioning children with autism spectrum

disorder. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 44(5), 1077–1086.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1964-y>

McCurdy, E. E., & Cole, C. L. (2014). Use of a peer support intervention for promoting academic engagement of students with autism in general education settings. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 44(4), 883–893. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1941-5>

McGrath, J. E. (1981). Dilemmatics: The study of research choices and dilemmas. *The American behavioral scientist*, 25(2), 179-210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000276428102500205>

McMaster University, Law, M., Stewart, D., Pollock, N., Letts, L., Bosch, J., & Westmorland, M. (1998). *Critical Review Form—Quantitative Studies*. McMaster University. [Accessed January 30, 2023].

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Wiley.

Mertens, D. M. (2005). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Mertens, D. M. (2015). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology*. Sage.

Miller, K. D., & Tsang, E. W. (2011). Testing management theories: Critical realist philosophy and research methods. *Strategic management journal*, 32(2), 139-158.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.868>

Milner, V., McIntosh, H., Colvert, E., & Happé, F. (2019). A Qualitative Exploration of the Female Experience of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 49(6), 2389–2402. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-03906-4>

- Milton, D. (2012). So what exactly is autism? In *Autism Education Trust Competency Framework*.
<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/62698/>
- Milton, D. E. M. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem.' *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008>
- Mir, R., & Watson, A. (2001). Research notes and commentaries. Critical realism and constructivism in strategy research: Toward a synthesis. *Strategic Management Journal*, 22, 1169-1173.
- Misheva, E. (2024). *Under the radar: An essential guide to autism and girls*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Mitchell, D., & Sutherland, D. (2020). *What really works in special and inclusive education: Using evidence-based teaching strategies*. Routledge.
- Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., Altman, D. G., & The PRISMA Group. (2009). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA statement. *PLOS Medicine*, 6(7), e1000097.
- Moore, I., Morgan, G., Welham, A., & Russell, G. (2022). The intersection of autism and gender in the negotiation of identity: A systematic review and metasynthesis. *Feminism & Psychology*, 32(4), 421–442. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535221074806>
- Moran, E., Sloan, S., Walsh, E., & Taylor, L. (2024). Exploring restorative practices: Teachers' experiences with early adolescents. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 6, 100323. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100323>
- Moran, E., Walsh, E., & Sloan, S. (2025). Promoting a restorative culture in schools: Insights from school leaders. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 8, 100397.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100397>

- Moss, P., Howlin, P., Savage, S., Bolton, P., & Rutter, M. (2015). Self and informant reports of mental health difficulties among adults with autism: Findings from a long-term follow-up study. *Autism, 19*(7), 832–841. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315585916>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications.
- Moyse, R., & Porter, J. (2015a). The experience of the hidden curriculum for girls at mainstream primary schools. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 30*(2), 187–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.986915>
- Moyse, R., & Porter, J. (2015b). Key barriers to inclusion for girls with Asperger's syndrome at primary school. In *Asperger syndrome: Risk factors, cognitive-behavioral characteristics and management strategies* (pp. 37–63). Nova Science Publishers.
- Mulholland, M., & O'Connor, U. (2016). Collaborative classroom practice for inclusion: perspectives of classroom teachers and learning support/resource teachers. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20*(10), 1070–1083. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1145266>
- Munroe, A. (2023). Systemic barriers to mainstream education provision as experienced by autistic girls: An executive summary of the literature. *Middletown Centre for Autism Research Journal, 1*(2), 62–84. https://www.middletownautism.com/files/shares/MCA_Research_Journal_1.pdf
- Munroe, A., & Dunleavy, M. (2023). Recognising autism in girls within the education context: Reflecting on the internal presentation and the diagnostic criteria. *Irish Educational Studies, 42*(4), 561–581. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2023.2260371>

- Murray, D. (2018). Monotropism – An interest-based account of autism. In F. R. Volkmar (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Vol. 10, pp. 978–981). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6435-8_102269-1
- Murray, D., Lesser, M., & Lawson, W. (2005). Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for autism. *Autism*, 9(2), 139–156. DOI: [10.1177/1362361305051398](https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361305051398)
- Mwita, K. (2022). Strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research in social science studies. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* 11(6), 618-625.
<https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i6.1920>
- National Council for Special Education. (2015). *Supporting students with autism spectrum disorder in schools* (Policy Advice Paper No. 5). Trim, Ireland: National Council for Special Education. <https://ncse.ie/policy-advice-on-supporting-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-in-schools>
- National Council for Special Education. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. Trim, Ireland: National Council for Special Education. <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NCSE-Annual-Report-2019-EN.pdf>
- National Council for Special Education. (2022). *Policy advice paper on special schools and classes: An inclusive education for an inclusive society*. Trim, Ireland: National Council for Special Education.
- National Council for Special Education. (2024). *An inclusive education for an inclusive society: Policy advice paper on special schools and classes* (Policy Advice Paper No. 7).
https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/An_Inclusive_Education_for_an_Inclusive_Society_NCSE_Policy_Advice_Paper_7.pdf

- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2013). *Autism spectrum disorder in under 19s: Support and management: Clinical guideline [CG170]*.
<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg170>
- Neal, J. W., & Neal, Z. P. (2013). Nested or networked? Future directions for ecological systems theory. *Social Development*, 22(4), 722–737. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12018>
- Neel, C. G. O., & Fuligni, A. (2013). A longitudinal study of school belonging and academic motivation across high school. *Child Development*, 84(2), 678–692.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01862.x>
- National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). (2003). *Working together to make a difference for children. The NEPS model of service*. https://www.educatetogether.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/the_neps_model_of_service.pdf
- National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). (2007). *Special educational needs. A continuum of support*. The Stationery Office. https://www.sess.ie/sites/default/files/inline-files/neps_special_needs_guidelines%20.primary.pdf
- National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). (2010). *Behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. A continuum of support*. The Stationery Office.
https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/National-Educational-Psychological-Service-NEPS-/neps_besd_continuum_teacher_guide.pdf
- Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 8(2), 90–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2>
- Niculae, A. Ş., & Pavăl, D. (2016). From molecules to behavior: An integrative theory of autism spectrum disorder. *Medical Hypotheses*, 97, 74–84. DOI:[10.1016/j.mehy.2016.10.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mehy.2016.10.016)

- Nohilly, M., & Tynan, F. (2022). The evolution of wellbeing in educational policy in Ireland: Towards an interdisciplinary approach. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 12(1), 80–96. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v12i1.1663>
- Nohilly, M., Tynan, F., Martin, R., Pope, J., Bowles, R., Dillon, M., Farrelly, G., Harmon, M., LaCumber, G., Kitching, N., Ní Chróinín, D., & O'Sullivan, L. (2023). *A systematic literature review to support curriculum specification development for the area of wellbeing*. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. https://ncca.ie/media/6229/ncca_a-systematic-literature-review-to-support-the-curriculum-specification-development-for-the-area-of-wellbeing.pdf
- Noon, E. J. (2018). Interpretive phenomenological analysis: An appropriate methodology for educational research?. *Journal of perspectives in applied academic practice*, 6(1), 75-83.
- Norcini J. (2004). Back to the future: clinical vignettes and the measurement of physician performance. *Annals of internal medicine*, 141(10), 813–814. <https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-141-10-200411160-00014>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1609406917733847. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Nugroho, K. Y., Wulandari, D. F. (2017). Constructivist learning paradigm as the basis on learning model development. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 409(4), 410-415.
- Nydén, A., Gillberg, C., Hjelmquist, E., & Heiman, M. (1999). Executive function/attention deficits in boys with Asperger syndrome, attention disorder and reading/writing disorder. *Autism*, 3(3), 213–228. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361399003003002>

- Nydén, A., Hjelmquist, E., & Gillberg, C. (2000). Autism spectrum and attention-deficit disorders in girls. Some neuropsychological aspects. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, 9(3), 180–185. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s007870070041>
- O'Brien, E. (2010). Teachers and Special Needs Assistants in Irish Classrooms: An Evaluation of a Model of Reflective Teamwork. *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*, 23(2), 81–94. Retrieved from <https://reachjournal.ie/index.php/reach/article/view/97>
- O'Hagan, S., Bond, C., & Hebron, J. (2022). Autistic girls and emotionally based school avoidance: supportive factors for successful re-engagement in mainstream high school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(9), 1919–1935. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2049378>
- Oireachtas. (2023, October 24). *Written answers: Autism services*. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-10-24/530>
- Oliver, M. (1990) *The Politics of Disablement*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20895-1>
- Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2022). A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE Guide No. 149. *Medical Teacher*, 45(3), 241–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2022.2057287>
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Dickinson, W. B., Leech, N. L., & Zoran, A. G. (2009). A Qualitative Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Data in Focus Group Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(3), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800301>
- Ozonoff, S. (1997). Components of executive function in autism and other disorders. In J. Russell (Ed.), *Autism as an executive disorder* (pp. 179–211). Oxford University Press.

- Ozonoff, S., Young, G. S., Carter, A., Messinger, D., Yirmiya, N., Zwaigenbaum, L., Bryson, S., Carver, L. J., Constantino, J. N., Dobkins, K., Hutman, T., Iverson, J. M., Landa, R., Rogers, S. J., Sigman, M., & Stone, W. L. (2011). Recurrence risk for autism spectrum disorders: A Baby Siblings Research Consortium study. *Pediatrics*, *128*(3), 488–495.
<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2010-2825>
- Ozonoff, S., Young, G. S., Landa, R. J., Brian, J., Bryson, S., Charman, T., Chawarska, K., Macari, S. L., Messinger, D., Stone, W. L., Zwaigenbaum, L., & Iosif, A. M. (2015). Diagnostic stability in young children at risk for autism spectrum disorder: A Baby Siblings Research Consortium study. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *56*(9), 988–999.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12421>
- O'Farrell, P., & Kinsella, W. (2018). Research exploring parents', teachers' and educational psychologists' perceptions of consultation in a changing Irish context. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *34*(3), 315–328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2018.1461612>
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, *42*(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Peabody, J. W., Luck, J., Glassman, P., Jain, S., Hansen, J., Spell, M., & Lee, M. (2004). Measuring the quality of physician practice by using clinical vignettes: a prospective validation study. *Annals of internal medicine*, *141*(10), 771–780. <https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-141-10-200411160-00008>

- Pennington, B. F., & Ozonoff, S. (1996). Executive functions and developmental psychopathology. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 37(1), 51–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1996.tb01380.x>
- Peters, M. D. J., Marnie, C., Tricco, A. C., Pollock, D., Munn, Z., Alexander, L., McInerney, P., Godfrey, C. M., & Khalil, H. (2020). Updated methodological guidance for the conduct of scoping reviews. *JBIM Evidence Synthesis*, 18(10), 2119-2126. <https://doi.org/10.11124/jbies-20-00167>
- Petticrew, M., & Roberts, H. (2003). Evidence, hierarchies, and typologies: Horses for courses. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 57(7), 527–529. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.57.7.527>
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2005). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: A primer on research paradigms and philosophy of science. *Journal of counseling psychology*, 52(2), 126.
- Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) (2019). *Code of Professional Ethics*. [https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/source/Code%20of%20Professional%20Ethics%20\(Oct%202019\).pdf](https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/source/Code%20of%20Professional%20Ethics%20(Oct%202019).pdf)
- Punch, K. (2005). *Introduction to Social Research Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. (2nd ed.) SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Rabbitte, K., Prendeville, P., & Kinsella, W. (2017). Parents' experiences of the diagnostic process for girls with autism spectrum disorder in Ireland: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 34(2), 54–66. <https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsecp.2017.34.2.54>

