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A critical realist analysis of the lived experiences of autistic teachers: “People don’t see the person”

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For my father, in whose memory this work is written.

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Abstract

Despite growing recognition of the importance of understanding the employment experiences of autistic adults, the perspectives of autistic teachers remain under-researched. This study explores the lived experiences of autistic teachers across their educational and professional journeys to identify the barriers they face and assets they bring to their work.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Process, Person, Context and Time (PPCT) model is used to explore the individual ecosystems of participants, with analysis conducted through a critical realist lens to uncover the structural, cultural and relational mechanisms shaping their lived experiences.

Life grids were used to support participants' recollections of past experiences and semi-structured interviews were conducted with four autistic teachers. Data were analysed in three stages: thematic analysis informed by critical realism; construction of participants' narratives using the PPCT model; developing cross-case thematic insights and identification of dispositional themes.

Findings revealed systemic barriers operating at multiple levels of the education system that affect autistic teachers' professional and personal lives. At the same time, supportive relationships were shown to play a critical role in enabling professional development and sustaining wellbeing. The study also highlights the strengths and transformative potential autistic teachers bring to the profession.

This research contributes new insights into the lived experiences of autistic teachers and calls for more inclusive and responsive education policies that recognise the valuable contributions they can make to schools and the pupils they serve.

Contents

Chapter 1 : Introduction.....	12
1.1 Focus for the study	12
1.2 Research aims and questions.....	14
1.3 A note on terminology	15
1.4 Outline of thesis	17
1.5 Conclusion	17
Chapter 2 : Literature Review.....	18
2.1 Introduction	18
2.2 Conceptualising autism in research	19
2.2.1 Medical model vs neurodiversity paradigm.....	20
2.3 Autistic teachers: A neglected research area	23
2.3.1 Emerging studies on autistic teachers	24
2.4 Employment and work for autistic adults.....	26
2.4.1 Employment outcomes and job quality	28
2.4.2 Career aspirations and timing of diagnosis	28
2.4.3 Workplace barriers and exclusion mechanisms.....	30
2.4.3.1 Recruitment and selection	30
2.4.3.2 Sensory and physical environments	32
2.4.3.3 Relational and sociocultural barriers.....	33
2.4.3.4 Character traits and the workplace	34
2.4.4 Disclosure and identity management.....	35
2.4.5 Autistic strengths and assets in the workplace.....	37
2.4.6 Intersectionality and multiply marginalised autistic professionals	38
2.5 Conclusion and rationale for the study	40
Chapter 3 : Theoretical Framework.....	43
3.1 Introduction	43
3.2 Structure and agency in a critical realist framework.....	44

3.3 Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development.....	47
3.4 The philosophy of critical realism	51
3.4.1 A critical realist approach to autism research.....	54
3.5 The bioecological model and critical realism.....	56
3.6 Conclusion	56
Chapter 4 : Methodology	58
4.1 Introduction	58
4.2 Research paradigm and philosophy.....	59
4.3 Research design	61
4.3.1 Researching the lived experience.....	61
4.3.2 Sampling and participant selection	62
4.3.3 Data generation methods	63
4.3.3.1 Life grids	63
4.3.3.2 Interviews	66
4.4 Data analysis	69
4.4.1 Thematic analysis and identification of experiential and inferential themes	70
4.4.2 Application of Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) thematic analysis approach.....	71
4.4.3 Application of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological PPCT model to present and analyse individual ecosystems.....	73
4.4.4 Identification of dispositional themes emerging from the cross-case analysis of participants' ecosystems.....	75
4.5 Ethical considerations	78
4.5.1 Informed consent	79
4.5.2 Confidentiality	80
4.6 Reflexivity and researcher positionality.....	80
4.7 Research trustworthiness.....	81

4.8 Conclusion	82
Chapter 5 : Narratives of Experience	84
5.1 Introduction	84
5.2 Stage one: Thematic analysis: Identifying experiential and inferential themes	84
5.3 Stage two: Application of PPCT model to present and analyse individual ecosystems	85
5.4 Alex's ecosystem using the PPCT model.....	86
5.4.1 Process (interactions and relationships)	86
5.4.2 Person (individual characteristics and agency).....	87
5.4.3 Context (systemic and environmental factors)	89
5.4.4 Time (career transitions and long-term change)	91
5.4.5 Summary	91
5.5 Stephen's ecosystem using the PPCT model	91
5.5.1 Process (interactions and relationships)	92
5.5.2 Person (individual characteristics and agency).....	93
5.5.3 Context (systemic and environmental factors)	94
5.5.4 Time (career transitions and long-term change)	97
5.5.5 Summary	98
5.6 Robyn's ecosystem using the PPCT model	98
5.6.1 Process (interactions and relationships)	98
5.6.2 Person (individual characteristics and agency).....	101
5.6.3 Context (systemic and environmental factors)	102
5.6.4 Time (career transitions and long-term change)	103
5.6.5 Summary	104
5.7 Nick's ecosystem using the PPCT model.....	104
5.7.1 Process (interactions and relationships)	104
5.7.2 Person (individual characteristics and agency).....	106

5.7.3 Context (systemic and environmental factors)	108
5.7.4 Time (career transitions and long-term change)	109
5.7.5 Summary	110
5.8 Cross-case analysis using PPCT	110
5.9 Conclusion	111
Chapter 6 : Discussion	112
6.1 Introduction	112
6.2 Interpretation of findings.....	114
6.2.1 Structural and institutional mechanisms	114
6.2.1.1 Recruitment practices in schools are designed based on neurotypical ways of communicating	114
6.2.1.2 The design of school environments promotes feelings of belonging or exclusion for autistic teachers.....	117
6.2.1.3 Autistic teachers are often required to manage their identity and disclosure decisions within power structures in which they have little control	120
6.2.1.4 Opportunities to connect with other autistic teachers are limited due to structural and cultural barriers	122
6.2.2 Interpersonal and sociocultural mechanisms	124
6.2.2.1 Attitudes of colleagues act as enabling or constraining forces in shaping autistic teachers' experiences	124
6.2.2.2 Ambiguity in expectations and communications generates anxiety and undermines role efficacy.....	126
6.2.3 Emotional and psychological mechanisms	128
6.2.3.1 The pressure to assimilate to neurotypical norms leads to emotional strain and reduced wellbeing	128
6.2.3.2 Strong internal drive toward competence and responsibility predisposes autistic teachers to burnout	131
6.2.4 Strengths and transformative potentials	133
6.2.4.1 Schools underutilise autistic teachers' strengths due to rigid institutional structures	133
6.2.4.2 Autistic ways of perceiving and engaging with the world generate pedagogical approaches that are inclusive and responsive	135

6.3 Conclusion	138
Chapter 7 : Implications of Findings	142
7.1 Structural and institutional mechanisms.....	142
7.1.1 Gaining employment.....	142
7.1.2 Inclusion by design	143
7.1.3 Opportunities for connection	144
7.2 Interpersonal and sociocultural mechanisms	145
7.2.1 Training for staff	145
7.3 Emotional and psychological mechanisms.....	145
7.4 Strengths and transformative potentials.....	146
7.4.1 Leadership opportunities.....	146
7.5 Conclusion	146
Chapter 8 : Conclusion.....	147
8.1 Summary of findings	147
8.2 Methodological contributions.....	148
8.3 Limitations of the study	149
8.4 Recommendations for further research.....	150
8.5 Final reflections.....	150
References.....	153
Appendices	168
Appendix 1: Emails to participants	169
Appendix 2: Life grid	170
Appendix 3: Life grid example.....	171
Appendix 4: Completed life grid example.....	172
Appendix 5: Interview schedule	176
Appendix 6: Example interview questions.....	177
Appendix 7: Inferential themes generated at stage one of data analysis	181

Appendix 8: Refined inferential themes and final dispositional themes.....	182
Appendix 9: Ethics approval.....	185
Appendix 10: Information sheet for participants	186
Appendix 11: Privacy notice	189
Appendix 12: Consent form.....	190
Appendix 13: Summary of policy and practice recommendations.....	191

List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Term
PPCT	Process-Person-Context-Time
HFA	High Functioning Autism
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
DfE	Department for Education
MMU	Multiply Marginalised and Underrepresented (group)
TA	Thematic Analysis
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education

List of Figures

Figure 1: The relationship between structure and agency. Adapted from Stutchbury, 2022	46
Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model	50
Figure 3: Critical realist stratified ontology (Alexander, 2013, p. 7)	53
Figure 4: Domains of reality (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 13)	54
Figure 5: Research process overview	59
Figure 6: Generation of dispositional theme related to recruitment practices	77
Figure 7: Dispositional themes	113

List of Tables

Table 1: The four ecological systems	49
Table 2: Stages of data analysis.....	70
Table 3: Summary of application of experiential, inferential and dispositional themes in thematic analysis. Adapted from Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021, p. 165).....	71
Table 4: Summary of dispositional themes mapped against the research sub-questions	138

Chapter 1 : Introduction

1.1 Focus for the study

Seven years ago, a beginning teacher asked me this question: 'Are there any resources for autistic teachers?' I began searching for an answer through books, academic journals and my professional networks. While there is a plethora of research into teachers and teaching, the vast majority is viewed through a neurotypical lens and I found nothing that related specifically to autistic teachers. This absence pointed to a significant gap in both academic literature and educational practice and raised critical questions about visibility, support and inclusion in the teaching profession. In response, this thesis seeks to explore the lived experiences of autistic teachers through a critical realist lens, contributing to a deeper understanding of the structural, cultural and interpersonal mechanisms that affect their personal and professional lives. While my professional background informs my interest in this study, the research prioritises the voices and interpretations of autistic teachers themselves.

Having been a teacher educator for over twenty years, I have seen a growing diversity in school student populations and consequently, a wealth of research devoted to developing culturally responsive teachers who embrace diversity in their classrooms. However, the growth in diversity regarding student demographics is yet to be reflected in the teacher workforce in England and therefore education is underutilising a rich resource (OECD, 2010). In recognition of this gap, in 2018 the Department for Education (DfE) released a statement of intent to diversify the teaching workforce in England (DfE, 2018). Whilst this could be welcomed as a positive move, particularly in relation to gender and ethnicity, the statement made little reference to other marginalised groups, apart from a short sentence, 'Research also suggests that there is more to do to support teachers from the LGBT community or disabled teachers' (DfE, 2018, p.1). Furthermore, there was no reference to neurodiverse groups such as autistic teachers. Despite over seven years having passed since the release of this statement there is no evidence of any progress in addressing this issue and little positive action.

The underrepresentation and/or invisibility of autistic individuals in teaching roles is not merely a reflection of societal biases but also of the unique challenges that

autistic individuals face in navigating the complex demands of teaching and the education system. Teaching has been identified as a highly stressful profession, with teachers reporting greater levels of work-related stress than those in many comparable occupations (Redin & Erro-Garcés, 2020). These pressures have been further exacerbated by significant changes to teachers' work over recent decades (Creagh et al., 2025).

Whilst teachers have always worked long hours, more recently the work undertaken in those hours has changed significantly due to non-teaching related demands such as administrative tasks, curriculum changes and the demands of accountability measures (e.g. Ofsted) (Allen et al., 2021). Furthermore, significant cutbacks in broader educational support services, such as school nurses and welfare officers, have increased the pressure on teachers to assume additional pastoral and welfare responsibilities, alongside their teaching duties (Green, 2021). For teachers from minoritised groups, this additional workload is also coupled with, 'an additional 'hidden workload' of coping with discrimination' (Vickers-Hulse and Whitehouse, 2024, p. 2048). Among these groups, autistic teachers represent a unique and underexplored demographic within the education sector and there is limited information about how the changing demands of teaching impact them. From my experiences as a teacher educator, I am conscious that more can be done to support autistic people to not only join the teaching profession but also to thrive in their careers.

To date, there has been limited empirical research into autistic teachers with a small amount of grey literature available through social media (Wood and Happé, 2021; StEvens, 2022). Current academic literature includes Baird's (2020) exploration of issues related to performativity for autistic teachers; Lawrence's (2019) sole case study of the experiences of an autistic trainee teacher, and Wood and Happé's (2021) findings from an online survey in the UK exploring the views and experiences of autistic school staff. It is clear, therefore, that there is a dearth of research available to teacher educators, policymakers, autistic students and teachers in this area and, consequently, limited sources of knowledge that could be utilised to address the issues that autistic teachers may face. It is essential that more research is undertaken to ensure that, in line with the Equality Act of 2010, autistic teachers,

both current and future, have access to the same opportunities as any other teacher and are protected from any forms of discrimination.

Not only is research essential to ensure that there is equality of opportunity, but it is also important to recognise the significance of a diverse teaching workforce which accurately mirrors wider society. Autistic teachers can be powerful role models for autistic students, bringing unique perspectives to their work and they may also be more inclined to view student diversity in the classroom as an asset (OECD, 2010). In addition, a more diverse teaching workforce, which includes autistic teachers, may serve to challenge the deficit discourses surrounding difference (Pritchard, 2010). Indeed, such discourses may be the most significant barriers that autistic teachers face.

Further compounding the issue of limited research into autistic teachers is the exclusion of autistic individuals from knowledge production about autism and autistic people in general (Pellicano, Ne'eman and Stears, 2011; Connor, 2013; Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman, 2014; O'Dell et al., 2016; Chown et al., 2017; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2018). As a result of this exclusion, for many years autistic voices, perspectives and subjectivities have been ignored and disregarded thereby distorting the knowledge that exists about autism.

1.2 Research aims and questions

Through this study I will address the issues raised above by exploring the individual narratives of four autistic teachers. I seek to share their unique perspectives on their lived experiences in education and how they navigate social, institutional and personal spaces. Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) is used to structure and interpret these experiences. Guided by a critical realist paradigm, this research aims to uncover the interplay between individual narratives and the underlying structural, social and cultural mechanisms that shape them. Ultimately, I want this research to highlight any injustices faced by autistic teachers and this can only be achieved through an understanding of the causal mechanisms that exist in our education systems (Bhaskar, 2009).

The research will address the following question: What structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers in educational settings?

This central question will then be addressed through the following four sub questions:

1. How do autistic teachers' personal histories, including their own schooling, shape their values, motivations and professional identities?
2. How do key stages in autistic teachers' professional development, such as training and early career, reflect broader structural and cultural influences?
3. How do autistic teachers navigate and respond to the social, sensory, and organisational demands of their professional roles?
4. What conditions and mechanisms enable or constrain the professional growth, inclusion, and wellbeing of autistic teachers?

It is hoped that the insights gained from this research can be used to help inform the policies and practices of government, employers and colleagues, leading to more equitable experiences for autistic teachers. In addition, it will highlight the benefits autistic teachers bring to their role which might currently go unrecognised. The research has the potential to lead to an increase in the number of autistic teachers entering and staying in the profession and ultimately serve to empower autistic people and open new career opportunities that hitherto they may have viewed as inaccessible to them. Thus, this creates what Hacking (1995) terms the 'looping effect', whereby 'people classified in a certain way tend to conform or grow into the ways they are described; but they also evolve in their own ways so that the classifications and descriptions have to be revised' (p. 21, as cited in O'Dell et al., 2016).

1.3 A note on terminology

As stated above, the research will align with the critical realism paradigm. A critical realist perspective acknowledges that there is a biological reality to autism, even if it is not yet fully known (Kourti, 2021) and our knowledge of that reality is socially constructed through language and discourse and, as such, is fallible and subject to change (Bhaskar, Danermark and Price, 2017). Currently, knowledge about autism has largely emanated from medical based studies which present it in deficit-based

language, classifying it as a disorder focussing on impairments and deviations from the normative phenotype (APA, 2013). Such language choices can have significant implications for autistic people through the influence on society, policy, practice and research (Vivanti, 2020; Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021). In contrast, a neurodiversity perspective, whilst acknowledging the ways in which autistic people can be disabled, avoids portraying autism in pathological terms, perpetuating the notion that autism is something to be *fixed* or *cured*. As the choice of language can have real-world implications for autistic people, it is essential that researchers pay attention to autistic voices when making their language choices (Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021).

Considering this, the terminology I will use in this study will ascribe to a neurodiversity-informed perspective on autism. Therefore, unless I am quoting another author, I will refer to *differences* between autistic and non-autistic people, as opposed to *deficits*. Any reference to disability will be made with the acknowledgment that such disabilities largely occur due to our social environments being constructed for the neurotypical population.

In accordance with the findings of Kenny et al.'s (2016) survey into the UK autistic community's preferred terms to describe autism, I will use identity-first (e.g., autistic teacher) rather than person-first language (e.g., teacher with autism) with the latter having connotations of some kind of pathology needing to be cured (Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2021). However, I am conscious that, as stated above, I need to listen to the voices of autistic participants and, therefore, when conducting the research, I asked each participant their preferred terminology and used that in reporting findings. Indeed, in line with Kenny et al.'s findings, all participants chose identity first language (Kenny et al., 2016).

For the purposes of this study, I may refer to the term high-functioning due to its wide use in literature and research, even though the terms high and low-functioning do not have any meaning in relation to an autism diagnosis. However, it is important to highlight that the use of binary terms such as high or low functioning can perpetuate stereotypical views of autism. Whilst the participants in the study, by the nature of their prior educational attainment, would likely be classed as high-functioning autistics (HFA) this does not mean that they will not face challenges in life, such as forming social relationships, accessing employment etc. Yet, being labelled as HFA

may limit and restrict the support available to them due to assessments being based on cognitive abilities rather than adaptive functioning (Alvares et al., 2019).

1.4 Outline of thesis

This thesis is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 reviews the literature on autism and employment, particularly in educational settings.
- Chapter 3 describes the theoretical framework underpinning this study.
- Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach adopted, including the research design and methods used.
- Chapter 5 presents the findings of the research through each participant's story, interpreted using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model.
- Chapter 6 offers a critical exploration of the dispositional themes that emerged from the analysis of the lived experiences of participants.
- Chapter 7 considers the implications and recommendations of the study's findings for policy and practice.
- Chapter 8 provides a conclusion of the study including limitations and recommendations for further research.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the context, rationale and aims of the study. I have outlined the significance of exploring the lived experiences of autistic teachers through a critical realist lens. The research questions that have guided the study have been introduced. This has laid the groundwork for the following chapter in which I review the relevant literature in relation to autistic teachers and the employment of autistic adults more generally.

Chapter 2 : Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Whilst there is an ever-growing body of literature focussed on the needs and educational outcomes of autistic children and young people in education, limited attention has been paid to the experiences of autistic adults. This is particularly evident in research relating to education and employment (MacLeod et al., 2020). Moreover, research into the experiences of autistic teachers is significantly absent (Wood and Happé, 2021). Furthermore, the voices of autistic children, young people and adults are absent from much of the research presented (Parsons et al., 2011; Parsons, 2015; Horgan, Kenny and Flynn, 2023). A greater inclusion of the autistic voice in research would facilitate the development of epistemic communities. These communities draw on experiential accounts to cast new light as to what counts as knowledge in autism studies. Such communities draw on diverse perspectives and cultural contexts to establish alternative forms of knowledge. These often challenge dominant biomedical and brain-based discourses and seek to disseminate more person-centred knowledge claims (Raz et al., 2018).

Given the increasing recognition of neurodiversity in the workplace (Austin and Pisano, 2017) there is an urgent need to examine how structures, policies and cultural expectations shape the experiences of autistic employees, including teachers. Such explorations can inform the development of workplaces that are responsive to the needs of neurodivergent employees and promote intersectional inclusion, thereby creating environments that benefit all (Praslova, 2024).

This literature review explores existing research on autistic teachers. However, as this body of work remains limited, it draws more broadly on research into autism and employment. The review critically engages with dominant narratives of autism, contrasting deficit-based discourses with the emerging neurodiversity paradigm (Kapp et al., 2013).

Existing research on autism and employment often focuses on observable behaviours or individual psychological differences. From a critical realist perspective, this risks Bhaskar's (2009) 'epistemic fallacy' by treating what is known/observed as a proxy for what exists, thereby obscuring the generative social, cultural, and

structural mechanisms that shape behaviour and experience. Therefore, informed by the critical realism paradigm, this review not only examines individual dispositions but also the cultural and structural mechanisms that create both barriers and opportunities for autistic adults, shaping their professional experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model provides a further lens to examine the dynamic interplay between individual characteristics, environmental contexts, and temporal dimensions. While these frameworks will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, they guide the current review by highlighting the need to move beyond surface-level descriptions and attend to the structural, relational, and developmental factors influencing the experiences of autistic teachers.

To understand these experiences, it is first necessary to consider how autism itself has been conceptualised in research and how these conceptualisations influence knowledge about autistic adults. The following section therefore examines the competing models of autism knowledge.

2.2 Conceptualising autism in research

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition commonly characterised by differences in social communication and interaction, and restricted or repetitive patterns of behaviour (APA, 2013). There is no medical test for autism and, currently, no single known cause; autism is understood to arise from complex genetic and environmental influences (National Autistic Society, 2019). Autism is diagnosed through a series of behavioural evaluations administered by psychologists and psychiatrists. Many countries use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) produced by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to make their diagnoses (APA, 2013). In the UK, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), produced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) is used (World Health Organisation, n.d.). Yet, from a critical realist perspective, the reliability and validity of the tests are debatable, as their subjective nature means that social expectations and values may influence the judgement of those conducting the assessments (Connor, 2013). Linked to this, there is evidence that certain sections of the autistic community, particularly those mildly affected, older adults or girls who may be better able to 'mask' their symptoms, may be going undiagnosed (Wood-Downie et al., 2021; O'Nions et al., 2023).

Zeidan et al. (2022) estimate that approximately 1 in 100 children are diagnosed with autism worldwide. However, it is probable that the prevalence of autism in the population is likely much higher due to those who are undiagnosed or choose not to seek a diagnosis but self-identify as autistic (Shaw et al., 2023). In addition, the long waiting times for a diagnostic autism assessment in the UK may deter some people from seeking a diagnosis (National Autistic Society, 2023).

It is clear that current diagnostic frameworks reside in the empirical layer of reality, focussing solely on observable behaviours of the individual. What counts as autism is shaped by the prevailing cultural norms, institutional practices and professional discourses, largely framed from a medical perspective. Yet, seen from a critical realist position, due regard must also be given to the deeper causal mechanisms that influence how autism is defined and how autistic adults experience and navigate professional contexts. While the medical model frames autism as an individual impairment, the neurodiversity paradigm reframes it as a natural variation in human cognition and experience. This reconceptualisation opens up the space to examine the social, structural and cultural conditions that enable or constrain autistic adults in the workplace. This is particularly important in schools, where diagnostic labels and underlying assumptions shape not only access to support but also the expectations and opportunities that influence both teaching practices and educational experiences of autistic individuals.

2.2.1 Medical model vs neurodiversity paradigm

Lorna Wing's research starting in the 1960s ultimately led to the introduction of the autism spectrum disorder concept (ASD) recognising that, whilst sharing common characteristics, individuals with autism were far from a homogenous group and autism affects people in different ways (Watts, 2014). This sits in tension with much of the research into autism which emanates from a medical model with the criteria for assessment, as outlined in the DSM-5 guidance, largely based on societal norms (APA, 2013). The guidance situates the problems within autistic individuals themselves rather than society's response to them (BPS, 2011) thereby creating an 'epistemic fallacy', assuming that observable behaviours are all that exist, while overlooking the deeper, unseen mechanisms, such as social, cultural or structural factors, that shape autistic people's behaviours, even when not immediately visible.

A dominant theory relating to autism is that autistic people have an impaired 'Theory of mind' (Baron-Cohen, 1995) and since the mid-eighties numerous tests have been administered to autistic people to provide further evidence of this belief (Yirmiya et al., 1998). The theory denotes the ability to empathise with others and to understand their thoughts and feelings, 'in brief, having a theory of mind is to be able to reflect on the contents of one's own mind and others' minds' (Baron-Cohen, 2001, p.169). However, findings from these tests have not always been as clear-cut as initially suggested.

Francesca Happé's research in 1995 demonstrated that autistic individuals are not inherently unable to acquire knowledge about mental states; rather they may exhibit a developmental delay in this ability. Consequently, this supposed impairment can diminish over time suggesting that older autistic adults' theory of mind may be comparable to that of neurotypical individuals and should not automatically be viewed as a lifelong barrier (Happé, 1995). Furthermore, rather than lacking a theory of mind, autistic people's theory of mind may simply be less complex than that of non-autistic individuals. Moreover, a critical realist perspective reveals that these tests may be inherently flawed often relying on assumptions about motivation to deceive, something autistic people may be less inclined to do (de Gelder, 1988). This highlights how prevailing neurotypical frameworks can misinterpret or undervalue autistic ways of processing social information.

To further challenge this deficit view, autistic researcher Damien Milton (2012), offers an important alternative perspective through his concept of the double empathy problem, reframing communication difficulties as issues of reciprocity and mutual understanding rather than individual deficit. Milton argues that empathising, as it is currently viewed in society, is one-sided with the breakdown in interactions being located solely with the autistic person. His theory highlights that such difficulties arise from the differing perspectives of those involved in an interaction, thereby positioning the non-autistic individual as equally responsible for achieving mutual understanding. This reframing is particularly valuable, as it shifts attention away from perceived autistic impairments towards the relational and contextual factors that shape social exchanges:

One could say that many autistic people have indeed gained a greater level of insight into non-AS society, and more than *vice versa*, perhaps due to the need to survive and potentially thrive in a non-AS culture. Conversely, the non-AS

person has no pertinent personal requirement to understand the mind of the 'autistic person' unless closely related socially in some way. (Milton, 2012, p. 886)

Funding patterns further compound the issue with much of the funding for autism research continuing to prioritise aetiological studies into causes and cures rather than research aimed at understanding and supporting autistic people within society (Singh et al., 2009; Autistica, 2016). This emphasis reflects the dominance of the medical model, which positions autism as a deficit to be explained or corrected. In contrast, from a neurodiversity perspective, research should be conducted *with* autistic people rather than *on* them, centring their lived experiences and expertise (Chown et al., 2017). Focusing on autistic people's lived experiences offers insights into real-world barriers and potential supports that purely cure-orientated research can never address, ultimately leading to outcomes that meaningfully improve autistic people's lives.

Nevertheless, there are also positive developments to acknowledge. More recently a growing body of autism research situated in the neurodiversity paradigm has begun to challenge deficit-based approaches and to scrutinise the social, cultural, political and environmental factors that affect autistic people (Stenning and Rosqvist, 2021). Alongside this, research emanating from the neurodiversity paradigm highlights the potential advantages of autism in the workplace such as high levels of focus, attention to detail, reliability, trustworthiness and creative problem solving (Thorpe et al., 2024), all of which are notably absent from any diagnostic manual.

By reversing the perception of each deficit or dysfunction it becomes possible to find a positive attribute for each trait. For example, an impaired theory of mind means that autistic people will be more likely to be truthful. Being hypersensitive to the environment means that autistic people will often see things that go unnoticed by others. Autistic people's attention to detail means they have excellent memories and often have in-depth knowledge of topics and highly refined skills. Autistic people are not tied to social expectations and rarely judge other people (Bennie, 2019). Yet, an asset-based view of autism remains underrepresented in educational discourse and is rarely reflected in policy and professional practices. For autistic teachers, however, such a framing has transformative potential and could lead to greater recognition of the many strengths they bring to the workplace thus shifting the narrative from

accommodation to inclusion. This perspective not only affirms autistic identity but also fosters environments where autistic teachers can thrive.

Much of the literature exploring autism and employment categorises participants using the contested labels high-functioning and low-functioning. In this chapter, I use the term high-functioning autistic (HFA) only when reporting how studies define their samples. As discussed in Chapter 1, I do not treat this label as a stable or meaningful descriptor of autistic experience. Rather, it is used to engage critically with an evidence base that typically refers to autistic adults without intellectual disability in this way. Importantly, this categorisation obscures the variability and context-dependence of autistic people's support needs and risks minimising the structural and environmental barriers they may face in professional settings. For the purpose of this study, I therefore mostly refer to literature pertaining to autistic adults without intellectual disability, recognising that much of this literature describes this group as high-functioning. This focus is particularly relevant to this study, which explores the experiences of autistic teachers working in mainstream education. Existing evidence suggests that individuals identified as high-functioning are more likely to pursue professional careers such as teaching, making this group especially pertinent to understanding how autistic traits interact with workplace expectations and norms (Curnow et al., 2025).

Before examining the broader literature on the employment experiences of autistic adults, I will first review the limited research that focuses specifically on autistic teachers.

2.3 Autistic teachers: A neglected research area

Research into autistic teachers remains scarce, and their voices are largely absent from the literature. Compounding this issue, the size of the autistic teaching population is unknown as there is no requirement for schools to report these data. It could be argued that this gap is due to the invisibility of autistic teachers or perhaps the stereotypical perspective that autistic people are not capable of becoming teachers. Yet, Curnow et al.'s study (2025) into the experiences of autistic professionals working in health care or education, found that 35 percent of their participants were working in education. Similarly, recent research by Vincent and Ralston (2023) identified the education sector, including teaching, as the most

common employment destination for autistic graduates. Findings such as these underscore the pressing need for further research in this area.

More broadly, research about disabled teachers, which may include autistic teachers, is also lacking. A review of the literature exploring recruitment and retention for under-represented groups in teaching found the number of high-quality studies was lacking and only 2 of the 24 studies related to disability. The findings from this small selection highlighted the prevalence of negative attitudes, stigma and prejudice towards people with disabilities (Bielby et al., 2007). The impact of these experiences is likely to contribute to lower retention rates for teachers from minoritised groups when compared to white British, cis-gendered, neurotypical teachers (Allen et al., 2016). The lack of research specifically relating to autistic teachers was further highlighted by StEvens' review of the literature (2022), finding only five articles meeting the search criteria specifically focussed on autistic teachers. The majority of the literature she accessed pertained to teaching autistic students.

This absence raises important epistemic issues. The invisibility of autistic teachers in research points to underlying mechanisms that systemically exclude autistic voices. As a critical realist, this research serves to unearth the social, cultural and institutional mechanisms that constrain the emergence of knowledge about autistic teachers and keeps their voices silenced.

2.3.1 Emerging studies on autistic teachers

Although the literature on autistic teachers is limited, emerging studies offer important insights into their lived experiences and the structural challenges they face. For example, Lawrence (2019) and Baird's (2020) single case studies begin to challenge some of the deficit-based discourses around autism by highlighting the unique contributions autistic teachers make. Both studies also illuminate the institutional pressures that autistic teachers must navigate. Lawrence's asset-focussed perspective suggests that autistic teachers may bring transformative insights into inclusive educational practices, while Baird's study explores issues of performativity and its links to disclosure, suggesting deeper systemic issues such as ableist assumptions about competence. Whilst both studies provide valuable perspectives, they are only reflecting the views and experiences of one individual

and, therefore, may not accurately reflect the wider views of the autistic teaching population. Indeed, Lawrence's (2019) findings relate to a trainee teacher who may not have been exposed to as many exclusionary experiences as an employed autistic teacher. Nevertheless, both studies point to the need for a wider research agenda that prioritises autistic teachers' voices and critically interrogates the institutional structures and cultures influencing their lived experiences.

To further address gaps in the literature, Wood and Happé (2021) conducted the largest study to date exploring the perspectives of autistic adults working in educational settings, including individuals who had left the profession, offering valuable insights into factors that may contribute to teacher attrition. While the breadth of the sample offers a wide lens on autistic experiences, its lack of specificity to teaching roles and reliance on survey data limits the depth of insight into the nuanced realities of autistic teachers. Nevertheless, the findings reinforce recurring themes highlighting how autistic teachers face barriers related to understanding and support, environmental issues, mental health concerns and issues around disclosure. In addition, their findings suggest that autistic teachers face structural barriers in relation to career progress (Wood and Happé, 2021). Such issues were also raised in more recent qualitative research conducted by O'Neill and Kenny (2023) into the experiences of four autistic teachers working in the Irish education system.

Dominant negative discourses around autism in the education system were found to be a significant factor for identity concealment in Rebecca Wood's (2024) qualitative study involving 12 former autistic school staff. Though not exclusively focussed on teachers, the findings highlight the sustained effort required to hide their autistic identities in order to conform to normative expectations, a process that ultimately led many to leave the profession. The expansion of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) may compound this invisibility, as standardised practices are often prioritised over opportunities for teacher connection and collaboration across multiple contexts (Walker et al., 2023).

Informal accounts by autistic teachers on social media offer valuable perspectives that counter the deficit-based narratives about autism that currently prevail, highlighting how autistic traits can align well with the demands of teaching. Individuals describe how structured environments, predictable routines, and clarity of

roles support their preferred ways of working and facilitate social interactions. In addition, the autistic traits of being methodical and focussing on details were not presented as limitations but rather professional strengths that enhance their planning and organisation. Furthermore, and as suggested previously, the autistic teachers expressed that they have a better understanding of the needs of others who behave differently to the norm (National Autistic Society, 2019b). While challenges such as perfectionism and adapting to sudden changes are acknowledged, these are not exclusive to autistic individuals and may reflect broader pressures within the teaching profession.

From a critical realist perspective, these findings suggest an interplay between autistic traits and institutional structures. The many strengths autistic teachers bring to their professional roles appear to be obscured by the dominant deficit-based discourse that prevails. Importantly, the challenges described by the autistic teachers in the studies serve to highlight how educational systems frequently fail to consider the needs of neurodivergent individuals. To retain autistic teachers in the profession, it is therefore essential that research focuses on illuminating the causal mechanisms that contribute to attrition. It is for this reason that this study explores the institutional and cultural structures, and associated power relations, that shape the visibility and legitimacy of autistic teachers.

Given the paucity of research into autistic teachers, the remainder of this review will address the issues raised in Wood and Happé's (2021) research with a focus on autistic adults' experiences in employment more generally. I will focus specifically on the barriers and challenges to employment for autistic people and the issues of disclosure. Firstly, I will outline what the literature says about employment outcomes for autistic adults.