- Rao, K., Gravel, J. W., Rose, D. H., & Tucker-Smith, T. N. (2023). Universal Design for Learning in its 3rd decade: A focus on equity, inclusion, and design. *International encyclopedia of education*, 6, 712-720.
- Ratto, A. B., Kenworthy, L., Yerys, B. E., Bascom, J., Wieckowski, A. T., White, S. W., ... & Anthony, L. G. (2018). What about the girls? Sex-based differences in autistic traits and adaptive skills. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(5), 1698–1711.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3413-9>
- Rattray, J., & Jones, M. C. (2007). Essential elements of questionnaire design and development. *Journal of clinical nursing*, 16(2), 234–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2702.2006.01573.x>
- Rawdon, C., Sampson, K., Gilleece, L., & Cosgrove, J. (2020). *Developing an evaluation framework for teachers' professional learning in Ireland: Phase 1*. Educational Research Centre.
https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ERC-TPL-Wellbeing-Literature-Review-Report_Final.pdf
- Reed, M. S., Ferre, M., Martin-Ortega, J., Blanche, R., Lawford-Rolfe, R., Dallimer, M., & Holden, J. (2021). Evaluating impact from research: A methodological framework. *Research Policy*, 50(4), 104147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2020.104147>
- Ritchie, J., & Spencer, L. (2002). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In A. M. Huberman, M. B. Miles (Eds.) *Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research* (pp. 305-329). SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986274.n12>
- Roberts, J., & Simpson, K. (2016). A review of research into stakeholder perspectives on inclusion of students with autism in mainstream schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(10), 1084–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1145267>

- Roberts, J., & Webster, A. (2020). Including students with autism in schools: a whole school approach to improve outcomes for students with autism. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(7), 701–718. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1712622>
- Roberts, K., Dowell, A., & Nie, J. B. (2019). Attempting rigor and replicability in thematic analysis of qualitative research data: A case study of codebook development. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 19, 66. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0707-y>
- Robinson, E. B., Lichtenstein, P., Anckarsäter, H., Happé, F., & Ronald, A. (2013). Examining and interpreting the female protective effect against autistic behaviour. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 110(13), 5258–5262. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1211070110>
- Rolfe, G. (2006). A critical realist rationale for using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 11(1), 79-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987106060898>
- Rose, R., Shevlin, M., Winter, E., & O'Raw, P. (2015). *Project IRIS – Inclusive research in Irish schools: A longitudinal study of the experiences of and outcomes for children with special educational needs (SEN) in Irish schools* (NCSE Research Report No. 19). National Council for Special Education. <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/02383-NCSE-Research-Report-19-Project-IRIS.pdf>
- Rutherford, M., McKenzie, K., Johnson, T., Catchpole, C., O'Hare, A., McClure, I., Forsyth, K., McCartney, D., & Murray, A. (2016). Gender ratio in a clinical population sample, age of diagnosis and duration of assessment in children and adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 20(5), 628-634. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315617879> (Original work published 2016)

- Rutter, M., Greenfield, D., & Lockyer, L. (1967). A five to fifteen year follow-up study of infantile psychosis: II. Social and behavioural outcome. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 113(504), 1183–1199. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.113.504.1183>
- Ryan, E. (2023). The relationship between continuous professional development and teacher self-efficacy levels of primary school teachers working with autistic students. *Middletown Centre for Autism Research Journal*, 1(2), 62–84.
https://www.middletownautism.com/files/shares/MCA_Research_Journal_1.pdf
- Rynkiewicz, A., & Łucka, I. (2018). Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in girls. Co-occurring psychopathology. Sex differences in clinical manifestation. Zaburzenia ze spektrum autyzmu (ASD) u dziewcząt. Współwystępujące zespoły psychopatologiczne. Różnice między płciowe w obrazie klinicznym. *Psychiatria polska*, 52(4), 629–639.
<https://doi.org/10.12740/PP/OnlineFirst/58837>
- Saad, M., de Medeiros, R., & Mosini, A. C. (2017). Are We Ready for a True Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model? The Many Meanings of "Spiritual". *Medicines (Basel, Switzerland)*, 4(4), 79. <https://doi.org/10.3390/medicines4040079>
- Sandars, J., & Eaton, D. M. (2017). Appreciative inquiry in medical education. *Medical Teacher*, 39(2), 123-127.
- Sandin, S., Lichtenstein, P., Kuja-Halkola, R., Larsson, H., Hultman, C. M., & Reichenberg, A. (2014). The familial risk of autism. *JAMA*, 311(17), 1770–1777.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2014.4144>
- Schiller, C. J. (2016). Critical realism in nursing: an emerging approach. *Nursing Philosophy*, 17(2), 88-102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nup.12107>

- Schön, D. A. (1991). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Schwarz, E., Guest, P. C., Rahmoune, H., Wang, L., Levin, Y., Ingudomnukul, E., et al. (2011). Sex-specific serum biomarker patterns in adults with Asperger's syndrome. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 16(11), 1213–1220. <https://doi.org/10.1038/mp.2010.102>
- Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research: Relating ontology and epistemology to the methodology and methods of the scientific, interpretive, and critical research paradigms. *English Language Teaching*, 5(9), 9–16. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n9p9>
- Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED). (2002). *Review of provision of educational psychology services in Scotland (The Currie Report)*. <https://www.aspep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Currie-Report-2002.pdf>
- Sedgewick, F., Hill, V., Yates, R., Pickering, L., & Pellicano, E. (2016). Gender differences in the social motivation and friendship experiences of autistic and non-autistic adolescents. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 46(4), 1297–1306. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2669-1>
- Setia, M. S. (2016). Methodology series module 3: Cross-sectional studies. *Indian journal of dermatology*, 61(3), 261-264.
- Sheldrick, R. C., Maye, M. P., & Carter, A. S. (2017). Age at first identification of autism spectrum disorder: An analysis of two US surveys. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 56(4), 313–320. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2017.01.012>
- Shevlin, M., Kearns, H., Ranaghan, M., Twomey, M., Smith, R., & Winter, E. (2009). *Creating inclusive learning environments in Irish schools: Teacher perspectives*. National Council for

Special Education. http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Creating_inclusive_learning_environments.pdf

Siegel, B., Pliner, C., Eschler, J., & Elliott, G. R. (1988). How children with autism are diagnosed: difficulties in identification of children with multiple developmental delays. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 9(4), 199-204.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2464003/>

Silberman, S. (2017). *Neurotribes: the legacy of autism and the future of neurodiversity*. CELA.

Silvertant, M. (2020, November 29). Autism & camouflaging | Embrace Autism. *Embrace Autism*.

<https://embrace-autism.com/autism-and-camouflaging/>

Sim, J., Saunders, B., Waterfield, J., & Kingstone, T. (2018). Can sample size in qualitative research be determined a priori? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 21(5), 619–

634. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1454643>

Simonoff, E., Pickles, A., Charman, T., Chandler, S., Loucas, T., & Baird, G. (2008). Psychiatric disorders in children with autism spectrum disorders: Prevalence, comorbidity, and associated factors in a population-derived sample. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 47(8), 921–929. <https://doi.org/10.1097/CHI.0b013e318179964f>

Singer, J. (1998). *Odd people in: The birth of community amongst people on the autism spectrum: A personal exploration of a new social movement based on neurological diversity* (Honours thesis). University of Technology, Sydney.

Slee, R. (2018). *Inclusive education isn't dead, it just smells funny*. Routledge.

Smith, J. A. (1996). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology. *Psychology and health*, 11(2), 261-271.

- Smith, L. O., & Elder, J. H. (2010). Siblings and family environments of persons with autism spectrum disorder: A review of the literature. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 23*(3), 189–195. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2010.00240.x>
- Sorrell, S. (2018). Explaining sociotechnical transitions: A critical realist perspective. *Research Policy, 47*, 1267-1282. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2018.04.008>
- Spector, P. E. (2019). Do not cross me: Optimizing the use of cross-sectional designs. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 34*(2), 125–137. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-018-09613-8>
- Strand, L. R. (2017). Charting relations between intersectionality theory and the neurodiversity paradigm. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 37*(2). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i2.5374>
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Sweeney, E., & Fitzgerald, J. (2023). Supporting autistic pupils in primary schools in Ireland: Are autism special classes a model of inclusion or isolation? *Disabilities, 3*(3), 379–395. <https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities3030025>
- Symes, W., & Humphrey, N. (2010). Peer-group indicators of social inclusion among pupils with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) in mainstream secondary schools: A comparative study. *School Psychology International, 31*(5), 478-494. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034310382496>
- The Teaching Council. (2015). *Teachers' learning (CPD)*. The Teaching Council – An Chomhairle Múinteoireachta. Retrieved May 6, 2024, from <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/teacher-education/teachers-learning-cpd/>
- Thomas, D. R. (2017). Feedback from research participants: Are member checks useful in qualitative research? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 14*(1), 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2016.1219435>

- Thrupp, M., & White, M. (2013). *Research, policy and advocacy in education*. Routledge.
- Tierney, S., Burns, J., & Kilbey, E. (2016). Looking behind the mask: Social coping strategies of girls on the autistic spectrum. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 23*, 73–83.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2015.11.013>
- Tomlinson, C., Bond, C., & Hebron, J. (2019). The school experiences of autistic girls and adolescents: A systematic review. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 35*(2), 203–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2019.1643154>
- Tomás, L., & Bidet, O. (2023). Conducting qualitative interviews via VoIP technologies: reflections on rapport, technology, digital exclusion, and ethics. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 27*(3), 275–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2023.2183007>
- Tong, P., & An, I. S. (2024). Review of studies applying Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory in international and intercultural education research. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1233925. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1233925>
- Tøssebro, J. (2004). Introduction to the special issue: Understanding disability. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 6*(1), 3–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017410409512635>
- Tudge, J. R., Mokrova, I., Hatfield, B. E., & Karnik, R. B. (2009). Uses and misuses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. *Journal of family theory & review, 1*(4), 198-210. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2009.00026.x>
- Tynan, F., & Davy, K. (2021). An Exploration of Teachers' Perceptions of how the Classroom Environment Can Support Pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the Mainstream Primary School. *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland, 34*(1). Retrieved from <https://reachjournal.ie/index.php/reach/article/view/314>

- Ültanir, E. (2012). An epistemological glance at the constructivist approach: Constructivist learning in Dewey, Piaget, and Montessori. *International Journal of Instruction*, 5(2), 195-212.
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2006).
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>
- van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315421056>
- Van Wijngaarden-Cremers, P. J., van Eeten, E., Groen, W. B., Van Deurzen, P. A., Oosterling, I. J., & Van der Gaag, R. J. (2014). Gender and age differences in the core triad of impairments in autism spectrum disorders: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 44(3), 627–635. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1913-9>
- Vermeulen, P. (2012). *Autism as context blindness*. Future Horizons.
- Vermeulen, P. (2015). Context blindness in autism spectrum disorder: Not using the forest to see the trees as trees. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 30(3), 182–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357614528799>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wahba, M. A., & Bridwell, L. G. (1976). Maslow reconsidered: A review of research on the need hierarchy theory. *Organizational Behavior & Human Performance*, 15(2), 212–240. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073\(76\)90038-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(76)90038-6)
- Wang, S., Rubie-Davies, C. M., & Meissel, K. (2018). A systematic review of the teacher expectation literature over the past 30 years. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 24(3-5), 124–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2018.1548798>

- Ward, T. B., Curtis, C., & Seehagen, S. (2022). Investigating the effects of perceived student gender on primary school teachers' recognition of autism. *Psychology in the Schools*, 59(7), 1363-1376. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22667>
- Wassell, C., & Burke, E. (2022). *Autism, girls & keeping it all inside* [PDF]. Autistic Girls Network. <https://autisticgirlsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Keeping-it-all-inside.pdf>
- Waters, L., & White, M. (2015). Case study of a school wellbeing initiative: Using appreciative inquiry to support positive change. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 5(1), 19-32.
- Westwood, H., Mandy, W., Simic, M. *et al.* Assessing ASD in Adolescent Females with Anorexia Nervosa using Clinical and Developmental Measures: a Preliminary Investigation. *J Abnorm Child Psychol* 46, 183–192 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-017-0301-x>
- White, E. I., Wallace, G. L., Bascom, J., Armour, A. C., Register-Brown, K., Popal, H. S., Ratto, A. B., Martin, A., & Kenworthy, L. (2017). Sex differences in parent-reported executive functioning and adaptive behavior in children and young adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism research : official journal of the International Society for Autism Research*, 10(10), 1653–1662. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.1811>
- White, J., McGarry, S., Falkmer, M., Scott, M., Williams, P. J., & Black, M. H. (2023). Creating Inclusive Schools for Autistic Students: A Scoping Review on Elements Contributing to Strengths-Based Approaches. *Education Sciences*, 13 (7), 709. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13070709>
- Whitlock, A., Fulton, K., Lai, M.-C., Pellicano, E., & Mandy, W. (2020). Recognition of girls on the autism spectrum by primary school educators: An experimental study. *Autism Research*, 13(8), 1358–1372. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2316>

- Wilkinson, L. A. (2008). The gender gap in Asperger syndrome: Where are the girls? *Teaching Exceptional Children Plus*, 4(4), Article 3. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ967482.pdf>
- Wing, L. (1975). *The autistic spectrum: A guide for parents and professionals*. Constable & Robinson Ltd.
- Wing, L., & Gould, J. (1979). Severe impairments of social interaction and associated abnormalities in children: Epidemiology and classification. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 9(1), 11–29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01531288>
- Wing, L., & Potter, D. (2002). The epidemiology of autistic spectrum disorders: Is the prevalence rising? *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews*, 8(3), 151–161. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mrdd.10029>
- World Health Organisation. (2019). *International classification of diseases for mortality and morbidity statistics* (11th Revision). <https://icd.who.int/>
- World Health Organisation. (2023). *Gender and health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/gender-and-health>
- Wynn, D. E., & Williams, C. K. (2012). Principles for conducting critical realist case study research in information systems. *MIS Quarterly*, 36(3), 787-810.
- Xu, W., & Zammit, K. (2020). Applying thematic analysis to education: A hybrid approach to interpreting data in practitioner research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920918810>
- Young, R. A., & Collin, A. (2004). Introduction: Constructivism and social constructionism in the career field. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64, 373-388.

Zamawe F. C. (2015). The Implication of Using NVivo Software in Qualitative Data Analysis: Evidence-Based Reflections. *Malawi medical journal : the journal of Medical Association of Malawi*, 27(1), 13–15. <https://doi.org/10.4314/mmj.v27i1.4>

Appendices

Appendix A: Reflections on my interpretation of theories and their relevance to autistic girls along with implications for teachers

Theory	Relevance to Autistic Girls	Implications for Teachers
Theory of Mind (ToM) (Baron-Cohen, 1990)	Girls may mask ToM difficulties or develop coping strategies like mimicking peers, making them appear more socially competent.	Teachers might assume social understanding is intact and miss subtle signs of difficulty with ToM.
Executive Dysfunction Theory (Pennington & Ozonoff, 1996)	Girls may experience EF difficulties in planning, organisation, or shifting attention, but often internalise these struggles.	Educators may mislabel these as laziness or inattentiveness rather than recognising them as EF-related challenges.
Extreme Male Brain Theory (Baron-Cohen, 2002)	Suggests autism aligns with stereotypically male traits, possibly leading to under-recognition in girls.	Teachers should be cautious not to rely on male-centric diagnostic expectations when observing girls and must be aware of biases that may exist from training.
Monotropism (Murray et al., 2005)	Intense focus on specific interests may be mistaken for obsessive behaviour or emotional immaturity.	Teachers can support learning by integrating these interests into curriculum or classroom activities.
Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012)	Challenges in communication are mutual and not just due to the autistic girl, but due to differences between neurotypes.	Encourages teachers to reflect on their communication styles and adapt their interactions rather than placing blame solely on the student.

Context Blindness Theory (Vermeulen, 2012)	Girls may struggle to use social or situational context to interpret meaning, which can affect classroom interactions.	Educators may need to provide clearer instructions or explicitly teach context cues.
Social Motivation Theory (Chevallier et al., 2012)	Challenges the assumption that autistic girls lack social interest; many want friendships but don't have the skills.	Helps teachers understand that seeming withdrawal may be due to social differences, not disinterest.
Female Protective Effect (Jacquemont et al., 2014; Robinson et al. 2013)	Girls may need greater genetic or environmental load to show clear traits, leading to later or missed diagnosis.	Highlights the importance of early and nuanced observation by teachers who are often the first to notice concerns.
Integrative Theory / Bayesian Brain (Niculae & Pavál, 2016)	Emphasises autism's heterogeneity and subtle presentation—especially in girls.	Teachers should be aware that “classic” traits may not apply and that subtle signs are still significant.

Appendix B: Diagnostic Criteria for Autism found in DSM-5-TR and ICD-11

DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022)
<p>A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by all of the following, currently or by history:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions. - Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye

contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.

- Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behaviour to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history:

- Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).

- Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).

- Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).

- Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).

D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual developmental disorder (intellectual disability) or global developmental delay. Intellectual developmental disorder and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual developmental disorder, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

ICD- 11(WHO, 2022)

Persistent deficits in initiating and sustaining social communication and reciprocal social interactions that are outside the expected range of typical functioning given the individual's age and level of intellectual development. Specific manifestations of these deficits vary according to chronological age, verbal and intellectual ability, and disorder severity.

Manifestations may include limitations in the following:

- Understanding of, interest in, or inappropriate responses to the verbal or non-verbal social communications of others.
- Integration of spoken language with typical complimentary non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, gestures, facial expressions and body language. These non-verbal behaviours may also be reduced in frequency or intensity.

- Understanding and use of language in social contexts and ability to initiate and sustain reciprocal social conversations.
- Social awareness, leading to behaviour that is not appropriately modulated according to the social context.
- Ability to imagine and respond to the feelings, emotional states, and attitudes of others.
- Mutual sharing of interests.
- Ability to make and sustain typical peer relationships.

Persistent restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities that are clearly atypical or excessive for the individual's age and sociocultural context.

These may include:

- Lack of adaptability to new experiences and circumstances, with associated distress, that can be evoked by trivial changes to a familiar environment or in response to unanticipated events.
- Inflexible adherence to particular routines; for example, these may be geographic such as following familiar routes, or may require precise timing such as mealtimes or transport.
- Excessive adherence to rules (e.g., when playing games).
- Excessive and persistent ritualized patterns of behaviour (e.g., preoccupation with lining up or sorting objects in a particular way) that serve no apparent external purpose.
- Repetitive and stereotyped motor movements, such as whole body movements (e.g., rocking), atypical gait (e.g., walking on tiptoes), unusual hand or finger movements and posturing. These behaviours are particularly common during early childhood.
- Persistent preoccupation with one or more special interests, parts of objects, or specific types of stimuli (including media) or an unusually strong attachment to particular objects (excluding typical comforters).

- Lifelong excessive and persistent hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to sensory stimuli or unusual interest in a sensory stimulus, which may include actual or anticipated sounds, light, textures (especially clothing and food), odors and tastes, heat, cold, or pain.

The onset of the disorder occurs during the developmental period, typically in early childhood, but characteristic symptoms may not become fully manifest until later, when social demands exceed limited capacities.

The symptoms result in significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning. Some individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder are able to function adequately in many contexts through exceptional effort, such that their deficits may not be apparent to others. A diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder is still appropriate in such cases.

Appendix C: Overview of Selected Studies

Title	Authors (Year) and Area	Research Focus	Methodology /Study Design	Participants	Data Collection	Data Analysis	Educatio n Setting	Key Findings	Contribution to Field
Identification of Autism in Girls: Role of Trait Subtleties, Social Acceptance and Masking	Corscadden & Casserly (2021) Ireland	Identification of autism in girls, with focus on trait subtleties, social acceptance, and masking	Qualitative interviews	Participants (N = 10) Autistic girls (N=1) Educators (N=4), Parents (N=5)	Semi- structured interviews	Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2017) using NVivo	Primary and secondary mainstrea m schools	Subtle traits and masking behaviours hinder the identification of autism in girls.	Calls for more nuanced criteria and increased awareness to improve autism recognition in girls.

Towards a Better Understanding of Girls on the Autism Spectrum: Educational Support and Parental Perspectives	Gray et al (2021) UK	Educational support and parental perspectives for autistic girls	Mixed-methods	SENCOs (N=53)	Questionnaires for SENCOs via post/email	Quantitative using SPSS	Early years, Primary schools and secondary mainstream schools	Parents emphasise the need for tailored educational support to address autistic girls' unique needs.	Advocates for stronger collaboration between parents and teachers in supporting autistic girls' education.
“Camouflaging” by Adolescent Autistic Girls Who Attend Both Mainstream and	Halsall et al (2021) UK	Camouflaging behaviours in adolescent autistic girls	Qualitative interviews	Adolescent autistic girls (N= 8) Parents (N= 8)	Semi-structured interviews	Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019)	Specialist resource classes attached to	Need for increased awareness of how camouflaging	Provides insights into camouflaging as a coping mechanism and

Specialist Resource Classes				Educators (N=6)			mainstream schools	presents and suggests that individualised, evidence-based support will be essential	its effects on mental health.
Asperger's and Girls: What Teachers Need to Know	Jarman & Rayner (2015) Australia	Teachers' knowledge of Asperger's syndrome and autism in girls	Qualitative Survey study	Parents of autistic girls aged 5-18 years (N=15) Adult autistic women (N=30)	Online Survey via Qualtrics	Inductive reasoning approach (O'Leary, 2004)	Primary and secondary mainstream schools	Teachers require more knowledge and awareness to effectively support autistic girls.	Highlights the need for teacher professional learning on autism in girls to improve educational support.