2.4 Employment and work for autistic adults

Evidence generated from research literature points to high levels of unemployment in the autistic population and, of those employed, frequent experiences of underemployment or malemployment, a situation that has remained unchanged for decades (Barnard et al., 2001; Hurlbutt and Chalmers, 2004; Howlin, Alcock and Burkin, 2005; Bancroft et al., 2012; Howlin, 2013; Roux et al., 2013; Baldwin, Costley and Warren, 2014; Sarrett, 2017; Patton, 2019; Bury et al., 2020; ONS, 2022).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) identifies employment as one of the essential dimensions to an individual's quality of life (WHO, 2012). Employment allows individuals to be integrated into a social network, be active members of society and have autonomy in decision-making and life choices; all of which can impact an individual's physical and psychological wellbeing and identity formation (Krieger et al., 2012; Fleming, Fairweather and Leahy, 2013). As such, employment can be viewed as one of the most important aspirations for any individual. As members of society, autistic individuals have the same desire for employment as their neurotypical peers. Moreover, it has been found that having a positive autism social identity, which includes being successfully employed, provides a protective mechanism for mental health (Cooper, Smith and Russell, 2017). Despite this, research indicates the employment opportunities for autistic people are severely limited (Hendricks, 2010).

Some widely cited estimates suggest that currently 80 percent of the world's autistic population is unemployed with unemployment higher for autistic people than any other disabled group (Davies et al., 2023). In the UK it is estimated that only 22 percent of autistic adults are employed, compared to 52 percent of disabled people and 81 percent of non-disabled people (Thorpe et al., 2024). The breadth of the autistic spectrum and, therefore, the range of capabilities for employment of autistic people adds another layer of complexity when considering employment rates for this population.

Much of the research undertaken to date into the employment rates of autistic adults has included individuals from across the IQ range with less research focussed specifically on HFA adults (Howlin, 2000; Curnow et al., 2025). Such individuals usually have average or above average IQs with no associated intellectual disabilities. Therefore, if the issues with social communication skills are discounted, HFA adults should be cognitively capable of undertaking a wide range of roles, including in professions such as teaching (Howlin, 2000). Yet, despite almost 50 percent of autistic adults having average or above average intelligence, only a small number are employed (Barnard et al., 2001; Hensel, 2017). Furthermore, only 36 percent of autistic graduates are in full-time employment a year after graduating (AGCAS, 2021). These data point to systemic social, cultural, and structural barriers that restrict access to employment opportunities, including in education.

Understanding these barriers is further complicated by the lack of reliable data on the number of autistic teachers in the workforce, which limits insight into the scale of underrepresentation within the profession.

2.4.1 Employment outcomes and job quality

While existing data highlights the exclusion of autistic individuals from the workforce, it is equally important to examine the nature of the work they undertake when employed, and how well these roles align with their strengths and potential. While many autistic adults are capable and highly educated, research shows a mismatch between their skills and the roles they occupy. This suggests that there may be an untapped pool of autistic individuals whose strengths and qualifications could make them highly suited to teaching, yet systemic barriers and employment practices prevent them from accessing such career opportunities.

Baldwin, Costley and Warren's (2014) national survey in Australia involving 130 HFA adults found that 46 percent were in jobs where the skill level required was below that of their formal qualifications. As the study presented only data gathered from surveys it cannot be ascertained whether the employment status of the participants was the result of an active choice and so warrants further exploration, ideally through more qualitative studies.

One such small-scale but significant study in 2011 by Griffith et al., which involved semi-structured interviews with 11 autistic adults, found that two-thirds of the unemployed participants had resigned themselves to permanent unemployment following negative experiences in the workplace (Griffith et al., 2011). Although limited in scope, the study emphasises the need for further research into the relationship between specific career paths and sustainable employment outcomes for autistic adults. Notably, its findings resonate with more recent research by Wood (2024), which explores the reasons autistic school staff choose to leave the education sector, suggesting a broader pattern of workplace challenges for autistic professionals.

2.4.2 Career aspirations and timing of diagnosis

Interesting insights into the factors that influence career choices for HFA autistic adults were highlighted in Johnson and Joshi's mixed methods study, particularly as they had purposely explored how the age of diagnosis influenced decision-making;

something that has not been explored in other research. Their findings suggest that autistic individuals who are diagnosed later in life are less likely to avoid jobs that involve higher levels of social interaction; seeing this as an opportunity to overcome the challenges associated with the condition and counter stereotypes. However, those diagnosed in their younger years were less likely to choose employment that involved high levels of social demands (Johnson and Joshi, 2016). If this research is linked to Kanner's longitudinal study in the 1970s (Kanner, 1973, as cited in Howlin, 2000), which highlighted that HFA individuals may show improvement in their social functioning during adolescence, a worrying hypothesis could be made. Potentially, if more people are diagnosed at an earlier age due to a raised awareness of the condition and improved diagnosis tools, HFA individuals may put self-imposed limits on their career options, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating the stereotypical views associated with autism (Davies et al., 2024). One consequence of such an occurrence would be that employers lose the opportunity to employ talented individuals who could make significant contributions to their organisation with education, and teaching specifically, being one such casualty (Goldfarb, Gal and Golan, 2019).

Significantly, a more important consideration is the impact that constrained career choices may have on the overall wellbeing and life opportunities of autistic individuals (Richards, 2012). A recent qualitative study by Smethurst, Thompson and Freeth (2024), which explored the lived experiences of eight unemployed and underemployed autistic adults, reveals how limited or negative employment experiences can erode self-confidence and place a considerable strain on mental health. These findings underscore that beyond financial implications, the consequences of exclusion from meaningful employment extend to psychological wellbeing and social participation.

Understanding these personal and emotional impacts provides an important foundation for examining the broader structural and systemic barriers that autistic individuals face in accessing and sustaining employment. The following section explores these barriers in more depth, considering how factors such as workplace environments and culture, recruitment practices, and lack of appropriate accommodations may limit opportunities and perpetuate disadvantage.

2.4.3 Workplace barriers and exclusion mechanisms

2.4.3.1 Recruitment and selection

Traditional recruitment practices present barriers for autistic adults. Generic adverts and job descriptors that detail the requirements for teamwork and social communication skills, even though these may not be relevant for the role, may deter autistic people from applying for jobs they would be well suited to (Praslova, 2024). Even when an autistic individual chooses to pursue a job position, they often encounter one of the most significant barriers to employment advancement: the interview process (Sarrett, 2017; Solomon, 2020; Davies et al., 2023; Finn et al., 2023; Curnow et al., 2025). Difficulties navigating this socially demanding part of the recruitment process can not only prevent access to specific roles but may also limit overall career progression by systematically excluding individuals from opportunities for advancement.

Job interviews can be stressful for any individual regardless of any disability. However, autistic adults are prone to be more susceptible to stress in job interviews and this is likely to have an associated effect on their executive functioning (skills such as organisation and self-regulation) thereby disadvantaging them in comparison to neurotypical peers (Finn et al., 2023; Praslova, 2024). In teaching, these challenges may be compounded by performance-based hiring practices such as classroom observations, which place additional demands on social communication and sensory regulation, potentially leading to greater stress and anxiety. The rise of MATs in England has introduced further complexity through more heavily centralised recruitment and HR practices enacted across multiple settings, which have eroded the autonomy of individual schools (Walker et al., 2023). Within teacher training recruitment, the nature and format of the interview process may lead to additional social communication and sensory regulation demands for autistic individuals and risk perpetuating systemic barriers to entry for autistic individuals. Whilst the DfE specify that Initial Teacher Education providers should, ‘ensure that they are not discriminating against applicants on the basis of any protected characteristic, or applicants with special educational needs (SEN)’ (DfE, 2025, p. 13), they fail to provide any clear guidance on reasonable adjustments or alternative assessment methods, leaving implementation inconsistent and potentially

inequitable. This lack of clarity may hinder autistic applicants' ability to access a teacher training programme.

A survey by Sarrett (2017) in the US highlights the challenges autistic adults face in interview situations including the need to think on one's feet, process questions quickly, articulate responses, maintain eye contact, and knowing when to tell the truth and when to lie to appear normal. Indeed, the characteristic honesty often associated with autism can present a considerable obstacle to successful employment, particularly when hiring processes involve deceptive or strategically ambiguous questions intended to entrap candidates, an approach that may advantage individuals who are more adept at avoiding being truthful (Praslova, 2024). In addition, the use of unstructured interview questions, such as discussing hobbies or leisure pursuits, can be more challenging for autistic individuals who may be reluctant to discuss their personal lives with strangers and may also not see the relevance of such questions to the related job requirements (Praslova, 2024).

As the interview is likely to be the first encounter made with the autistic person the implications of first impressions cannot be underestimated. Unlike other groups with invisible social identities, autistic adults may have limited control over whether to conceal or disclose aspects of their identity, particularly where differences in communication and social interaction, often framed as soft skills, become more visible in high-stress interview situations (Clair, Beatty and Maclean, 2005; Hensel, 2017). Furthermore, non-autistic individuals, often form negative first impressions of autistic people within seconds, particularly when unaware of an autism diagnosis (Sasson et al., 2017). This rapid judgement reflects deeper cultural mechanisms that shape perceptions of social competence and difference. Such biases can result in reluctance to hire autistic individuals, regardless of their qualifications, thereby reinforcing exclusionary practices within employment settings.

Yet again, whilst there has been research focussed on supporting autistic adults in the interview process, this has largely operated from an impairment led approach seeking to change the behaviours of the autistic person (Mawhood and Howlin, 1999; Strickland, Coles and Southern, 2013; Smith et al., 2014) whilst failing to address how employers might adapt their interview processes to better accommodate the needs of autistic people (Sarrett, 2017).

Even when autistic individuals secure employment they face additional challenges when trying to navigate workplace environments that have not been designed with their needs in mind.

2.4.3.2 Sensory and physical environments

Research highlights that autistic individuals frequently experience sensory-related difficulties in workplaces (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004), which can create additional barriers to employment. These difficulties often involve heightened or reduced sensitivity to stimuli such as light, touch, noise, smell, and visual input (Romualdez, 2021). Such sensory challenges in the workplace are a significant but often overlooked barrier for autistic individuals, and this is particularly pronounced in school environments (Wood et al., 2024; Thorpe et al., 2024; Curnow et al., 2025).

School settings frequently feature fluorescent lighting and high gloss surfaces which can overload the visual senses of autistic people (Bontempo, 2009). Additionally, densely populated classrooms and staff areas tend to be noisy, particularly where hard floors and minimal soft furnishings amplify sound (Praslova, 2024) and may include strong odours that add to the sensory challenges. Space constraints often require staff to share work areas, and when these are cluttered or poorly maintained, they can heighten anxiety and stress (Wood, 2024).

All these factors can cause additional fatigue, physical pain (Howe and Stagg, 2016; Raymaker et al., 2020) and stress for an autistic person which can impact their ability to focus and concentrate, leading to detrimental consequences for their professional performance (Bontempo, 2009). For autistic employees in particular, sensory inclusion needs are rarely apparent and therefore may not be seen as real and potentially could be disregarded (Praslova, 2024). Furthermore, sensory overwhelm may require autistic individuals to spend extended periods recovering at the end of the workday, thereby reducing their capacity for social activities and potentially negatively affecting their overall health and wellbeing (Wood and Happé, 2021).

These environmental features reflect deeper structural and cultural assumptions about what a normal workplace looks like and in doing so, systematically excludes those with sensory needs that differ to the norm. For autistic adults, many of the challenges they face in the workplace have clear antecedents often manifested in

the working environment not solely related to the physical environment but also to relational aspects of work environments.

2.4.3.3 Relational and sociocultural barriers

The social aspect of employment can be mentally exhausting for autistic adults as they try to exist in environments created based on neurotypical ways of being. This is particularly acute in the teaching profession which has high social demands and distinct social expectations.

Developing relationships with colleagues presents challenges as the direct manner of autistic people may be perceived as blunt or rude (Cockayne, 2016). Likewise, decoding workplace politics and engaging in office banter can present further barriers to successful social relationships potentially leading to social exclusion (Hendrickx, 2009; Julian and Barron, 2019). Autistic people's preference for clear and precise instructions (Tomczak, Szulc and Szczerska, 2021) may seem counter-intuitive for employers, due to the high levels of intelligence of an individual, leading to questions about their capacity to perform their tasks (Griffith et al., 2011). Further compounding this issue, autistic individuals may experience greater frustrations, and potentially workplace bullying, due to their preference for following the rules and adherence to routines which may not be reciprocated by their neurotypical colleagues (Hurlbutt and Chalmers, 2004). For teachers there is the added challenge of developing good social relationships with children and young people. Professional expectations around emotional responses and managing unpredictable classroom dynamics may conflict with autistic ways of relating to others.

Masking and mimicking are common strategies that autistic people use to avoid discrimination and be accepted socially in the workplace (Pearson and Rose, 2021). Arguably, for autistic teachers, masking may be viewed as crucial in order to be seen to be aligned with the social constructs of what it means to be a professional teacher (Baird, 2020). However, masking can lead to stress and anxiety, and for many autistic people, it also brings feelings of guilt about being inauthentic, alongside fears of the consequences of incorrect masking (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Rice-Adams, 2023).

Given that many of the challenges faced by autistic people in the workplace relate to the social interactions needed, it is essential that more is done to find out

neurotypical employees' perspectives of working with autistic colleagues. Indeed, autistic employees themselves have identified that there needs to be more autism awareness training for co-workers to promote a better understanding of the condition and why they may need the accommodations provided (Müller et al., 2003; Santuzzi et al., 2014). Research by Sasson and Morrison (2019) suggests that autistic people have improved social outcomes if their non-autistic counterparts are more knowledgeable about the condition. Even so, such findings need to be treated with caution as the judgements formed by the non-autistic individuals in their research were based on artificial representations of autistic people using video and vignettes. In addition, the participants were drawn from a university undergraduate population which may not reflect the views of the general population. Nevertheless, what this research highlights is the importance of a raised awareness of the nature of autism, including how the manifestations of the condition vary from person to person, to counter some of the stereotypical views that may exist.

Stereotypical understandings of autism are often shaped by the diverse ways executive functioning differences appear in workplace contexts, where these challenges are typically located within the individual rather than understood as arising from interactions with the environment.

2.4.3.4 Character traits and the workplace

While often framed as individual deficits, traits such as differences in executive functioning or communication styles may constrain autistic adults in workplace environments that do not recognise and accommodate such differences. Differences in executive functioning, including challenges with prioritisation, task initiation, and cognitive flexibility are commonly reported among autistic adults (Kenworthy et al., 2009) and may be amplified in complex work environments such as schools.

Teachers are expected to manage multiple tasks simultaneously, respond swiftly and flexibly to changing demands and maintain their emotions in dynamic and often challenging situations. Challenges such as perfectionism, difficulty with prioritising, and managing transitions may be exacerbated by institutional norms that assume neurotypical functioning. Furthermore, strategies that individuals use to help them manage these challenges, such as stimming, may not be deemed appropriate in a school setting. Despite this, it may be that if teaching environments are well

structured and predictable, autistic teachers may excel in organisation, attention to detail and consistency.

Considering all the factors discussed so far, autistic adults are likely to experience stress and other mental health issues which can have detrimental impacts on both their personal and professional lives (Barnard et al., 2001; Hendrickx, 2009; Hallett and Crompton, 2018). Access to appropriate workplace accommodations can play a vital role in supporting the health and wellbeing of autistic individuals. However, obtaining such support typically requires disclosure of a diagnosis, a process that may expose individuals to stigma and discrimination.

2.4.4 Disclosure and identity management

Disclosure in the workplace for people with non-visible disabilities is challenging (Clair, Beatty and Maclean, 2005; Santuzzi et al., 2014). To receive the legal protection against discrimination in the workplace a person must disclose. While this is true, it is important to note that a disclosure can lead to stigmatisation and discrimination thus, 'both positive and negative career outcomes hinge upon disclosure' (Beatty and Kirby, 2006, p. 30). Disclosure for autistic people may be even more complex.

Drawing on stigma theories, Clair, Beatty and Maclean (2005) highlight the challenges faced by those with stigmatised social identities. Stigmatisation can be defined as 'individuals possess[ing] (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, which conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context' (Crocker, Major and Steele, 1998, p. 505, as cited in Clair, Beatty and Maclean, 2005). Stigmatising characteristics can in turn lead to discriminatory stereotyping which can present challenges in not only securing employment but also in career advancement. Unlike stigmas associated with race, gender, sexual orientation etc., neurological differences can be seen as directly associated with work performance and as such the impact may be even more profound for such individuals (Johnson and Joshi, 2016).

Despite facing similar stereotyping and stigmatising risks as other minority groups, autistic people face added challenges. Santuzzi et al. (2014, p. 206) state that, 'adopting an invisible social identity is unique in that the decision to do so is internal and under the control of the individual'. In contrast, autistic people may have far less

control over managing their social identity as their difference may be episodically visible through the way they act in social situations therefore leading to unintentional disclosure (Johnson and Joshi, 2016; Lindsay et al., 2019). Further to this, common stereotyping of autism may lead to autistic employees being fearful of being pigeonholed into certain types of employment therefore making them more reluctant to disclose. Conversely, not disclosing could lead to further challenges if the nature of the employment changes over time. For example, if a person is promoted to a position that involves higher levels of social interaction, their previously hidden condition may become more visible and could lead to poorer judgements of work performance and, ultimately, career hindrance (Santuzzi et al., 2014).

Recent research has focussed on invisible disability disclosure for people with chronic illnesses, mental illness and learning disabilities but little attention has been paid to disclosure amongst the autistic population (Johnson and Joshi, 2014). Hensel's (2017) exploration of the legal issues associated with employing autistic individuals suggests that disclosure is preferable so that workplace accommodations can be implemented. Yet, Hensel does not acknowledge that the act of disclosing may itself be problematic for individuals who struggle with social communications (Neely and Hunter, 2015). Knowing who to disclose to, due to a lack of social awareness, could lead to an individual disclosing to someone who has little understanding of the condition and, therefore, this could not only result in little or inappropriate support being offered but there is also the potential for workplace discrimination. In addition, as autistic people tend to have high levels of systematisation, they have a good understanding of hierarchical relationships in the workplace and therefore may be inclined to disclose to supervisors but less so with co-workers, the positive or negative outcome of such a decision therefore being dependent on the knowledge and understanding of the supervisor (Johnson and Joshi, 2014). Furthermore, if co-workers are not privy to the disclosure, they may view the implementation of accommodations for the autistic person as illegitimate which could hinder the development of social relationships in the workplace (Santuzzi et al., 2014; Praslova, 2024).

Disclosure of an autism diagnosis presents a complex dilemma for autistic teachers, shaped by both personal considerations and institutional cultures. In educational settings, where normative expectations around behaviour, communication, and

competence are deeply entrenched, revealing an autistic identity can expose individuals to stigma and/or professional disadvantage (Baird, 2020; Wood, 2024). The expansion of MATs has been associated with heightened performativity in schools, reinforcing normative expectations of teacher competency (Walker et al., 2023). Such cultures may further marginalise autistic teachers. Crucially, prevailing deficit discourses in educational settings about autism may lead to autistic teachers feeling compelled to conceal their identity for fear of misjudgement.

To further challenge some of the deficit-based stereotypical views of autism, more attention should be given to the assets that an autistic person may bring to the workplace. Yet research focussed solely on this area is, sadly, elusive.

2.4.5 Autistic strengths and assets in the workplace

Asset-based framings of autism remain marginal within the literature, reflecting the dominance of deficit-orientated approaches in autism research. Nevertheless, a growing body of evidence identifies a range of attributes that autistic people may bring to the workplace, many of which are highly valued in teaching. These include visual skills in science, maths and the arts; attention to detail; creativity and outside the box thinking; reliability and low absenteeism; and a strong sense of social justice (Mawhood and Howlin, 1999; Hurlbutt and Chalmers, 2004; Hagner and Cooney, 2005; Baldwin, Costley and Warren, 2014; Scott et al., 2015; Cockayne, 2016; Hensel, 2017; Julian and Barron, 2019; Lawrence, 2019; Wood and Happé, 2020; Cope and Remington, 2022; Praslova, 2024).

However, this evidence must be interpreted with caution. Much of the research draws on self-reported data and samples autistic adults who are already employed, limiting generalisability. In addition, employer-reported strengths often emerge from organisations already committed to inclusive hiring practices, which may not reflect wider workplace conditions (Nesbitt, 2000; Scott et al., 2017). A systematic review by Bury et al. (2020) similarly concludes that there is insufficient evidence to confidently assert that core autistic traits constitute an inherent workplace advantage, highlighting instead the need for more ecological research conducted within real work environments.

Research also suggests that autistic people may communicate and collaborate particularly effectively with other autistic individuals, while interactions between

autistic and non-autistic people can be more challenging, reflecting the double empathy problem (Crompton et al., 2020; Milton, 2012). In educational contexts, this may offer potential benefits for autistic pupils, though it may also present relational challenges within predominantly neurotypical school cultures.

Alongside this, targeted employment support initiatives have been shown to increase employment and income levels for autistic adults (Nesbitt, 2000; Hagner and Cooney, 2005; Howlin, Alcock and Burkin, 2005; Hillier et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2015; Cockayne, 2016). However, such programmes often fail to address issues of underemployment or skill–role mismatch and are typically implemented in already supportive organisations, limiting their transferability to the wider labour market (Beardon and Edmonds, 2007).

2.4.6 Intersectionality and multiply marginalised autistic professionals

While this study is focussed specifically on the lived experiences of autistic teachers, it does not directly address how intersecting identities, such as race, gender, sexuality or socioeconomic status shaped those experiences. Historically, representations of autistic people have predominantly reflected white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, and middle-class perspectives with a lack of consideration given to the intersection between autism and other minoritised identities (Botha and Gillespie-Lynch, 2022).

Intersectionality, as conceptualised by Crenshaw (1989), offers a valuable framework to explore how multiple social identities interact in ways that shape individual experiences, particularly in professional environments such as teaching. The impact of stigma and discrimination is likely to be heightened for people with multiple marginalised identities (Schmidt et al., 2024) potentially influencing individuals' decision-making around autism disclosure, particularly if certain identities are more visible or socially acceptable than others (Cohen et al., 2022). For instance, an autistic person of colour may weigh the risks of disclosing their autism differently than a White autistic person due to pre-existing racial biases in the workplace (Cohen et al., 2022).

Gender and sexuality also play a critical role in shaping autistic people's workplace experiences. Research suggests that autistic women are significantly

underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed due to gendered expectations around behaviour (Cruz et al., 2024), which can delay access to support or recognition in the workplace. Moreover, autistic women in teaching, a profession already shaped by gendered expectations of care, communication, and emotional labour, may feel additional pressure to mask or compensate for their autism (Baldwin and Costley, 2015). Similarly, autistic LGBTQ+ individuals may experience compounded stigma, as their identities challenge multiple normative frameworks at once making disclosure even more complex (Schmidt et al., 2024).

A recent study by Hong et al. (2024), illustrates how multiply marginalised and underrepresented (MMU) teachers face heightened threats to their wellbeing. Although small in scale, focussing on case studies of two teachers, the study highlights the complex decision-making MMU teachers engage in when choosing to disclose or conceal aspects of their identity in order to ‘yield to the society’s heteronormative ideal of being a teacher’ (Hong et al., 2024, p. 776) and the emotional toll this process can take. Socioeconomic status (SES) further influences autistic adults’ employment experiences. Those from lower SES backgrounds often have reduced access to timely diagnosis, formal accommodations, or social capital necessary for navigating professional environments (Pellicano, Hall and Ying Cai, 2023).

For autistic teachers, these intersecting identities may also shape the extent to which they feel able to disclose their diagnosis or request accommodations. For example, a Black autistic teacher may feel particularly vulnerable in predominantly White institutions, where race-based stereotypes already exist. Disclosure in such contexts may not only risk ableist stigma but also racialised assumptions about competence or professionalism. Likewise, LGBTQ+ autistic teachers may be hyper-aware of prevailing norms around gender and sexuality in schools, further complicating decisions around disclosure or self-advocacy.

Despite these insights, intersectionality remains a largely underexplored area within autism and employment research. There is a pressing need for more qualitative research that centres the voices of multiply marginalised autistic individuals, particularly those working in socially demanding professions like teaching.

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this section suggests that barriers to autistic adults' employment are not primarily the result of individual deficits but are produced through dominant deficit-based discourses, ableist norms, and institutional structures that privilege neurotypical ways of being. In education, these mechanisms are particularly pronounced due to the profession's high social, sensory, and performative demands. Such structural exclusions not only constrain autistic individuals' participation in teaching but also shape how they perceive and navigate career opportunities, often obscuring the potential contributions autistic teachers could make to the education system.

2.5 Conclusion and rationale for the study

This review has explored the conceptualisation of autism, employment outcomes for autistic adults, and the specific challenges and strengths of autistic teachers. These themes directly inform the central research question of this study: What structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers in educational settings? By critically engaging with these bodies of work, this review establishes the rationale for a deeper exploration of autistic teachers' lived experiences through a critical realist lens.

It is clear from this review of the literature and research on autism in the workplace that more needs to be done to foster greater knowledge and understanding of the experiences of autistic people in employment. The data obtained from the assorted studies is largely qualitative in nature, providing rich and detailed content. Even so, the small number of participants means that generalising from these studies should be treated with caution; it would be dangerous to assume the views presented are representative of the whole autistic population.

To date, the research conducted has explored employment experiences across a range of jobs and whilst this has afforded insights into common experiences, it fails to explore specific employment related issues that might manifest from the nature of the work undertaken, for example teaching. As such, more research is needed to explore specific challenges autistic people may face based on the nature of their work. Ultimately this could lead to the dismantling of stereotypical views of autism and therefore enhance the employment opportunities for the autistic population.

Finally, it is clear from this literature review that there is a lack of involvement of autistic people in the research process with the research being done *to* rather than *with* autistic individuals. If the research aims are to be emancipatory, then more should be done to involve autistic people in every aspect of the research process from design through to dissemination.

While the existing literature highlights the considerable challenges autistic individuals face in securing and sustaining employment, particularly in socially demanding professions such as teaching, it often fails to offer an analysis of the systemic structures that perpetuate barriers. Teaching environments, with their high levels of social interaction, sensory stimuli, and rigid institutional expectations, can be particularly exclusionary. Although some studies highlight the strengths autistic individuals bring to their roles, such as attention to detail, innovative thinking, diligence, and loyalty, these are frequently presented in a tokenistic manner, without addressing how workplaces can meaningfully accommodate and leverage such strengths. Despite these insights, there remains a gap in understanding the complex interplay between individual experiences and the broader systemic factors that shape autistic adults' professional lives. Notably, there is a dearth of focussed research on the specific structural conditions within professions like teaching, which limits understanding of how workplace design, culture, and policy may actively enable or constrain autistic professionals.

As suggested by Baird, our knowledge of autistic teachers is limited and, therefore, there is a pressing need for more research:

The normative, ableist assumptions that act to form intricate relationships regarding power, identity, and culture places autistic teachers within a delicate position between seemingly warring private and professional spheres. With this in mind, this topic remains underdeveloped in terms of qualitative data. Thus, further research is needed regarding autistic teachers' personal experiences as they navigate the professional and social demands within the ableist parameters of the classroom. (Baird, 2020, p. 44)

To address this significant gap, I situated this research in the critical realist paradigm, guided by Bronfenbrenner's Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) model, to explore both the lived experiences of autistic teachers and the underlying causal

mechanisms that shape those experiences. By focusing on the interplay between personal dispositions and structural mechanisms, this research aims to reveal how institutional cultures within education both enable and constrain autistic teachers' agency.

Chapter 3 : Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in the literature review, frequently, research related to autism tends to be depicted in polar extremes. Either the research is aetiological in nature e.g., the search for biomarkers for autism (Singh et al., 2009; Autistica, 2016) or research which explores autism as purely a social construct (O'Dell et al., 2016; McGuire, 2016). In both cases, the research can lead to an essentialist view of autistic people and to reductionism. Knowledge generated from such research may fail to address the full complexity of autism, in particular, the underlying structures and mechanisms that can influence the experiences of autistic people (Botha, 2021a).

In light of this, I situated the research within the critical realist paradigm, which acknowledges the existence of an objective reality while recognising that lived experiences are shaped by social, institutional, and contextual factors. From this perspective, individual experiences are understood as real and meaningful, yet mediated by underlying structures and mechanisms, such as organisational practices, social expectations, and power relations, which are not always directly observable. To explore these layered influences, I adopted Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development, specifically the process–person–context–time (PPCT) framework, for this study (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This framework is well suited to exploring autistic teachers' experiences because it enables an examination of how individual characteristics interact dynamically with multiple environmental systems over time. Autistic experiences and outcomes are not shaped solely by individual traits, but also by the wider educational, occupational, and social contexts in which autistic individuals live and work (Nuske et al., 2019).

By integrating critical realism with the PPCT framework, the study moves beyond surface level descriptions to critically examine the interplay between individual agency and systemic structures in the education system. The education system, as a structured environment, presents both opportunities and constraints for autistic teachers, influencing how they navigate their professional roles. Critical realism provides an opportunity to examine how these structures operate at different levels and how autistic teachers exercise agency within these constraints. It allows researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions of experience and uncover

the hidden mechanisms that shape teachers' experiences, even when those mechanisms are not immediately visible. This position aligns with Archer's realist sociology, which emphasises the need to analytically separate actors from the structural conditions in which they are situated:

Actors react to the situations in which they find themselves; they remain unaware of the factors which moulded such situations or of some of their properties. These socio-educational contexts must be investigated independently, and in doing so the sociological task is not just to record how they were viewed by people at the time but also to conceptualise how the broader context structured the actual situation in which each group found itself vis-à-vis education. (Archer, 2013, p. 55)

3.2 Structure and agency in a critical realist framework

According to critical realist thinking, society pre-exists human beings. Yet, society does not exist independently of the actions of human beings (Bhaskar, Danermark and Price, 2017) and both the structures within society and humans as active agents can act as causal mechanisms and are ontologically distinct yet linked, 'societies make people and people make societies' (Collier, 1994, p. 144). According to Bhaskar (1989, as cited in Wheatley, 2019, p. 3) societal structures consist of two things:

1. The material cause/structural conditions of human agency (people are always born into societies and structure).
2. The societal structures are the reproduced outcome of human agency.

However, agency is also two things:

1. Agents engage in conscious production (people choose to live and be in the world in particular ways).
2. Agents will reproduce and transform societal structures; however, this happens in an unconscious manner typically.

Therefore, whilst social structures (e.g. norms, rules) pre-exist agents they do not determine action and individuals have the capacity to choose how to act. For teachers, previous experiences in the social environment may have inculcated a set of dispositions, or *habitus*, which determines how they see themselves and behave

in the world (Bourdieu, 1990, as cited in Elder-Vass, 2010). However, whilst *habitus* can function as a causal power, so too can *reflexivity*, which Archer (2003) argues is the power to monitor ourselves in relation to our circumstances and exert control over our actions. As such, our actions are codetermined by both *habitus* and *reflexivity* (Elder-Vass, 2010).

Therefore, while structures shape the contexts individuals enter, such as schools with entrenched norms about what constitutes a good teacher, teachers are not passive within these systems. Through their actions, they may either reproduce these norms by conforming to them or begin to transform them by resisting or challenging expectations. As such, agency holds the potential for transformation and social change, although this process unfolds gradually over time (Archer, 2000).

Drawing on Archer's morphogenetic approach (1995), schools are frequently characterised by morphostasis, the tendency of systems to maintain their existing structures over time. As Elder-Vass (2010, p. 36) notes, 'In the social world, organisations may continue to exist in the same form for many years despite the regular replacement of their role incumbents by other human individuals'. In this context, the *habitus* adopted by autistic teachers, shaped by their prior experiences in the education system, may carry greater causal weight than their *reflexivity*, thereby limiting their capacity to effect change or bring about morphogenesis.

This aspect of critical realism is particularly relevant when considering the experiences of autistic teachers who must navigate institutional and cultural 'norms' based on neurotypical ways of being. As exemplified in Figure 1, examining how and why individuals act can uncover the social structures that shape their behaviour. Likewise, analysing social structures can help explain the opportunities and constraints individuals face in their actions.

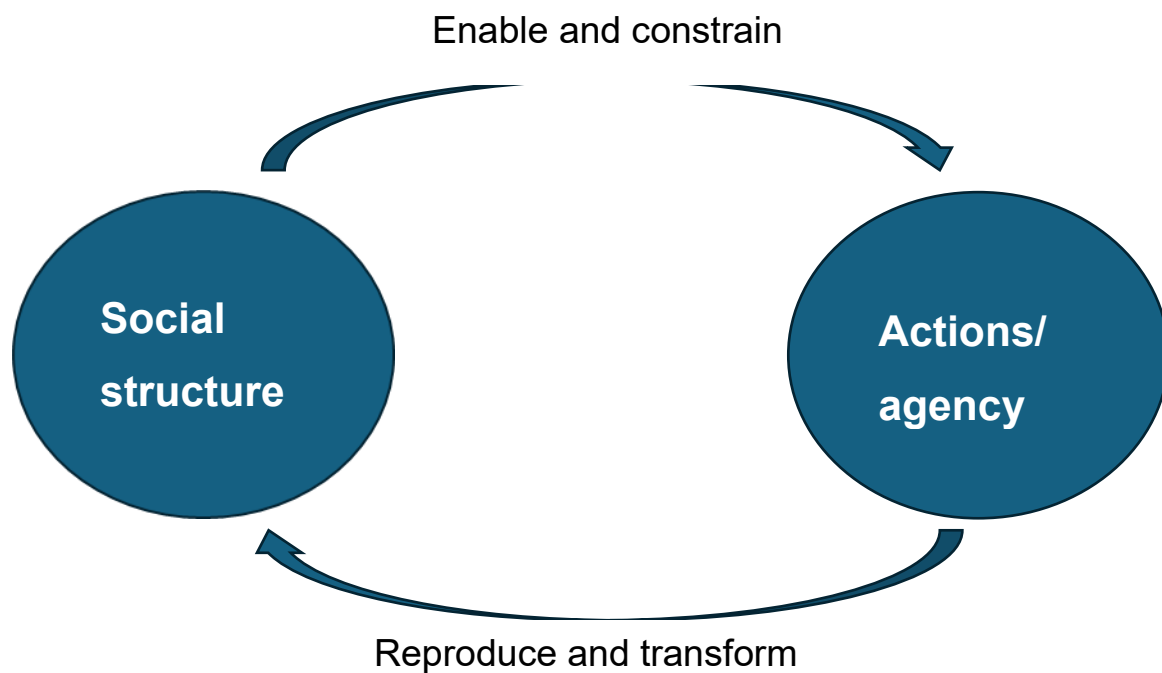


Figure 1: The relationship between structure and agency. Adapted from Stutchbury, 2022

The critical realism framework also enables a deeper examination of how agency may operate under constraint. For example, autistic teachers may choose to disclose or conceal their diagnosis depending on how safe or stigmatising their environment feels. Such decisions are not purely personal but are in response to broader structural conditions. Thus, agency is not understood as a stable individual trait but as something negotiated in context and over time. This perspective aligns with the aims of this research, which seeks not only to describe autistic teachers' experiences but to understand how they exercise agency in relation to structural constraints and, in some cases, how they challenge or transform the conditions they work within (Stutchbury, 2022). As Kourti (2021, p. 11) observes:

Autistic people inevitably change the structures they inhabit in a unique way because they are autistic and despite any neurotypical attempts to kerb their tendency to do that. [...] Existing as an autistic person, therefore, is almost a forceful demonstration in agency. [...] It is also important to recognise the extensive pervasiveness of neurotypical societal structures. Autistic people may not even be able to perceive themselves outside of these ever-present and pervasive structures.