Investigating the Effects of Perceived Student Gender on Primary School Teachers' Recognition of Autism	Ward et al (2022) New Zealand	Effects of perceived student gender on teachers' recognition of autism	Quantitative Descriptive	Primary school teachers (N=249)	Vignette-based survey	Pearson's χ^2 analysis and exploratory analysis	Primary schools	Participants did not make gender-based assumptions about autism characteristics.	Suggests ongoing training to support teachers confidence in their awareness of autism
Recognition of Girls on the Autism Spectrum by Primary School Educators: An Experimental Study	Whitlock et al (2020) UK	Recognition of autistic girls by primary educators	Quantitative Descriptive	Primary school educators (N=289)	Experiment with vignettes	Multi-level model analysis	Primary schools	Educators are less likely to recognise autism traits in girls due to subtler presentations compared to boys.	Emphasises the need for educator training to recognise autism in girls accurately.

Appendix D: WoE A Methodological Quality Criteria adapted from Hong et al.'s Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (2018)

Study	Design	Relevant MMAT Criteria	WoE Quality Assessment
Corcadden & Casserly (2021): <i>Identification of autism in girls: Role of trait subtleties, social acceptance and masking</i>	Qualitative	<p>1.1: Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?</p> <p>1.2: Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?</p> <p>1.3: Are the findings adequately derived from the data?</p> <p>1.4: Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?</p> <p>1.5: Is there coherence between data sources, collection, analysis, and interpretation?</p>	<p>1.1: Yes. The study's qualitative approach, focusing on interviews to explore social acceptance and masking, is appropriate for the research question.</p> <p>1.2: Yes. Semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth data collection on subjective experiences.</p> <p>1.3: Yes. Findings are clearly derived from the data through thematic analysis.</p> <p>1.4: Yes. Interpretations are supported by data and aligned with the findings.</p> <p>1.5: Yes. There is coherence between the data sources, collection, and analysis.</p> <p>Overall WoE Quality Score: 100%.</p> <p>WoE A Rating: High.</p>
Gray et al. (2021): <i>Towards a better</i>	Mixed-methods	5.1: Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed	5.1: Yes. Mixed methods are justified for capturing both educator and parental perspectives.

<p><i>understanding of girls on the autism spectrum: Educational support and parental perspectives</i></p>	<p>methods design to address the research question?</p> <p>5.2: Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?</p> <p>5.3: Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?</p> <p>5.4: Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?</p> <p>5.5: Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?</p>	<p>5.2: Yes. Integration of qualitative and quantitative data provides a comprehensive view.</p> <p>5.3: Yes. Interpretation reflects an adequate synthesis of components.</p> <p>5.4: Yes. Inconsistencies between methods are acknowledged and addressed.</p> <p>5.5: Yes. Both qualitative and quantitative components meet quality standards.</p> <p>Overall WoE Quality Score: 100%.</p> <p>WoE A Rating: High.</p>
<p>Halsall, Clarke, & Crane (2021): <i>“Camouflaging” by adolescent autistic girls: Perspectives of</i></p>	<p>Qualitative 1.1 - 1.5 as above for qualitative studies.</p>	<p>1.1: Yes. The qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring camouflaging behaviours.</p> <p>1.2: Yes. In-depth interviews with multiple stakeholders (girls, mothers, educators) provide valuable insights.</p>

*girls, mothers,
and educators*

1.3: Yes. Findings are robustly derived through thematic analysis.

1.4: Yes. Interpretations are grounded in data.

1.5: Yes. There is coherence across sources, collection, and analysis.

Overall WoE Quality Score: 100%.

WoE A Rating: High

Jarman & Rayner (2015): Qualitative survey study
Asperger's and girls: What teachers need to know

1.1 - 1.5 as above for qualitative studies.

1.1: Yes. Sampling strategy appears relevant to explore what parents and autistic females wish teachers' knew about Asperger's in girls.

1.2: No. Semi-structured interview would have been more beneficial than surveys for exploring this topic.

1.3: Yes. Findings are derived from survey responses using deductive reasoning approach.

1.4: Yes. Interpretation supported by data.

1.5: Yes. There is coherence across sources.

Overall WoE Quality Score: 80%. WoE A Rating: Acceptable.

Ward, Curtis, & Seehagen (2022): Quantitative Descriptive
Effects of perceived student

4.1: Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?

4.1: Yes. Sampling strategy aligns with the goal of examining gender bias in autism recognition.

4.2: Yes. Sample is reasonably representative

<i>gender on teachers' recognition of autism</i>	4.2: Is the sample representative of the target population? 4.3: Are the measurements appropriate? 4.4: Is the risk of non-response bias low? 4.5: Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?	of primary school teachers. 4.3: Yes. Measurements (vignettes) are well-suited to the research question. 4.4: No. Non-response bias risk not fully controlled. 4.5: Yes. Statistical analysis is appropriate and aligns with the study's aims. Overall WoE Quality Score: 80%. WoE A Rating: High.
Whitlock et al. (2020): <i>Recognition of girls on the autism spectrum by primary school educators</i>	Quantitative Descriptive 4.1 - 4.5 as above for quantitative descriptive studies.	4.1: Yes. Sampling strategy effectively targets educators to assess autism recognition in girls. 4.2: Yes. Sample representativeness is appropriate for generalising to primary educators. 4.3: Yes. Measurements are validated and relevant to study objectives. 4.4: No. Potential for non-response bias exists. 4.5: Yes. Statistical analysis is rigorous and suitable. Overall WoE Quality Score: 80%. WoE A Rating: High.

Appendix E: Overall WoE B Methodological Relevance Scores

WoE B Methodological Relevance Rating Score	WoE B Descriptive Relevance Rating	Research Design	Rationale
1	Low	Single Case Study	A case study design is employed in the study. The case study is significant and describes the impact camouflaging tendencies have on mental health. Single-case studies were not recommended by researchers as suitable research methodologies when investigating research questions involving 'salience' (Gray, 1997; (Petticrew & Roberts, 2003)
2	Medium	Cross Sectional Survey Design or Qualitative	Survey or interview methods are utilised in the study to answer the review questions. There is evidence of a low response rate (69% or less) in survey studies or in the case of interview studies, less than 12 interviews are conducted (Guest et al., 2016).
3	High	Cross Sectional Survey	Survey or interview methods are employed in the study to address the review questions. There is evidence of a high response rate (70% or higher) for survey studies (Johnson & Christensen, 2008,

Design or cited in Mertens, 2015 p. 191) or in the case of
Qualitative interview studies, the study reaches data
saturation (12 interviews) (Guest et al., 2016).

**Appendix F: Table summarising quality judgements for WoE C Scoring Criteria
and Rationale**

WoE C Criteria	WoE C Scoring	Description	Rationale
Focus on Educator Perspectives	1	Educator perspectives were not explored or were only tangentially related to the study.	Understanding educators' perspectives is critical for this review, as their attitudes, knowledge, and practices directly influence how autistic girls are supported in educational contexts.
	2	Educator perspectives were partially explored or indirectly connected to the focus of the study.	
	3	Educator perspectives were a primary focus and explored comprehensively.	
Focus on Recognising and Supporting Autistic Girls	1	Little to no focus was placed on recognising or supporting autistic girls in educational settings.	Identification and support are central to understanding how educators engage with autistic girls, as this impacts their educational experiences and outcomes.
	2	Identification/support was explored but only superficially or as a secondary focus.	
	3	Identification/support was explored in-depth and central to the study's aims.	

School Setting Relevance	1	The study's context was unrelated or minimally relevant to mainstream or specialist school settings.	School setting relevance ensures
	2	The study addressed school settings but not in a detailed or focused manner.	that the findings are applicable to the real-world environments
	3	The study's context was directly relevant to mainstream or specialist school settings.	where autistic girls are educated and teachers are directly involved.
Appropriate Measures for Capturing Insights on Autism and Gender Bias	1	The study did not use validated tools or measures relevant to autism or gender bias.	Using appropriate and validated measures enhances the rigor of
	2	The study used some validated measures but lacked depth in capturing autism-related gender biases.	studies, particularly in understanding subtle gender differences in autism presentation
	3	The study employed validated and appropriate measures, capturing nuanced insights on autism and gender bias.	and the role of educators in recognising these traits.

Appendix G: Research Poster

Exploring teacher's perspectives and experiences with identifying and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools.

We Are Looking For:

PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS



Requirements :

- Teaching in a mainstream school
- Experience of identifying and supporting an autistic girl through the use of the Continuum of Support
- Involved in referral process which led to diagnosis



ANY QUESTIONS EMAIL

15143635@micstudent.mic.ul.ie



FOR MORE INFORMATION :

'click for information sheet'

Appendix H: Final Interview Schedule

Introductory Script: “Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this research is to explore teachers’ experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls. Your insights will contribute to a better understanding of current practices, challenges, and areas for development. There are no right or wrong answers – I am interested in hearing about your honest experiences. You are free to decline to answer any question or to withdraw at any point. Before we begin is it ok with you if this interview is audio recorded for accuracy? Your responses will remain confidential and be in way identifiable to you. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

Recognition

What have been your experiences to date with recognising autistic girls?

What helped you to identify autistic girls in your classroom ?

Can you tell me a little about the referral process.

Tell me about any other factors that played a part in recognising autistic girls in the classroom (ask if there was any psychologist involvement here in the process)

Understanding Autistic Girls

What kind of presentations have you noticed with autistic girls?

Do you think these presentations differ from boys with autism?

What kind of strengths have you noticed for autistic girls?

What kind of challenges have you noticed for autistic girls?

Support

Can you tell me more about how you supported their strengths and challenges in the school environment.

Can you tell me about using the continuum of support at each level with autistic girls.

What has enabled you, as a teacher, to support autistic girls effectively?

Have you encountered challenges in supporting autistic girls? If yes, can you tell me about those challenges?

Training

Have you been facilitated to avail of CPD/training for autism?

Do you feel the training was helpful? If yes, why? If no, why?

Who provided this training?

Would you be interested in availing of training on autistic girls?

Debrief: Finally, before we finish up is there anything else that you would like to mention in relation to the topic that we haven't touched on today.

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me today. Your insights are incredibly valuable in enhancing our understanding of how autistic girls are identified and supported in schools. If any of the topics we discussed today have caused you concern or if you would like to access support, please feel free to reach out. Should you have any further thoughts or wish to withdraw your contribution, please contact me within the next two weeks. Thank you again for your time and openness.

Appendix I: Participant Information Sheet



Information Sheet for Participants

Exploring teacher's perspectives and experiences with identifying and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools.

Dear Teachers,

My name is Madeleine Dolan, and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology Programme and I am carrying out this research under the supervision of Dr Michele Dunleavy, Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. The current study will form part of my doctoral thesis.