From this perspective, autistic people may reshape the environments they inhabit, merely by existing in them. This interplay between agency and structure is key to understanding the ways autistic sociality manifests and evolves in professional contexts such as education.

In the next section I will firstly introduce Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model and how it can be applied to understanding autistic teachers' experiences. Next, I will discuss critical realism as a philosophical approach and how it allows for the identification of causal mechanisms that have shaped these experiences. I will also present an argument for the value of critical realist approaches in autism research. Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced understanding of how individual agency is exercised within, and shaped by, broader structural conditions, with critical realism helping to uncover the deep generative mechanisms behind these structures, and Bronfenbrenner's framework illustrating how they interact dynamically over time and across contexts. Finally, I will outline how the two frameworks are complementary to one another.

3.3 Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development

Bronfenbrenner's original ecology theory of human development stemmed from his perception that other theories of human development often focussed exclusively on the individual, neglecting the significant impact of the environment in shaping development. He proposed a theory that emphasises development, 'as a function of the interaction between the developing organism and the enduring environments or contexts in which it lives out its life' (Bronfenbrenner, 1975, p. 439). In his early works, Bronfenbrenner prioritised the role of environmental context in shaping individual development. However, later in his career, he became self-critical of this approach, acknowledging that it overemphasised the environment at the expense of the individual's role in their own development (Tudge et al., 2009). In response, he redefined his theory, giving rise to what is now known as the bioecological theory.

A central concept of this theory is *proximal processes*, which Bronfenbrenner identified as the primary mechanism through which development occurs. He describes proximal processes as:

Progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and

symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time.

(Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 797)

For proximal processes to function effectively, several conditions must be met. A supportive environment is essential, offering the necessary resources, stability, and opportunities for interactions. Furthermore, these processes must align with the individual's developmental stage to ensure the interactions are relevant to their evolving needs and capabilities. As Bronfenbrenner and Evans stated:

The form, power, content and direction of the **proximal processes** producing development vary systematically as a joint function of the developing **person**, the environmental **context** – both immediate and remote – in which the processes are taking place, and the social continuities and changes occurring over **time** through the life course, and the historical period during which the person has lived; and, of course, the nature of the **developmental outcomes** under consideration. (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000, p. 118)

These interactions drive development, allowing individuals to understand their world and their role within it. However, the process is not passive as individuals also exercise agency in response to these interactions, either adapting to existing structures or resisting and reshaping them (Tudge et al., 2009). Nevertheless, adapting to a new environment can be challenging and stressful. People may choose to leave a setting if they feel they are unable to adjust to it (Shelton, 2019). Previous experiences also influence this adaptation; when a new environment aligns with prior expectations, individuals are more likely to adapt successfully and feel at ease (Shelton, 2019).

Whilst Bronfenbrenner largely focussed on proximal processes that foster positive development outcomes, more recently, researchers have extended the model by discussing *inverse proximal processes*. Rather than functioning as supportive interactions, inverse proximal processes involve negative environmental influences that occur in the ecosystem which can lead to reduced competency and impairment. Examples include adverse parent–child, peer, or teacher–pupil interactions (Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020).

The evolution of Bronfenbrenner's ideas resulted in the *process-person-context-time* (PPCT) model, which has become the central element of his bioecological theory. While acknowledging the biological aspects of the person, Bronfenbrenner focussed primarily on personal characteristics and how these influence interactions with the environment. These characteristics can be grouped into three categories (Tudge et al., 2009):

- **Demand Characteristics:** these are observable traits that act as an immediate stimulus to another person e.g. gender, skin colour, age, physical appearance.
- **Resource Characteristics:** these are not immediately obvious internal resources of the person e.g. past experiences, social resources, mental and physical health, skills etc.
- **Force Characteristics:** these are aspects that drive interactions e.g. motivation, persistence, temperament etc.

The environmental *context* in Bronfenbrenner's model is structured into a series of interconnected systems as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The four ecological systems

System	Description
Microsystem	The smallest and most immediate system, comprising the relationships and environments in which an individual directly participates, such as family, school, or peer groups. This system has the most direct influence on development.
Mesosystem	The mesosystem comprises the interconnections among an individual's microsystems (e.g., home–school, family–work), and these linkages may vary in strength and form over time.
Exosystem	A system in which the individual does not actively participate but which still influences their microsystems and mesosystem. Examples include media, school policies, and government decisions.

Macrosystem	A broader, more abstract system encompassing cultural values, beliefs, and ideologies that shape the roles, activities, and interactions within the other systems.
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The final component of the model is *time*, which Bronfenbrenner referred to as the *chronosystem*. This system includes significant life events (e.g., starting school) as well as the sociohistorical context in which these events occur. Changes over time, whether in policies, societal norms, or an individual's personal changes, interact with the other systems to influence development (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994).

Traditionally, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory has been represented as a model depicted through a series of concentric circles as shown in Figure 2.

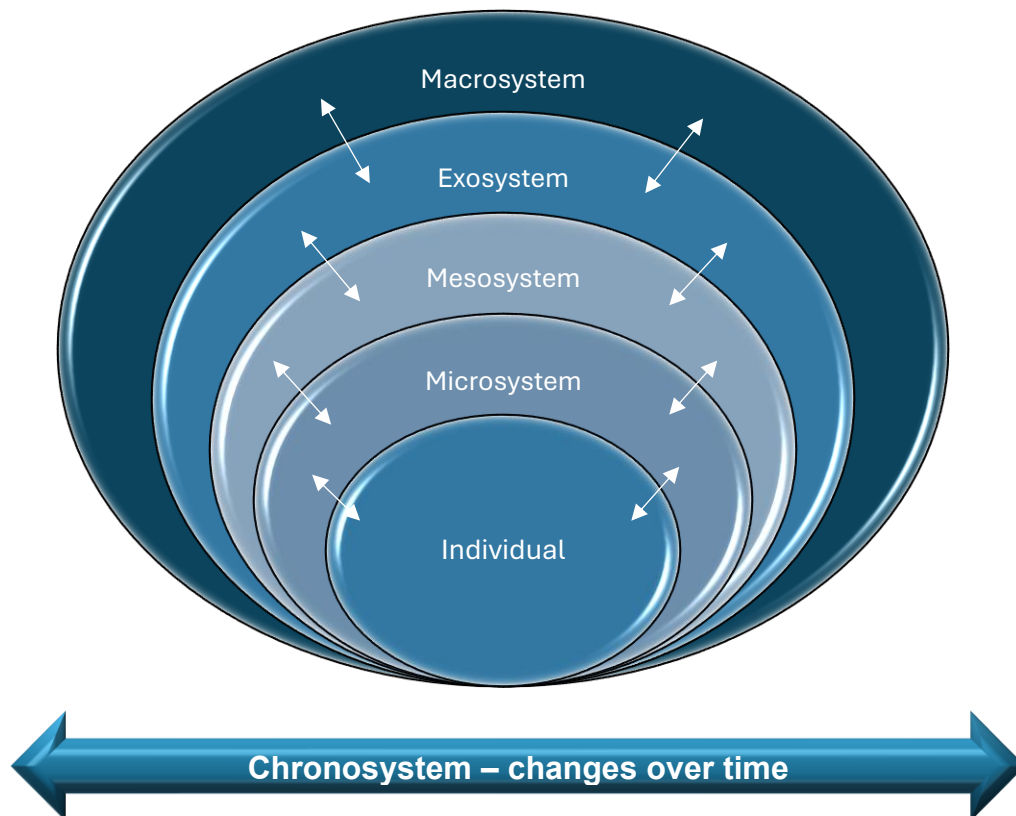


Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model

While the concentric circles provide a useful visual framework, they may not fully capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of human development as described by Bronfenbrenner. The static nature of the circles appears somewhat at odds with his emphasis on the evolving and reciprocal nature of interactions that occur over time. Moreover, the model can be seen to oversimplify the interconnectedness and

bidirectional influences between systems. For instance, changes in the macrosystem (e.g. cultural shifts) can directly and indirectly affect the microsystem (e.g. family dynamics), but this complexity is not always clear in a circular model. Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017) argue that separating culture from the immediate contexts of human development is problematic and propose that culture should flow across all the different systems. Linked to this, the image suggests a hierarchical structure in which the outer circles exert influence on the inner ones, but not vice versa (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Finally, the model may not sufficiently account for individual variability, as people experience the same environment in distinct ways depending on their unique contexts and lived experiences (Neal and Neal, 2013).

Whilst firmly rooting human development as a social affair, one of the main criticisms of Bronfenbrenner's theory is that it is too anthropocentric focussing primarily on human interactions. Little reference is made to how development is shaped through engagement with material environments, physical spaces and other non-person-centred entities (Elliott and Davis, 2020, as cited in Walton, 2025). Furthermore, the model fails to explicitly address issues of power and the associated impact on individual agency; without this, any new knowledge derived from it is unlikely to move from the expository to the explanatory (Houston, 2017). These limitations highlight the need for a theoretical approach that accounts for both structure and agency, as well as the interplay between human and non-human forces, a gap addressed through the application of critical realism.

Nevertheless, through applying Bronfenbrenner's model, it is possible to explore how multiple environmental systems interact to shape the professional lives of the studies participants. It provides a valuable lens through which to examine both challenges and opportunities they experience in educational settings. Despite this, the model does not account for the deeper, hidden causal mechanisms that shape these experiences which may not solely reside in humanistic origins. For this reason, critical realism is essential to ensure that this research moves beyond description to explain why the influences of the different systems function as they do.

3.4 The philosophy of critical realism

A basic tenet of critical realism is that we must separate epistemology from ontology. Roy Bhaskar (1975), the most prominent proponent of critical realism, argues that all too often in research there is a conflation of epistemology with ontology, an

‘epistemic fallacy’. In this fallacy, reality has been reduced to what can only be perceived by our senses (the transitive dimension) yet, from a critical realism perspective, a world exists independent of people and their perceptions of it (the intransitive dimension) (Bhaskar, Danermark and Price, 2017) and that reality cannot always be accessed through empirical or hermeneutic investigations (Archer et al., 2016; Kourti, 2021). Such a perspective leads to an ontological realist view of the world as opposed to the view that reality is purely subjective and built on our own experiences.

However, whilst critical realism purports that there is a reality that exists independently of our awareness of it, our understanding of that reality comes from epistemic relativism through our accounts of events and experiences, all of which are culturally, socially and historically situated (Kourti, 2021). Furthermore, critical realists argue that as knowledge is always influenced by human activity, perspectives and interests through different contexts, it is fallible and subject to change (Danermark et al., 2002; Archer et al., 2016). So, whilst we may aim to be objective in our research, there must be acknowledgement that our concepts of reality are just that, *our* ‘concepts’ constructed through language and discourse; ‘there is no way of knowing the world except under particular, more or less historically transient descriptions’ (Bhaskar, 2009, p. 99). As such, whilst there is one reality, there are multiple interpretations of that reality, therefore, judgemental rationality is required to evaluate the different and, potentially, competing accounts of reality and to express a preference for one account over another (Bhaskar, Danermark and Price, 2017). Thus, whilst we can produce knowledge about an object, such knowledge can change over time and context.

Unlike positivist approaches, critical realism does not focus on researching observable events but rather, investigates the objects and structures that exist and generate those events. Critical realists contest that reality is stratified into three overlapping domains as shown in Figure 3 (Bhaskar, 1975). The domain of the *real* includes entities and structures with causal powers that exist independently of our knowledge of them; in the social world, these include emergent social structures that depend on human activity yet are not reducible to individual intentions (Bhaskar, 1975). The next domain, the *actual*, includes the events that occur when the causal powers of entities and structures are enacted, even if these are not observed or

experienced by humans. The third domain is the *empirical* and consists of the experiences and observations of the events by humans. For example, a lightning strike, when observed, is experienced in the empirical domain. However, the generative mechanism (the flow of electrons and atmospheric conditions) that produces the strike resides in the real domain. Whether or not it is observed, the lightning event itself occurs in the actual domain (Malherbe, Seedat and Suffla, 2025).

This stratified view of reality contrasts with positivist and interpretivist views which suggest a flat ontology (Wynn and Williams, 2012). The former reduces reality to that which can be observed and measured, while the latter construes reality as a purely social construct lacking ontic depth (Fleetwood, 2014). This model is central to the study as it enables me to move beyond surface-level observations of autistic teachers' experiences (empirical) to uncover the underlying structural and cultural mechanisms (real) that shape those experiences.

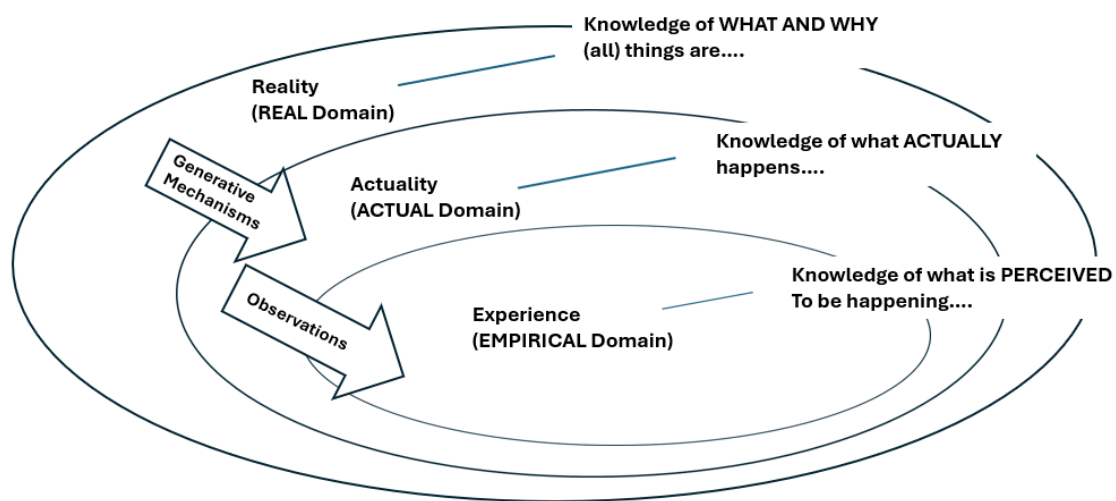


Figure 3: Critical realist stratified ontology (Alexander, 2013, p. 7)

Thus, critical realism looks to find causal explanations for events and experiences; exploring *why* events/experiences occur not merely describing *what* has occurred. Therefore, any investigation must focus on the generative mechanisms that occur in the real domain as these have greater explanatory power than events, which in turn, have greater explanatory power than experiences as highlighted in Figure 4.

	Real	Actual	Empirical
Mechanisms	X		
Events	X	X	
Experiences	X	X	X

Figure 4: Domains of reality (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 13)

This exploration involves examining the causal powers of entities (molecules, individuals, organisations etc.) with these powers dependent on the mechanisms that relate one entity to another. In open systems, such as the social world, an entity may possess a power, yet that power may not be actualised as there may be other powers within the system that counteract that power (Vincent and O'Mahoney, 2017). Therefore, whilst we might experience a pattern of events, we cannot assume that this is a sufficient explanation of reality as these events may not accurately reflect the powers at play in an open system such as the social world. Rather we should seek how the properties of single or multiple entities affect other entities in that system. Therefore, when researching into a phenomenon like autism, it is necessary to critique how past and current epistemology has shaped our beliefs and understanding as to what autism 'is' and 'is not' (Kourti, 2021).

3.4.1 A critical realist approach to autism research

A critical realist approach to autism research avoids conflating ideas and beliefs *about* autism with what autism *is*, thus eschewing the epistemic fallacy (Botha, 2021b). In contrast to other research paradigms, for example, social constructivism, critical realists do not ignore the reality of impairment (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006). For some autistic individuals, impairment can be a major limiting factor to socialisation, yet, for others, impairment is less of an issue but rather it is the actions of others that results in disempowerment (Shakespeare, 2014). Yet, the ideas of autism generated through language and discourse have causal powers that can be limiting for autistic people (Botha, 2021a). It is necessary, therefore, to make a deep exploration of the socio-structural relations that produce and reproduce knowledge about autism and, ultimately, challenge the dominant discourses that prevail and disempower autistic people. In critical realism terms, generative mechanisms may be relatively enduring, even as our descriptions and explanations evolve over time; in

autism research, this means acknowledging biological realities while also recognising that socio-cultural mechanisms shaping autistic lives can and do change, e.g. moving towards a more neurological explanation:

As human beings, 'knowing' and reflecting subjects, we continually evaluate the experiences we are making, which may lead to changing our actions and practices in various aspects. Since we have language, this can happen just by our partaking in and discussing other people's experiences and notions.

Therefore, even the social phenomena under study might themselves change through people's learning of and adapting to – or rejecting and opposing – knowledge continually being produced in society. (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 35)

The example below is adapted from Berth Danermark's paper which emphasises the importance of identifying mechanisms that operate at biological, psychological and social levels in disability research (Danermark, 2002). For example, it could be argued that the neurobiological issue of an impaired theory of mind (Baron-Cohen, 1995) is associated with mechanisms that are working at the biological level. How this is experienced would differ from person to person so the outcomes at a psychological level would vary. How an autistic person experiences the impairment is therefore due to psychological mechanisms. However, what must be acknowledged is that there are also generative mechanisms at the socio-cultural level since how we communicate is socially constructed as is the stigmatisation associated with communication issues. The issue of stigmatisation, therefore, cannot be addressed at the biological or psychological level, although generative mechanisms at these levels are involved as they determine the nature of the impairment and the experiences associated with it. A critical realist approach would question the inferences made by neurotypical researchers as they seek to explain, largely through surface level, behaviourist approaches, the embodied differences of autistic people comparing them to neurotypical bodies and minds. Instead, critical realists examine the social structures, values and beliefs that serve to influence these perceptions and do so through an engagement with the embodied experiences of events for autistic people (Kourti, 2021). Such an approach has the potential to transform the idea of an impaired theory of mind and propose an alternative explanation such as Milton's 'double empathy' theory, which suggests that neurotypical people also lack

the ability to empathise with the experiences and subjectivities of autistic people (Milton, 2012).

Hitherto explanations of autism, largely emanating from positivist biomedical research, are epistemically unjust and have led to the marginalisation of autistic people (Botha, 2021b) and silenced their voices and subjectivities (Pearse, 2020). Indeed, the inclusion of autistic voices in the generation of knowledge, through epistemic accounts of being autistic, is dismissed due to the view that such accounts lack objectivity (Botha, 2021a). The aim of this research is to bring the lived experiences and perspectives of participants to the forefront of the research and, in doing so, critically examine the way autism is framed in language and discourse in educational contexts, thus presenting causal explanations that move from the *what* to the *why* (Vincent and O'Mahoney, 2017). In doing so, I aim to address the criticisms often levelled at non-autistic researchers whose work often lacks epistemological integrity due to failing to sufficiently address the lived experience of autism with insufficient attention given to the needs and interests of the people they are researching (Oliver, 1992; Wood et al., 2018; Rosqvist et al., 2023).

3.5 The bioecological model and critical realism

This research examines not just the events and experiences of autistic teachers but why those experiences have occurred. In this study, Bronfenbrenner's framework primarily informs the organisation of influences across time and context, while critical realism supports the explanation of how these experiences relate to underlying generative mechanisms. This multi-dimensional approach will facilitate a critical exploration of social and historical structures that persist in educational settings and how these constrain or enable autistic teachers' agency and also highlight possibilities for change.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework underpinning the study, drawing together critical realism and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model.

Bronfenbrenner's model provides a tool to explore the environmental systems in which the participants live and work while critical realism provides a philosophical basis for exploring the underlying structures and mechanisms that exist within those environments and shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers.

The next chapter outlines how the critical realism philosophical framework and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model informed the research design, including methodological choices related to data generation and analysis. This approach ensures a focus both on experiential accounts and the identification of underlying causal mechanisms shaping the lived experiences of the autistic teachers involved in the study.

Chapter 4 : Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted for this study, which is shaped by the critical realism paradigm and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). In this section, I will define my philosophical orientation, my 'worldview' and the motives for adopting this stance. The chapter then details the research design, explaining the rationale for narrative inquiry and participant selection. Following this, I describe the data generation methods, including the use of life grids and interviews, before outlining the data analysis approach, which combines thematic analysis in the critical realism paradigm and Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model. The chapter concludes with discussions on ethical considerations, reflexivity, and trustworthiness.

This methodological approach was designed to address the study's central research question: What structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers in educational settings? Narrative inquiry enabled participants to construct accounts of their experiences across time, while life grids supported the recall of these experiences. Semi-structured interviews then provided depth and detail. Analysis proceeded through critical realist thematic analysis to generate experiential and inferential themes, followed by the construction of individual PPCT profiles to preserve each participant's story, and finally cross-case retroductive analysis to develop dispositional themes that illuminate underlying causal mechanisms.

Figure 5 illustrates the stages of the research process, highlighting the progression from my philosophical orientation and research design through to data generation and analysis.

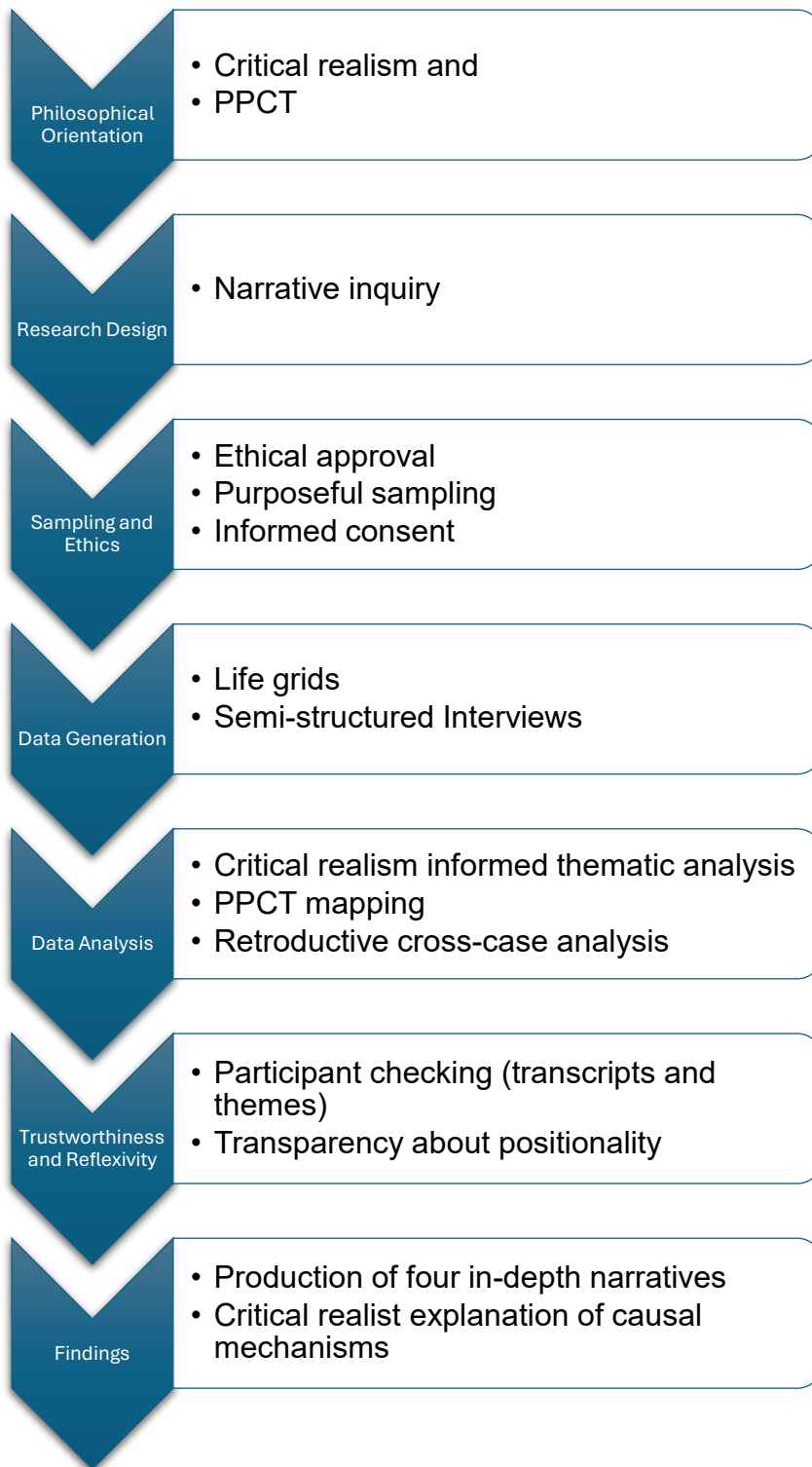


Figure 5: Research process overview

4.2 Research paradigm and philosophy

A research paradigm reflects our beliefs about the world and, consequently, how we act and interpret events in the world (Lather, 1986; Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Each paradigm has a set of assumptions, beliefs and norms with regard to ontology (the

nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), methodology (how we measure reality) and axiology (values in research) which will influence and determine what should be studied, how it should be studied and what interpretations can be made (Oliver, 1992; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

From reflections on my experiences and exposure to new ideas, I can see how my philosophical orientation has evolved over time. Initially, as a scientist, my ontological beliefs were rooted in the positivist paradigm with the view that there was one true reality which could be studied objectively and empirically through the scientific method with no consideration given to non-observable phenomena. However, as I moved into the field of social science, I began to question my positivist beliefs, particularly the notion that there is a single, objective truth which I feel is incompatible with the lived realities of individuals. As a result, I was drawn to the interpretivist paradigm.

The interpretivist philosophy emphasises the role of interpretation, context and subjective meaning in understanding reality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011) with a view that multiple interpretations of reality are equally valid (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Whilst I subscribe to the view that meaning and interpretation shape reality, the notion that reality is purely a social construct does not accurately align with my own views on reality. I believe that consideration must also be given to structures and mechanisms that generate the events individuals experience. In particular, how issues of power and agency can have causal effects on individuals in society (Pham, 2018). This belief intensified the more I engaged with existing research and knowledge about autism.

This recognition led me to critical realism, which accommodates both the subjective interpretation of lived experience and the existence of underlying generative mechanisms. As a result, critical realism became the paradigm that most accurately aligned with my evolving worldview, and it is where I chose to situate this research.

As discussed in Chapter 3, a key facet of critical realism research is to identify the mechanisms and structures that exist in the real domain that serve to cause observable phenomena. Access to the real domain can be inferred through an exploration of the lived experiences of social agents (Olsen, 2009) with narrative inquiry being a valuable research tool in this regard, hence the adoption of this

approach in this research (Smith and Elger, 2012; Brönnimann, 2022; Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022). However, from a critical realism perspective, it is important to highlight that the aim of this study is not to produce universal laws and there are limits on the generalisability of the findings. This is because causal mechanisms that generate experiences are always context specific and dependent on other structures and conditions with their own generative powers. As a result, the same mechanism may not produce the same outcome across different contexts (Mukumbang, 2023).

Whilst critical realism provides the foundation for understanding causal mechanisms, Bronfenbrenner's PPCT Model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) provides a framework for structuring this exploration, highlighting how environmental systems and proximal processes interact to shape lived experiences. Integrating these approaches enables this study to move beyond individual narratives to examine how systemic structures influence the realities of autistic teachers.

The first stage of the research was to capture the lived experiences of participants through their time in education.

4.3 Research design

4.3.1 Researching the lived experience

Whilst funding for autism research still heavily favours biomedical studies, and has traditionally excluded autistic individuals (Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022) there is evidence of a changing landscape with more research focussing on examining the variety of lived experiences of autistic people (Waldock and Keates, 2023), including a focus on participatory research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). Such an approach will serve to challenge some of the hitherto explanatory theories about autism that have emanated from neurotypical interpretations of autistic behaviours. As, through the narration of their embodied experiences, autistic people may be better positioned to access deeper domains of autism knowledge, having access to both the empirical and actual domains of reality, and, therefore, possessing greater explanatory power as to the structural mechanisms that generate these experiences (Kourti, 2021).

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach which places a strong emphasis on the stories people tell about their lives (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The use of narrative inquiry allows a researcher to gain access to how individuals make meaning from their experiences, over time and place, and ultimately how they 'see'

the world (ontology) (Pino Gavidia and Adu, 2022). However, unlike research undertaken in a purely interpretive paradigm, in the critical realism paradigm there is the acknowledgement that, ‘the social world is mediated by power relations in a constructed lived experience amidst social and historical contexts, which in turn, shape social reality’ (Pino Gavidia and Adu, 2022, p. 1). Therefore, research should seek to attempt to uncover the underlying causal mechanisms that influence the individual’s life experiences to gain access to reality. Yet, to access this reality we must first listen to the voices of participants and recognise their role as knowledge co-creators:

We therefore need to devise ways of developing mechanisms that both place the perspectives of autistic people “at the centre of the autism conversation” (Ne’eman 2011) and are attentive to the diversity of voices within the autism community. Such mechanisms must also be truly participatory (see Pellicano et al., 2011; Ne’eman 2011), actively seeking to overcome the power differentials that exist between autistic people and established authorities. (Milton, Mills and Pellicano, 2012, p. 2651)

Moreover, McLean and Syed emphasise when analysing personal narratives, a researcher should firstly attend to the individual’s construction of their lives but then engage with these stories a second time attending to the structural factors that may shape their account (McLean and Syed, 2015).

It is for these reasons that I view the use of narrative inquiry as a suitable methodology to unearth the relational interplay between structures, power and agency in the storied lives of autistic teachers (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

4.3.2 Sampling and participant selection

Sampling for this research was purposeful; I sought individuals who are autistic and qualified teachers. I purposefully avoided trying to recruit a large number of participants as I was conscious that this would make data generation, analysis, and interpretation an unwieldy exercise, and, therefore, reduce the opportunity to achieve ‘thick descriptions’ of the lived experiences of those involved in the research (Geertz, 1973). Fortunately, through my connections within the teacher education field, I was able to recruit four participants who all volunteered to take part. I already had working relationships with three of the participants who had previously expressed an

interest in having access to research about autistic teachers. I contacted these three directly to see if they would like to take part in the research. These existing relationships were acknowledged during recruitment and the consent process, and participants were reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary. While having an already established working relationship may have facilitated trust and openness, I remained mindful of potential bias and power dynamics throughout the research process, particularly as a non-autistic researcher. To mitigate this, I adopted strategies such as reflexive journaling and ensuring participants had as much control over the research as possible, including sharing themes and emerging findings throughout the process. The fourth participant was someone who had a close working relationship with one of my colleagues so the initial contact came from them and this was followed up with direct contact from me. A copy of the invitation email is included in [appendix 1](#).

Whilst my interests lie in the lived experiences of the participants through the phases of their education, I did not feel it was essential that all participants had a formal diagnosis of autism. However, all the participants had been formally diagnosed as autistic, albeit at various stages in their lives. The four participants represented a range of demographic backgrounds and professional experiences. They ranged in age from mid-twenties to late fifties and included both male and female teachers. All four participants had received a formal diagnosis in adulthood. They all worked in mainstream educational settings, primary and secondary, with one having more recently moved into the field of teacher education. Their teaching experience ranged from under five years to over twenty, offering a rich and varied insight into the lived experiences of autistic teachers across different stages of their careers.

4.3.3 Data generation methods

4.3.3.1 Life grids

Accessing the lived experiences of participants necessitated them to recall personally experienced events and specific facts related to their past. One of the most appropriate methods for gaining access to these lived experiences is through interviews. However, autistic people can face greater difficulties recalling these memories (Norris, Crane and Maras, 2020). In consideration of this, my approach to data generation needed to provide an explicit structure and sufficient time for participants to be able to recall their memories.

Therefore, to stimulate the recall of memories, the first stage of data generation involved participants completing a life grid ([see appendix 2](#)). The use of life grids in qualitative research is a useful method to facilitate interviews allowing participants to retrospectively reflect on past experiences (Crawford and Wilkinson, 2019). Whilst the use of life grids as a social science research tool has grown in the last few decades, to my knowledge, their use in autism research has not been documented.

Once I had received consent from the participants I emailed them with a life grid template. The life grid was designed to help participants map significant moments and experiences across their personal and professional lives. To aid understanding, I included a partially completed example alongside the blank template ([see appendix 3](#)). In recognition of the participants' busy working lives, I encouraged them to take as long as they needed to complete the grid and to only include information that they felt comfortable sharing.