Participant requirements

I am seeking to recruit Mainstream or Special Education Teachers with experience teaching and supporting autistic girls through the use of the Continuum of Support or referral process in mainstream primary schools.

What is the project about?

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of teachers perspectives and experiences on identifying and supporting autistic girls' in mainstream education at primary school level. I will gather data using semi-structured interviews and this will provide teachers with the opportunity to share their lived experience of identifying and supporting autistic girls in mainstream education setting. The primary focus will be on the teachers experience of identifying autistic girls and the experience of onward referral. This research will also explore strategies put in place to support autistic girls.

Why is it being undertaken?

The research questions for this study are driven by the evident disparity in the literature on autistic girls receiving timely diagnoses. The literature highlights that this is largely due to girls ability to camouflage and internalise emotions in school, however, the research questions now turn to focus on the role of the teacher in the identification process. It is clear that teachers are an important factor in the identification of students' strengths and needs, and often are the first to raise concerns which leads to referral, diagnosis, appropriate supports and services. Previous research demonstrates that gender differences exist in autism, and autism presentation can vary significantly meaning it is important for teachers to be aware of this so that all children are supported as required. Therefore, it is deemed relevant to explore teachers experiences with autistic girls to gain their insights and perspectives. It is hoped that this will help elucidate some of the enablers and challenges in identifying and supporting autistic girls in primary school.

What are the benefits of this research?

It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will:

- a) enhance our understanding of teachers experiences with identifying and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary school settings
- b) identify good practice in terms of what teachers have found worked well in supporting autistic girls

- c) highlighting potential areas of concerns in terms of the challenges teachers face with identifying and supporting autistic girls
- d) provide insight into teachers' awareness of how autism presents in girls and their perceptions of support provision.

What are the risks?

In terms of informed consent, all participants will be fully informed of the research, its purpose and anticipated benefits. Consent forms from participants, will be signed prior to completing the interview. For some participants, aspects of the interviews may ask them to focus on some past experiences in their career as a teacher where they may have encountered challenges identifying/supporting autistic girls. In the interest of participant sensitivity, teachers will be notified before completing the interview that "if there is a question that you do not feel comfortable answering, please feel free to continue on to the next question". Teachers will also be reminded of their right to discontinue their participation in the study at any stage, without providing any reason.

Exactly what is involved for the participant?

Semi-structured Interviews: To begin the researcher will provide information about the interview, setting out the purpose, and duration. Consent forms from participants will be signed prior to completing the interview. The interview will take approximately 15-20 minutes depending on the respondents answers. The interview will consist of a series of open-ended questions to provide a space for teachers to offer their perspectives on identifying and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary school classrooms.

Right to withdraw

Your participation in the research would be greatly appreciated and would considerably enhance this research project. This participation is voluntary and you have the right to refuse to answer any question. If you agree to take part and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time before you click submit without giving a reason and without consequence.

How will confidentiality be maintained?

All information will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than for discussion with my research supervisor. All data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop in an encrypted file. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisors. Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, and will be bound by the laws of GDPR. The participants will be assigned ID numbers to ensure their anonymity when completing online questionnaires. For the qualitative piece, all participants will be assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the responses. Data will be stored up to 5 years in accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Record retention schedule. After this period data will be destroyed. The research is bound by the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee policy and procedures.

How will the information be used/disseminated?

The data from this study will form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the dissertation. Direct quotations from interviews will be used, however, these remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. These individual excerpts will be combined

with those from other participants. The data collected may also be presented at national/international conferences or published in academic journals.

Thank you most sincerely for taking the time to read this information letter. I would be extremely grateful if you would consider taking part in this study. If you have any queries, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor. Our contact details are provided below:

Contact details:

Researcher

Madeleine Dolan

15143635@micstudent.mic.ul.ie

Supervisor

Dr Michele Dunleavy

Michele.Dunleavy@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (application reference A24-008).

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix J: Informed Consent Forms



Consent Form for Participants

Exploring teacher's perspectives and experiences with identifying and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools.

Should you wish to participate in this study, please read the statements below and if you agree to them, please tick the boxes and sign the Consent form.

- I have read and understood the information sheet for Participants.
- I understand what the project is about, how data will be collected and what the results will be used for.
- I am aware that all information relating to my participation will be kept confidential.
- I am aware of what I will be asked to do, and of any risks and benefits of the study.
- I am aware that participation in this study is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any stage without giving any reason to the researchers.
- If I partake in an interview on the research topic, I consent to this interview being audio recorded using a digital device.
- I have read and understood the information in this form and I provide my Consent to participate in this study.

In the space below, please provide an email address to which a link to the online questionnaires for this study may be sent:

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Principal Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Once completed, please return this form to Madeleine Dolan, the Principal Investigator by emailing an electronic copy to 15143635@micstudent.mic.ul.ie

Appendix K: Researcher Identity Memo (Maxwell, 2005)

Introduction

This memo outlines my positionality as the researcher in the study titled "Exploring Teachers' Experiences with Recognising and Supporting Autistic Girls Using the Continuum of Support." My professional experiences, academic background, and current training significantly shape my approach to this research, enabling me to engage deeply with the subject matter while maintaining a critical perspective.

Professional Experience

My journey into the world of education began with direct involvement in teaching autistic children, both as a mainstream class teacher and as a special education teacher. This dual role has provided me with invaluable first-hand insights into the practical challenges educators face when supporting neurodiverse students. The complexities of these experiences resonate with existing literature that emphasises the importance of practitioner experience in shaping educational practices (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). Through my interactions with students, I have witnessed the diversity of needs among autistic girls and the barriers they encounter in mainstream classrooms. These experiences have fuelled my desire to explore how teachers identify and support these students effectively.

Academic Background

My academic journey includes completing a Graduate Certificate and a Graduate Diploma in Autism Studies. These programs were instrumental in addressing gaps in my knowledge and understanding of autism, particularly concerning the unique experiences of autistic girls. The theoretical frameworks and evidence-based practices I encountered during my studies have equipped me to critically examine current

educational policies and strategies (Pellicano et al., 2018). This academic foundation allows me to approach my research with a blend of theory and practice, fostering a deeper understanding of the systemic issues that affect autistic girls in educational settings.

Personal Interest

My interest in autism deepened significantly after completing the Graduate Certificate in Autism Studies (GCAS) and Graduate Diploma in Autism Studies (GDAS) at Mary Immaculate College. These programs provided me with valuable knowledge and expertise, which I am eager to continue expanding. Given the increasing prevalence of autism, there is a growing need for deeper insight and understanding in this area. During the Autumn Semester, I conducted a Systematic Review and delivered a presentation on camouflaging behaviours in autistic girls. This experience ignited my passion for this specific area of research, which I found both fascinating and personally meaningful.

Personal Experience with NEPS

On my first day of Professional Placement 1 with the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), I observed a case involving a 10-year-old girl in primary school who was being assessed for autism. Hearing the mother's account of her experience was profoundly moving. She shared how, for years, her concerns about her daughter went unacknowledged by teachers—until her current class teacher finally recognised potential signs of autism. The mother described how her daughter's ability to camouflage her difficulties in social settings often led others to perceive her as thriving, while at home, she would be utterly exhausted, causing significant strain on family life. This case prompted me to reflect on whether unconscious biases or limited awareness among teachers might contribute to such delays in recognising autistic girls.

Personal Experience as a Teacher

During my teaching career, I encountered a young girl who exhibited subtle differences and struggled with certain aspects of school life. While some teachers suspected she might be autistic, they hesitated to act on their suspicions because she did not display the more overt signs typically associated with boys on the spectrum. At that time, the girl was coping well within the supportive environment of a small primary school. However, I worried about how she might fare upon transitioning to secondary school, where the environment could be less accommodating. Her brother, who had been diagnosed with autism and attended a special school, may have influenced her parents' perceptions; they perhaps overlooked her challenges by comparing her development to his more pronounced needs. This experience underscored for me the critical role teachers play in advocating for children by raising concerns—even when parents might not yet recognise them.

Personal Experience Speaking to an Experienced Principal

In another instance during my teaching career, I had a conversation with a principal who shared her regret about missing the signs of autism in a 6th-class student who had only recently been diagnosed. Despite her extensive experience as both a Special Education Teacher (SET) and teacher in a special school, she felt deeply guilty for not recognising the girl's autistic traits earlier. The student began refusing to attend school due to mounting challenges, which ultimately led to her diagnosis. This situation made me wonder whether earlier identification and support could have prevented the disruptions to her education and mental health. It also highlighted how even seasoned professionals can overlook autistic tendencies in girls due to their ability to mask difficulties effectively.

Current Role and Perspective

Currently, I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), where I continue to work with autistic girls in both educational and healthcare contexts. This role has further illuminated the pressing need for research focused on understanding and supporting these students. My experiences as a TEP enable me to adopt a

holistic perspective that integrates psychological theory, educational practice, and advocacy for neurodiverse students. I recognise the importance of considering both individual factors, such as personal experiences and needs and systemic factors that influence educational outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Reflexivity and Critical Reflection

In light of my background, I identify as a ‘partial insider researcher’ (Chavez, 2008). While my experiences provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by educators, they also present potential biases that I must navigate throughout this research process. To mitigate these biases, I commit to engaging in reflexivity and critical reflection (Darlaston-Jones, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2018). This involves continuously examining how my positionality influences my interpretations and interactions within the research context.

Conclusion

In summary, my unique combination of professional experience, academic training, and current role as a TEP positions me to conduct this research with both depth and critical awareness. By acknowledging my positionality and striving for reflexivity, I aim to contribute meaningfully to our understanding of how educators can better identify and support autistic girls within mainstream classrooms. This study not only seeks to fill existing knowledge gaps but also aspires to advocate for improved practices that foster inclusive educational environments for all students.

Appendix L: Ethical approval from MIREC

MIREC-5, Created November 2021



MIREC-5

Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:

A24-009

1. PROJECT TITLE

Exploring teacher's perspectives and experiences with identifying and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools.

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Madeleine Dolan
Department / Centre / Other:	EPISE
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher


3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair <i>pro tem</i> without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

I have reviewed this proposal and I am satisfied it meets MIREC requirements. It is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	1 st March 2024

Appendix M: Six-step Reflexive Thematic Analysis Procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase process for reflexive thematic analysis was followed to analyse the qualitative data arising from the semi-structured interviews conducted for this study. A summary of each phase is presented below.

Phase One: Familiarisation with the Data

The interview transcripts were read and re-read to ensure immersion in the data. Initial observations and reflections were documented while reviewing interviews in the researcher's journal to capture early analytic insights.

Please see attached pictures from the researchers journal

Date: 23-05-24.

PI

- feeling ill equipped in NQT year
- Not familiar with referral pathways
- Seeking support from other colleagues.
- Autism studies / research helped teacher develop understanding of how autism presents differently in girls
- Teacher confidence levels.
- Support from colleagues
- Support from NEPS psychologist
- Parental awareness / parent beliefs
Parents + Teacher being 'on the same page'
'singing from the same hymn sheet'
- Infant teachers being first to raise concerns and broach the subject with parents
- Teacher completed own research
- Teacher completed observations during play
- Understanding autistic individuals needs
- Teacher Attitude towards the child -
aiming to reduce stress for child / adapt environment rather than 'fixing issues'.
- Challenges: Time + Resources (SNA)
- Parental Involvement: generalisation of skills
- Provided training as autism teacher not as mainstream

Diary entry 23-05-24.

Reflecting after interview.

I am feeling extremely motivated and reassured after conducting interview with participant 1. It was so interesting to hear about her experiences of identifying and supporting autistic girls in the mainstream classroom. One thing that struck me is how this teachers confidence levels and knowledge developed over time due to her own motivation to research and learn more but also through engaging with other professionals. This included the SNA, SET, principal, NEPS psychologist, as well as discussions with parents. It was so interesting to learn of all the factors that were at play in the successful identification and support of this autistic girl. This interview confirmed my own thoughts that there is a gap in ITE around what exactly teachers should do if they have concerns for a child and around referral pathways. I was surprised to

hear the school principal was also not sure of how to advise this teacher as an NQT. However, on reflection this teacher was fortunate to have input from NEPS as it sounded like the psychologist played a vital role in validating teachers concerns, signposting referral pathways and resources, as well as advising on the classroom support plan.

P2 08-06-24.

- group work / pair work.
- Daydreaming in class - losing focus
- Only interested in certain subjects e.g. creative arts
- Challenges of balancing individual needs with needs of whole class e.g. presenting work orally, reaching the 'happy medium'!
- Schools having set approach, older SET dictating support.
- Social group ~ Teacher reported happier after it, sharing feelings, relating to one another, feeling less alone
- Teacher reflected that she was mainly getting academic support, not social/emotional, but would have benefitted from SEL.
- Teacher not willing to challenge school wide procedures already in place - makes me think about systems.
- Impact of getting autism diagnosis.
- Supporting Transition to secondary school - good practices in place / collaboration between schools

P3 20.06.24

- Experience of having an autistic girl previously supported identification.
- School Systems Piece: School completes a screening process for J.T in August prior to them commencing in September. Teacher noted benefits of this. Initially this process was for ^{detention} needs of school, grouping classes etc. but now seeing wide benefits of this practice. Have been doing it for 2 years now.
- SNA provision ~ grouping classes accordingly
- SET observations in class ~ collaboration between teachers
- Approaching parents (parent attitude)
- Differences in presentation at home + school
- Autism diagnosis required to access autism class
- School funded private Ax.
- Teachers confident they had autism before referring for Ax.
- Teacher had poor experience with AON process (sounded like when they were completing screening for AONs couple years ago). Still waiting lists now.
- Internalisation was noticed
- Teacher valued movement breaks and offered variety

Reflections. from P3 interview.

What have I learned? What assumptions/bias challenged?

- I was surprised to hear that the parents were not seeing some challenges at home or advocating for support. In past experience, or in my own conceptualisation of autistic girls, I have usually heard of or viewed them as complying/masking in school, and then struggling or decompressing at home. I was not expecting parents to be in denial or reluctant to accept their child's needs. However, perhaps this is a bias or false assumption of mine about autistic girls.
- Thinking about our needs-led model now in school with COS, how some may think diagnosis is no longer needed to access adequate support, however this interview highlighted that autism diagnosis was required with urgency to secure a place in the autism class, where the school felt they would be best able to meet her needs.

This interview really made me realise the power and positive influence we can have on a child's educational trajectory. Simply by completing one observation of the child and a consultation with staff, helped to change their lens on the child and start implementing supports.

I used to feel frustrated in NEPS. Like oh all we are able to do is diagnose dyslexia, and sometimes that is the narrative you hear from schools as well, and they wonder why we can't diagnose autism and help with the waiting list issues, however hearing this story made me feel more hopeful about my future role as a NEPS psychologist, and made me realise the positive impact I can have in my role by helping staff understand and support students better.

P6 08.07.24

- Toileting issues
- Collaboration with Pre-school ~ role of pre-school in collaboration and communication.
- Difficulty transitioning
- Emotional Regulation
- Sensory issues
- Language use ~ beyond her years
- Teacher feeling reassured on getting the diagnosis that SET time was justified
- Impact of parent support ~ got her extra help outside of school in form of music therapy
- Fully immersed (this made me think of Tracey on Monotropism).
- Pupil: Teacher Ratio
- Importance of communication

P7 - 22.07.24

- Parent approached teacher with concerns in 6th class.
- NEPS psychologist got involved ~ completed ~~ax~~ ^{not} identified mild LD and advised her going for autism ax.
- Once parent ^{came} ~~became~~ with concerns teacher became more aware, started making observations in class
- Teacher reflecting that she was comfortable with him as a familiar adult, but had to consider what she was like with other adults or peers
- Teacher felt it became more apparent as girls got older.
- School refusal was biggest challenge
- Identifying needs tricky when they sometimes find it hard to articulate themselves, so a process of trial and error, or problem solving with the child.

P8 - 09.07.24

- long process to reach autism diagnosis 'A Journey'
- slowly started to notice things. e.g. r+l, then sensory, then social.
- Differences in teaching styles e.g. group work
- Differences in classroom environment
- Child may present differently depending on teacher and classroom environment
- Mental Health
 - ↳ Anxiety re transition.
 - ↳ Overwhelm
 - ↳ Teacher finding councillor needing to research resources

P5 - 07.06.24.

- CAP/training geared towards boys
- Teacher felt she had internal bias or belief system that it can only really present in boys, took the facts at face value.
- Teacher was thinking of all possible reasons other than autism, e.g. reduced socialisation, learning difficulty
- Role of SET + NEPS psychologist in helping teacher recognise that autism was a possibility
- Lack of training led to teacher having blind spot
- Having a consistent SET, particularly for children going through slow referral / assessment process.
- Role of NEPS Psychologist - helped staff change their lens on child, impacted support even without the diagnosis.
- Teacher noted there was never any externalisation of inner frustrations, however when teacher changed practice and put in support she noticed a positive

change in the child, she was so much happier and at ease.

- Communication with parents
- Teacher incorporated views + voice of the child with the help of the parent.

* NOTE: Teachers differing views on social skills groups. This teacher on reflection embarrassed they were doing this. Need to reflect on this myself and think about my own stance, values and beliefs on social skills training.

- Classroom / School culture / climate
The power of celebrating diversity and difference, understanding we all have different needs
- Post-diagnostic support

P5 - 07.06.24.

- CAP/training geared towards boys
- Teacher felt she had internal bias or belief system that it can only really present in boys, took the facts at face value.
- Teacher was thinking of all possible reasons other than autism, e.g. reduced socialisation, learning difficulty
- Role of SET + NEPS psychologist in helping teacher recognise that autism was a possibility
- Lack of training led to teacher having blind spot
- Having a consistent SET, particularly for children going through slow referral / assessment process.
- Role of NEPS Psychologist - helped staff change their lens on child, impacted support even without the diagnosis.
- Teacher noted there was never any externalisation of inner frustrations, however when teacher changed practice and put in support she noticed a positive

change in the child, she was so much happier and at ease.

- Communication with parents
- Teacher incorporated views + voice of the child with the help of the parent.

* NOTE: Teachers differing views on social skills groups. This teacher on reflection embarrassed they were doing this. Need to reflect on this myself and think about my own stance, values and beliefs on social skills training.

- Classroom / School culture / climate
The power of celebrating diversity and difference, understanding we all have different needs
- Post-diagnostic support

Phase Two: Coding

Each transcript was systematically coded for significant features related to the research questions. Codes were generated across three broad areas: identification, support, and enabling factors/challenges.

Phase Three: Generating Initial Themes

Codes were collated into meaningful groups, resulting in the generation of initial themes:

- Varied experiences in recognising autistic girls
- Delayed recognition and diagnostic bias
- Varied presentation of autism in girls
- Parental involvement – a double-edged sword
- Classroom support strategies
- School-wide support and collaboration
- Enhanced individualised support ("School Support Plus")
- Collaboration with others
- Training and continuous professional development (CPD)
- Challenges and systemic constraints

The screenshot displays a coding software interface. On the left, a text document is open, showing several paragraphs of text with yellow highlights. The text includes phrases like "day, but for her I found that sometimes that was planned. So she did really love to know what was overwhelming to see from start to finish. So on Monday morning, and then I would change it in the middle. And then change again in the afternoon. But like I remember, I had little just images of E motivated her then to go check her schedule and", "So ya timetables I find really helpful for autistic. A lot of them really like to know what's happening. It's I think it's good for all the children anyway. You know, I would see all the kids going up to lunch and what else, I suppose, just being really clear. Like, really believing myself and those expectations. You know there can be these things of and I, you know, into college.", "You know the rules of sitting still looking up straight. I wouldn't have that expectation anymore, so by doing this 5 minutes of work, we're going to sit after that, then we're going to have a movement break. You can get up.", "You can walk around so having that kind of break. I think sensory spaces can be really helpful as well. And then I suppose I haven't mentioned it yet, but movement breaks like the difference.", "Even when I do a whole class movement break, motivation afterwards, it's huge and it's the same. That have gone out for me from breaks. They can't. The movement break is done correctly, obviously, they're just so much more kind of hyper-analytical. But it's, I suppose training the SNA's and that as this time, responding to the needs appropriately, alerting break? You know, but yeah, the SNA's and autistic children in my class as well."

On the right side of the interface, there is a "CODE STRIPES" panel with a list of codes:

- Teacher confidence
- Coding Density
- Gender differences
- Subtle Presentation
- Cost
- Delayed diagnosis
- Building rapport
- Special Interest
- Transitions
- Perfectionist
- Rigid thinking
- Clear communication
- Sensory supports
- SNA support

Below the list is a "CODE PANEL" with a search bar and a list of codes:

- Codes
 - (RQ1) Identification
 - A slow journey
 - Gender differences
 - School Placement
 - Teacher observation
 - Varied autistic presentati...
 - (RQ2) Support using COS
 - Needs focused
 - School Support
 - School Support Plus
 - Whole School
 - (RQ3) Factors
 - Enabling Factors
 - Hindering factors
- Cases

There are no cases to code to. You can create cases on the Create tab.

Phase Four: Reviewing Themes

Themes were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure they accurately represented participants' experiences. A second coder reviewed themes and provided feedback which helped me gain clarity on my rationale for themes. Overlapping themes were refined and renamed for clarity. Specific attention was given to ensuring that both enabling factors and challenges were distinctly captured.

Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes

The final themes were defined and named, capturing the core narratives that emerged:

Research Question	Theme	Key Focus Areas
RQ1: Identification	Varied experiences in recognizing autistic girls	Diagnostic bias, varied presentations, role of parental input
	Parental involvement – a double-edged sword	Positive and negative impacts of parental advocacy
RQ2: Support	Classroom support strategies	Visual schedules, sensory breaks, rapport building
	School support	Social groups, consultation practices
	School Support Plus	One-to-one support, consistency, skill generalisation
RQ3: Factors	Collaboration with others	Staff collaboration, transition supports, external supports, psychological consultation
Enabling		

	Training and CPD	Impact of specialised training on teacher confidence
Challenges/Limitations	Systemic and resource constraints	Limited resources, confusing referral pathways, need for school-wide training

Phase Six: Write-up

The detailed results of this reflexive thematic analysis are presented in Chapter Three: Results section of this thesis.