Whilst I consider life grids to be a valuable research tool to capture participants' narrative accounts of their lived experiences, there is a danger that this could lead to a perception of a coherent and linear story; the fulfilment of a project with a determined destiny, thus producing a *biographical illusion* (Bourdieu, 1987). Bourdieu's concept of the biographical illusion highlights how personal narratives often attribute meaning retrospectively, interpreting past actions in light of new understandings. From a critical realist perspective, participants' narratives operate at the empirical level, representing their current understandings and retrospective interpretations of their lives. However, the reality of human life is far more complex, shaped by structural forces that can produce disorder and fragmentation (Bourdieu, 1987). As a critical realist researcher, I therefore need to engage with the real level to understand the mechanisms that shaped these experiences.

Whilst I did not explicitly ask the participants to reflect on the structural mechanisms behind the events they described, I hoped that engaging with the grid might prompt such reflections. My intention was not to use the grid simply as a chronological mapping tool, but rather a stimulus for participants to consider how they make sense of their life trajectories. In doing so, I remained attentive to the structural mechanisms that may have shaped these experiences (Nico, 2015). I used the information shared in the grid as a starting point for deeper exploration during the

interviews, helping to surface meaningful moments that might otherwise have remained implicit and to help the participants make sense of events.

The use of life grids also aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model by making the temporal and contextual dimensions of lived experience visible. The 'Person' dimension was addressed through the focus on each participant's individual characteristics and dispositions as they navigated educational and professional contexts. Through discussing key life events and everyday experiences the 'Proximal Processes' (interactions and relationships) that shaped participants' professional and personal trajectories were surfaced. Finally, the events recorded in the grid highlighted multiple 'Contexts', from microsystem experiences within schools to broader exosystem and macrosystem influences such as institutional cultures and societal discourses about autism.

Through the completion of the grid participants were prompted to recall specific events or experiences over the different phases of their education. In addition to supporting memory recall, the life grid also allowed participants to exercise some control over the construction of their biographies (Parry, Thompson and Fowkes, 1999). Furthermore, through the creation and sharing of the life grid with me, I hoped that this would establish a rapport between myself and the participants in advance of the interviews taking place (Parry, Thompson and Fowkes, 1999).

Whilst life grids offer many affordances, there is the risk that important data could be missed if it is not captured on the grid itself (Bell, 2005). In addition, there is a danger that only using data presented in the life grid for the interview questions has the potential to lead to a heavier focus on events at the expense of the more emotional aspects of participants' life experiences (Bell, 2005; Wilson et al., 2007). Therefore, interview questions did not emanate solely from the information contained in the grids but also incorporated topics and themes drawn from existing literature on autistic teachers' experiences.

The life grids provided me with a wealth of rich data, capturing personal, educational and professional experiences across the participants' life spans. The completed grids enabled me to identify key experiences which I later explored in more detail through the interviews. Importantly, the use of life grids was central to ensuring that participants' voices remained front and centre in the data, as the tool provided a

structured yet flexible way for them to narrate their experiences in their own terms, rather than being constrained by my own pre-determined categories of interview questions.

An example of a completed life grid is provided in [appendix 4](#) to illustrate the depth and structure of the data generated during this phase. The life grids provided a substantial body of contextual and chronological information that supported the construction of participants' narrative accounts, rather than being analysed as a standalone dataset. It was the interview data that formed the primary analytic material. Together, these sources supported the development of rich and detailed participant profiles that reflect the complexity of autistic teachers' lived experiences.

I recognise the importance of piloting research tools, including the life grid and interview materials, to refine their design and ensure they elicit rich, relevant data. However, I did not pilot these tools prior to data generation for methodological, ethical and population-size reasons. Autistic teachers are a small and hard-to-reach population, and every participant was therefore valuable to the study. Piloting with non-autistic teachers risked generating feedback based on different communication and processing preferences, which could mislead rather than improve the tools. From a critical realist perspective, knowledge also emerges from specific contexts, meaning that piloting with a different population might not have produced relevant insights. Instead, I prioritised consultation and iterative adaptation. After receiving each completed life grid, I asked participants about their experience of the process and adjusted my communication accordingly. For example, the first participant reported difficulty placing information that did not fit neatly into any box, leading me to clarify for later participants that they could add any additional information at the end of the grid.

4.3.3.2 Interviews

The ways autistic people and non-autistic people communicate can be very different. Non-autistic people have a greater tendency to use non-verbal forms of communication such as hand gestures, facial expressions etc. to support their communication and express their ideas, thereby reducing the burden on the language used. In contrast, autistic people place a much heavier emphasis on the words and language used and tend not to relate to other forms of non-verbal communication. Such a heavy reliance on words and language can present

challenges for autistic people when trying to process information at a conversational rate (Harrington and Foster, 2013). Considering this, I wanted to make sure participants were able to choose the most suitable format for the interviews based on their own preferences.

Participants were offered the choice of face-to-face interviews at a location of their choosing, online interviews via video-conferencing or text-based interviews via email exchanges. In the event, three participants chose to have face-to-face interviews, with two choosing to have these in their place of work and one choosing to come into university. The fourth participant chose an online interview, and this was conducted via MS Teams. This preference for face-to-face interviews was also noted in MacLeod et al.'s study and could be viewed as surprising, especially when you consider the prevailing discourses that suggest autistic individuals may prefer online communication (MacLeod et al., 2018).

With participants' consent, all interviews were digitally audio-recorded to ensure an accurate record. Recordings were transcribed verbatim by me. Transcripts were anonymised during transcription, with identifying details such as names of individuals, schools, and locations removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Audio recordings were securely stored and deleted once transcription was complete, in line with the approved ethical protocol.

Before starting the interview phase of the research, I produced an interview schedule ([see appendix 5](#)) to ensure that I maintained an ethical approach at all times and to support a consistent approach to data generation. Ahead of each interview I generated a series of questions for each participant based on their responses to the life grid (for an example see [appendix 6](#)).

I was conscious of the challenges participants might face in recalling events and experiences in the moment during the interview (Norris, Crane and Maras, 2020) and so I offered to share these interview questions in advance of the interview. In the event, only one participant chose this option. Upon receipt of the proposed questions, the participant concerned requested that questions pertaining to family life were omitted as they did not feel comfortable discussing this aspect of their lived experiences. One of the participants who declined to receive the questions in advance cited that this would potentially lead them to over-think their responses and,

therefore, make them more anxious. This is contrary to the findings of Norris, Crane and Maras (2020) whose research suggests having questions in advance was helpful in recalling specific memories and reducing anxiety. However, it is possible that completion of the life grids afforded the participants similar opportunities.

For three participants, interviews were conducted across two sessions of approximately 90 minutes each, while the fourth participant took part in a single two-hour interview. This approach was adopted to ensure that each aspect of the participant's lived experience was explored in sufficient depth, while avoiding undue cognitive or emotional burden within a single session. Staging the interviews over two sessions also supported ethical practice by giving participants time to process and reflect between sessions and allowing them greater control over how their narratives were shared. Although I initially considered conducting all first-round interviews before beginning the second round, I instead prioritised flexibility and worked collaboratively with each participant to find suitable dates and times for their interviews, remaining mindful of their busy professional lives.

My aim for the interviews was to allow participants to share their lived experiences as openly as possible, with little intervention from me. Therefore, initially I generated a series of fairly open-ended general questions based on data from the life grids. However, during the first interview, I realised that my questioning needed to be more precise, therefore, for the most part, I reverted to asking prompt questions from the outset, ignoring the broader more open-ended initial questions. For example, in the first interview I asked the question, 'How important have your friendships been to you in your life?' It was clear from the participant's reaction that they were struggling to answer this question so I moved straight to the prompt question which was, 'How was your relationship with your best friend in primary different to your other three friendships?' This aligns with Morris, Crane and Maras' (2020) research findings which highlighted that a lack of guidance and awareness of the level of detail required makes open ended questions more challenging for autistic people.

The subjective experiences and narrative accounts of the participants were essential to this research in creating shared meaning construction and knowledge production. Yet, whilst access to reality can be gained through empirical experiences, in critical realism research, it is essential to not conflate 'real' with the empirical (Olsen, 2009). Therefore, these accounts were only the starting point of the research. Through

analysis I sought to identify the causal mechanisms that created these experiences (Smith and Elger, 2012; Lawani, 2021) and ensure the findings are not just exploratory but also explanatory (Fryer, 2022; Christodoulou, 2023).

4.4 Data analysis

The analysis of data involved three stages that reflect the ontological distinction between the real, actual and empirical domains (Bhaskar, 1975). The process entailed moving from analysis of experiences toward the causal mechanisms that produce them as outlined in Table 2. While the life grids were not subject to formal coding in the same way as the interview transcripts, they nevertheless played an important analytical role. The grids allowed me to identify key events, recurring themes and time-related experiences that I later explored in greater depth during interviews. For example, as shown in [appendix 4](#), this participant's entries indicated an increasing emphasis on independence over time, which informed one of the subsequent interview questions. This temporal marker also contributed to the time-related development pattern represented in their PPCT profile. I also regularly referred back to the life grids during the analysis process to ensure that I had not omitted any important information.

The first stage, thematic analysis, was chosen to enable close engagement with participants' narrative accounts. Drawing on Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) approach to thematic analysis within a critical realism paradigm, I generated both experiential themes, grounded in the data, and inferential themes, developed through abductive reasoning. This stage ensured that the analysis remained closely anchored in participants' lived experiences.

The second stage involved applying Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model to construct individual contextualised profiles of each participant. This was an important stage to preserve the individuality of each participants' lived experiences but also to examine how personal, social and structural factors shape these experiences. This stage also provided a structured lens to consider common themes across all four of the participants' narrative accounts.

The third and final stage involved applying retroductive thinking to develop insights across all four accounts and generate dispositional themes. These themes aim to illuminate the underlying causal mechanisms that give rise to the observed

experiences. This stage is essential in critical realism research as it moves the focus from 'what is happening' to 'what must exist to cause these events,' thereby providing explanatory depth.

Table 2: Stages of data analysis

Stage of Analysis	Ontological Domain	Method	Theme Type	Purpose
Thematic Analysis	Empirical and Actual	Coding of interview transcripts	Experiential and Inferential	Capture lived experiences and infer what shaped those experiences
Application of PPCT Model	Empirical and Actual	Mapping narratives using PPCT model	Experiential and Inferential	Contextualise individual experiences within ecological systems
Cross-Case Analysis	Real	Retroductive thinking	Dispositional	Infer deeper causal mechanisms that generate the experiences

4.4.1 Thematic analysis and identification of experiential and inferential themes

Thematic analysis (TA) is a commonly used approach to data analysis in the qualitative paradigm (Fryer, 2022). It is a method used to identify, analyse and report on themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The meanings created using this method are viewed as truth since, in the context of constructionism, reality is socially constructed and so is deemed to be what individuals perceive it to be (Wiltshire and

Ronkainen, 2021). However, as a critical realist researcher, my aim through this research was to develop an understanding of *why* and *how* the experiences of the participants came to be, rather than merely describing them. I ultimately sought a causal explanation, unearthing the mechanisms that generate participants' experiences; mechanisms which they may be unaware of (Christodoulou, 2023). In light of this, it could be perceived that TA's origins in more qualitative traditions such as the interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, which focus on subjective meanings and experiences, make it an unsuitable approach for data analysis in the critical realism paradigm. However, I believe TA offers a systematic, robust yet flexible approach well suited to critical realism research to foster insights into the causal mechanisms that generate the experiences of the participants, particularly through the process of abduction and retroduction.

4.4.2 Application of Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) thematic analysis approach

To date there is little guidance available to researchers wishing to adopt a thematic analysis approach informed by critical realism (Fryer, 2022). Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) and Tom Fryer (2022) have recently identified this as an issue, with both making contributions to the field. In his work, Fryer suggests that his approach may not be the most suitable for under-researched areas, which autistic teachers are (Fryer, 2022). Therefore, I largely adopted the approach outlined by Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021). Wiltshire and Ronkainen's approach is specific to critical realism research and involves the use of three types of themes as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of application of experiential, inferential and dispositional themes in thematic analysis. Adapted from Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021, p. 165)

Type of theme	Ontological domain	Generating theme
Experiential	Observed experiences and events in the 'empirical domain'	Discrete data driven themes reflecting participants' intentions, hopes, feelings, beliefs etc.

Inferential	Unobserved but occurring experiences and events in the 'actual domain'	Derived from experiential themes through inductive and abductive reasoning to infer what might be occurring
Dispositional	Unobservable causal powers and potential mechanisms in the 'real domain'	Use retroductive thinking to suggest underlying powers or mechanisms that produce the phenomena being studied

Generating these themes involved multiple stages of coding. Initially, I began by applying descriptive codes to interview transcripts to generate the experiential themes, taking one transcript at a time. With each new transcript I checked for a recurrence of the theme as well as identifying new data-driven themes. After checking the final transcript, I reviewed all the generated themes once more to ensure that there were no omissions and to check that the themes were sufficiently supported by the data and the theme appropriately described the experiences and events. The experiential themes were recorded in a code book.

Once I was confident that the identified experiential themes were appropriate I began to identify plausible inferential themes using abductive reasoning to infer what experiences and events might be occurring to produce the experiences identified. Returning to the themes initially generated, I was aware that, in a number of cases, I had already begun to identify inferential themes in the first stage of coding. However, I consider this to be expected due to my immersion in existing research and literature related to autistic teachers. Moreover, it was clear that some participants had already conveyed inferential themes during the interviews, thus serving to reinforce the notion that they are the ones with expert knowledge of autism. For example, one participant stated in the interview that having a sense of belonging in school was important for autistic teachers.

At the end of this first stage of analysis, I had identified 23 inferential themes as outlined in [appendix 7](#). Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) suggest that it is appropriate

to share the experiential themes with participants to provide a level of confidence that these are empirically adequate. However, as I was researching with four participants, I felt sharing data that was not directly related to their experiences might be confusing. Therefore, I decided that it was more appropriate to share the inferential themes with participants to check they were comfortable with, and recognised, the inferences made from their accounts. At this stage of the analytical process, I was also attentive to what was missing from the data, what had not been said or referred to and why this might be the case. This involved revisiting transcripts and journal entries to identify recurring silences or absences across participants' accounts and considering how these might reflect underlying structural or cultural constraints. From a critical realist perspective, such absences may be analytically significant in identifying causal mechanisms that exist (Fryer, 2022).

4.4.3 Application of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological PPCT model to present and analyse individual ecosystems

Not losing sight of the individuality of each participant's experiences was at the forefront of my mind when conducting the data analysis (Watts, 2014). Therefore, to allow for individual-level analysis and to contextualise their experiences, in the next stage of analysis I chose to map each participant's ecosystem using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006):

- **Process** – The nature of interactions and relationships (e.g., how professional support or lack thereof influenced the individual).
- **Person** – Individual attributes, such as identity, self-advocacy, and sensory needs, which mediate how they navigate their environments.
- **Context** – The ecological systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) that structure their professional lives.
- **Time** – Longitudinal changes, including career development, shifting policies, and evolving self-perceptions of autism.

Through applying the model to analyse participants' narratives, this study engaged with the empirical and actual layers of reality, as framed by critical realism. The model illuminated participants' lived experiences by examining their interactions across process, person, context and time, thereby making visible the events and

experiences that have shaped their professional lives. This stage of the analysis ensured that the findings reflected not just what was experienced but how different systems interacted to influence each teacher's lived reality.

As part of my ongoing commitment to ethical research and recognising that autistic individuals are experts in autism (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017), I chose to share each participant's individual ecosystem analysis with them to ensure that their experiences were accurately represented. This approach not only upheld ethical research practices but also strengthened the trustworthiness of findings, forming the basis for the next stage of analysis, identifying the dispositional themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis of participants' ecosystems. In sharing their ecosystem, I asked participants if there was anything they felt was missing or any information they did not want to be included in the findings. In the event, only one person gave me feedback on their ecosystem and this was just a request to change the pseudonym I had chosen for them.

While 23 inferential themes were initially generated through the first stage of analysis, these were refined and revised during the second stage of analysis as each participant's narrative was explored in depth using Bronfenbrenner's model. This iterative approach reflects my commitment to a critical realism approach, allowing for emergent themes to be reevaluated over time (Fryer, 2022; Christodoulou, 2023). These inferential themes served as a bridge between participants' accounts and the dispositional themes developed in the final stage of analysis. These refined inferential themes are presented in [appendix 8](#).

Whilst the PPCT model provides a foundation for identifying dispositional themes, it does not explicitly uncover the real layer, comprising of the deeper structures and causal mechanisms that have shaped these experiences. To uncover these generative mechanisms and structural conditions, the final stage of analysis employed abductive and retroductive reasoning, working backward from the identified themes to infer the underlying forces shaping participants' experiences through the identification of dispositional themes.

4.4.4 Identification of dispositional themes emerging from the cross-case analysis of participants' ecosystems

The final stage of analysis involved using abduction and retroductive reasoning to generate dispositional themes by asking the question 'what best explains these events/experiences?' This stage of coding required deep thought as to the possible structures and causal mechanisms that influenced the realities shared by the participants (Wiltshire and Ronkainen, 2021).

Abductive reasoning is an essential tool to infer social structures from observable events and experiences (Danermark et al., 2002). Unlike deduction, which proves something must be a certain way (testing theories) or induction which seeks empirical regularities to infer generalisations, abduction is, 'to move from a conception of something to a different, possibly more developed or deeper conception of it' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 91). The process of abduction requires an element of creativity and imagination on the part of the researcher to 'see something as something else' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 94). Unlike deductive reasoning, which often excludes data that is not in keeping with the theoretical framework, in abductive reasoning such data is of great significance and may offer plausible explanations and lead to new ideas (Meyer and Lunnay, 2013).

Whilst abduction may offer explanations for the observed phenomena, retroduction is the essential form of reasoning required to identify the underlying mechanisms or structures that must exist to generate the observable phenomena (Danermark et al., 2002) with the acknowledgement that this new knowledge may be fallible (Bhaskar, 1975). In retroductive reasoning the question 'What makes X possible?' must be asked and can be answered by, 'attempting to reconstruct the system of social positions, the norms and rules, or the social and culturally acquired dispositions (habitus) structuring a particular action' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 97).

My retroductive thinking involved re-engagement with existing theories of autism, with a view to recontextualising these in light of findings and potentially generating new meanings, defined as the capacity 'to think about something in a different context, an ability to see something as something else' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 93). However, in doing so I was conscious of the notion that theories are 'fallible and changeable and there will always be a number of competing theories' (Danermark et

al., 2002, p. 117). Ultimately, I sought to provide the most appropriate explanation as to the causal mechanisms that must exist to account for what the data analysis has revealed (Wiltshire and Ronkainen, 2021).

An example of the process undertaken to generate the dispositional themes is shown in Figure 6 and the full list of dispositional themes can be found in [appendix 8](#).

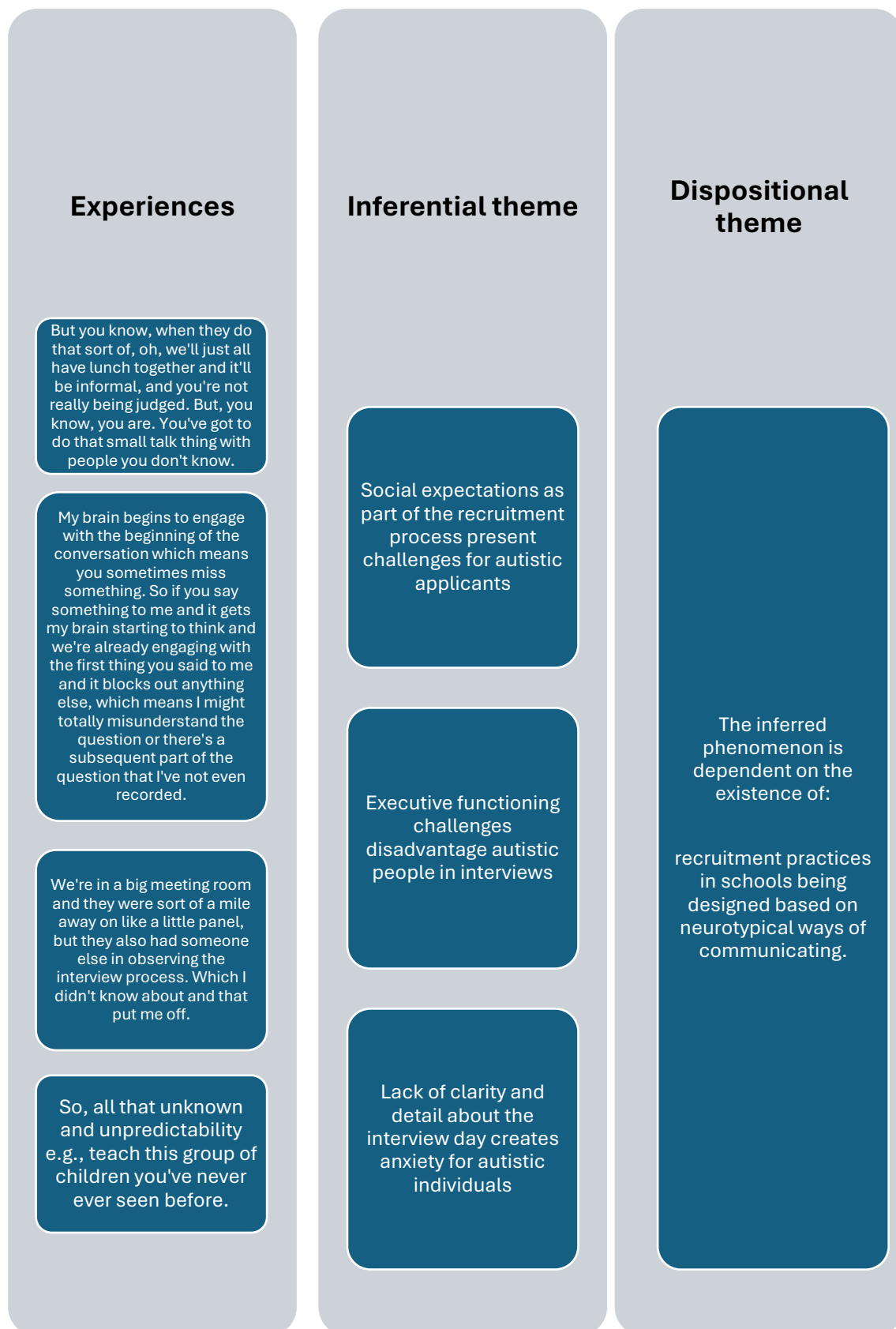


Figure 6: Generation of dispositional theme related to recruitment practices

As a sole researcher I had the advantage of full control over all of the stages of data analysis. Having established my research questions and conducted the interviews myself I was very familiar with the data which was helpful in the coding process. Nevertheless, having multiple researchers involved in the data analysis could have helped ensure the dispositional themes adequately capture the causal mechanisms behind the observed phenomena (Wiltshire and Ronkainen, 2021).

The importance of working ethically throughout the data analysis was always at the forefront of my mind. This research focussed on not only illuminating the lived experiences of the participants but also identifying the causal mechanisms that might exist which serve to create or maintain injustices for autistic teachers (Bhaskar, 2009).

4.5 Ethical considerations

Given that critical realism emphasises the role of power structures in shaping individual experiences, ethical considerations were particularly important in this study. Autistic individuals have historically been excluded from research decision-making (Botha, 2021b), reinforcing the need for participant-led approaches. To address this, I prioritised transparency, autonomy, and reflexivity at every stage of the research process, aligning with critical realism's commitment to uncovering hidden power dynamics (Bhaskar, 2009). This approach reflects the need to conduct research 'in a critically conscious ethical manner, one that will promote respect, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice both for the participant and the researcher' (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012, p. 64).

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Nottingham School of Education Ethics Committee before I recruited participants (see [appendix 9](#)). As part of this process, I documented the information to be shared with participants about the study ([appendix 10](#)), including details about how their data would be managed ([appendix 11](#)). A draft consent form was also submitted for approval ([appendix 12](#)). These materials were designed to ensure transparency, support informed consent, and uphold ethical standards throughout the research.

Whilst this process fulfilled the formal requirements for conducting research, I was conscious that working ethically should not be a one-off incident, a process of competence, but should be considered a process of being (Costley and Gibbs,

2006). As a qualitative researcher this research should 'not only be about something or someone, but for someone, and this renders it morally vulnerable' (Williams, 2010, p. 256). Therefore, ethical considerations needed to be made at every stage of the research process from design through to dissemination, thereby positioning ethics as an ontological issue rather than a methodological one (ibid). Foremost, I was mindful to ensure that the research was trustworthy. Pring (2001) conceptualises trustworthiness as the exercise of judgement that is as impartial as possible, drawing conclusions that are justified by the evidence, and remaining open to critical scrutiny, whether actual or anticipated.

To develop knowledge that is trustworthy I needed to ensure that the key principles, as discussed by Pring (2001), underpinned all my actions and decisions. Firstly, respect for others which entailed maintaining confidentiality, preserving dignity, and valuing any contributions made by the participants. I also needed to maintain respect for the autistic community. As discussed previously, the heterogenic nature of the autistic community could lead to some members of the community feeling alienated by the research findings and this was carefully considered when disseminating findings. Equally, I was mindful that for some participants, recounting their past experiences could be traumatic and, therefore, I ensured that I had details of local support services to hand during the process in case any distress was experienced. Lastly, I ensured my conduct throughout the process was ethical in that I acted justly, kept any promises made and always told the truth.

4.5.1 Informed consent

In line with the BERA guidelines (2018) and the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics (2021), I received informed consent from the research participants (see [appendix 12](#)). From the outset I shared as much information as possible about the purpose of the research, the methods being employed, the potential uses of the research and any risks associated with their involvement. I was conscious that securing consent should not be a one-off event but rather sustained throughout the research by adopting a 'process consent' approach (Silverman, 2017) and this entailed checking with participants at each stage of the research process to ensure they were happy for their contributions to be included. After the interviews, I shared the transcripts with each participant, giving them the opportunity to modify or remove any content they did not wish to be

included. Additionally, as discussed earlier, I shared aspects of the data analysis with participants to ensure that their experiences were accurately represented and interpreted with fidelity.

4.5.2 Confidentiality

Appropriate steps were taken to protect participants' anonymity such as the use of pseudonyms when reporting findings. The audio recordings of the interviews were deleted after transcribing and names or other potentially identifiable details were changed in the transcript. The transcript documents were stored in a password protected O365 site to protect against loss, corruption, and unauthorised access. In addition, a full data management plan was developed as part of the ethical approval process.

4.6 Reflexivity and researcher positionality

In the sections above, I have outlined my philosophical position with regard to my ontological and epistemological views. It is also important to articulate my values because, as a critical realist researcher, I am very aware that these will have influenced every stage of my approach to this research. As Milton (2010, p. 2) notes, 'the notion of value-free knowledge about the social world is an illusion'. From the outset, I have approached this study with the belief that I want this research to be emancipatory for the autistic community through giving a 'voice' to participants and not to objectify them in any way (Botha, 2021a). In addition, I have also remained aware that, as the author of this study, I hold the power to determine, 'whose voice is heard and the authenticity of what is said, recorded, analysed and ultimately written' (Drake, 2010, p. 97).

Throughout the research I was acutely aware that, as a non-autistic person, I am an outsider in relation to becoming and being an autistic teacher. Therefore, I was conscious that I needed to be open to 'reorientating [my] view of reality as well as [my] view of [my] role' (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p. 8). As an outsider, I will never embody the experience of being autistic and, therefore, cannot access the same level of understanding as the autistic participants. I was also very aware of the power imbalance in the relationships, such power stemming from my position as a neurotypical person being in the majority (Rosqvist et al., 2023).

Initially, to address this ethical issue, I had intended to make the research fully participatory, seeking to involve participants in every stage of the research design, ensuring the research was done *with* and not *to* them (Rosqvist et al., 2023). However, such an approach presented significant challenges.

Firstly, the research needed to fulfil the formal assessment requirements of the EdD which resulted in many aspects of the research design needing to reside solely with me. In addition, the research participants have busy professional lives and, therefore, their capacity to be involved as much as they might have liked was restricted. Furthermore, being practising teachers not researchers, I could not expect participants to understand research methodologies. Nevertheless, I continually sought opportunities to allow the participants to have some control over the process, for example in choosing their preferred method for the interviews. I was mindful of the importance of representing participants' experiences authentically, without filtering them through the lens of my own lived experience. To enhance the trustworthiness of the research, I shared interview transcripts and the emergent themes from the data analysis with participants, allowing them the opportunity to review, clarify, or challenge my interpretations.

Whilst avoiding harm is an important consideration, so too is the potential advantages participants might gain from being part of this study. Participation could be a validating and empowering experience, as engaging in narrative inquiry allows individuals to reflect on their professional journeys and feel that their voices are valued (Milton, 2012; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Indeed, one participant, at the end of the interview process, shared with me how they felt that being able to share their story was a cathartic experience.

4.7 Research trustworthiness

It is often argued that qualitative research lacks validity (Maxwell, 1992). While traditional measures of validity, such as randomisation and controls, are not applicable in qualitative research, alternative approaches can be employed to ensure trustworthiness and credibility.

Sharing the research transcripts served as a means of ensuring descriptive authenticity in the findings and of building confidence, both my own and that of readers, that participants' views had not been misrepresented (Wiltshire and

Ronkainen, 2021). In addition to descriptive authenticity, there is the notion of epistemic coherence to be considered. Epistemic coherence is seeking to ensure that the meaning constructed from the research emanates from participants' perspectives and not my own (Maxwell, 1992). To address this important aspect, it was essential that participants were made aware of, and agreed with, the themes I had identified in the findings, whether these themes were consciously conceptualised or pertained to, 'the unconscious intentions, beliefs, concepts and values of these participants' (Maxwell, 1992, p. 288).

In addition to the two approaches to trustworthiness outlined above, there is the concept of explanatory depth which considers whether the explanations generated have a sound logical basis and are plausible and appropriate (Fryer, 2022). For this, I was careful at all stages to ensure that my theoretical constructs adequately served as an explanation of the experiences of the participants and were not merely a description or interpretation of them (Maxwell, 1992).

Finally, it could be argued that having a small number of participants involved in the research could reduce the confidence conveyed in findings (Wiltshire and Ronkainen, 2021). However, to overcome this limitation I was able to draw on similar research conducted with autistic adults in relation to their experiences of employment (Wood and Happé, 2021).

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach I adopted for this study, shaped by the critical realism paradigm and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model. By integrating critical realism reasoning, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model, and thematic analysis, this study moves beyond simply describing autistic teachers' experiences to identify the systemic barriers and structures that shape them.

In addition, I have acknowledged the reflexive processes that have disrupted and shaped my thinking, prompting me to reflect not only what I know but how I know and who I am as a researcher. I have sought to be transparent about the values, assumptions and power dynamics that have influenced this work. In line with Fox and Allan's (2013) conceptualisation of reflexivity, this has been a continuous thread across three key dimensions. Conceptually, reflexivity was enacted through critical engagement with theoretical frameworks and an openness to complexity. Ethically, it

involved remaining attuned to my responsibilities in representing participants' voices with integrity and care. Performatively, it required navigating the institutional expectations of a professional doctorate while striving to remain true to my values as a researcher. This commitment underpins the analysis presented in the following chapter.

The next chapter presents participants' narrative accounts, structured using the methodological approach outlined in this chapter. These narratives foreground autistic teachers' lived experiences within their professional environments and provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent analytical chapters, in which causal mechanisms shaping these experiences are examined.

Chapter 5 : Narratives of Experience

5.1 Introduction

The main focus of this chapter is to present the narratives of each of the participants. While each narrative stands on its own, together they provide the foundation for the cross-case analysis in the following discussion chapter. In this chapter, my emphasis remains on preserving the integrity of each participant's story. These narratives were constructed following stage one of data analysis, in which I identified experiential and inferential themes.

5.2 Stage one: Thematic analysis: Identifying experiential and inferential themes

As outlined in Chapter 4, the first stage of data analysis involved the thematic analysis of interview transcripts informed by Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) critical realism thematic analysis framework. This process generated experiential and inferential themes grounded in participants' accounts of their lived experiences. Initial coding identified a range of experiential themes that reflected participants' descriptions of events, feelings and challenges encountered in both their schooling and professional lives. These experiential themes reflect the experiences existing in the empirical domain. These themes were analysed and a series of inferential themes generated as outlined in [appendix 7](#). These themes reflect unobservable experiences situated within the actual domain.

The themes generated in stage one of analysis informed the second stage of analysis in which each participant's lived experience was reconstructed within Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). This framework provides a lens through which to understand how personal, environmental and time factors interact to shape the experiences of autistic teachers. I have chosen to share each participant's ecosystem separately in the first instance. My reason for taking this approach reflects the important view that autistic people are not a homogenous group (Watts, 2014) and, therefore, whilst there are some commonalities in the experiences shared by participants, it is equally vital to highlight the significant and unique aspects of each individual's lived experience. These distinctive narratives provide valuable insights that deserve recognition and should not be overlooked.

Indeed, I was very aware that the stories shared by the participants were important to them and I was conscious that I needed to position myself as a storyteller in the first instance (Drake, 2010). Following this, key themes are summarised highlighting how personal, social and structural factors shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers.

Finally, in the third stage of analysis, I draw on retroductive thinking to generate dispositional themes that represent the causal mechanisms and structures, operating in the real domain, which have influenced these experiences. These dispositional themes are presented and discussed in Chapter six.

5.3 Stage two: Application of PPCT model to present and analyse individual ecosystems

I will now present the ecosystems of the four participants. Before presenting each ecosystem, I will briefly introduce the four participants whose experiences form the basis of this analysis. Alex, Robyn, Stephen and Nick are all qualified teachers working in a range of different educational settings, each with varying lengths of experience and unique professional journeys. Of note, all four participants were diagnosed after they had completed their compulsory schooling. While their backgrounds and roles differ, together they provide a diverse yet complementary set of perspectives on the lived experiences of autistic teachers. The participants' experiences will be structured using the four components of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model:

- **Process:** The key interactions and learning experiences that have shaped development.
- **Person:** Individual traits, strengths, and challenges that influence their development.
- **Context:** The various systems they experience from immediate environments to broader societal influences.
- **Time:** The impact of life transitions and personal growth over time.