Appendix N: Support Strategies in Provision Mapping Format

Support For a Few (Individual)

Environmental Supports

Strategy	Quote
Laminated break card	She was very quiet and found it hard to ask for what she needed... so we laminated a little card and she would tap or hand it to me when she needed support.
Individualised sensory box	She had her own sensory box... if she was feeling anxious she would take it to regulate.
Now, Next, Then visual schedule	On her desk, I just had the first three things in the morning on a now-next-then chart...
Environmental accommodations	She'd go outside the room for paired reading because it was too noisy in the classroom.

Emotional & Sensory Regulation

Strategy	Quote
Ear defenders	She had her ear defenders... she'd go and put them on when songs came on.

Movement breaks	She needs a lot of movement breaks. However, they are minimal in length.
Low Arousal Technique	I often use the low arousal technique... less confrontation and more quietness.
Sensory regulation with SET/SNA	The SET teacher did a lot of calming her down, sensory stuff like water beads.

Curricular & Pedagogical Adaptations

Strategy	Quote
Use of interest-based materials	You're able to do reading comprehensions based on celebrities she liked.
Supporting using special interest	She loved Barbie... I put images of Barbie on her schedule.
Carefully assigned roles in group work	I carefully assigned group roles based on her strengths, avoiding stressful tasks.
Adjusting expectations	I stopped requesting eye contact... she was much happier.

Social & Communication Supports

Strategy	Quote
Social stories	She used to do social stories with her, especially around toileting issues.
Therapy dog support	The school therapy dog helped her transition into school.

Collaboration & External Supports

Strategy	Quote
Parental involvement	Parents were implementing the same visual timetable at home.
Collaboration with SLT	The SLT emailed strategies for classroom support.
Collaboration with OT	She used a trampoline, did push-ups, and helped carry milk cartons.
Collaboration with NEPS Psychologist	NEPS psychologist suggested Lego group and provided key support strategies.
External assessments	Principal paid for private assessment to secure autism class placement.
Art/Play therapy	She was receiving art/play therapy and therapists shared useful insights.

Mindset & Approach

Strategy	Quote
Mindset of 'supporting' not 'fixing'	I wasn't trying to get rid of her difficulties... I was trying to help manage her needs.
Proactive vs Reactive support	Now I'd say we should have built movement breaks into the day proactively.

Summer Provision Programme	Summer provision allowed her to explore her interests and come out of her shell.
Teacher handover insights	The previous teacher reflected that a visual timetable would have helped, so I implemented one.
Clearly communicating change	If there was a change, I'd explain it clearly and update her timetable.

Support For Some (Group)

Group-Based Emotional & Social Supports

Strategy	Quote
Emotional regulation groups	When we started the School Support Plan and the SET Teacher started withdrawing her then for emotion regulation breaks with other children in the class...
Social group using 'Fun Friends' and 'Friends for Life'	Two separate programs. One is called 'Friends for Life' and the other one is called 'Fun Friends'...
Social groups with games of interest (Lego Club, Chess Club)	They do a social group setting three times a week, it's called Lego Club... She joined the chess club and she loves playing that with others...

Benefits of social group	They seemed a lot happier and more productive when they returned from the social group... smaller group away from the classroom.
--------------------------	--

Collaborative Professional Support

Strategy	Quote
Collaboration with SNAs (group movement breaks)	Training the SNAs in terms of what the child needs at that time... calming break or alerting break?
Collaboration with SET	I was drawing on my own knowledge and the knowledge of SET teachers... we came up with a classroom and school support plan.
Indirect consultations with NEPS psychologists	Indirect and unnamed consultations were noted, although not quoted directly.

Environmental & Sensory Supports

Strategy	Quote
Use of sensory tools and calm corners with weighted blankets	That's the cosy corner that I've kind of made with a weighted blanket and sensory toys to get her into a calm state first.

Support For All (Whole class)

Classroom-Based Supports

Strategy	Quote
Whole class visual schedule/timetable	She also has a visual schedule on her desk. And there's one at the top of the classroom just to let her know what's coming next...
Use of calming subjects (art, music, drama)	Just making sure I was consistent as well with art, music and drama within the classroom because they were subjects that she was... strong in.
Whole class movement breaks	Even when I do a whole class movement break, the difference in terms of their focus and motivation afterwards is huge...
Extension activities for early finishers	So that when she was finished her work or art she had something to keep her occupied and challenged with.
Supporting interests using thematic content	Anything that I do, I have a theme of animals and that gives her the interest in doing her work.

Relational & Pedagogical Approaches

Strategy	Quote

Building rapport with all students	I suppose building rapport is the first thing that I would do with all the kids... teacher-student relationship is so important.
Strengths-based teaching approaches	We try to identify each student's strengths and build on them in group and individual contexts.

School-Wide Initiatives & Inclusive Culture

Strategy	Quote
Neurodiversity & awareness (e.g., LEANS, As I Am)	We engage in autism awareness month... poster competitions and activities to encourage neurodiversity awareness.
Wellbeing practices (e.g., breathing, self-talk)	Breathing exercises, positive self-talk, and mindfulness are part of our daily wellbeing practices.
Whole-school use of 'Friends for Life'	She was also getting another half an hour once a week with another teacher on a whole class level...
Whole-school Zones of Regulation	The Zones of Regulation is used in every single classroom... it helps all children understand emotions.
Quiet Zone on the yard	We have a quiet zone on yard... you're encouraged to use it if you need space or 'you time'.

Culture of inclusion and acceptance (e.g Sesame Street youtube video)	We had a diversity day in school... brought acceptance to the class and now they are so inclusive of her.
Minding Buddies initiative	Every child in infants has a senior minding buddy to help them settle in school and yard. There were two 6th class buddies paired up with her who watched out for her at break and it was a huge help to her.

Appendix O: Factors Influencing Identification and Support Aligned with Theoretical Frameworks

Factor Identified in Study	Related Theoretical Framework	Explanation of Link
Collaboration with School Staff	Bronfenbrenner – Mesosystem	Collaboration between teachers, SNAs, and school staff supports continuity of care and shared knowledge, aligning with the mesosystem where interactions between environments influence the child’s experience.
Collaboration with School Leadership	Bronfenbrenner – Exosystem	Leadership decisions (e.g., funding assessments) impact student support indirectly, illustrating the role of the exosystem in shaping educational pathways.

Collaboration using Documentation	Continuum of Support	Use of Classroom and School Support Plans reflects structured, tiered intervention as outlined in the Continuum of Support framework.
Collaboration with Other Schools (Transitions)	Bronfenbrenner – Mesosystem	Inter-school coordination ensures smoother transitions and maintains social continuity, a key mesosystem interaction.
Collaboration with Psychologists (NEPS)	Bronfenbrenner – Exosystem	NEPS psychologists influence teacher confidence and early intervention indirectly, highlighting the impact of broader professional systems.
Continual Professional Development (CPD)	Maslow – Esteem / Self-Actualisation	Empowered and knowledgeable teachers experience growth and confidence, which enhances their capacity to

		support students— reflecting higher levels of Maslow’s hierarchy.
Tools and Resources	Continuum of Support & Maslow	Access to structured resources enables both targeted supports and promotes belonging, esteem, and confidence for students and teachers alike.
Resource Limitations	Maslow – Safety/Physiological Needs	Insufficient staffing and large classes jeopardise the basic educational environment, impeding foundational needs on Maslow’s pyramid.
Systemic Constraints	Bronfenbrenner – Macrosystem	Long waitlists and systemic barriers reflect macro-level policy and healthcare constraints that impact access to timely support.

Lack of Specialised Training	Continuum of Support / Bronfenbrenner – Exosystem	Absence of training hinders proactive identification and places strain on tiered support structures and external systems of professional development.
Referral Pathway Confusion	Bronfenbrenner – Exosystem	Lack of clarity in referral processes shows gaps in systemic and institutional structures that indirectly influence classroom experiences.
Teacher Confidence & Identity	Maslow – Esteem	Feelings of doubt and inadequacy reveal unmet esteem needs, impacting teachers' confidence and capacity to act as advocates for students.

Appendix P: Initial Questionnaire Drafted

Open-ended questions for Online Questionnaires

1. Are you familiar with any diagnostic criteria for autism e.g Diagnostic Statistics Manual 5 (DSMV) or International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision (ICD11)?

Yes

No

If you are familiar with diagnostic criteria for example DSMV what is your opinion on criteria for autism diagnoses? (150 words)

2. Are you familiar with the Dyad of Impairments in Autism, and the three levels within the Dyad?

Yes

No

If you are familiar with Dyad of Impairment what is your opinion on this? (150 words)

3. What is your understanding of gender differences in autism? (150 words)

4. Have you any experience of teaching autistic girls? Describe your experiences (150 words)

5. In your experience, do girls with autism present differently to boys with autism? (150 words)

6. What supports do you believe would work well for supporting autistic girls in primary school? (150 words)

7. Have you experience of making a referral for a girl who subsequently received an autism diagnosis? Yes/No (IF yes please answer the following)

7a. Please describe the referral and support seeking process for you as a teacher (150 word)

7b. Did you seek additional support or advice regarding this child WITHIN your school e.g. the school SET, school principal . Please describe if so.

7c. Was the child previously set up on a continuum of support? Yes/No

If yes what level of support: tick box as appropriate

- Support for Few
- Support for Some
- Support for All



7d. Did you seek support from a psychologist? Yes/ No .

If yes please give details e.g educational psychologist, clinical psychologist

7e. Did you seek support from external agencies? Yes/No

If yes, which agency do you feel most appropriate:

- National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)
- Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT)
- Primary Care
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHS)

**Appendix Q: The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist for Qualitative
Research (2024)**



Reviewer Name:	Madeleine Dolan
----------------	-----------------

Paper Title:	Unmasking potential: Exploring teachers' experiences of recognizing and supporting autistic girls in mainstream primary schools using the Continuum of Support.
Author:	Madeleine Dolan with supervisor Dr Michele Dunleavy and Dr Therese Brophy
Web Link:	
Appraisal Date:	January 2025

CASP Checklist:

For Qualitative Research

During critical appraisal, never make assumptions about what the researchers have done. If it is not possible to tell, use the “Can’t tell” response box. If you can’t tell, at best it means the researchers have not been explicit or transparent, but at worst it could mean the researchers have not undertaken a particular task or process. Once you’ve finished the critical appraisal, if there are a large number of “Can’t tell” responses, consider whether the findings of the study are trustworthy and interpret the results with caution.

Section A Are the results valid?	
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell Yes: The study had a well-defined research aim, exploring teachers' experiences of recognising and supporting autistic girls, with relevance justified through the completion of a Systematic Review.

<p><i>CONSIDER:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>what was the goal of the research?</i> • <i>why was it thought important?</i> • <i>its relevance</i> 	
<p>2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell</p> <p>Yes: A qualitative approach was appropriate for exploring subjective experiences, aligning with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm.</p>
<p><i>CONSIDER:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>If the research seeks to interpret or illuminate the actions and/or subjective experiences of research participants</i> • <i>Is qualitative research the right methodology for addressing the research goal?</i> 	
<p>3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell</p> <p>Yes: Semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis were clearly justified.</p>

<p><i>CONSIDER:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>if the researcher has justified the research design (e.g., have they discussed how they decided which method to use)</i> 	
<p>4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell</p> <p>Yes: Purposive and snowball sampling were appropriate, although self-selection bias was acknowledged.</p>
<p><i>CONSIDER:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>If the researcher has explained how the participants were selected</i> <i>If they explained why the participants they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study</i> <i>If there are any discussions around recruitment (e.g. why some people chose not to take part)</i> 	
<p>5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell</p>

	<p>Yes: The semi-structured interviews were well explained and aligned with the research questions.</p>
<p>CONSIDER:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>If the setting for the data collection was justified</i> • <i>If it is clear how data were collected (e.g. focus group, semi-structured interview etc.)</i> • <i>If the researcher has justified the methods chosen</i> • <i>If the researcher has made the methods explicit (e.g. for interview method, is there an indication of how interviews are conducted, or did they use a topic guide)</i> • <i>If methods were modified during the study. If so, has the researcher explained how and why</i> • <i>If the form of data is clear (e.g. tape recordings, video material, notes etc.)</i> • <i>If the researcher has discussed saturation of data</i> 	
<p>6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell</p> <p>Yes: Reflexivity through journaling and memo-writing was demonstrated to address potential biases.</p>

<p><i>CONSIDER:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>If the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during (a) formulation of the research questions (b) data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location</i>• <i>How the researcher responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design</i>	
Section B: What are the results?	
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell Yes: Ethical approval was obtained and participant welfare was considered.

CONSIDER:

- *If there are sufficient details of how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained*
- *If the researcher has discussed issues raised by the study (e.g. issues around informed consent or confidentiality or how they have handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study)*
- *If approval has been sought from the ethics committee*

8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?

 Yes No Can't Tell

Yes: A transparent thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software, with critical engagement with contradictory data as well as the use of a double-coder and discussion of themes with supervisor. Analysis process was outlined in depth.

CONSIDER:

- *If there is an in-depth description of the analysis process*
- *If thematic analysis is used. If so, is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data*
- *Whether the researcher explains how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process*
- *If sufficient data are presented to support the findings*
- *To what extent contradictory data are taken into account*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Whether the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation</i> 	
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell <p>Yes: Findings were systematically presented with supporting quotations and linked to existing literature.</p>
<p><i>CONSIDER:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>If the findings are explicit</i> • <i>If there is adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher's arguments</i> • <i>If the researcher has discussed the credibility of their findings (e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst)</i> • <i>If the findings are discussed in relation to the original research question</i> 	
<p>Section C: Will the results help locally?</p>	
10. How valuable is the research?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell <p>Yes: The study adds valuable insights for teacher professional learning, policy, and practice in supporting autistic girls. I plan to use tools such as the GIRLS framework for</p>

	recognising and the support provision map in my practice in the future when working with schools.
<p><i>CONSIDER:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>If the researcher discusses the contribution the study makes to existing knowledge or understanding (e.g., do they consider the findings in relation to current practice or policy, or relevant research-based literature</i> <i>If they identify new areas where research is necessary</i> <i>If the researchers have discussed whether or how the findings can be transferred to other populations or considered other ways the research may be used</i> 	

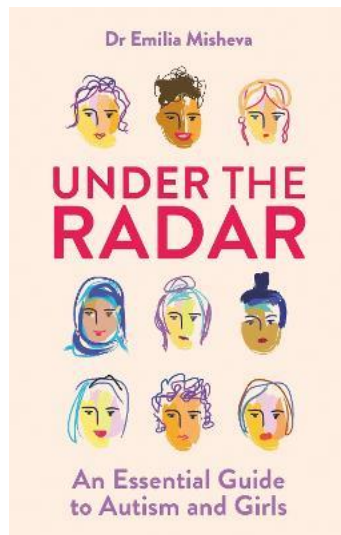
<p>APPRAISAL SUMMARY: <i>List key points from your critical appraisal that need to be considered when assessing the validity of the results and their usefulness in decision-making.</i></p>		
<p>Positive/Methodologically sound</p>	<p>Negative/Relatively poor methodology</p>	<p>Unknowns</p>
<p>- Clear aims and appropriate qualitative methodology.</p>	<p>- Potential self-selection bias in participant recruitment.</p>	

<p>- Rigorous and transparent use of reflexive thematic analysis.</p> <p>- Use of NVivo software enhanced data organisation.</p> <p>- Ethical considerations carefully addressed.</p>	<p>- Virtual interviews limited observation of non-verbal cues.</p> <p>- Snowball sampling may have led to homogeneity of views.</p>	
---	--	--

Appendix R: NEPS Research Brief

Book Review: “Under the Radar: An Essential Guide to Autism and Girls” by Dr Emilia

Misheva



Rationale for Choosing the Book

I recently came across *Under the Radar: An Essential Guide to Autism and Girls* by Dr. Emilia Misheva while researching the topic as part of my doctoral thesis on autistic girls. My interest in this area stems from firsthand experiences in primary schools, where I have seen many autistic girls "fly under the radar" due to their ability to mask their challenges. Additionally, through my experiences working alongside teachers, I have also seen how many educators find it

challenging to recognise autism in girls, as traditional diagnostic criteria have been largely based on male presentations. Given these observations, I wanted to explore a resource that provides both research-backed insights and practical guidance on the topic. Dr. Misheva's book stood out as an accessible yet comprehensive guide that could deepen my understanding and contribute to my academic work on this topic.

About the Author

Dr. Emilia Misheva is a practitioner psychologist, university lecturer, and author. She practices in a London local authority and is an associate lecturer at The Open University. She is a chartered member of the British Psychological Society with a specialist interest in paediatric neuropsychology, autism, inclusion, and developmental trauma. Dr. Misheva completed her

degree in Psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London, followed by postgraduate studies at the University of Cambridge and doctoral training at UCL. Her previous work includes "Child Neuropsychology in Practice," published in 2021.

What the Book is About

This concise and accessible guide explores the differing presentations of autism commonly observed in girls. Historically, autism has been perceived predominantly as a male condition, leading to under-identification and support for autistic girls and women. However, the book delves into why referring to 'male' and 'female' autism can be reductive and discusses the reasons behind the late or missed identification of autistic girls' needs. The book covers various aspects of life, including friendships, relationships, education, mental health, and puberty, drawing on both lived experiences and research to provide a comprehensive overview.

Overview of Topics Covered in Each Chapter

1. **Flying Under the Radar: Autism, Girls and Diagnosis:** This chapter examines how societal norms and stereotypes contribute to the under-identification of autism in girls. It questions the accuracy of labelling autism as a 'male' condition and introduces the

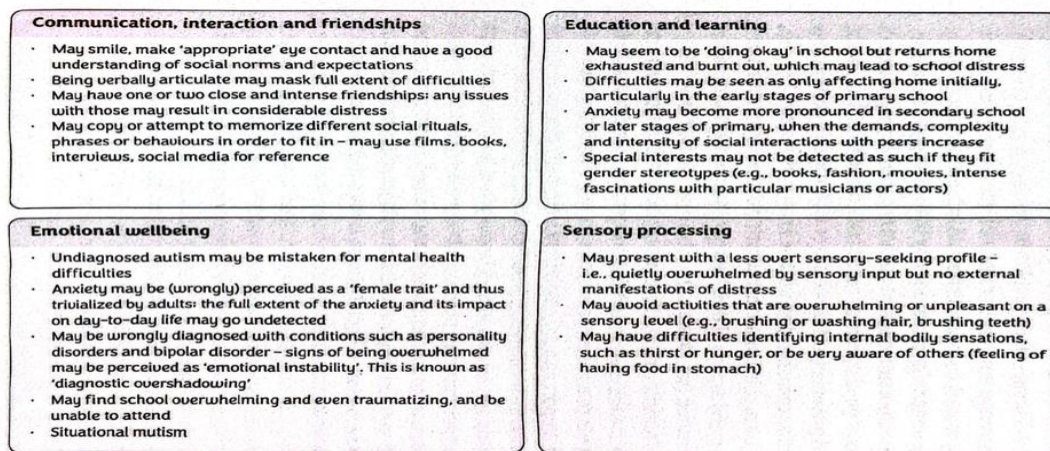


Figure 1.1: Internalized presentation of autism

concept of the 'internalised presentation of autism' as a more useful framework. The chapter also provides useful case studies to reflect on the internalised presentation and the importance of considering the perspective of the young person, rather than just the impact their difference may have on those around them. Useful figures such as Fig 1.1 are included to conceptualise the internalised presentation of autism.

2. **School and Education:** This chapter gives us an insight to the school experiences of autistic girls from their perspective. It discusses how their needs may evolve from primary to secondary school as well as highlighting how the absence of academic challenges can further mask their needs, leading to incorrect assumptions about their differences.
3. **Friendships and Relationships:** This chapter explores how the internalised presentation of autism influences autistic girls' approaches to social interactions. It challenges the misconception that autistic individuals lack empathy and provides insights into their unique social experiences.
4. **Puberty, Menstruation and Personal Care:** This chapter explores the unique challenges faced by autistic girls during puberty. It informs us of how autistic girls experience increased difficulties with sensory processing as well as emotional and executive regulation during this transitional phase. Both the internal and external sensory experiences during this time can be particularly overwhelming for autistic girls, alongside the unpredictable nature of hormone fluctuations throughout the cycle. It offers guidance on navigating these changes and emphasises the importance of support during this time.
5. **Mental Health and Wellbeing:** The final chapter discusses the mental health needs of autistic girls, exploring challenges such as alexithymia, autistic burnout, autistic

meltdowns and autistic shutdowns. Furthermore, it highlights the exponential risk for autistic females of developing mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders. This chapter includes a number of alarming statistics and figures in relation to the mental health challenges for autistic women. Emotional based school non-attendance and diagnostic overshadowing are also explored. It emphasises the importance of timely and accurate identification to support mental well-being.

Conclusion

"Under the Radar" is a timely and essential contribution to the discourse on autism. Dr. Misheva successfully sheds light on the unique experiences of autistic girls by incorporating the voice of the autistic person, challenging outdated stereotypes and advocating for greater awareness and understanding. This book is a valuable resource for anyone looking to broaden their perspective on autism or develop an understanding of autism from a more inclusive perspective.

Reviewed by Madeleine Dolan

For more information and resources:



https://nasen.org.uk/resources/girls-and-autism-flying-under-radar	https://autisticgirlsnet.work.org/	https://www.middletonautism.com/research/research-bulletins	https://autisticgirlsatschool.com.au/	https://www.edpsyched.co.uk/blog/supporting-autistic-girls-to-thrive-in-school
---	---	---	---	---