While the PPCT dimensions are presented separately for clarity, in reality they are not discrete; rather, there is dynamic interplay between them that serves to shape development. This relational perspective is essential to understanding how

experiences emerge across individual ecosystems and demonstrates the value of applying the PPCT framework within the study.

5.4 Alex's ecosystem using the PPCT model

Alex is a former primary teacher and now a teacher educator. Alex spent the majority of her time in education undiagnosed, only receiving her diagnosis in her late forties.

5.4.1 Process (interactions and relationships)

Alex's formal education started when she was two and a half years old. In her early years she attended a strict and 'traditional' all girls' private school. Whilst most of the teaching in the school was very traditional, Alex recalls one teacher who used more creative and 'hands-on' teaching approaches which sparked Alex's love for creative activities like arts and crafts and engaging learning experiences.

Alex thrived in structured and traditional learning environments where there were clear expectations, stating, *'as long as I knew exactly what they wanted from me, I just got on with it.'* However, Alex's academic success created pressures and increasing expectations from her family and teachers which Alex began to find overwhelming, *'people are going to have these huge expectations of me now.'* The high expectations to continue to achieve academically led to Alex giving up many of the creative hobbies and interests that she had enjoyed so much in her early years.

In her early years, Alex had few friends and was often manipulated by peers, trying to get her to do things which she knew were wrong, *'when I look back at those sorts of things, I think maybe they knew I was different even though I didn't.'* Moving to secondary school presented challenges for Alex. Whilst friendships in school were not a priority for her (she had a small group of friends both in primary and secondary school), she did seek to integrate herself into the social circles. She recalls copying and aligning herself with one of the more popular and outgoing pupils in the school. However, due to Alex not wishing to sustain this connection outside of school, the relationship broke down which led to incidents of bullying.

Alex's professional relationships have played a significant role in shaping her career and workplace experiences. Early in her teaching career, Alex flourished in environments where she felt supported and understood, such as the small village school where the head teacher recognised her strengths and fostered a comfortable

and collaborative atmosphere. *'We had a fantastic relationship, I got on really, really well with her. Everything was comfortable, everything was easy. She got me.'*

Conversely, when professional relationships became strained, such as with the arrival of a new head teacher who implemented changes without consultation, Alex found the environment untenable, leading her to leave her job.

5.4.2 Person (individual characteristics and agency)

In her years in compulsory education Alex excelled academically, particularly in her ability to read and comprehend text at an advanced level. Alex's love for creative and engaging learning has been central to her career as a primary teacher and later as a teacher educator. She relishes the opportunity to share her enthusiasm for children's literature with colleagues and students.

Alex discussed feeling overwhelmed by the expectation to achieve academically, particularly at secondary school after she had excelled in her GCSEs. This constant drive for perfectionism placed additional stress on her, leading to her giving up many of the hobbies and interests that helped to maintain her well-being.

I mean I suppose, people talk about stimming, don't they with autism. And I think, you know, the gymnastics in a way and all of that was probably part of my way of sort of regulating and feeling more regulated or dealing with, you know, all the sort of overwhelm and everything.

During her A level studies, Alex continued to feel pressure to socialise more and once again found herself spending time with the more 'outgoing' peers. However, trying to maintain this social life whilst also feeling the pressure of family expectations about her academic achievement led to her experiencing frequent bouts of ill health and eventually burnout.

That sort of, you know, if I'm going to fit in, if I'm going to look normal, do what everybody else of my age group is doing, then I need to also sustain this as well. And that was hard.

Before receiving her diagnosis, Alex masked her difficulties in educational settings, often internalising these rather than seeking support, *'I have a real block with sort of asking for help, asking for support. I think I've just got used to just getting on with things and just doing things by myself really.'*

Alex recalls being told she was 'bossy' as a child and this would make her suited to a career in teaching. However, Alex now feels that her behaviours at that time were more related to feeling the need to have some control over her own environment.

I was always told I was bossy and, you know, a leader. But again, I look back and I think actually, no, I think that was me trying to take charge and trying to control things.

This need for control in her life and having experienced burnout during her A levels caused her to decline the university offer she had received. Instead, she had a range of different jobs as she tried to find her place in the world.

I think I was just looking for where I fitted and I was going well, I didn't really fit in that place, and I didn't really fit with those people. So maybe I'll fit better with these people. I think I was just trying different things out really.

Ultimately, Alex did return to education and completed her degree. However, this was very much on her terms.

I just want to do the learning. I wanted to get back into education, but on my terms, I think. And it didn't appeal to me at that time to do that whole sort of student experience. I think I was scared it would end up being too much again with all the other stuff that goes around being a student probably.

Alex's desire to fit in and be normal led to her seeking out opportunities to work abroad, '*I thought, oh, lots of people have had gap years and they've gone abroad, whereas I really wasted mine.*' However, she knew that she needed to maintain some sort of structure in her life and so she applied to be a holiday rep. This was an incredibly challenging experience for Alex, particularly in terms of the socialising aspect of the job. However, Alex was able to draw on her ability to mimic the social behaviours of others to help her cope.

I did grit my teeth absolutely gritted my teeth, and I went and did it, and it was hard. You know, doing a welcome meeting in front of all these people that you've never met. Having said that, though, you are in control, and I was in control.

Alex feels that getting her diagnosis has been positive.

I think it's just for having that self-awareness now. I think knowing the reasons for things, knowing why certain things are more difficult and not kicking myself for it, you know what I mean?

This self-understanding also allows Alex to make sure she plans her time so that she builds in opportunities to rest and recover. She is also now mindful to avoid, wherever possible, situations that will require her to be in spaces that are likely to cause her to experience sensory overload.

Having her diagnosis has also enabled her to make good use of her strengths, such as attention to detail, creative thinking and hyper-focus, and bring these into her professional life. In addition, Alex feels that she is better able to support autistic student teachers as she knows the aspects of teaching which might present them with challenges.

5.4.3 Context (systemic and environmental factors)

Due to family financial constraints, at the age of seven, Alex moved to a state school. Alex thrived in this setting feeling more comfortable and enjoying the more creative and engaging learning environment. Alex appreciated the routine and structure of school life but found unstructured times, like breaks, more challenging. She especially enjoyed gymnastics, often spending her break times practising in the playground. She enjoyed having the space to spread out away from the other pupils and teachers and just do her own thing.

Throughout her time in schools, both as a pupil and as a teacher, Alex has found smaller settings more comfortable. At university her campus was small and self-contained meaning she only needed to be in one building throughout her time there. During her teacher training year, both of her placements were in small primary schools, and she also secured her first teaching position in a similarly small setting. Due to relocating to be closer to her and her partner's families, Alex secured her next teaching post at a much larger primary school. This new setting presented many challenges for Alex with regards to the structure of the school buildings which meant pupils and staff frequently had to pass through her classroom. In addition, the larger number of people meant it was always busy and noisy. Alex left after a year.

During Alex's teacher training, her experiences on placements in small, supportive school environments allowed her to have autonomy and the opportunity to

experiment with teaching approaches. She recalls her mentor giving her the freedom to do things her way, *'he just said basically do whatever you want to do. I planned the lessons how I wanted to plan them. I taught them how I wanted to teach them. So yeah, it was easy, really.'* Alex felt her teacher training programme suited her well, *'Placements were fine... It was nowhere near as pressured as it is now. We had a lot less time in placement, a lot more time at uni, and the days at uni were not as pressured.'*

Alex's first interview experience was through a 'pool' hiring process where head teachers conducted generic interviews with candidates then being ranked based on their perceived strengths. Alex's passion for children's literature and her enthusiasm were significant factors in her being successful. Alex recalled that the process was straightforward and not overly complex and the fact that she did not have to go for lots of separate interviews made the process less stressful.

In contrast, her interview experience for her teacher education position was more challenging. Part of the interview process involved questions about hypothetical scenarios which Alex struggled to answer as she felt there was a lack of specificity and contextual detail, *'I need more information. And you can't just ask me to tell you without telling me all these other things. I did find that hard.'* The process also included a presentation which Alex was happy to do as she had control but this was followed by a series of questions including from people Alex had not already met which she found stressful.

Alex was able to reflect on how the expectations placed on teachers has evolved and increased over time and how these can be particularly challenging for neurodivergent teachers. For example, she enjoyed her time as a leader in school, again feeling that she had control over her professional life but acknowledges that she never felt able to do things as well as she would have liked due to not having enough time.

Whilst Alex acknowledges that teacher training now has a much stronger emphasis on inclusive education for children, she feels that there is still much more to be done to make teacher training courses more inclusive for neurodivergent teachers.

I do think it's really hard for neurodivergent teachers and students actually [...]. But this is policy, this is huge. This is structural, isn't it? [...] So, I don't

know how we make schools or universities really inclusive in that way, particularly when you've got these rigid structures that you've got to work to.

In her role as a teacher educator, Alex also experiences barriers. Referring to her recent experiences at a conference she shared how she faced challenges due to the crowded and busy environment and feeling that she did not have a safe space in which to retreat and recover from the sensory overwhelm.

5.4.4 Time (career transitions and long-term change)

Alex's experiences in different jobs and working environments has helped her to understand what aspects of being an educator will be challenging for her. Her current role as a teacher educator affords her more flexibility and helps her avoid burnout. She sensed that had she tried to stay in the classroom it is highly likely that she would have left the profession, *'I don't think I'd have lasted beyond 13 years. No way.'*

Having received an autism diagnosis has given Alex great insight into the challenges she has faced in the past and allowed her to make professional choices that better suit her needs. Alex feels that this unique insight into autism in the workplace makes her well suited to supporting autistic student teachers.

5.4.5 Summary

Alex's experiences as an autistic teacher highlight the complex interplay between personal traits, workplace relationships, systemic structures, and career progression. While she thrived in small learning environments with clear expectations, leadership changes, sensory overload, and educational policies created significant challenges. Alex's late autism diagnosis allowed her to reframe past struggles and develop stronger self-advocacy skills. Alex's narrative offers valuable insights into research sub-questions one and three, particularly regarding the influence of early schooling and the sensory demands encountered in professional roles.

5.5 Stephen's ecosystem using the PPCT model

Stephen, an experienced secondary science teacher, was diagnosed as autistic at 48. His diagnosis followed a particularly difficult period in his professional life when a workplace incident led to a disciplinary process. This event became a significant turning point in how he understood himself and his interactions at work.

5.5.1 Process (interactions and relationships)

Stephen grew up in a Catholic family as the eldest of four children. Growing up he was closer to his mother than his father, who he suspects may also have been autistic. He doesn't feel particularly close to his siblings and has minimal contact with them as an adult. He reflected, *'I don't feel a loss with that. It's not something that I feel that I've missed.'*

Stephen recalled how he struggled with friendships at school, having only 3 or 4 close friends who he described as *'oddballs'*. He reflected that he probably didn't engage with masking during his school years which might account for the difficulty he had in making friends. Even now Stephen struggles to maintain friendships when the person is no longer close by which does bring him some sadness.

And that's sad because a friend of mine passed away earlier this year. There's a great, great deal of regret there because he was someone I knew from back home and went to university with him. We have been in contact on an annual basis, but never actually spoken to him over the last few years and that saddens me.

In addition, Stephen struggles to understand his friends' perspectives in their relationship.

If people aren't engaging with me.... your mind is not really sure because you think you ought to keep in contact and then you do keep contact and some people don't keep in contact with you and you think well actually, do they want it or not?

Stephen's relationship with his wife has helped him learn more about relationships, *'I've been trained a little bit in relationships because I hadn't got that grounding.'* He feels that he can be his authentic self with her but recognises that his behaviours can sometimes frustrate her.

Stephen reflected on his relationships with colleagues and how, perhaps, he has tried too hard to be liked and part of the team.

In that sense of wanting to be part of something and want to be part of a team that perhaps you didn't have when you were younger [...] it is a very fine line between wanting to draw that line between needing to do the job, but also

wanting to be liked [...] because you haven't had that sense of worth and value and people wanting to be your friend if you like, you in a way almost desire that and that makes you cautious or not upsetting people, whatever I don't know.

5.5.2 Person (individual characteristics and agency)

Stephen's hobbies and interests are very important to him and he uses these as a way to relax and look after his wellbeing. He enjoys engaging with and learning about nature and this was influential in his decision to become a biology teacher. He also has a passion for music and in all his teaching positions he has integrated himself into the music department.

Stephen has a thirst for learning and attained highly at school, particularly in maths and he felt that he was pushed and challenged by his teachers. It is in Stephen's nature to complete any task he is set and to do so to a very high standard.

Because I am too much of a perfectionist and too much wanting to achieve. You spend more time doing school stuff then perhaps you need to, but you feel that if you don't you don't feel you done a good enough job.

This drives him to work long hours,

I'm in here at 7:00. I'll go home at half five. I'll still do a couple of hours at home. That's what I've got almost locked into my entire career, so from early teaching I would work all day, come home to several hours work. Even at those times I might still be working at eleven or 12:00 at night because I had to get it right.

This tendency for perfectionism has an impact on his family life as he has little energy left once he is home and spends much of his holiday recovering. Similarly, Stephen regularly refers to the exhaustion he feels with needing to mask in the workplace.

Your brain is working in two halves. This part is working to be normal to try and make sure you don't say the wrong things [...] the other half is working on you being you, and it's incredibly tiring situation to be in physically and mentally and more so mentally I think.

Receiving his autism diagnosis has been helpful to Stephen in making sense of his previous experiences.

[...] there was an element of reassurance in a way that actually there was something to explain and something we could use in the circumstances we're in to use as an explanation and I think that was quite useful.

However, because this diagnosis came out of a very traumatic experience he struggles to see any positives in being autistic.

I find it very difficult to relate autism with positivity [...] in fact because it almost like it feels like autism actually has caused me problems in relationships. I don't tend to see it as having any positive, no.

Despite this Stephen believes in the importance of diagnosis as a 'safety net' for understanding and accommodation of neurodivergence.

So, if I'd been a child, they would have failed me as an individual and they failed me as a member of staff. And that is why having a diagnosis is so important to me, because I can go to this school and I say look you have to make a reasonable adjustment.

However, Stephen is clear that autism should never be used as an excuse, 'We don't want to use autism as an excuse. We want to use it as let's understand.'

Stephen does not share his diagnosis widely but he makes sure that people who he works most closely with know, 'They know that sometimes if I am short or whatever, it's not personal, it's just sometimes it's the way things come out.' Stephen would love to feel brave enough to share his diagnosis with pupils as he feels that could be incredibly empowering for autistic children. However, he does not share his diagnosis as he is fearful of the repercussions based on stereotypical views of autistic people.

5.5.3 Context (systemic and environmental factors)

Both Stephen's mother and grandfather were teachers and so there is a cultural connection to education within the family. Being able to work in small educational settings with relatively consistent expectations has been important to Stephen's development. In addition, being able to work in catholic schools has been important for his sense of belonging and identity.

Stephen has always enjoyed the school environment and feels that school is a safe place for him and somewhere he can be successful. Reflecting on his experiences he recalled how he felt more comfortable in smaller educational settings and, if he was in a larger setting, he would mostly keep to a small section. His enjoyment of school was a significant factor in him deciding to become a teacher.

It was somewhere that almost drew you back because it was somewhere that you been successful, somewhere that was non-threatening. And the thought of going out there and having to reintroduce yourself to a whole workplace environment you are not familiar with at all. There was a comfort to going back into an environment in which you've been successful in.

During his time as a pupil in school he felt the classroom environment was calm and quiet which suited him well. He contrasts this with his more recent experiences as a teacher in busier and noisier environments, *'sometimes I find classrooms can be quite noisy and trying to follow multiple conversations is very challenging and that wasn't a feature of my education.'*

Whilst it is clear that over his career in teaching Stephen has benefitted from working in small and stable environments this has not been without challenges. For example, he recalled how challenging it was in his first teaching job as he did not have his own room and so had to move around a lot. In addition, he did not have a dedicated space to work and so had to use a corridor in the science department which placed additional stress on him. In addition, Stephen finds change challenging. For example, in his first school a new headteacher brought in a range of changes, e.g. length of school day, length of lessons which he recognised as minor changes but, to him, these felt significant.

Managing behaviour in line with school policies has often presented Stephen with challenges in terms of knowing how to respond.

I do think of occasions where I have totally misread a youngster and you have ended up then making a situation worse, not for intent or anything, but just because you just read the signals all wrong.

However, he does feel that being autistic does allow him to depersonalise challenging situations.

You don't get drawn into the personal side of it and you can be quite objective and certainly thinking about later on in life when I was in more of a pastoral role, that ability to sometimes not read a young person's emotions, but read a person's thought process, you get into their head has been something that is easier for me to do.

Another aspect of teaching that Stephen has always found challenging is working with parents. He can manage parents' evenings as he feels he is more in control, *'I've got the data in front of me. I can talk about what they're doing. I'm in control, and I know what I want to say. I know what I'm talking about.'* However, the unpredictability of phone calls is a challenge, not knowing how the parent might react and what they might say.

Stephen works hard and is very committed to completing his work to a high standard. He reflects that, at times, his employers have taken advantage of this noting that in one case, when he left a post, the school replaced him with two people who went on to share the role.

Over his career in teaching Stephen has had many experiences of interviews. When he started out in teaching the process was different to current processes and did not involve having to teach as part of the recruitment process.

It is tough to be parachuted into a situation where you don't know the students and it is often last minute. So that is particularly daunting that unknown bit, you know, even where are the resources? How do you turn on computer, how does the board work? There's an extra layer of stress because of that uncertainty.

Conversely, Stephen feels he performs much better in situations where he has more control such as when doing a presentation. He recalls how, for one job, he was told that he would not have secured the post had the decision been based on his first interactions, *'because of the difficulty in making that initial contact with somebody you didn't know in an unfamiliar environment, just didn't deliver very well.'* Not only was having a task which he could control important for Stephen but so too was having the interview questions written down.

So, if you say something to me and it gets my brain starting to think and we're already engaging with the first thing you said to me and it blocks out anything

else, which means I might totally misunderstand the question or there's a subsequent part of the question that I've not even recorded.

Stephen's current employing school have worked hard to try to make their setting more inclusive for neurodivergent staff, *'I think they are, like many places, still grappling with, what does it mean to employ somebody who's neurodivergent.'* They have taken on board his advice about how systems and processes might be adapted based on his own experiences.

However, he knows that there are still challenges and unhelpful views that perpetuate. For example, he was faced with the following comment when he shared that he had only recently received a diagnosis, *'given the fact you work in education and you are used to assessing children with special education needs, why didn't you know that that was you?'*

He also recognises that, whilst there are many aspects of autism that bring great affordances to the education system such as hard work, attention to detail, commitment etc., autistic teachers do face more challenges than their neurotypical peers when it comes to the more social elements of being a teacher.

I think the biggest thing is an awareness of us and awareness that sometimes we are different [...] what doesn't faze a neurotypical person can actually be incredibly scary for a neurodivergent, particularly things like the interview process, the appointment process, teaching things like an unknown class. That can be pretty scary, and it can mean that people don't see the person.

Just like with neurotypical people, Stephen is clear that not everyone can be a teacher but it shouldn't be assumed that because you are autistic you can't be a teacher, *'Neurodivergent people can be successful teachers and I would like to think over my time I've been a successful teacher.'*

Stephen feels that there could be power in setting up an opportunity for neurodivergent teachers to have space and time to meet one another.

5.5.4 Time (career transitions and long-term change)

Stephen has always felt the need to be kept challenged in his working life. As many of the schools he has worked in have had relatively low turnover of staff this has

often meant that he has had to move schools to pursue his career ambitions, a process that has brought additional stress.

Stephen's diagnosis came out of a significant professional experience that was linked to him wanting to appear 'normal'. Throughout his professional career, he had frequently been told that he wasn't much of a 'people person'. As he was keen to progress his career and moved into senior leadership roles he found himself copying the behaviours of senior leaders who he felt were more people orientated. This led to him misreading social cues and struggling with masking ultimately culminating in a disciplinary process.

But the problem then is you've got a variety of behaviours in front of you, and you don't necessarily always select the right ones and because it's not your behaviour it can come across quite in artificial and inappropriate at times because you're trying to do something, but you're not. It's not really you, if that makes sense.

5.5.5 Summary

Stephen's experiences as an autistic teacher highlight the complex interplay between personal characteristics and workplace environments. His story is particularly relevant to research sub questions two and four, highlighting how professional development and workplace conditions affect wellbeing and inclusion. Spending most of his career undiagnosed, he had to navigate various educational contexts without the benefit of necessary adjustments or accommodations. This lack of support has significantly impacted his well-being, presenting numerous challenges in both his professional and personal life.

5.6 Robyn's ecosystem using the PPCT model

Robyn is a secondary maths teacher who had been teaching for seven years at the time of the study. Robyn received her autism diagnosis at the age of 24.

5.6.1 Process (interactions and relationships)

Robyn grew up in a large family of seven children. Her father was distant, and she had a difficult relationship with her mother. She was very close to her younger sister and over time she learnt to copy her behaviours to avoid upsetting her parents, 'Over

time, I sort of learnt from my younger sister. What kind of reactions that they wanted and learned to kind of give those reactions.'

Friends have been central to Robyn's life. Despite not being able to talk to them initially as a child (she was selectively mute), her friends were keen to include her in their friendship groups. She had a particularly close relationship with twin girls in primary school and felt she was able to be her authentic self in their company. However, she would revert to masking behaviours and mutism when visiting their home. Despite being popular, she did experience some bullying in school with one girl in particular calling her '*weird*' and mocking her mannerisms. Some of her peers in school would also try to get her to misbehave and swear and would bully her for not doing so.

Robyn's friendship groups were instrumental in her being able to manage the social and practical aspects of university life. Knowing that navigating new social circles would be hard they supported her in meeting peers in online spaces in advance of having to meet them in person. They also supported her with unfamiliar tasks such as paying bills, cooking, navigating public transport etc.

Her peers were very understanding, always including her in discussions without pressuring her to speak, while ensuring she had the space to contribute if she wished. Even now, Robyn struggles with knowing when to make her point as she feels she is interrupting, '*It got to the point where people would kind of leave a space, which is nice, or someone would ask me or notice that I wanted to say something.'*

Robyn's first teaching practice placement was negatively affected by a department culture that she described as '*cold*' and unsupportive. She noted, '*My mentor expected me to be a certain way and didn't have empathy for why I found some things difficult. They kept comparing me to the last trainee who they said did it better,*' which left her feeling isolated and undervalued. This lack of empathy made her question her choice of career and almost led to her leaving her teacher training course. Robyn also reflected on her struggles when expectations were not made clear, '*people weren't straightforward with what they wanted. They would say one thing and then expect another.'*

Robyn's tutor made sure that her next teaching practice placement was in a more supportive environment where she would feel included and expectations were clear.

People were sort of bringing me up there, then straight away telling me how everything happens and they're really happy to see me. And we do this at this time and things like that. So, it was just like welcoming, and people were telling me sort of what was expected of me immediately rather than sort of me not knowing where people eat lunch and if they eat lunch together or things like that.

Robyn felt she was able to integrate herself into the department at her own pace and wasn't expected to socialise with everyone immediately. For example, the department would eat their lunch together which enabled her to get to know people.

I got to know people without having to have sort of have individual conversations with them I can just kind of observe their conversations and slowly start to include myself in them when I got more comfortable and things like that but at the pace that's right.

It is clear that Robyn has benefited from working with people who have taken the time to get to know her, supporting her with aspects of her work that she finds particularly challenging. Her mentor has definitely been a key person who has helped her succeed in the profession.

Sort of how my mind worked. Kind of. So, she knew the things that I would worry about most and how important it was for me to worry about it and things like that. So yeah, she knew me really well.

Throughout the interview process Robyn regularly referred to people (teachers, friends and colleagues) being 'advocates' for her and, therefore, supporting her to successfully navigate neurotypical environments. For example, on the day of our second interview, someone had used her teaching space for a cover lesson which meant we had to conduct the interview in an unfamiliar setting. Robyn shared that as a result, 'my mentor will go upstairs and is sending an e-mail about the situation that's happened this morning. Because they know that it causes me problems.'

Robyn related many incidents which highlight a lack of awareness of the needs of autistic teachers. She recalls being criticised for 'taking things too literally' when she asked for clarity on a process that didn't make sense to her. Similarly, in one

interview she was asked to share her biggest weakness but was not allowed to explain why, which she found frustrating.

I explained anyway because I felt the need because I felt like I had to say why it was a problem, especially because it was about sort of at that point I told them about my autism and I told them about sort of speaking with parents is probably the thing that I struggle with the most, but it doesn't mean I'm bad. It just means that I need to take a bit more time, so parents' evenings are very draining for me and things like that.

Some experiences highlight a prevailing stereotypical view of autism such as being told, 'you never would have known' when sharing her diagnosis.

5.6.2 Person (individual characteristics and agency)

Robyn attained well at school, particularly in maths. She would struggle in subjects like English, despite having a high reading age, due to the interpretive nature of the subject and having to do presentations. However, creative subjects like art and textiles are important to her and are an outlet for expressing thoughts and feelings she struggles to articulate in words. They also provide a valuable outlet for her wellbeing and managing the challenges of being a teacher.

I use it to relax and it's almost meditative as well. So, one of the things I keep sort of an art journal as well because I struggle with putting words down. But drawing is a lot easier. So, I can put whatever I'm feeling or whatever happened and things like that into pictures. But trying to put into words it's a lot harder to.

Robyn's preference for structure and routine in her life make her well suited to teaching as a career and she knows that her autistic traits are valuable in her role as a teacher.

Yes, I'm very good at the next steps of something so very good at putting something into sort of a logical order. So, and I think that helps with a lot of things. I'm very good at de-escalation with students as well. So, because I don't get very angry, and my emotions pretty much can stay very level that helps a lot. So, I tend to be given more difficult classes because I'm very patient with them.

She also feels that having an autistic teacher helps autistic children and their parents to see that being autistic should not put limits on what you can or cannot do, *'specifically when a parent is struggling and is using a student's diagnosis as an excuse. So, almost limiting their own perceptions of what they can do because of their child's diagnosis.'*

5.6.3 Context (systemic and environmental factors)

In general, Robyn's experiences in school were largely positive, particularly her primary school which was small with class sizes of only 10-15 pupils. Mostly, she felt her teachers were supportive, *'I liked the teachers who didn't put me on the spot or insist on eye contact,'* and she enjoyed being able to work in small groups, which contributed to her sense of comfort and safety.

Large and open spaces in schools, such as assembly halls and the canteen, are uncomfortable spaces for her and she avoids these as much as possible. As a child she would spend a lot of her free time in the library which was a quieter and calmer space. In her current school she values having her own teaching space where she spends most of her time.

Robyn was relieved to secure her first teaching post at the school where she completed her second teaching practice placement as the environment suited her well, being relatively small and compact. It also meant that she was familiar with the school community and expectations, *'Which I'm very grateful for because then it meant that I knew the students. I knew the procedures and the policies and things like that.'*

This was in stark contrast to the school environment of her second teaching position which was much larger and more spread out which affected her ability to get to know her colleagues.

But then it's an even bigger department and it just kind of made the issue worse. So that's when I realised that's what the issue was. It was so big, and everything was so isolated. Yeah, and that I really didn't enjoy that I wasn't able to make relationships with anybody.

Robyn's experiences during interviews highlight systemic challenges for autistic teachers. She found the process stressful and confusing due to the lack of clarity and unpredictability during the day. She recalls having only a vague idea about the

tasks and activities to be included in the day and the anxiety this caused her. For example, at the last minute the lesson timings for the lesson she was to teach changed, *'I didn't know whether to finish when it was meant to be 20 minutes or whether I needed to do the full time.'*

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was a particularly challenging period of time. While she adapted to online teaching, the constant changes and lack of predictability during this time were significant challenges. She explained,

No one had a consensus on what people needed to do. It kept changing, and I found it really, really difficult. Teaching live lessons without feedback was very draining.' She explained, *'The lack of structure was the hardest part, as I rely heavily on having a consistent routine.'*

5.6.4 Time (career transitions and long-term change)

Over time, Robyn has become more independent, taking control of her own development. For example, her parents were insistent that she stayed living at home for her undergraduate studies which she did for the first year. However, in her second year she decided to move out which was a turning point for her giving her independence and helping her to thrive socially and academically, *'I decided I was going to do it anyway because, yeah, it was at that point that I started to kind of create more boundaries and stuff.'* Robyn shared, *'I realised I could manage my own time and make decisions for myself, which was a big step forward.'*

With the exception of her younger sister, none of her family thought that Robyn could become a teacher but she was determined to prove that teaching was a suitable career for her, *'all of my family, apart from my young sister, thought it was a ridiculous idea and didn't think it was something that I should do at all.'*

Robyn has pushed herself out of her comfort zone to support her development as a teacher. For example, making the decision to move schools even though she knew it might cause her problems.

I wanted to prove to myself I could, because I had got to the point where I felt so comfortable that I didn't feel like I could go anywhere else, which then put me in a difficult position. If anything went wrong for whatever reason, or I had to move somewhere or something like that.

Robyn has a strong sense of self awareness. She knows what she can do well and she knows what she may find more challenging and this is reflected in her career ambitions which are to become a head of department, *'I enjoy teaching too much. Higher roles mean less structure, and I prefer the predictability of teaching the same lessons every day.'*

5.6.5 Summary

Robyn's ecosystem highlights how she has grown both personally and professionally over time. She has developed coping strategies which reflect her own needs whilst also playing to her strengths. Her years in education demonstrate the importance of a supportive working environment to support such growth. Her lived experiences demonstrate her commitment to teaching and particularly to supporting autistic learners and their families. These experiences speak directly to research sub questions one, three and four, illustrating the impact of schooling, sensory environments and supportive mechanisms on her professional and personal life.

5.7 Nick's ecosystem using the PPCT model

Nick is a secondary science teacher who had been teaching for five years at the time of the study. Nick was not diagnosed as autistic until his first year of undergraduate studies after suffering a head trauma. Therefore, Nick spent his years in compulsory education undiagnosed.

5.7.1 Process (interactions and relationships)

Nick's early childhood was heavily influenced by his mother, a primary school teacher who placed great value on working hard and academic success, *'My mother, she thinks you should always be working so that was just a way to keep yourself busy.'* Nick's mother played an important role in Nick's education, arranging exchanges to France and Germany and helping him with his schoolwork.

Nick's father was not often around when he was growing up as he worked abroad much of the time. However, when he was around, Nick's father pushed him to take part in numerous sports, such as football, rugby, swimming, cricket etc. as well as drama. Nick happily took part in all the activities his father organised, not because he specifically wanted to but more because this is what his father wanted, *'these were things that he wanted me to do rather than things I wanted me to do. I think. Yeah, I wanted to do it because he wanted me to do it.'*

In early childhood, Nick struggled to form friendships. Even now, he identifies only three people he would class as friends. By secondary school, Nick had learned how to mimic social behaviour by observing and copying how the popular children in school acted.

So, at Primary I was terrible at having any friends at all and certainly the start of secondary as well [...]. I'd just watch what all the other people do and just do that. It's like if you're reasonably intelligent you just do it really well. [...]
Responding how you actually think you should respond. Pick the most attractive popular people and whatever they do, do that. Like, I don't think anything else about it other than before it was inconvenient. Now it's convenient, so I'll do it.

This mimicking/masking is something that he has continued to do throughout his life in all his social interactions with the exception of when he is with his best friend. Nick feels that he and his best friend share many similar characteristic traits but his friend does not have an autism diagnosis.

Nick enjoyed being academically challenged at school, enjoying secondary education more than primary school which he claimed was ‘*easy and boring.*’ Often his enjoyment for a subject was influenced by his perception of the academic ability of the teacher and their ability to answer his questions and ‘*push*’ him more. He recalled being frustrated when teachers didn’t appear to be competent, for example, when he reflects on his English teacher, ‘*Yeah, she didn't know what some of the words meant when we read the book. But I knew what the words meant, and she didn't know.*’

He recounted experiences of food technology whereby the appearance of the food mattered more than the taste, which in his view was pointless.

So as long as it looked nice, you could get a good grade even if it was terrible. Like I forgot to put salt and sugar in bread, and it tasted horrible, but it looked really good and so, like I got a really high grade. I was really pleased, and I came home and gave it to my mum. She thought it was horrible and so we threw it away. It's like well, what's the point of this?

Similarly, if Nick wasn’t able to learn because of the teacher’s approach he would teach himself instead, ‘*So I did all of my chemistry GCSE work over the summer like*

between year nine and year ten and just brought in a folder and just didn't do anything.'

As Nick did not have a diagnosis of autism during his time in compulsory education he acknowledged that his teachers probably found him annoying and he can understand why they may have felt that way.

Which is fair enough, because I was quite annoying, but I can appreciate why it's really annoying. Like because I used to make really nice notes and then he was like, I'm going to mark it. So, if you mark it, I'll rip it out. So, he marked it and then I ripped it out because he'd written on it. Yeah. And then he got very annoyed about it. So, I can see why he's got annoyed about it.

Nick's autism diagnosis came during his first year of university when he suffered a severe head trauma after a canoeing accident. This was a traumatic time for Nick and he relied heavily on a friend he had made at university for support. Due to his illness Nick couldn't take part in a 'typical' undergraduate lifestyle of clubbing and drinking as he couldn't tolerate loud noise and bright lights and couldn't drink alcohol and so, with the exception of his friend, he was largely excluded from social activities, *'other people weren't overly keen on making any accommodations on that front'*.

Nick's need for academic challenge and success have presented him with issues in some of his professional relationships during his development as a teacher, particularly during his teacher training year. He struggled in his relationship with his mentor on his first placement feeling that she was ineffective in her role and was unable to give him the advice and support he needed to succeed, in much the same way as he felt about some of his own teachers in school. *'No, we didn't get on at all. I don't mind doing lots and lots of work. I love work. I love being busy, right? But if the conversation is not constructive, I would rather just not have it.'* Just as he had done in school, Nick reverted to largely teaching himself, trying out strategies and seeing what does or doesn't work.

5.7.2 Person (individual characteristics and agency)

Nick is a fiercely independent person. His canoeing accident was clearly a traumatic experience and marked a time when he had to rely heavily on the support of others,

something which he is reluctant to do, *'No I don't need other people. I would hate to need other people. Because it would mean in some way you were insufficient.'*

The interactions between Nick's family expectations and educational experiences have influenced his development as a teacher. His mother placed a high value on hard work and academic success which has instilled a sense of discipline in Nick. He actively sought out experiences that would challenge him. For example, his decision to take on the role of student ambassador at university was partly influenced by his mother's view that you should always keep yourself busy but also his ambitions to be 'successful', *'It's good to have experience of doing something because effectively there's a large proportion of the population goes to university and you have to differentiate yourself from them.'*

Nick's decision to become a teacher was inspired by his mother as he had observed how much she enjoyed her job and his enjoyment of working with young people through his experiences as a scout leader and his work for the National Citizen Service. Nick also felt that teaching would be more intellectually challenging than other jobs he had had which he felt were mundane, boring and easy.

Like my purchasing job at [a previous workplace], got to the point where I just wrote computer programmes that did the work instead and so I could just draw for more time. Obviously so I have just written myself out of a job now.

In contrast he felt teaching would keep him more occupied and interested, *'Well, it's never the same days again. No one ever has perfect lessons. There's always stuff to do, so that's interesting.'*

Throughout his life, even before diagnosis, Nick has been using masking strategies in an attempt to conform to neurotypical expectations in social situations. He has pushed himself to engage in social settings that are often uncomfortable for him in order to help him 'fit-in' to society. *'I'm not a huge fan of meeting and talking to new people in general. I'd rather just not meet and talk to them. But I accept I have to do it. So, I may as well practise.'*

Nick works hard to counter the societal stereotypes which often convey limitations about what autistic people are capable of. This is particularly important to him in his work with autistic children, *'I also think it's good, like when I speak to children, they're*

like I can't do this, I am autistic. Yes, you can. I am and I'm doing it. It's not an excuse.'

Nick's own contributions to supporting inclusion in his own school are impressive. He spoke with great pride about the Lego club he runs for autistic pupils in the school, which, up until recently, he funded himself. He has also been sought out by individual pupils who have a diagnosis of autism and now acts as their mentor.

Nick actively chose not to disclose his autism diagnosis during his teacher training or when making job applications stating that, *'it was not relevant.'* Many of Nick's comments reflect a desire to not have to rely on others and to have control over his own development which also influences his decisions around disclosure, *'I wouldn't want people to make accommodations'*. He feels strongly that being autistic doesn't limit achievement.

5.7.3 Context (systemic and environmental factors)

In his teaching role at the time of the study, Nick felt that his school environment suited him well. The school is quite small and located on one site which feels comfortable for him. The school building is kept well, which he feels shows the pupils take pride in their school.

The physical environment of the school is significant for Nick's personal wellbeing. He values having his own teaching space which is fairly remote in its location. This provides a quieter and less distracting environment which aligns with his sensory needs. When he is not teaching Nick mostly stays in his room and does not need to visit other spaces in school that often. Nick makes a point of avoiding certain areas of the school such as the school canteen which tend to be noisy and bright and if he finds himself in a noisy environment he uses noise cancelling headphones.

Nick struggles with some of the systems that operate in his school viewing them as inefficient and disconnected. This leads to frustration as he believes they impact his ability to work effectively but he feels powerless to make any changes, *'they're slightly pointless and that's not joined up thinking and things don't make sense. I find that really confusing. But I don't know what to do about it.'*

Similarly, Nick finds having to use the school computer restrictive as it does not suit his preferred way of working with technology. He would prefer to be able to use his own computer as he feels this would help him be more productive.

Working through the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for Nick, particularly the loss of routine.

I'd say the best thing about schools for me is their routine. Because other jobs don't have the same routine. I have a timetable for the entire year. It's great. And they stole my timetable.

Nick navigated this period of time by creating himself a new timetable to keep himself busy and maintain a sense of order.

During the first lockdown, the school was not set up for remote teaching which Nick felt could have been easily manageable. Even when remote teaching was initiated during the second lockdown, Nick was frustrated about the processes and rules that were implemented which he felt were ineffective.

Nick knows that many of the systems and policies he works within cause tensions for him but he feels he has no opportunities to promote change.

Nick recognises the importance of diversity in teaching,

[...] I think the same with the same reason you have diversity for anything, difference of opinion and difference of perspective. Well, I think most people teach in different ways and it's good to get experience of being taught by different people in very different ways. Like I watch a lot of other people's lessons and I think I don't teach like that at all. It is good to get experience like that.

5.7.4 Time (career transitions and long-term change)

A common theme running through Nick's lived experiences is his need for intellectual stimulation and his high work ethic. This has shaped his teaching career largely through his self-driven ambition to seek out opportunities for his own professional development. Most recently Nick has taken on the role of head of biology in his school but feels that other opportunities for career development that he actively wants, e.g. mentoring new teachers, are not available to him.

Throughout his time as a teacher Nick has consistently sought out additional tasks and activities particularly drawing on his creative interests. For example, he has set up new systems for the science department, created mural displays for the school,

alongside his work with autistic pupils. These are tasks he has taken on voluntarily but there is no doubt that his employing school has greatly benefitted.

5.7.5 Summary

Nick's experiences presented here highlight the connection between his personal resilience, and commitment to his work and the environmental systems, and societal expectations that have shaped his development as an autistic teacher. His account contributes to research sub questions two and four highlighting the impact of structural influences in teacher training and the conditions that support autistic teachers' professional growth.

5.8 Cross-case analysis using PPCT

The cross-case analysis of participant ecosystems using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model enabled a deeper examination of the inferential themes generated in stage one of data analysis. While the initial thematic analysis identified common experiences across narratives, applying the PPCT model allowed for a more systematic exploration of these experiences across the four domains: Process, Person, Context and Time.

The refined inferential themes can be found in [appendix 8](#) and are briefly summarised below:

Processes – Social interactions have played a significant role in shaping the professional growth of participants. Supportive and understanding colleagues have been instrumental in fostering this development, providing a sense of inclusion and stability. Conversely, a lack of understanding and unclear expectations have created challenges and barriers, impacting their ability to navigate their professional environments effectively.

Person – the participants have many strengths that they bring to their professional roles, e.g. high work ethic, high expectations of themselves, creativity and special interests and self-understanding. These strengths have shaped how they engage in their work as teachers and navigate their working environments.

Context – the make-up of physical spaces is a significant factor influencing participants' development. The school setting, expectations for academic success and workplace culture influence their sense of belonging and ability to thrive.

Time – the participants' stories highlight the fine balance between enjoyment in their professional lives and exhaustion due to burnout. Feeling a sense of control in their personal and professional lives has been important for their development over time.

Collectively, these themes illustrate how autistic teachers navigate their roles, balancing the environmental demands and their personal strengths all of which shape their professional identities.

5.9 Conclusion

The ecosystems of the four research participants highlight the complex interplay of personal experiences, relationships and external environments that have shaped their lived experiences in education and as autistic teachers. The analysis has shown that autistic teachers navigate complex and often challenging educational environments, where systemic structures, social relationships, and personal dispositions interact over time.

Whilst the PPCT framework has provided a valuable structure for understanding the experiences of the participants, it does not in itself explain the underlying mechanisms that create and sustain these experiences. To address this, the next chapter will present the dispositional themes that emerged through retroductive analysis, offering a deeper exploration of the structures and powers that influence autistic teachers' agency in the education system.

This analysis will provide insight into the conditions necessary for fostering inclusive environments that support and empower autistic teachers in their professional contexts. Findings from the literature review will be integrated into the discussion to contextualise these themes within the existing body of research into autistic teachers' experiences in education and employment experiences of autistic adults more broadly.

Chapter 6 : Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of autistic teachers in education, and, in doing so, to uncover the structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms that enable or constrain their individual agency, influence their wellbeing, and shape their sense of belonging. The literature review highlights the challenges autistic adults face when securing and maintaining employment within workplaces designed for neurotypical employees. Furthermore, it highlights the significant gap in research that addresses these challenges specifically within the teaching profession. This study aims to address this gap in knowledge.

Building on the narrative accounts presented in Chapter 5, and through retroductive analysis, I identified ten dispositional themes that capture the possible causal mechanisms that influence participants' experiences and shape their professional lives. As discussed in Chapter four, as a non-autistic researcher studying the lived experiences of autistic teachers, I was mindful of my positionality and the potential influence my neurotypical lens might have on the interpretation of autistic experiences. To mitigate this, I engaged in continual reflexivity throughout the analysis, prioritising participants' voices and meanings over my interpretation.

Figure 7 presents the ten dispositional themes, grouped into four interrelated domains: *Structural and Institutional Mechanisms*; *Interpersonal and Sociocultural Mechanisms*; *Emotional and Psychological Mechanisms*; and *Strengths and Transformative Potentials*. These categories reflect different layers of reality: structural, relational, and personal, that interact to shape the conditions under which autistic teachers engage with the profession. The full set of themes is mapped against the research sub-questions in Table 4 (section 6.3). In this chapter, these dispositional themes are used as the organising framework for the interpretation of findings, rather than being re-presented as a standalone list.

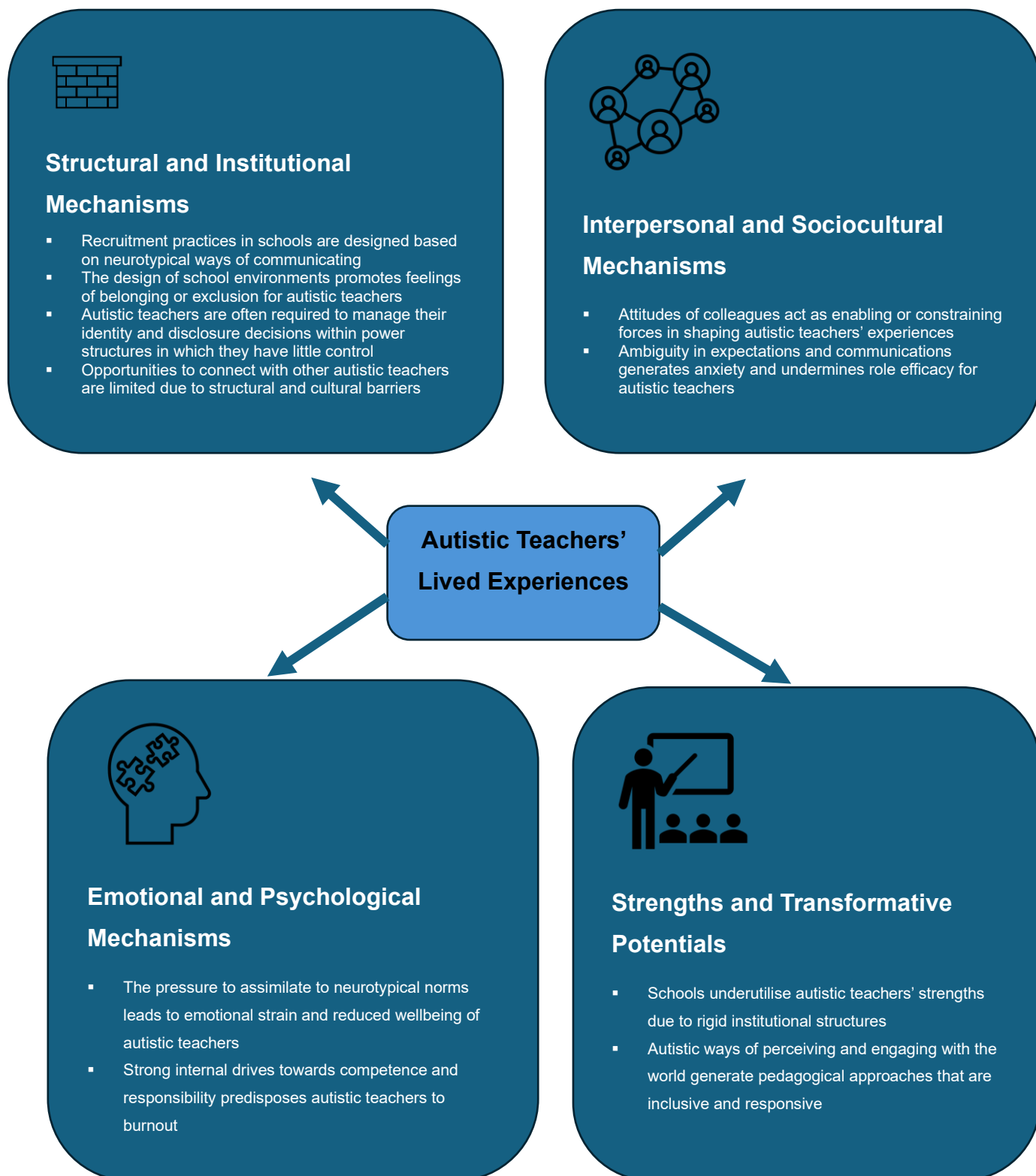


Figure 7: Dispositional themes

In this chapter, I move from presenting findings to interpreting their meaning. The discussion draws on data from the individual narratives alongside additional

illustrative quotations, enabling a deeper exploration of participants' experiences. Drawing on existing literature and theoretical perspectives, it examines how these findings address the research questions and what they reveal about the lived experiences of autistic teachers. This critical engagement not only situates the study within the wider research context but also contributes new insights to the existing knowledge base on autistic teachers.

6.2 Interpretation of findings

6.2.1 Structural and institutional mechanisms

This section addresses the central research question and sub-questions two and three, by examining how institutional structures shape autistic teachers' professional development and access to employment.

6.2.1.1 Recruitment practices in schools are designed based on neurotypical ways of communicating

As highlighted in the literature review, employment rates for autistic adults are significantly low, with recent employment records showing only 29% of autistic people are employed (ONS, 2022). Research suggests that one of the main barriers to gaining employment for autistic adults is the nature of the recruitment processes which unfairly disadvantage autistic candidates (Davies et al., 2023).

The experiences of the participants serve to highlight that many of the current recruitment processes in teaching fail to accommodate neurodivergent ways of thinking and communicating, resulting in systemic barriers to employment. Their accounts align with broader research on autistic job applicants (Davies et al., 2023; Finn et al., 2023; Curnow et al., 2025), particularly regarding the ways in which interview formats and questioning styles can disadvantage autistic candidates (Praslova, 2024).

For many autistic candidates, the nature of interview questions can be particularly difficult to navigate. Traditional recruitment processes often reward candidates who can think quickly, interpret ambiguous questions, and engage in unwritten social norms, all of which may pose challenges for autistic individuals (Praslova, 2024). For example, Stephen described how his cognitive processing style made it difficult to keep up with multi-part questions in interview situations.

My brain begins to engage with the beginning of the conversation which means you sometimes miss something. So, if you say something to me and it gets my brain starting to think and we're already engaging with the first thing you said to me and it blocks out anything else, which means I might totally misunderstand the question or there's a subsequent part of the question that I've not even recorded.

Similarly, the nature of the questions asked can present additional challenges for autistic people as they tend to be more honest and transparent in their responses compared to their neurotypical peers, which can put them at a disadvantage (Sarrett, 2017; Wood and Happé, 2020; Praslova, 2024). For example, in one interview Robyn was asked to tell the panel her biggest weakness without explaining why it was a weakness. Robyn felt uncomfortable in sharing the weakness, which related to engaging with parents, without the inclusion of an explanation as to why this was an issue for her in relation to being autistic.

Another significant challenge for autistic candidates is the lack of clear and structured information about the interview process (Tomczak, Szulc and Szczerska, 2021; Davies et al., 2023). Robyn's experiences highlighted how vague or ambiguous details about the interview day increases anxiety. Furthermore, recruitment processes for teaching jobs now include an expectation that candidates are required to teach a lesson. Information about the class to be taught, individual pupil needs and available resources is often vague and tends to be shared at the last minute, all of which serves to add additional stress for autistic candidates.

Because I've had sort of interviews and jobs in the past, but I know exactly what that process was [...] they'd tell me that it was the interview and then this or this [...] but for teaching, you don't know until the day [...] For some places they say that you've got this period of time where you'll be doing your interviews and there's a period of time where you'll be doing a task and in this period of time where you'll be doing your lesson at some point. But none of the lessons that they said would happen happened at the time that they said that they were happening [...] so, we got there and then they said OK, now it's your lesson. But then they said it was 20 minutes but then it started late because of the class and I found it really stressful because I didn't know

whether to finish when it would have meant to be 20 minutes, or whether I had to do a full 20 minutes. I didn't know what they wanted. (Robyn)

In addition to the stress caused by the lack of clarity and specificity about the interview day itself, participants' experiences also serve to demonstrate the ways in which autistic interview candidates are disadvantaged due to the challenges they face in social communication (Sarrett, 2017). Robyn, who finds large and open spaces uncomfortable, reflected on the stress she experienced when she was interviewed in a large meeting room where the panel sat at a considerable distance from her. The situation was further exacerbated by the unexpected presence of an observer whose role was solely to monitor the interview process, something Robyn had not been informed of in advance, adding to her anxiety.

Many of the experiences shared by the participants highlight how traditional social norms and, potentially individual biases, heavily influence decisions made during teaching recruitment processes (Davies et al., 2023).

The head there I remember him saying to me if it had been on the basis of his first conversation with me I wouldn't have got the job because of the difficulty in making that initial contact with somebody you didn't know in an unfamiliar environment, you just didn't deliver very well. (Stephen)

As discussed earlier, Robyn felt compelled to disclose her autism during the interview process; she recalled being told by the panel that '*we never would have known*'. These experiences suggest that stereotypical perceptions of autism persist, reinforcing the idea that autism must present in a visibly obvious way. Such misconceptions can contribute to bias in school recruitment processes, potentially disadvantaging autistic candidates who do not fit these narrow expectations (Sarrett, 2017).

In many recruitment situations, part of the interview process includes candidates and existing employees having lunch together. Whilst this might not be considered a formal part of the interview process, the interactions that take place will no doubt influence the perceptions made about individual candidates. This practice further demonstrates a lack of awareness that this might present more challenges for autistic people compared to their neurotypical peers (Pearse, 2020).

But you know, when they do that sort of, oh, we'll just all have lunch together and it'll be informal, and you're not really being judged. But, you know, you are. I actually think that would have been the hardest thing for me. You've got to do that small talk thing with people you don't know. (Alex)

While all four participants encountered challenges during the interview stage of the recruitment process, Alex and Stephen, who have been teaching for the longest, described interview practices at the start of their careers that differed from the more recent recruitment processes experienced by Robyn and Nick. For example, neither Alex nor Stephen were expected to teach as part of their interview experience. Undoubtedly, teaching an unknown class in an unfamiliar environment is challenging for all teachers but presents greater challenges for autistic teachers who are more likely to rely on structure and predictability to feel confident in their teaching (Davies et al., 2023). Alex also benefitted from a 'pool' recruitment process and so reduced the number of high stress interviews she had to undertake.

The experiences of the participants illuminate the ways in which traditional teaching recruitment processes, structured around neurotypical norms, systemically disadvantage autistic candidates (Praslova, 2024). From ambiguous interview questions to unpredictable scheduling and social expectations, the current model fails to accommodate different communication styles and cognitive processing needs (Scott et al., 2015). Findings align with existing research on recruitment disadvantages for autistic candidates (Davies et al., 2023; Praslova, 2024) but also highlight how some of the more informal aspects of the recruitment process, for example, lunch with staff, disproportionately disadvantage autistic teachers.

Whilst consideration of barriers related to differences in communication styles and cognitive processing needs is important, due attention must also be given to those arising from sensory sensitivities faced by autistic teachers (Hurlbutt and Chalmers, 2004).

6.2.1.2 The design of school environments promotes feelings of belonging or exclusion for autistic teachers

The physical and sensory environment of a school plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' sense of belonging and security in their professional lives. For autistic teachers, the school layout can foster a sense of inclusion or act as a barrier to

wellbeing and participation (Wood and Happé, 2021). The participants described how certain school environments made it difficult to form connections with colleagues, manage sensory input or have ownership of their space, all of which impacts their sense of belonging.

All four of participants reported positive experiences as pupils in school, with each highlighting the small size of the school being a contributing factor. This preference for smaller education settings aligns with recent research exploring how autistic children navigate learning environments that are predominantly designed for neurotypical pupils (Goodall, 2018; Birkett, McGrath and Tucker, 2022). This finding also connects with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, which suggests that individuals are more likely to feel at ease and successfully adapt to new environments when these environments reflect positive experiences they have encountered in similar contexts (Shelton, 2019).

Although none of the participants were diagnosed as autistic during their time in compulsory education, their experiences of belonging played a formative role in shaping both their sense of self and their academic success. This finding aligns with Horgan, Kenny, and Flynn's (2023) research, which suggests that 'a sense of belonging at school is associated with a range of positive academic, psychological, behavioural and social outcomes, including school completion and educational attainment' (p. 534).

The participants described how smaller schools tend to be less busy and more contained thereby reducing some of the sensory overload often experienced in larger settings (Wood and Happé, 2021). Additionally, as Robyn noted, larger school settings can create challenges for autistic teachers in building relationships with colleagues, as the size of the institution limits opportunities for meaningful social interactions. In Robyn's case, this contributed to her decision to leave her teaching position at her second employing school, reinforcing the bioecological perspective that individuals may choose to exit environments where they struggle to adapt (Shelton, 2019). Of note, had Robyn's first employing school not offered to keep a post available for her, she would have left the profession, '*I just wouldn't have been in teaching. I would have quit*'. This highlights how structural mechanisms, such as overwhelming sensory environments can constrain agency. From a critical realism perspective, Robyn's decision can be understood as an agentic response based on

reflexive deliberation in the face of morphostatic conditions within the education system, structures that resist change (Archer, 2003).

Regardless of the scale of the school, findings reveal how physical layouts present significant sensory challenges for autistic teachers, particularly in high-traffic areas such as canteens, assembly halls and corridors. These spaces often generate sensory overload due to excessive noise, strong smells and overcrowding. This is consistent with previous research highlighting how work environments disadvantage and can be exclusionary for autistic employees due to designs being based around neurotypical preferences (Wood et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2024; Curnow et al., 2025). The participants noted that having their own space to retreat to was essential in helping them to manage the sensory overload experienced in communal spaces. Without access to such spaces the sensory demands of school environments could exacerbate the already high stress levels associated with being a teacher, leading to eventual burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020) and potentially influencing an individual's decision to leave the profession (Shelton, 2019; Wood and Happé, 2021; Wood, 2024).

From a critical realist perspective, these experiences highlight the interplay between underlying structures, such as the norms and expectations embedded in the design of mainstream school environments, and individual agency. The physical, sensory and social aspects of school design, rooted in neurotypical assumptions, can act as structural barriers that not only marginalise autistic learners but also shape the makeup of future teaching workforces. In particular, those who experience exclusion or alienation within school, due to the physical space, are less likely to envision teaching as a viable or desirable career path. Therefore, the realities produced by these educational structures have enduring effects, influencing both who becomes a teacher and how diversity within the profession is constrained. Such issues are likely to be contributing factors to the enduring morphostasis that exists in the education system (Archer, 2003).

Within these structurally constrained environments, the sensory needs of autistic teachers are often not immediately visible (Praslova, 2024). This invisibility means that autistic teachers would be required to disclose their diagnosis in order to seek necessary accommodations. In doing so, however, they are placed in a position

where they must give up a degree of agency and control simply to have their needs met.

6.2.1.3 Autistic teachers are often required to manage their identity and disclosure decisions within power structures in which they have little control

The participants' narratives reveal how their sense of self has evolved over time. They highlight the influence of social interactions on their perceptions of themselves and the complexity of choices they have to make with regard to the 'self' they present (Rice-Adams, 2023). There is evidence that throughout their time in education they have internalised the stigma associated with autism as evidenced by their use of masking, reluctance to disclose and unwillingness to seek support or accommodations.

For Stephen in particular, due to the trauma he experienced which led to his diagnosis, he struggles to associate anything positive about being autistic, *'I find it very difficult to relate autism with positivity in relationships [...] in fact, because it almost like it feels like autism actually has caused me problems in relationships. I don't tend to see it as having any positive, no.'* For Robyn, it was not only the stigma associated with autism that influenced her sense of self but also the gendered view of autism (Moore et al., 2022), *'I'd only ever heard it in boys. I hadn't heard of any girls that had autism, ever, and the only people that I know who did have autism were sort of really struggling'*.

However, for Alex, gaining a diagnosis of autism has been a more empowering experience. She shared how she has now been able to make sense of past experiences and has been able to challenge her experiences of internalised ableism (Cohen et al., 2022; Jóhannsdóttir, Egilson, and Haraldsdóttir, 2022). She is now able to use her understanding of self to help fulfil her professional responsibilities whilst also managing her own wellbeing. However, arguably she is better placed to balance these two requirements more easily than Robyn, Nick and Stephen as she is no longer working in mainstream schools.

I think it's just having that self-awareness now. I think knowing the reasons for things, knowing why certain things are more difficult and not kicking myself for it, you know what I mean? And I think I'm more mindful now when I'm still

planning my diary and things as well about making sure I don't have a lot of very intense things to fall very close together and trying to sort of space things out in a way and those sorts of things have been helpful. (Alex)

Both Nick and Robyn had an autism diagnosis at the time of applying for their first teaching jobs, yet neither chose to disclose this at the application stage. Nick in particular was adamant that he did not want to share his diagnosis when applying for jobs, even though disclosure might have enabled him to access workplace adjustments. He stated, *'I wouldn't want people to make accommodations'*, reflecting a strong desire to avoid being positioned as different within a predominantly neurotypical professional context. This was reinforced by his belief that support had never been made available to him in the past, *'well no one had made any for like the last 20 years. I don't think they would start now'*. Nick's stance highlights not only his strong desire for autonomy and control in his professional life but also a broader mistrust in institutional willingness to provide meaningful support (Santuzzi et al., 2014). His reluctance to disclose suggests a tension between the potential benefits of formal accommodations and the risk of being positioned as lesser than his neurotypical peers (Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022; Praslova, 2024).

As previously discussed, Robyn felt compelled to disclose being autistic during her interview for a teaching post. However, during her teacher training placements she made the decision not to disclose explaining, *'at the time, I didn't think it was relevant'*. Her decision was also influenced by the way teachers spoke about autistic pupils, as she reflected, *'it kind of felt like it would almost make people look at me in a certain way if they knew'*. This highlights the unique challenges autistic teachers face when considering disclosure. Unlike professionals in other fields, their decision is shaped not only by general workplace attitudes toward autism but also by the dominant discourses within education, particularly the ways in which autism is framed through the lens of childhood and deficit-based perspectives. The perception of autism as something primarily associated with pupils, rather than teachers, reinforces stereotypes that may deter autistic individuals from disclosing, for fear of being misunderstood or treated differently by colleagues (Clair, Beatty and Maclean, 2005). This finding challenges the assumption that disclosure is inherently beneficial or empowering. Instead, it shows how dominant deficit-based discourses in

education are causal mechanisms that operate to deter disclosure even in contexts that are committed to inclusion.

In contrast, Stephen's traumatic experiences in his professional life have led him to view disclosure not as a risk but as an essential support mechanism. His use of reflexivity as a causal power (Archer, 2003) enables him to act intentionally when sharing his diagnosis. He deliberately ensures that his department is aware of his diagnosis, recognising that this transparency helps prevent misunderstandings about his communication style (Thorpe et al., 2024). By explaining his tendency to be short or direct in interactions, he mitigates the risk of colleagues misinterpreting his behaviour as rudeness. Additionally, disclosure enables him to advocate for reasonable adjustments, providing a degree of agency in navigating workplace challenges. However, despite recognising the benefits of openness with colleagues, Stephen does not feel able to share his diagnosis with pupils, fearing how they might judge him. This distinction further highlights the complexities of disclosure in the teaching profession. While disclosure can foster understanding among colleagues, ingrained societal perceptions of what a 'good' teacher is may make disclosure to students feel too risky, reinforcing the barriers autistic teachers face in fully integrating their authentic selves into the profession (Baird, 2020).

In addition to navigating disclosure within systems where they have limited power, autistic teachers also face isolation due to a lack of opportunities to connect with peers who share similar experiences. Structural and cultural barriers within the education system further restrict these opportunities, limiting access to potentially valuable support networks.

6.2.1.4 Opportunities to connect with other autistic teachers are limited due to structural and cultural barriers

The participants' narratives are littered with examples of how they keep their autistic identity hidden in their professional lives due to the pathologising of autism as a 'disorder' and the associated negative stereotyping of autistic people (Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022).

However, this distancing from the negative discourses associated with autism comes at a cost to their wellbeing and sense of self in the workplace. They are working incredibly hard to exist in spaces that serve the needs of neurotypical individuals with

little regard given to those who do not fit the 'norm'. Whilst it is evident that they have all benefited from working with colleagues who have tried to help them navigate the structures and social spaces in schools, none of them have had opportunities to foster connections with other autistic teachers. In fact, both Stephen and Robyn referred to this being a missed opportunity. Such opportunities would allow autistic teachers to create a sense of community and provide spaces in which they can foster their autistic identities and, as a collective, challenge the deficit discourses that exist in education (Crompton et al., 2020; Farahar, 2023). Such opportunities for connection may also be impeded due to the rise of Multi Academy Trusts (MATs). The large size and centralisation of many MATs can hinder the formation of close-knit communities (Walker et al., 2023). Furthermore, opportunities to build relationships with colleagues in other schools are often constrained due to limited cross-trust collaboration.

The lack of connection between autistic teachers cannot be separated from the persistent stigmatisation of autism. In environments where autism is still framed through deficit-based narratives, disclosure carries significant risk, pushing many autistic teachers into invisibility (Neely and Hunter, 2015). This enforced invisibility not only isolates individuals but also makes collective organising incredibly difficult. The expectation that autistic teachers should take the initiative to create spaces to connect with other autistic teachers overlooks the systemic barriers they face, including executive functioning differences that may make organising and sustaining networks challenging (Kenworthy et al., 2009). Once again, responsibility is shifted onto autistic individuals to fix problems created by exclusionary structures, further reinforcing their marginalisation within the profession.

It is clear that autistic teachers have to navigate structural and institutional barriers in their professional lives due to systems that have been established based on neurotypical ways of experiencing the working environment. Whilst these structural and institutional mechanisms create the broader context within which autistic teachers work, it is often the interpersonal and sociocultural dynamics within settings that mediate how these structures are experienced on a day-to-day basis.

6.2.2 Interpersonal and sociocultural mechanisms

These findings relate closely to sub-questions two, three and four, exploring how autistic teachers navigate interpersonal dynamics and respond to social expectations in the workplace.

6.2.2.1 Attitudes of colleagues act as enabling or constraining forces in shaping autistic teachers' experiences

Whilst half of the participants entered the teaching profession without an autism diagnosis, the narratives shared reveal how their professional growth has been significantly shaped by key individuals who have provided on-going support in their personal and professional lives. For instance, Robyn's friend, who facilitated an online exchange before she began university to help her form social relationships with her peers, and her university tutor, who actively intervened to secure a more suitable teaching practice placement. Similarly, Alex and Stephen's experiences of working with colleagues who fostered environments of safety and belonging. These colleagues have played a crucial role in helping them navigate workplace environments and cultures that have historically only served the needs of neurotypical employees, often stepping in to advocate on their behalf. These positive relationships have been essential to the wellbeing of participants helping them feel a sense of belonging in the contexts in which they work (Hong et al., 2024). Without access to these supportive relationships, it is questionable as to whether the participants would have been able to stay in the teaching profession.

While these relationships have undoubtedly been significant, they also raise critical questions about where power and control reside in shaping the professional development of autistic teachers (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000). From a critical realist perspective, this points to the dominant influence of broader structural forces over individual agency in shaping their lived experiences. The importance of autonomy and control, both personally and professionally, emerged strongly in participant interviews. For instance, Nick spoke about his desire not to rely on others, while Alex and Robyn described how taking control of decisions in their teenage years had been empowering turning points in their lives.

As Robyn shared, the ability to contribute to discussions relating to policies and practices can be more challenging for autistic people who may be unsure of when or

how to offer their ideas. Furthermore, if organisational cultures privilege rapid verbal contributions or unstructured discussion the valuable insights of autistic teachers may be overlooked (Praslova, 2024). Without intentional structures that support inclusive communication, schools risk missing out on the unique perspectives that autistic teachers can bring to educational discourse.

Contrary to harmful stereotypes that depict autistic individuals as lacking social motivation (Jaswal and Akhtar, 2019), all of the participants highlighted the significance of relationships in both their personal and professional lives. However, the pressure to conform to neurotypical social expectations and norms often adds additional layers of stress to their working experiences (Curnow et al., 2025). Their stories emphasise the mental and physical toll they can experience in social situations. As Alex discussed,

And one to one is never a problem and small groups are not a problem. It's big group, I think. I will avoid big you know big social events because I know that it will take me a long time to recover from and it's just not worth it the price I'll pay for it. It's just, you know, I can get through it at the time, and it'll be fine at the time. It's the aftermath that I know I'll have to deal with.

Participants see socialising as an important part of belonging in their working environment and, despite the challenges they face in social situations, they work hard to connect and communicate with others (Wood, 2024). In contrast, it appears that participants' neurotypical colleagues rarely reciprocate by adjusting their own communication styles or social interactions to better accommodate their needs. This inequity exemplifies Milton's (2012) Double Empathy theory, emphasising the systemic imbalance in workplace interactions and the expectation that autistic individuals must bear the burden of adaptation, regardless of the impact on their wellbeing (Bury et al., 2021).

The experiences shared highlight the significance of personal agency for participants and the importance of fostering social environments that enable greater autonomy and decision-making power for autistic teachers (Archer, 2000). They demonstrate how supportive colleagues can help mitigate some of the challenges associated with navigating school environments. However, even where colleagues are well-

intentioned, a lack of understanding about autism can result in communication challenges (Sasson and Morrison, 2019).

6.2.2.2 Ambiguity in expectations and communications generates anxiety and undermines role efficacy

One of the many strengths of autistic people is that they often have, ‘an eye for detail and clarity’ (Lawrence, 2019, p. 5). Yet, this strength can quickly become a limitation when modes of communication do not take account of autistic individuals’ needs.

Throughout their experiences in education, both as learners and as teachers, participants consistently expressed a strong preference for clear communication and well-defined expectations. As students, they thrived in environments where expectations were explicitly stated and they received clear, structured guidance to support their ongoing development. In contrast, ambiguous language or misaligned advice often led to stress and uncertainty. For example, when recalling his experiences during his teacher training programme, Nick’s mentor’s lack of clear and meaningful guidance added further stress,

and they are going, you just need to think about improving your behaviour management more, all while I am working as much as I possibly can. We just need to work a bit more! So, I was like, right you’re out now. I’ll not listen to you. Their advice just wasn’t helpful.

Nick demonstrated great tenacity in independently seeking out resources and materials to enhance his professional development and his ability to navigate these challenges highlights the importance of his individual agency in supporting professional growth (Archer, 2000). However, others may have lacked the same capacity for independent learning, leading to more constrained professional development and potential difficulties in meeting required standards.

As identified in previous research, participants’ narratives highlight a deep commitment and loyalty to the teaching profession and a desire to complete their work to a high standard (Wood and Happé, 2021; O’Neill and Kenny, 2023; Curnow et al., 2025). However, when modes of communication fail to consider their needs as autistic teachers, they create significant challenges, which potentially diminishes professional satisfaction and overall well-being. For example, Robyn relayed how

poor communication in her second school was one of the factors that made her decide to leave.

So they'd say they were implementing this thing, but then what they were actually looking for was something different or it wasn't quite what they meant [...] I got told a few times that I took things too literally.

As discussed previously, had Robyn not been given the opportunity to return to her original school, the persistent lack of consideration for the communication needs of autistic individuals would likely have driven her out of the teaching profession.

Nick's narrative also highlights the importance of colleagues understanding that autistic teachers may be direct and literal in their own communications (Milton, 2012). Reflecting on his interview experience, Nick recalled how he responded to the first question he was asked:

Well, he said. 'How are you?' I said, 'I had bran flakes for breakfast and it is sitting a bit heavy in my stomach' and that that was how I was. I think he was just like, 'well, it's a bit of a strange response'. But that's how I was at the time. So, it was a perfectly reasonable response to me. To him, it's a completely mental response because normally people go, 'yes, I'm fine'.

Without an awareness of the autistic tendency towards literal interpretation and directness, there is a danger that such approaches to communication might be perceived as rudeness or incompetence, potentially leading to limited opportunities for autistic individuals (Wood et al., 2022; Curnow et al., 2025).

The structured nature of the school day, with its predictable routines and defined timetables, generally aligns well with the working preferences of participants. However, as Nick noted, whilst routine is important, teaching is never "boring," as the variability inherent in the profession ensures that no two days are the same. Nevertheless, it is clear from the experiences shared by participants that changes to routines are particularly stressful for autistic teachers. The last-minute room change that Robyn had to manage during one of my visits to the school was clearly problematic and stressful for her. Similarly, Nick's reflections of the broader disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were challenging for him to navigate. These findings exemplify the complexity and added stress autistic teachers may face

working in professional environments, where routine provides stability but unpredictability remains an integral feature (Wood et al. 2022).

For Stephen and Robyn, the challenges of unpredictability in their professional lives also extended to interactions with parents (Wood, Crane and Happé, 2024). While they were able to exert some control over structured events such as parents' evenings, less predictable situations, such as impromptu phone calls with parents, posed greater challenges as Stephen relayed.

But it is still the thing that I've never got comfortable with is ringing up parents. I still don't like doing that at all. I've never, never become comfortable with that. I mean, some people pick the phone up and just do it. I still find that a really hard part of the job.

These accounts reveal a deeper causal mechanism: communication practices within schools often presume a neurotypical norm, disregarding the additional effort required by autistic teachers to manage ambiguity and unpredictability. In doing so, autistic teachers face additional pressures which have the potential to exacerbate anxiety and undermine their confidence in their roles within an already demanding profession. Moreover, unclear expectations or inconsistent communication can unintentionally diminish their perceived credibility among parents and colleagues, further marginalising them within the school community (Baird, 2020).

The cumulative effect of navigating complex interpersonal environments, often without any reciprocal adaptation by neurotypical colleagues, can give rise to significant emotional and psychological strain, as explored in the next section.

6.2.3 Emotional and psychological mechanisms

This domain reflects sub-questions one, three and four, highlighting the emotional toll of navigating professional roles and the conditions that support or hinder wellbeing.

6.2.3.1 The pressure to assimilate to neurotypical norms leads to emotional strain and reduced wellbeing

From an early age, participants had invested considerable effort in observing and mimicking the behaviours of their neurotypical peers. In doing so, they learned to mask their autistic traits in order to navigate the social expectations of school and

avoid being seen as ‘different’ (Horgan, Kenny and Flynn, 2023; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023).

And I don't think you realise all the time how much your behaviour is masking and you don't realise how much of that is actually a strategy you do to feel normal or to feel part of something. Also how incredibly tiring it is to do that and that's something that, I think is a major factor. That the amount of energy they're putting in trying to be normal. (Stephen)

This drive to appear ‘normal’ continued into their professional lives, where they felt pressure to maintain credibility as teachers by conforming to neurotypical norms. For many, the expectation to ‘fit in’ remained a significant challenge, reinforcing the need to suppress their authentic selves in order to be perceived as competent and accepted within the profession (Baird, 2020). Furthermore, as exemplified in Stephen’s narrative, inaccurately or inappropriately mimicking the behaviours of others in order to mask autistic traits can have significant and serious professional consequences. Thus, a fear of ‘getting it wrong’ can further exacerbate the stress that autistic people face in their professional lives (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023).

These findings reflect the operation of social mechanisms within the real domain, operating below the level of observable events, which shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers through the reproduction of dominant structures (Bhaskar, 1975). Education systems have long been shaped by historical, cultural, and political constructions of what it means to be a ‘good’ teacher, constructions that inherently privilege neurotypical ways of being. Teaching is governed by a deeply embedded ‘natural’ order, or doxa, that dictates what a ‘good’ teacher should be, largely influenced by discourses of performativity (Baird, 2020). Bourdieu (2000, cited in Deer, 2014) describes doxa as ‘a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma’ (p. 16). Within this framework, autistic teachers often feel compelled to mask or camouflage their autistic traits to align with these expectations, concealing their authentic selves in order to navigate a system that was not designed with their needs in mind (Baird, 2020).

The considerable energy and effort participants devote to masking in their professional lives, combined with the intense demands of teaching (Creagh et al.,

2025), place additional strain on their wellbeing. As a result, many found themselves emotionally and physically exhausted, leaving them with little capacity to engage fully in their personal lives.

I think my masking is probably far more energy consuming than perhaps it is for somebody else, and I think that's the thing I am conscious of and I've become more conscious of it. It's the energy I put into masking; I never appreciated how much energy goes in to trying to be normal. (Stephen)

All four of participants shared how their creative interests such as art or music are important to them in helping them to relax and unwind. Robyn shared how doing art is important for her wellbeing and provides a way for her to communicate non-verbally.

I use it to relax and it's almost meditative as well. So, one of the things I keep is sort of an art journal because I struggle with putting words down. But drawing is a lot easier. So, I can put whatever I'm feeling or whatever happened and things like that into pictures. But trying to put it into words it's a lot harder.

However, the demands of maintaining a professional front often undermined participants' ability to devote time to their hobbies and interests. These accounts suggest that the expectations embedded within educational environments are not only exhausting for autistic teachers but also erode the opportunities for them to focus on their wellbeing outside of work (Raymaker et al., 2020).

This constant self-monitoring and adaptation is not only effortful but can significantly undermine personal agency and reduce an individual's sense of power and control in their professional lives. This lack of power acts as an additional exclusionary force, reinforcing a sense of 'othering' (Anderson, 2006). Indeed, all participants emphasised the importance of having a sense of control in their professional lives, which aligns with Archer's (2003) assertion that reflexivity is a causal power.

However, in line with critical realist thinking, participants' ability to exert control was often constrained by other mechanisms operating in the real domain, such as cultural norms operating in their contexts (Bhaskar, 1975). Although not explicitly articulated by participants, a critical realist reading suggests that a lack of agency and professional disempowerment may lead individuals to impose limitations on their

career progression. More concerningly, it may ultimately result in their decision to leave the teaching profession altogether (Wood and Happé, 2021; Wood, 2024).

6.2.3.2 Strong internal drive toward competence and responsibility predisposes autistic teachers to burnout

It is evident that participants all make significant contributions to the institutions in which they work and their narratives are filled with expressions of their dedication and strong work ethic. Their commitment to their roles is often driven by a deep sense of responsibility and a desire to achieve high standards.

Because I am too much of a perfectionist and too much wanting to achieve. You spend more time doing school stuff than perhaps you need to, but you feel that if you don't you don't feel you have done a good enough job.

I've got to get it right but also that sometimes that sense of not being able to let go of some things and having to see things through.

I love work. I love being busy, I can't not be busy.

However, while this strong drive for high standards benefits the institutions in which they work, it also carries significant implications for their well-being and personal lives. Their high attention to detail often results in them spending more time on work tasks than their neurotypical colleagues, largely driven by a need to ensure things are done correctly (National Autistic Society, 2019b). This, coupled with the energy required to mask their autistic traits in professional settings, can lead to chronic exhaustion (Raymaker et al., 2020), as both Alex and Stephen described:

I think again work, it was just work and then recharging, I would say most of the time it was just, work and trying to recharge at weekends really. (Alex)

It is evident from participants' stories that this drive to complete their work to a high standard impacts all aspects of their lives as often in their free time they have little energy to devote to anything else. Alex, spoke about how as a learner, her ambition to do well academically, led her to give up her hobbies such as gymnastics, despite recognising its importance for her wellbeing.

And I think, you know, the gymnastics in a way and all of that was probably part of my way of sort of regulating and feeling more regulated or dealing with, you know, all the sort of overwhelm and everything.

Similarly, Stephen highlighted how his high work ethic has affected his family life, limiting the time and energy he can devote to loved ones.

Yeah, and sleep and not do an awful lot. And then that's dangerous because there's things there's the job list to do [...] so a bit of time we get together is probably some of the Saturday evenings or Saturdays to do things and we'll try and make more effort now but come most evenings and Sunday the contact isn't there because I'm just working. Because I am too much of a perfectionist and too much wanting to achieve. You spend more time doing school stuff than perhaps you need to, but you feel that if you don't you don't feel you done a good enough job.

I always have been, you know, come in the evening and have something to eat and I'm doing maybe 2–3-hour schoolwork in in the evening and that's just the way I've always been. You know, if I don't work in the evening, I feel guilty. I feel I'm not doing my job and there's always something I feel I should be doing and that I think is very much a consequence of the condition. But it's just what I have grown up through in my teaching career and that has had implications when I had a younger family.

For Nick, whilst high standards of work are important, equally significant is being perceived as a full and active member of the teaching team, including socialising with colleagues, even when this comes at the expense of his health (Hedley et al., 2017). The week before my interview Nick had been on a stag do with other members of the science department which had clearly taken its toll on him, ‘*I've not been very well all week, but I just take lots of medication. I could have not gone to school as I am not very well, but I wouldn't.*’

These accounts highlight the critical need for greater awareness of the risks of overwork and burnout among autistic teachers. This is particularly important given the stressful nature of teaching (Redin and Erro-Garcés, 2020). Furthermore, the structural context in which teachers work can compound these risks. Evidence suggests that teachers employed within large Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) often face higher workloads, increased managerial demands, and poorer work-life balance (NEU, 2025). For autistic teachers who may already be navigating heightened

sensory and cognitive demands, such environments may intensify the stress they experience.

The participants' commitment to excellence and full involvement in school life can be seen as a real strength which they bring to the profession and is a significant aspect of their professional persona. However, these experiences also highlight structural factors, such as workplace expectations and the lack of emphasis on employee well-being, that, when combined with the cognitive and emotional demands of masking, can negatively affect both their professional and personal lives. Without recognition and support, the pressure to meet high standards at the expense of personal well-being can lead to long-term negative consequences for autistic teachers.

Despite the emotional toll experienced due to adapting to neurotypical norms, participants remain deeply committed to their profession, demonstrating resilience and unique strengths. The final section highlights the transformative potential that autistic teachers bring to the teaching profession and the factors that enable or constrain these.

6.2.4 Strengths and transformative potentials

The final domain speaks to sub-questions one and four, identifying mechanisms that support inclusion and recognising the unique contributions autistic teachers bring to education.

6.2.4.1 Schools underutilise autistic teachers' strengths due to rigid institutional structures

The participants' narratives reveal a fundamental tension between their desire for professional growth and the need for stability (Bury et al., 2020). Throughout their experiences in education as learners they all thrived when challenged intellectually, and this desire to expand their expertise and deepen their knowledge has remained central to their professional identities.

For example, Alex was able to bring her passion for children's literature and her creative thinking to the fore when she took on a leadership role in one of her employing schools.

I know there were lots of things I sort of did that were new and you know, I know wouldn't have happened if I hadn't had been the one doing them sort of

thing, you know. Getting authors in and you know having theme days and doing sort of exciting stuff. Yeah, which I really enjoyed doing.

Clearly, the creative and innovative approaches that autistic teachers bring to their classrooms and wider schools could be stifled in school or trust contexts which promote standardised practices and rigid structures (NEU, 2025). This lack of autonomy may not only diminish autistic teachers' unique contributions but also increase the risk of them leaving the profession.

While career advancement and leadership roles provide opportunities for autistic teachers to engage with their areas of interest, they also introduce additional complexities that their neurotypical peers may navigate with greater ease (Davies et al., 2024). The demands of leadership, including increased unpredictability and social expectations, mean that career progression often comes at a higher personal cost for autistic teachers.

Alex's experience of taking on leadership roles in her school, with the strong connection to her area of expertise in children's literature, was a time when she flourished in her job, *'being able to share a special interest, a passion with others, it was a really nice thing to do'*. This finding echoes existing research that highlights how autistic individuals often excel in their work when it is associated with their intrinsic interests, providing both motivation and a sense of purpose (Goldfarb, Gal and Golan, 2019). However, for others career progression presents challenges. Robyn, for example, is acutely aware of the compromise between ambition and the need for structure, stating, *'I know that the higher up I go, the less structure I will have, and I do not want that.'* This highlights how leadership roles often introduce greater uncertainty and shifting responsibilities, which can be particularly challenging for autistic professionals (Santuzzi et al., 2014).

Similarly, Stephen's career ambitions led him to leave a school where he felt comfortable due to the lack of progression opportunities: *'If I had a choice, I wouldn't have left.'* Like Alex, Stephen found fulfilment in leadership when it allowed him to make use of his expertise, first in curriculum development for the science department and later as an assistant head responsible for whole-school data analysis, which he approached in a highly *'pragmatic'* way. However, as data analysis in schools became more computerised, this part of his leadership role declined whilst the need

for greater responsibility for staff management increased, an area which did not play to his strengths and ultimately led to him experiencing significant trauma. As Stephen shared, *'it's the skills we are not good at that can sometimes take more importance [...] we are becoming much more people orientated and that is a bigger challenge'*.

These experiences reflect broader systemic issues within how career progression is structured in the teaching profession. Opportunities for career progression are often limited towards leadership roles, which may not necessarily accommodate the needs of autistic teachers (Santuzzi et al., 2014). The assumption that career progression must involve increased managerial or social demands acts as a structural mechanism that risks marginalising those who may have strengths in other areas such as curriculum development (Davies et al., 2024). Without alternative pathways for career development that value expertise beyond relational aspects of teaching, autistic teachers may face difficult choices between professional stagnation and unsustainable work expectations. In addition, within these constrained progression structures, it is important to recognise the dangers of adopting stereotypical views of autism, for example a hyper-focus on areas of interest, even if these reference positive traits. Instead, employers should focus on individuals and their specific strengths and support needs (Bury et al., 2019). Increasing neurodiversity in leadership in schools would also likely improve the experiences of neurodivergent staff and pupils. As leaders, autistic professionals can draw on their lived experiences in education to influence policy and introduce initiatives that are more equitable for all marginalised groups (Praslova, 2024).

Taken together, these findings offer an alternative conceptualisation of career progression in teaching that moves beyond traditional equations of leadership with people management. For autistic teachers, leadership may be more sustainable and fulfilling when it centres on areas such as curriculum expertise or areas of special interest.

6.2.4.2 Autistic ways of perceiving and engaging with the world generate pedagogical approaches that are inclusive and responsive

The stories shared by participants demonstrate the unique contributions they make to schools, often without any formal recognition. As experts with lived experience, they are a valuable yet underutilised resource for schools, being particularly well

positioned to challenge the stereotypical portrayals of autistic people (Curnow et al., 2025)

Nick, Robyn and Alex devote time in their working lives to support other autistic people. Alex spoke about how she supports autistic beginning teachers in ways that a neurotypical person might not be able to.

You know, we've talked about the sensory input of just being on the playground in a primary school, you know, and how you manage that and things like that, which other tutors might not even think about.

This highlights the unique insights autistic teachers bring to fostering inclusive practices. This was further reinforced by Nick's comment, *'I think the same reason you have diversity for anything, difference of opinion and difference of perspective.'*

Robyn spoke about how she creates calm learning environments that are particularly well suited to neurodivergent learners. She attributes this ability to remain composed in challenging situations, *'So, because I don't get very angry, and my emotions pretty much can stay very level that helps a lot'*. In recognition of this, her school often will give her the more 'challenging' teaching groups acknowledging her effectiveness in being able to manage behavioural dynamics.

Beyond their formal teaching responsibilities, both Nick and Robyn actively contribute to the wider school community by running extracurricular clubs tailored for autistic pupils. Nick has been independently funding a Lego club for several years, while Robyn collaborates with a colleague to run a weekly lunchtime board game club. These spaces provide vital opportunities for neurodivergent learners to experience a greater sense of belonging within the school environment. It is, however, questionable whether such opportunities would have been available without the presence and initiative of autistic teachers like Nick and Robyn (Lawrence, 2019; Wood and Happé, 2021).

Nick's contributions to the wider school community extend beyond supporting autistic learners. Independently he identified flaws with some of the systems used within the science department, for example, the laboratory requisition process. Using his technological skills, he took it upon himself to create a new system that was adopted across the science team, significantly easing the workload of the laboratory technicians. In addition, he created a suite of online revision resources to support

student learning. Beyond the science department, Nick's contributions extended to the wider school environment, as he took it upon himself to design and produce artwork for various walls within the school. Reflecting on this, he explained, *'I do a reasonable amount of artwork for the school. I just see things and think, that would be a good idea. I just went in and thought, this looks like it could do with a poster.'*

Nick's proactive engagement with school systems and structures illustrated how individual agency of autistic teachers can improve many aspects of the school environment. However, it also raises important questions about the extent to which such contributions are recognised and supported within existing structures. The participants undertook these initiatives independently, without being asked or prompted by others. Had they not felt able to do so, the school community would likely have missed out on valuable improvements.

In line with other research findings participants shared how their lived experiences in education enabled them to have a deep empathy and understanding of the challenges faced by autistic students (Lawrence, 2019; Wood and Happé, 2021). Robyn and Alex both shared how the learning environments they create in their classrooms to help them manage their own sensory sensitivities, also benefit neurodivergent learners. Robyn was able to draw on her own experiences of being selectively mute to support teachers facing similar challenges in their teaching.

I've had lots of people even when I wasn't working here, sort of getting in touch and saying I have this student who's selectively mute. Do you have any strategies that I could use because I can't really find anything because most things are for parents or sort of other autistic people that can speak.

More significantly, both Stephen and Nick discussed how being an autistic teacher challenges some of the deficit-based narratives about autism (Lawrence, 2019). Through their interactions with autistic pupils, they reinforce that an individual should not allow themselves to be limited by such narratives that prevail in the field of education, *'As an example, when they say it to you in terms of I can't do this because I am autistic. So am I. It's useful that you learn to do this, because I've learned to do it and it is useful for me.'* (Nick).

Whilst these findings demonstrate the many ways that autistic teachers can contribute to schools beyond their formal teaching roles, it is also essential that there

is recognition of the heterogeneity of autistic people. Therefore, schools should not assume that every autistic teacher would want to, or be able to, contribute in similar ways (Bury et al., 2020). Nevertheless, what is clear from the experiences shared by participants is that educational outcomes for neurodivergent children and young people, and the wider school environment and community, can be significantly enhanced if schools are able to draw on the strengths autistic teachers bring to the workplace. Conversely, if educational structures and systems fail to acknowledge and support autistic teachers' unique strengths and the perspectives they bring to their work, then the potential for improving autistic students' experiences remains constrained.

6.3 Conclusion

The above sections have explored the findings of this study and critically engaged with these in relation to existing literature and research. It is also important to demonstrate how the analysis responds to the study's research questions. Table 4 maps the ten dispositional themes, identified through retroductive thinking, against the four research sub questions.

Table 4: Summary of dispositional themes mapped against the research sub-questions

Research sub-question	Dispositional themes	Summary
1. How do autistic teachers' personal histories, including their own schooling, shape their values, motivations, and professional identities?	- Strong internal drives toward competence and responsibility predispose autistic teachers to burnout - The pressure to assimilate to neurotypical norms leads to emotional strain and reduced wellbeing - Autistic ways of perceiving and engaging with the	Early family and school experiences show how features such as perfectionist tendencies, masking and resilience developed over time and contributed to teacher identities. Past feelings of exclusion also shape pedagogical approaches to inclusion. The importance of having control of professional

	world generate pedagogical approaches that are inclusive and responsive	growth developed over time.
2. How do key stages in autistic teachers' professional development, such as training and early career, reflect broader structural and cultural influences?	▪ Recruitment practices in schools are designed based on neurotypical ways of communicating ▪ Ambiguity in expectations and communications generates anxiety and undermines role efficacy ▪ Attitudes of colleagues act as enabling or constraining forces in shaping autistic teachers' experiences ▪ Autistic teachers are often required to manage their identity and disclosure decisions within power structures in which they have little control	Experiences of teacher training, placements, job interviews and institutional practices exposed systemic barriers to inclusion. Structural and cultural mechanisms limit the capacity for control in professional lives.
3. How do autistic teachers navigate and respond to the social, sensory, and organisational demands	▪ The design of school environments promotes feelings of belonging or exclusion	Participants developed strategies (such as masking, withdrawal, use of safe spaces) to help them cope with the

of their professional roles?	▪ The pressure to assimilate to neurotypical norms leads to emotional strain and reduced wellbeing ▪ Opportunities to connect with other autistic teachers are limited due to structural and cultural barriers	sensory overload and social pressures of school environments that are not designed with their needs in mind. Working within such environments can have a negative impact on health and wellbeing.
4. What conditions and mechanisms enable or constrain the professional growth, inclusion, and wellbeing of autistic teachers?	▪ Attitudes of colleagues act as enabling or constraining forces ▪ Schools underutilise autistic teachers' strengths due to rigid institutional structures ▪ Autistic ways of perceiving and engaging with the world generate inclusive pedagogy ▪ Opportunities to connect with other autistic teachers are limited	Having agency in their professional lives enables autistic teachers to apply their strengths to their work. Supportive colleagues are essential enablers of this agency. Professional identities are constrained by rigid systems and normative expectations. A lack of networking opportunities can further constrain professional development.

This mapping highlights the connections between participants' personal histories and professional development as they navigate the structural and cultural mechanisms that serve to enable or constrain their professional growth.

Similar to previous research, findings reveal the immense effort autistic teachers must exert to sustain their employment and the impact this has on both their professional and personal lives (Wood and Happé, 2021). This highlights the disproportionate burden placed on autistic teachers to conform to neurotypical cognitive styles and practices, rather than the educational system adapting to accommodate their approaches. Building on this, this research further highlights the impact of negative stereotyping and discriminatory behaviour towards members of the autistic community, often compelling them to conceal their identities and thereby adding further stress and anxiety in their professional lives (O'Dell et al., 2016; Wood, 2023). Moreover, findings exemplify a missed opportunity within the education system to foster more inclusive environments by recognising and drawing on the unique strengths and contributions that autistic teachers bring to their roles (Lawrence, 2019; Wood and Happé, 2020).

Finally, the findings from this study offer a broader critique of educational doxa currently perpetuated within our education system. They highlight the additional emotional and professional burdens autistic teachers face and suggest that there needs to be a reconceptualisation of what it means to be a 'good teacher', that goes beyond neurotypical norms. In the next chapter, I will consider the implications of these findings for practice and policy.

Chapter 7 : Implications of Findings

This chapter considers the implications of the study's findings for policy and practice, drawing on the dispositional themes identified in Chapter 6. Autistic teachers need greater visibility and a sense of belonging within the school environment to truly flourish. Schools should strive to foster genuinely inclusive environments, rather than relying solely on accessibility measures or individual accommodations, as the latter can still permit subtle or systemic forms of discrimination to persist (Praslova, 2024). Ultimately, autistic teachers should feel they can be their authentic selves without resorting to camouflaging strategies to manage their professional identities.

This study has highlighted significant barriers that exist within the education system that serve to negatively impact the personal and professional lives of autistic teachers. In addition, it has also revealed the many unique strengths of autistic teachers which frequently go unrecognised and underutilised in educational settings. There are some key changes that could result in the removal of barriers for autistic teachers and challenge prevailing negative stereotypes about autism. However, it is vital that members of the autistic teaching community are consulted and fully involved at all stages of the implementation of any changes. Furthermore, any changes made must be considerate of the fact that what works for one autistic teacher may not necessarily work for another. Therefore, it is essential to build in opportunities for conversations to be held at an individual level. The changes suggested would not only positively impact autistic teachers but also enhance support for autistic children and other neurodivergent individuals.

A summary of the recommended changes mapped against each of the ten dispositional themes can be found in [appendix 13](#). In the next section I have documented these against the four domains discussed in Chapter six: *Structural and Institutional Mechanisms*; *Interpersonal and Sociocultural Mechanisms*; *Emotional and Psychological Mechanisms*, and *Strengths and Transformative Potentials*.

7.1 Structural and institutional mechanisms

7.1.1 Gaining employment

First and foremost, it is essential that the government systematically collects and publishes data on the demographics of the teaching workforce, including disability

and neurodivergence. Without accurate data, it is difficult to understand representation, identify disparities, or develop informed policies that support equity and inclusion within the profession. Furthermore, inclusion efforts must be supported by policy frameworks that embed accountability at all levels and autistic teachers' lived experiences should foreground policy creation.

The recruitment practices of schools and teacher education providers need to consider the needs of autistic individuals. Clear and detailed information about the interview day should be provided to candidates, and schools could offer the option of receiving the interview questions in advance as part of an inclusive recruitment process. If part of the interview process will involve teaching, then candidates should be given sufficient detailed information about the class as well as the resources and technology that will be available to them. Overly lengthy and vague or ambiguous interview questions should be avoided and questions posed should relate directly to the requirements of the role. A quiet space should be provided during the interview day for individuals to relax and de-stress.

Once recruited to a teacher training programme, initial teacher education providers must embed inclusive pedagogies and provide tailored support for autistic beginning teachers. This includes mentoring, clear and transparent expectations and accommodations that align with individual communication styles.

7.1.2 Inclusion by design

It is essential that the design and renovation of educational spaces consider the needs of autistic teachers, and neurodivergent individuals more broadly, from the outset and not merely as an afterthought. Ideally, such environments should be co-designed with autistic professionals, whose lived experience provides valuable insight into how to mitigate sensory challenges, such as through the considered use of lighting, colour schemes, soft furnishings etc. Whilst it may not be possible to remove all the barriers that autistic people face due to sensory sensitivities, other adjustments such as providing quiet spaces and allowing the use of noise cancelling headphones will help individuals to manage the sensory overload they can experience. Consideration should be given to the location of teaching spaces allocated to autistic staff to avoid spaces that are particularly busy and noisy. If there

are room changes needed, wherever possible, schools should avoid this involving the autistic teacher's room.

Once in employment, leaders should ensure that adjustments are made to the operational structures that exist in schools. Consideration should be given to the ways in which communications operate in schools and how these might be challenging for individuals with differences in their executive functioning. The planning and operational aspects of events such as professional development sessions, staff meetings, parents' evenings and social gatherings, should always take account of the needs of autistic teachers.

One of the more complex challenges facing the teaching profession is the provision of flexible working arrangements that support autistic teachers in managing the cognitive and sensory demands of their roles. However, such flexibility would not only benefit autistic teachers, but it could also help reduce barriers for other groups, including working parents, those with chronic health conditions, and those with caregiving responsibilities, thereby promoting a more inclusive and sustainable workforce.

If the above changes were implemented in schools this would foster an inclusive culture whereby autistic teachers would not have to rely on disclosure as a prerequisite for accessing support. Instead, the system would be adaptable and responsive to diverse needs thus reducing the risks and burdens associated with disclosure.

7.1.3 Opportunities for connection

Both Stephen and Robyn expressed a strong desire to connect with other autistic teachers. Schools and trusts could play a valuable role in supporting this by facilitating structured networking opportunities. This could include peer support networks or informal spaces to share experiences and strategies. These spaces should be shaped by autistic educators themselves and not imposed from above, thereby creating epistemic communities (O'Dell et al., 2016). They should be voluntary, confidential and accessible in multiple formats to accommodate different communication preferences. These connections can help reduce isolation, promote wellbeing and amplify autistic voices in the profession.

However, without a broader cultural shift within educational settings, one that moves away from deficit-based views of autism, individuals may be understandably hesitant to put themselves forward for such initiatives. Establishing connections across multi-academy trusts (MATs) may present additional challenges due to the restricted opportunities to connect with educators working in different trusts. However, universities that are providers of initial teacher education could serve as valuable conduits for fostering these networks, as they often maintain established relationships with a wide range of schools and trusts.

7.2 Interpersonal and sociocultural mechanisms

7.2.1 Training for staff

It is essential that colleagues working with autistic individuals receive training that is ideally grounded in lived experience examples (Curnow et al., 2025) and designed and delivered in collaboration with autistic educators. Such training should be framed around a shared understanding between individuals, in line with Damien Milton's double empathy theory (Milton, 2012) and should actively challenge the stereotypical framings of autistic people. This training should extend to those supporting beginning teachers undertaking initial teacher education programmes. Key areas might include communication preferences, sensory differences, identity-first language and the diversity of autistic experiences.

More importantly, professional development must extend beyond awareness-raising to actively cultivate inclusive school cultures. This requires embedding neurodiversity within leadership development, professional progress reviews, and staff dialogue, alongside a sustained focus on challenging and disrupting deficit-based discourses. Ultimately, all staff should be equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to recognise and challenge ableism in the workplace.

7.3 Emotional and psychological mechanisms

Wellbeing frameworks operating in schools should reflect the unique stressors autistic teachers face. There should be regular check-ins with autistic teachers to review workload and working hours. These processes must be framed as supportive and collaborative, rather than surveillant or punitive, to avoid undermining trust or wellbeing. Support should be provided to help autistic teachers to manage their energy levels and maintain a healthy work-life balance. This support could be

provided through peer support networks or coaching opportunities. Wherever possible flexible working should be offered to autistic teachers and they should be allowed to work in quiet environments. Individuals must always be given the option to withdraw from activities that may cause them to become overwhelmed.

7.4 Strengths and transformative potentials

As highlighted in the findings of the study, autistic teachers bring many strengths to the profession but these largely go unrecognised. This fact, coupled with the need for intellectual challenge as described by participants, could lead to an early exit from the teaching profession as individuals may choose to leave the profession in search of more fulfilling and appropriately challenging opportunities. Autistic teachers should be offered opportunities to help shape curriculum and pedagogy drawing on their unique insights and lived experiences. Ultimately, through greater inclusion of autistic voices, schools can create cultures that are more inclusive and responsive to all.

7.4.1 Leadership opportunities

Schools should consider alternative leadership pathways that align with the strengths of autistic and other neurodivergent individuals. Not only could this help retain highly skilled teachers, but increasing neurodivergent representation in leadership may also encourage the recruitment of more neurodivergent teachers, fostering a more inclusive and diverse workforce.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a range of implications for policy and practice that have arisen from the findings of this study. These recommendations have been structured around the four domains explored in Chapter six: structural and institutional mechanisms; interpersonal and sociocultural mechanisms; emotional and psychological mechanisms; and strengths and transformative potentials. Each domain reflects a distinct but interconnected layer of change needed to make the education system more inclusive for autistic teachers. Through adopting the changes suggested in this chapter, inclusion would be designed into the system rather than being made contingent on the need for accommodations based on disclosure.

Chapter 8 : Conclusion

In this final chapter, I bring the thesis to a close by drawing together the key contributions of this research. The chapter provides a summary of the findings and outlines the empirical and methodological contributions of the study. The limitations of the study will be discussed and future directions for research considered, followed by a closing reflection on this research.

This study sought to address the main research question: What structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers in educational settings? It also sought to address the limited attention paid to autistic teachers in existing research and to highlight both the barriers and challenges autistic teachers face in their professional lives. Importantly, it also recognises the many assets autistic teachers bring to the teaching profession.

8.1 Summary of findings

Through adopting a critical realist lens and using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, this research has uncovered the complex interplay between deeper mechanisms, structural, social, cultural and institutional, that impact the lived experiences of autistic teachers. Through participants' narratives, it addressed how early schooling influenced their identities, how professional development, particularly in the early career stage, reflected broader cultural expectations, how they navigated the social, sensory, and organisational demands of teaching, and what conditions supported their inclusion and professional growth.

At the process level, this research highlights how supportive and understanding colleagues have been crucial to the professional development of participants. Conversely, unclear expectations, ambiguous communications and unsupportive professional relationships acted as barriers, undermining confidence and contributing to anxiety.

At the level of the person, this research reveals the many strengths participants bring to their roles, including creativity, perseverance, subject expertise, high professional standards, and inclusive pedagogical approaches shaped by their autistic perspectives. However, the systemic structures that currently exist within schools

and high internal expectations made participants susceptible to exhaustion and burnout.

The contexts of the schools which participants inhabited played a pivotal role in shaping their professional identities and well-being. Small, supportive and well-structured environments fostered a sense of belonging. Conversely, large and fragmented institutions often amplified sensory and social challenges. Recruitment practices, workplace cultures, and rigid institutional structures frequently privileged neurotypical ways of communicating and working, limiting opportunities for participants and adding undue stress to their personal and professional lives.

Across time, participants' narratives reveal the enduring effects of structures on agency. Diagnosis emerged as a significant turning point offering new opportunities for self-understanding and, in some cases, agency. Although participants demonstrated reflexivity as a causal power through their active reflections that shaped their professional decisions, they often faced structural mechanisms that limited their capacity to act autonomously. These constraints highlight how mechanisms in the real domain may remain unactualised when countered by other, more dominant mechanisms operating in certain contexts. Despite this, participants actively exercised agency by seeking environments that suited their needs and developing strategies to sustain their professional lives.

From a critical realist perspective, these findings highlight the interplay between generative mechanisms, such as recruitment practices, workplace cultures and normative expectations, that impact autistic teachers' agency. The findings demonstrate the many contributions autistic teachers can bring to their schools and students when they are able to exercise agency in their professional lives.

8.2 Methodological contributions

This study also makes several methodological contributions. Through combining Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model within a critical realism paradigm, the research shows how narratives of lived experience can be analysed to reveal the underlying structural and cultural mechanisms existing in the real domain. These mechanisms serve to shape autistic teachers' personal and professional lives. In addition, the use of life grids for facilitating reflections across time, proved to be an effective research tool in supporting accessibility and giving agency to participants and may have

broader applications in research with other underrepresented groups. Furthermore, the ethical and relational stance adopted, foregrounding participants' voices and avoiding deficit framings, offers an approach that may be valuable for future research with autistic participants.

8.3 Limitations of the study

Whilst this study offers rich qualitative insights and critical realist depth, it is not without its limitations. Firstly, the sample may not be reflective of all autistic teachers. Whilst there was gender balance in the sample, all participants were of white ethnic background which limits the ability to explore how racial or cultural identities intersect with the experiences of autistic teachers. In addition, all participants had received their autism diagnosis as adults and so their lived experiences may differ to autistic teachers who had been diagnosed during their time in compulsory education. As a result, participants had already developed established ways of navigating neurotypical educational and professional environments, which may have shaped both their coping strategies and their capacity to remain in the profession. Furthermore, participants are still in the profession and their views and experiences may not reflect autistic teachers who have left the profession possibly due to more traumatic or isolating experiences.

Given the small number of participants in the study, findings cannot be generalised to all autistic teachers. Indeed, the notion that what works for one autistic teacher would work for all is a flawed assumption due to the heterogeneous nature of the autistic population. As discussed in the methodology chapter, causal mechanisms are context dependent. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted with attention to the specific contexts in which they emerged. However, the in-depth nature of the interviews enhances the analytical depth and transferability of the findings to similar educational contexts.

Although this study sought to foreground participants' voices, due to the restrictions of the professional doctorate requirements, it was not possible to design the research as a fully participatory project. The participants were not involved in determining the research questions or the design of the study, including the analytical process. A more participatory approach may have yielded different insights and offered greater empowerment for the autistic teachers who were involved in the study. Furthermore, my own positionality as a neurotypical teacher educator

informed the way I engaged with participants' narratives and constructed meaning through retroductive analysis. While every effort was made to remain reflexive and grounded in participants' voices and stories, interpretation is inevitably influenced by my perspective.

Finally, in line with a critical realism perspective, I acknowledge that the findings presented here are fallible and the causal mechanisms identified may represent only a partial and situated understanding of the deeper structures operating in the real domain. These limitations open up directions for further research.

8.4 Recommendations for further research

This research has opened up several avenues for further inquiry. Future research should explore the perspectives of school leaders, neurotypical teachers and policy makers to better understand how organisational structures and cultures affect the recruitment, retention and wellbeing of autistic teachers.

This research was situated in England and in mainstream educational settings. Comparative studies across international contexts could provide significant insights into how policy and context shape inclusion. Similarly, exploring the lived experiences of autistic teachers in small independent schools and alternative provisions that are specifically designed for neurodivergent children and comparing these to those teaching in mainstream settings might also yield valuable information.

In addition, there is a need for longitudinal studies that explore the full career trajectories of autistic teachers, from initial teacher education through to career progression and leadership roles. Future research should consider the impact of intersectionality, recognising that autistic teachers may also navigate additional layers of marginalisation related to race, gender, sexuality, or other aspects of identity. Exploring these intersecting experiences can offer a more nuanced understanding of the barriers and enablers within the profession and help inform more inclusive policies and practices.

8.5 Final reflections

Returning to the wider policy context and specifically the DfE's (2018) statement of intent to diversify the teaching workforce, the challenges and barriers faced by participants highlight how little progress has been made in relation to autistic teachers. This failure undermines the aim of the Equality Act (2010) which seeks to

provide equity of opportunity and protection against discrimination. The findings of this study offer opportunities to develop more inclusive policies and practices for both schools and policy makers. The study also connects to Hacking's (1995) notion of the looping effect: by naming and examining the category of 'autistic teacher' within educational discourse, new possibilities emerge for how autistic teachers might be perceived, supported, and empowered. If institutions take these insights seriously, the teaching profession may begin to evolve in ways that more fully recognise and embrace neurodiversity.

To conclude, I return to the question posed to me seven years ago by a beginning teacher: '*do you know of any resources for autistic teachers?*' That question sparked a search that largely came back empty and ultimately became the catalyst for this study. What began as a search for practical resources to be shared evolved into a much broader inquiry: Why are autistic teachers' voices so absent from educational discourse? What are their experiences? And crucially, what structural, cultural and social factors shape those experiences?

I recognise that I have not directly addressed the beginning teacher's question, nor have I developed the practical resources I imagined at the outset. However, I hope through this research, by giving voice to autistic teachers and examining the systems that surround them, I have contributed something of value. Findings suggest that the burden should not fall on autistic teachers to adapt, but on institutions to change. I hope this research can lead to the creation of environments where autistic teachers are not seen as an exception to be accommodated, but as an integral part of an inclusive profession. In doing so, the need for resources and toolkits may no longer be necessary.

This research has raised a significant and underexplored research area that could reveal hidden mechanisms that may contribute to a lack of diversity in the teaching profession. An important point emerging from findings is that participants had positive experiences as learners in school, which influenced their decision to pursue teaching as a career. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, which suggests that individuals are more likely to feel at ease and successfully adapt to new environments when these environments reflect positive experiences they have encountered in similar contexts (Shelton, 2019). This raises an important question: to what extent do the physical and social conditions of schools shape the career

aspirations of autistic students? If school environments are not designed to accommodate autistic needs, many autistic students may assume that the education system is not a space in which they can thrive, thereby limiting their perception of teaching as a viable career. Without addressing these structural barriers, the teaching profession risks remaining largely inaccessible to future generations of autistic teachers.

Finally, my contribution to knowledge offers a nuanced understanding of how educational environments can be reshaped to recognise neurodiversity from the outset, and how workplaces can be created where differences are not just tolerated but embraced. Through unearthing and understanding many of the causal mechanisms that operate in the real domain, this study offers suggestions of changes that have the potential to bring about morphogenesis in the education system and create more inclusive environments that will benefit everyone:

Just like fresh air benefits all, work environments that welcome human cognitive and emotional differences – including the acute sensitivity to the world associated with many forms of neurodivergence – benefit all. Creating organisations where canaries can thrive, create and innovate also means creating healthier, stronger organizations. (Praslova, 2024, p. 2)

From a personal perspective, undertaking this research has been transformative for me. Listening to the depth, honesty and courage in participants' stories has made me acutely aware of the biases that can shape neurotypical perceptions of autism. I now move through my professional and personal life with a greater sensitivity to communication differences and a heightened awareness of systemic injustices that autistic people face. As a result of this work, I carry forward a stronger commitment to amplifying the voices of autistic people and challenging deficit discourses around difference.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Emails to participants

Email to potential participants

Initial contact

Dear xxxx

I am currently undertaking a Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) with the University of Nottingham, researching into the lived experiences of autistic teachers through the different phases of their education. I was wondering if you might be willing to be involved in this research.

It would mean spending some time reflecting on your experiences in the different phases of your education: school, college, higher education, teacher training and early career and capturing these reflections on a document called a life grid. This would be followed by a series of two one-to-one interviews with me to further discuss the experiences captured on your life grid. The interviews will be scheduled at a time and place that best suits you, or if you prefer, can be conducted via an online email exchange.

The research will help to inform future developments of our Initial Teacher Education programmes to support the next generation of autistic teachers.

If you would be interested in finding out more, please let me know and I can send you more detailed information to consider. If you would value a conversation to find out more as well, please contact me directly via email at helen.bowhay@nottingham.ac.uk.

Thank you.

Best wishes

Helen Bowhay

Helen.bowhay@nottingham.ac.uk

Follow up email

Dear xxxx,

Thank you for being willing to consider being involved in this research. I have attached an information sheet and privacy notice which provides more detail about the research and how data generated from this research will be stored and used.

I have also attached a consent form. If you would like to be involved in this research, please could you complete this and return it to me via email (**give a date to return by date**)

If you have further questions that you would like to ask before making a decision, please do not hesitate to contact me directly via email at helen.bowhay@nottingham.ac.uk.

If you decide that you no longer wish to be part of this research, that is completely fine. I appreciate how busy you are. Please could you let me know if this is the case.

Thank you.

Best wishes

Helen Bowhay

Helen.bowhay@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Life grid

Age/Stage	Experiences (might include mention of significant people or events and how they shaped your experiences at different points)			
	Family Context	Social Context	School/Work Context	Other contexts (e.g. interests/hobbies)
Primary age				
Secondary age				
University				
(Other careers if applicable)				
Early career teacher				
Experienced teacher				

Appendix 3: Life grid example

Life history grid *(including examples of what might be included)*

Age/Stage	Experiences (might include mention of significant people or events and how they shaped your experiences at different points)			
	Family Context	Social Context	School/Work Context	Other contexts (e.g. interests/hobbies)
Primary age				<i>Developed an interest in steam trains spending lots of time researching different types of locomotive engines</i>
Secondary age				
University			<i>Year 2 joined the Autism Social Network – first time I felt part of a community....</i>	
(Other careers if applicable)				
Early career teacher				
Experienced teacher				

Appendix 4: Completed life grid example

Age/Stage	Experiences (might include mention of significant people or events and how they shaped your experiences at different points)			
	Family Context	Social Context	School/Work Context	Other contexts (e.g. interests/hobbies)
Primary age	Have memories from as young as 2 (according to my family). Only spoke to immediate family (mum, dad, sister), otherwise mute when other people were present. Was punished for not showing excitement about presents so would get them taken off me or just given to my sister. Very close with my younger sister (1.5yrs younger than me) and we did everything together. Had a long running game called "Teddy ship of schools" which we would sink hours upon hours into. Scared of "men".	Had 2 close friends who were the only ones I spoke to. They were twins and my friends until I went to uni when we lost touch. I was relatively well liked and would play with all the people in my class except one girl who was mean to me. In year 6 I had my first "crush" on a girl, I got told by a friend it can't be a crush because I'm a girl. That made sense so I ignored it. Scared of "men".	Didn't speak to anyone working in school except one dinner lady. Would follow rules to the letter – regularly wet self instead of asking to use the toilet because the teacher said no to somebody else. Hated reading aloud, or reading fiction, but was able to read novels in year 4 (favourite were "Heidi" and "the faraway tree"). Got told off by my teachers for being too slow with painting and crafts. Scared of "men" so couldn't have a male teacher.	Obsessed with Alice in Wonderland and Winnie the Pooh. Loved reading "how its made" books and magazines, specifically the ones that folded out and have the layers of a train or aeroplane. Loved to draw, paint and craft. Regularly did puzzles, cross stitch and knitting with my Grandma, each time sitting in my Grandad's green chair listening to horrid history or goose bumps audio books.
Secondary age	Spoke to wider family when spoken to and specifically asked a question. My older sisters teased me for being a "square". My mum was abusive both physically and emotionally. We regularly got screamed	Very well liked by most, heavily bullied by some. I had a good circle of friends, but wasn't part of one particular group. Bullying was mostly around my weight, my mutism, my inability to swear even when	Fear of "men" lessened and could have male teachers. Learned to not drink during the school day so I didn't need to use the toilet. Had to stop guitar lessons due to not being able to speak to the instructor and being	Developed an interest in rubber ducks – started collecting them. Loved drawing and painting, spent most of my spare time doing this. Discovered my own likes and dislikes with music and very quickly

	at for not responding in the way she wanted, got hit by various objects, got things thrown at us, etc. Particularly when we didn't respond to a situation how she wanted (regularly as I was still selectively mute and struggled outside of my close friends and family). Dad was neglectful and would blame things on us. Struggled to do any chores without conflict – I would somehow just forget and it would “fall out of my mind”.	I could speak and my absolute need to not break rules. Made a lot of extraverted friends who “lead” the formation of the friendships. I was bullied for being too gullible, when I didn't understand why someone would lie intentionally about something so was too trusting about what people said.	unable to leave or enter a classroom part way through so would either miss the guitar lesson or truant the second half of a lesson. I felt lucky that I was intelligent enough to get by because I couldn't ask teachers for help. I would cry when teachers insisted on participation, eye contact or for me to speak to them 1on1.	became obsessed with “emo” music and particular bands. Very self-conscious and self-harmed
University	Remained extremely close to my younger sister, drifted apart from my older siblings. I went to a university close by because my parents told me I wouldn't cope living away from home and needed to commute in. I decided to move out for second year after I started to trust my sense of justice and argued a lot with my mum and would spend nights with my friends. Mum would tell me that crying was a sign of defeat, but by this point I had learned that I could push past some of my mutism I just had tears as a side affect.	Met a couple of friends online before I started university. My current spouse specifically. They were extremely accepting of me from the start and we very quickly formed a tight bond and I promised to meet them the morning of the first day. My need to keep the promise outweighed my crippling anxiety about starting. Through them, I made a few very strong friends who I am still friends with now. There were a lot of people who didn't want to interact with me (they told me I was too blunt).	My attendance wasn't what it could have been because I still couldn't walk into a room late (exacerbated by a lecturer who made a big deal of anyone coming in late). This wasn't that often but I really struggled to self regulate <i>anything</i>. I did a presentation to a small group on “professional teaching skills” and cried the whole way through. For my 3rd year dissertation, I was allowed to do a video presentation rather than one in front of the whole cohort which I was relieved for.	Was introduced to a lot of video games and found a whole group of people who would use them for socialising – perfect! Continued painting and drawing and love for music.
(Other careers if applicable)				

Early career teacher	Parents and older siblings were very negative about my career choice. They didn't think I could do it and told me so every time I saw them, so I stopped seeing them as often. Family were unhappy I moved to Nottingham to train to teach as it was nearly 2 hours away so they couldn't see me as often. Younger sister and her husband were extremely supportive.	Found that I liked going to social events as they were a low pressure way to socialise with fellow trainee teachers and colleagues. Friends at home mostly lived elsewhere but through my spouse made some very strong friendships in the area. Quickly made friends with colleagues.	My PGCE was very rocky. I almost quit after my first placement as I would get overwhelmed and cry every single day after school, sometimes during the day. By this point, I was able to put it off and seem fine in front of students. My tutor, was amazing at helping me through it, and my second placement changed everything. I started at X school and everyone was extremely friendly and understanding, and let me do things at my own pace. As always, my biggest hurdle was speech, and whilst I could do the basics fairly easily, I particularly struggled talking to parents or when encountering a situation I hadn't before. Speaking to, my mentor, we decided I would start to create written scripts, similar to those in my head, so I could think ahead of time what I would say for each situation and be prepared if it were to come up again. This was a massive help and I started to build what would become a huge portfolio of conversation scripts in mindmap form.	Found that I would get too engrossed in work, I discovered interests in teaching such as teaching for mastery, mentoring, the memory model, that I would pour hours of time into. I found that scheduling my social time helped so set up a weekly schedule that I have stuck to for the last 6 years to ensure I socialise too and make time for my painting, drawing, gaming, etc.
Experienced teacher	Only really interact with my younger sister. I have become fiercely independent and I have to mask too	Same as above.	As an experienced teacher, most things have become routine so most of the time I don't notice the problems I had. I find my Autism is a	Same as above

	much with the rest of my family.		superpower when it comes to my patience, my consistency, my attention to detail with my language used, my expectations, advocating for other staff and students, and my relationships with students. I still really struggle when it comes to advocating for myself or speaking to parents. Sometimes things can build up and I can get overwhelmed, especially if I feel judged or undermined, but having supportive people around me that understand how I deal with and process things makes all the difference.	
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Appendix 5: Interview schedule

Interview Schedule

I intend to conduct two one-hour interviews with each participant. The nature of the interview questions will depend on their responses to the life-grid. These interviews will be semi-structured in nature to maintain a focus on my research questions but to also allow my participants to discuss things that are important to them. The mode for the interviews (in person, online or via email exchange) will also be decided in negotiation with my participants.

For all interviews:

Start

- Thanks for time and willingness to be involved
- Explanation of the format for the interview including timing, opportunity to take a break if needed
- Have a copy of consent form to refer to and remind of what they have agreed to:
 - Restate their right to withdraw at any time
 - Restate principles of anonymity and confidentiality
 - Explain how interview will be recorded and stored
 - Explain how the research will be disseminated

Background

- Explain why I am doing this research and the structure/purpose of interview schedule
- Explain their role in the process
- Provide an opportunity to ask any questions before starting
- Check willingness to be proceed

Appendix 6: Example interview questions

Interview 2 with research participant 4

Date: Thursday 7 December 2023 9.30am

Location: Participant's school

Equipment: Digital recorder and phone for back up; note paper; journal; participant's life grid

Room set up: N/A

Preamble:

- Thank you for time and willingness to be involved.
- Confirm informed consent. Check re recording. Follow-up process – send transcript for checking ahead of next interview. Transcript stored securely, recordings deleted after transcribing.
- Sensitive topics to discuss which might be distressing so important to stop at any point. Don't need to answer a Q if don't want to. Anyone you'd like me to contact if you do become upset?
- Also, I would like to check my use of language – are you OK with autistic teacher or do you prefer teacher with autism?
- Check OK with room – lighting etc.
- I want questioning to be as open as possible so do please speak freely.
- Any questions?
- Still happy to be involved?

Review of first session – not recorded!

As a neurotypical person I am keen to make sure that I get this right for my autistic participants.

- Are you happy with the first transcript?
- Is there anything you would like me to remove or is there anything you would like to add?
- Were you happy with the process or is there anything you would like me to change?
- Did you feel you had the opportunity to say what you wanted to?

BEGIN RECORDING

Thank you for completing and sharing your life grid with me. I would like to follow up on some of the experiences you have reflected on in this interview.

Topic	Follow up questions		Notes
Exploring your teacher training year		What led you to choosing X for your PGCE?	
	You mention that the PGCE was a difficult year, can you explain why?	Why did you find your first placement overwhelming?	
		What did your tutor, X, do that was particularly helpful?	
		What stopped you from quitting?	
		What made your second placement better?	
		Did being on the course and learning about autism influence your decision to get diagnosed?	
	How did you choose the schools you applied to?	What factors influenced your choices?	
		How many interviews did you have?	

Exploring the process of securing first teaching post		What was it about the school you chose that attracted you to it?	
		Did you disclose that you were autistic when you applied? If so, why? If not, why?	
	What was the interview process like for you?	What aspects of the process did you find the most challenging?	
		If you had disclosed, were any accommodations made?	
		What changes to the interview process would have helped?	
Your experience as an early career teacher		Did you feel you could be authentic during the process?	
	What was your relationship like with your ECT mentor?	Did you disclose to them? If so, how did they respond?	
		Do you feel they were equipped to support you with your professional development?	

Experiences as an experienced teacher	From your life grid I can see that your independence is very important to you. Can you explain why?	Are there times when you wished you could depend on others more?	
	I know you moved schools recently, can you tell me why you chose to move?	Do you think you would be as confident/independent if you had stayed at your other school?	
		What is it about your current school that makes you feel more settled?	
	Do you have ideas/thoughts about what you would like to do with your career in the future?	What has influenced you?	
		Do you think there might be any barriers to you?	
	You mention advocating for staff and students, can you tell me a little more about this?	What do you have to advocate for?	
		How do people respond?	
		What changes would you like to see in schools for neurodiverse staff and students?	

Appendix 7: Inferential themes generated at stage one of data analysis

1. physical spaces impact sensory regulation and feelings of comfort
2. social interactions based on neurotypical norms present barriers
3. understanding colleagues is important for inclusion and wellbeing
4. pressures to conform to neurotypical expectations are experienced
5. having control over environment and routines is important
6. professional growth is supported when systems recognise neurodivergent strengths and challenges
7. contributions to school are often undervalued or constrained
8. academic success is important
9. clarity and predictability in expectations reduces anxiety
10. Executive functioning challenges present barriers for professional growth
11. special interests provide motivation and promotes wellbeing
12. understanding of self fosters self-advocacy
13. comfortable environments and positive connections fosters enjoyment in professional roles
14. Emotional and sensory exhaustion arises from sustained adaptation to inaccessible systems
15. internalised pressure for competence contributes to overwork and burnout
16. visibility of role models is important
17. strong internalised work ethic
18. Past trauma (personal or professional) influences risk management and disclosure decisions
19. creativity is a strength
20. familiar settings and relationships support professional development
21. disclosure decisions are shaped by perceived risks
22. completing tasks to a high standard reflect internal and external pressures
23. community and connection with other autistic people reduces feelings of isolation

Appendix 8: Refined inferential themes and final dispositional themes

Inferential Themes	Dispositional Themes
Social expectations as part of the recruitment process present challenges for autistic teachers	Recruitment practices in schools are designed based on neurotypical ways of communicating
Executive functioning challenges disadvantage autistic people in interviews	
Lack of clarity and detail creates anxiety for autistic individuals	
Disclosure is often avoided during interview due to fears of discrimination	
Supportive professional relationships enhance confidence and reduce masking pressures	Attitudes of colleagues act as enabling or constraining forces in shaping autistic teachers' experiences
Stereotypical views from colleagues contributes to masking behaviours and stress	
Trust in relationships supports professional authenticity and agency	
Colleagues' knowledge and understanding of autism supports access to informal accommodations	
High personal standards lead to overwork and limits wellbeing	Strong internal drives towards competence and responsibility predispose autistic teachers to burnout
Autistic teachers feel a duty to 'prove' themselves despite challenges	
Autistic teachers value having control over their personal and professional lives	
Stereotypical views that exist can lead to a reluctance to ask for help	
Disclosure decisions are shaped by perceived risks to professional status, relationships and opportunities	Autistic teachers are often required to manage their identity and disclosure decisions within power structures in which they have little control
Non-disclosure can lead to stress due to unmet needs	
Pressure to appear 'normal' impacts autonomy and agency	

Open plan and overstimulating spaces cause distress and reduce functionality	The design of school environments promotes feelings of belonging or exclusion for autistic teachers
Smaller, predictable environments support wellbeing	
Control over space (classroom, quiet areas) promotes safety and inclusion	
Physical spaces are not designed with neurodivergence in mind	
Vague and unclear institutional expectations increases anxiety and stress	Ambiguity in expectations and communications generates anxiety and undermines role efficacy for autistic teachers
'unspoken rules' of school culture are difficult to interpret and navigate	
Inconsistent communication and feedback undermines confidence	
Masking leads to fatigue and emotional stress	The pressure to assimilate to neurotypical norms leads to emotional strain and reduced wellbeing of autistic teachers
Conforming to expected behaviours erodes confidence	
Autistic teachers self-monitor constantly to avoid negative judgements	
There is little opportunity to express authentic neurodivergent traits without risk	
Autistic staff are often isolated in their schools with no peer network	Opportunities to connect with other autistic teachers are limited due to structural and cultural barriers
Lack of disclosure norms and neurodivergent visibility makes connection difficult	
There are few spaces for autistic teachers to share their experiences	
Professional development rarely addresses neurodivergent inclusion for staff	
Autistic teachers' creativity, attention to detail and insights go unrecognised in standardised systems	Schools underutilise autistic teachers' strengths due to rigid institutional structures
Leadership roles are not tailored to neurodivergent strengths	
Policy and structure limit the space for innovation or difference in teaching approaches	

Attention to detail and clarity supports all learners	Autistic ways of perceiving and engaging with the world generate pedagogical approaches that are inclusive and responsive
Sensitivity to exclusionary processes/practices informs adaptive teaching approaches	
Passion for subject (special interests) leads to creative and engaging pedagogy	
Personal experience of difference informs inclusive practices with learners	

Appendix 9: Ethics approval



**University of
Nottingham**

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

School of Education

University of Nottingham

The Dearing Building

Jubilee Campus
Wollaton Road
Nottingham

educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

30/01/2023

Our Ref: BowhayH_67

Dear Helen

Thank you for your research ethics application for your project:

Becoming a neurodiverse teacher in a neurotypical world: A critical analysis of the stories of autistic teachers' experiences in education and the associated impact on their agency

Thank you for making the small changes we requested in a letter dated 11 January 2023. Following receipt of your revised documents we are pleased to confirm that your research is now:

Approved

If your research overruns the intended completion date, please contact the Ethics Team to arrange an extension and update on any additions/changes to your work.

We wish you well with this research.

Dr Gary Winship

On behalf of the Ethics Committee

Appendix 10: Information sheet for participants

Research project to explore lived experiences in education of autistic teachers

Researcher: Helen Bowhay

Institution: School of Education, University of Nottingham

Supervisors: Dr Debra Costley, Dr Rupert Knight

You have been invited to take part in a research study for my Doctorate in Education (EdD). Before you agree to take part it is important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to carefully read the following information. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information. Please think about it carefully and then decide whether you would like to take part or not.

What is the research about?

To date there has been very little research undertaken in relation to the experiences of autistic teachers working in mainstream schools and, therefore, there are limited sources of knowledge that could be used to address some of the issues autistic teachers may face in their working lives. The aim of this project is to provide knowledge about the lived experiences of autistic teachers through the different phases of their education. Through examining the events autistic teachers experience, and have experienced, in education, I hope to identify factors which produce or reproduce those experiences and how these impact the teachers in their working lives.

What are you being asked to do?

The research will involve 4-6 autistic teachers. You will be asked to complete a life grid which will capture your reflections of your experiences in the different phases of your education: school, college, higher education, teacher training and early career. The life grid is a simple form on which you can document the experiences you had in relation to different contexts during a particular phase in your education e.g. family context, social contexts etc. You will then be asked to participate in two one-hour interviews with the researcher. These are planned to take place during XXXXXX with approximately two months between each interview. The interviews will involve discussing your responses to the life grid.

Interviews will take place at times and locations to suit participants and also using participants' preferred medium. For example, in-person, online via MSTeams or via email exchange. The interviews will be recorded using a digital recording device or a MSTeams recording and then transcribed. Transcriptions will be shared via a secure link to check for accuracy.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Your details will be held in complete confidence and I will follow ethical and legal practice in relation to all study procedures. The data collected will be treated confidentially, and only myself and my supervisors will have access to the raw data. All information collected while carrying out the research will be stored on the University SharePoint which is password protected and strictly confidential. Once I have recorded our discussions with you, these will be transcribed straight after the interview. I will then remove any identifying elements and destroy the recordings. Your name will not appear on any database or any information which is then published. Instead, a number will be used as an identifier on all data associated with you. The master copy of the names associated with each number will be kept in a folder on SharePoint separate to the transcribed interview. A pseudonym will be used for all data associated with you and in any reporting of the research.

Do you have to take part?

Your participation is entirely voluntary. It is important you understand that you do not have to participate in the project at all, and even if you decide to take part you are still free to stop at any time and without giving a reason. If you do decide to withdraw from the research I will destroy any data pertaining to you.

I will not ask you to participate without you formally providing your consent. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a form giving your permission to take part.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Taking part in this research may raise some uncomfortable issues or be stressful in some way as you reflect on your past experiences. I will do all I can to provide further support as required. The completion of the life grid and time required to attend the interviews may be tiring for you but I will do all I can to minimise any discomfort and inconvenience.

What are the possible benefits to me of taking part?

You may find exploring and discussing your own educational experiences will help you to make sense of some of these life events. It is hoped that, through sharing your experiences and being involved in this research, you may feel that you can make a positive contribution to future generations of autistic teachers.

Ethical review of the project

This research has been approved by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee. The University of Nottingham Code of research Conduct and Research Ethics (2021) and the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (2018) will be adhered to throughout all stages of the research process. A separate GDPR compliance notice will be sent.

What will happen to the results of the research?

Data will be deposited in the University of Nottingham research data archive for a minimum of 7 years unless a participant asks for their data to be withdrawn from the research.

This research is for my Doctorate in Education (EdD) which will be made available online following the completion of the programme. I also expect to present my research at conferences and academic and professional journals.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions:

Helen.bowhay@nottingham.ac.uk

You can also contact my supervisors:

Debra.costley@nottingham.ac.uk and rupert.knight@nottingham.ac.uk

You can also raise issues with the Research Ethics Committee, University of Nottingham School of Education educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 11: Privacy notice

GDPR Privacy Notice

Privacy information for Research Participants

For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit:

www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Why we collect your personal data

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

Legal basis for processing your personal data under UK GDPR

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

Special category personal data

In addition to the legal basis for processing your personal data, the University must meet a further basis when processing any special category data, including: personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation.

The basis for processing your sensitive personal data on this occasion is Article 9(2a) the data subject has given explicit consent to the processing.

How long we keep your data

The University may store your data for up to 25 years and for a period of no less than 7 years after the research project finishes. The researchers who gathered or processed the data may also store the data indefinitely and reuse it in future research. Measures to safeguard your stored data include the use of pseudonyms for the participant in all research records and written academic work, and the anonymisation of data, including direct and indirect identifiers.

Who we share your data with

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

Appendix 12: Consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project title: A research project to explore the lived experiences in education of autistic teachers

Researcher's name: Helen Bowhay

Institution: School of Education, University of Nottingham

Supervisor's name: Dr Debra Costley and Dr Rupert Knight

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I have read the project's Privacy Notice.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future. I may also withdraw any data related to me at this point so that it is not included in the thesis.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.
- I understand that I will be audio/video recorded during the interview.
- I understand that data will be stored electronically on the University of Nottingham SharePoint and will only be accessible by the researcher and their supervisors.
- All anonymised research data created by the project will be deposited in the University of Nottingham research data archive (<https://rdmc.nottingham.ac.uk>). University of Nottingham will retain and preserve research data in line with UoN for a minimum of 7 years unless a participant asks for their data to be withdrawn from the research.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research.

Signed (research participant)

Print name **Date**

Contact details

Researcher: helen.bowhay@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisors: debra.costley@nottingham.ac.uk; rupert.knight@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator: educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 13: Summary of policy and practice recommendations

Dispositional Theme	PPCT Element	Policy and Practice Recommendations
Recruitment practices in schools are designed based on neurotypical ways of communicating	Context (school systems); Person (autistic traits)	Recruitment processes in education should be redesigned to accommodate diverse communication styles and sensory preferences.
The design of school environments promotes feelings of belonging or exclusion for autistic teachers	Context (school systems/structures); Person (autistic traits); Time (schooling history)	Educational spaces should be co-designed with sensory and spatial needs of autistic staff in mind.
Autistic teachers are often required to manage their identity and disclosure decisions within power structures in which they have little control	Process (identity negotiation and disclosure); Context (institutional norms); Person (reflexivity)	Create inclusive work environments where systemic supports reduce or eliminate the need for individual disclosure and accommodations.
Opportunities to connect with other autistic teachers are limited due to structural and cultural barriers	Process (peer connection and mutual support); Context (school culture); Time (professional development)	Establish safe and voluntary peer networks for autistic staff.
Attitudes of colleagues act as enabling or constraining forces in shaping autistic teachers' experiences	Process (supportive relationships); Context (mentoring, peers)	Provide high-quality staff training created and delivered in collaboration with autistic staff.
Ambiguity in expectations and communications generates anxiety and undermines role efficacy for autistic teachers	Process (social interactions); Context (school systems); Person (autistic traits); Time (schooling history)	Ensure all communications and expectations are timely, clear, coherent and unambiguous
The pressure to assimilate to neurotypical norms leads to emotional strain and reduced wellbeing of autistic teachers	Process (social interactions); Person (identity negotiation); Context (workplace norms)	Policies should recognise and mitigate the psychological toll of masking and assimilation for neurodivergent staff.
Strong internal drives toward competence and responsibility predisposes	Process (overcommitment and emotional labour); Context (workplace)	Implement regular wellbeing check-ins with clear access to support mechanisms.

autistic teachers to burnout	demands); Time (career phases)	
Schools underutilise autistic teachers' strengths due to rigid institutional structures	Person (values, motivations); Context (work expectations); Time (career trajectory)	Develop leadership pathways that recognise and build on autistic teachers' strengths.
Autistic ways of perceiving and engaging with the world generate pedagogical approaches that are inclusive and responsive	Person (autistic traits reframed); Process (classroom teaching); Context (pupil interactions)	Embed autistic teachers' pedagogical insights in teacher training and inclusive curriculum design.