

Masking in Primary School: Exploring Educational Psychologist and Teacher Understanding and Responses to Children Masking in Education

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
APA	American Psychological Association
BPS	British Psychological Society
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
EBSA	Emotionally Based School Avoidance
EHCP	Education, Health, and Care Plan
ELSA	Emotional Literacy Support Assistant
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
KS1	Key Stage 1
KS2	Key Stage 2
LA	Local Authority
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
NICE	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
TA	Teaching Assistant
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
UEA	University of East Anglia
UK	United Kingdom

Thesis Introduction and Overview

This thesis is an enquiry into school-based masking and is organised into three primary sections, a literature review, empirical chapter and reflective chapter. Chapter 1 reviews the literature relating to the concept of masking, both at a conceptual level and as specifically applied to children and young people in the context of education. School-based masking involves strategies used by children and young people to hide differences and navigate social contexts, which can have notable consequences for wellbeing. Varying conceptualisations of the masking construct are provided as a theoretical basis for the rest of the review. How these conceptualisations overlap to present an understanding of masking is presented. The second half of the review explores masking specifically in schools, organising findings from the literature into the motivations, behaviours, contexts, consequences of masking, as well as how this is perceived and supported by adults. Lastly, findings from the literature on how to support school-based masking are discussed.

Chapter 2, the empirical chapter, presents a qualitative study exploring school-based masking in primary school contexts through the experiences of Educational Psychologists (EPs) and teachers. This research aimed to investigate how these educational professionals understand and respond to children who mask in school. A focus group of EPs and semi-structured interviews with teachers were conducted to collect the qualitative data which was then analysed via reflexive thematic analysis. The findings are discussed with relevance to EP practice. A definition and model for understanding school-based masking are provided.

The final chapter consists of a firsthand reflective account by the researcher of the research process, from deciding on the topic through to the production of this thesis. This chapter reflects upon the researcher's positionality and decision making as well as lessons learned from the research process.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.0 Introduction

This literature review explores the research on 'masking', assessing contemporary understanding of this construct with relevance to applied educational psychology practice. This chapter reviews and evaluates how the construct is conceptualised generally and the state of knowledge in the context of children and young people (CYP) who mask in school.

Until recently, the phenomenon of masking has remained significantly under-researched. Masking has strong conceptual and research links to autism where the term is used to describe how individuals disguise their autistic differences from others, or compensate for related difficulties (Sedgewick et al., 2022), but across what is now a growing literature base masking escapes a consistent characterisation or general definition (Petrolini et al., 2023). Whether the idea of masking applies more broadly, as the concealment of difficulties beyond autism, remains a subject of debate. More generally, masking may be understood as the cognitive and behavioural coping strategies employed to navigate and manage social contexts, depending on individual aims, difficulties or differences. The phenomenon is noted to be complex and employed by individuals with varied motivations in different contexts (Petrolini et al., 2023). Some reported examples of masking strategies include forcing eye contact, using rules to follow in conversation and suppressing sensory seeking behaviour (Hull et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023).

Masking might offer individuals some adaptive benefits, including facilitating social relationships, but is most often associated with detrimental consequences such as identity loss, mental ill health and delayed access to diagnosis and support (Summerhill & Summers, 2025). These consequences have primarily been investigated in adult populations, but emerging literature amongst CYP and in the context of education suggests a similar pattern (Klein et al., 2025), although Goscicki et al. (2025) note that understanding of masking in schools is still limited.

Educational Psychologists (EPs) work at the level of individual children, whole schools, and wider local authority (LA) systems to support areas of Special Educational Needs (SEN) including autism (Birch & Frederickson, 2024) and CYP's mental health (Birch & Gulliford, 2024), making school-based masking directly relevant to their work. The relatively underdeveloped literature on school-based masking struggles to provide conceptual clarity for educational professionals who seek to apply an understanding of masking in school contexts. Considering the important role the school system plays in a child's development, paired with

the potentially significant consequences for a child who masks in school, greater clarity is required on this topic for education professionals.

Through reviewing the literature, this chapter aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of masking, first at a conceptual level and then applied specifically to CYP in school contexts. It achieves this by presenting relevant research, examining psychological theory and organising the current state of knowledge to directly support educational professionals.

1.1 Use of Language

As the concept of masking is not consistently characterised and conceptualised in the literature (Petrolini et al., 2023), inconsistency naturally extends to the language and terminology used. The terms *masking*, *camouflaging*, *compensation*, and *adaptive morphing* are all used within the literature (Cook et al., 2021; Livingston & Happé, 2017). In some models these terms are employed simultaneously to refer to specific subcomponents of an overall masking phenomenon (Hull et al., 2017) whereas others understand these phrases to be synonyms for the same construct (Cook et al., 2021).

Camouflaging is the term frequently used in the research literature to refer to the overall phenomenon. Other authors, including Sedgewick et al. (2022), employ the term ‘masking’ to collectively refer to the variously named but related concepts and experiences, asserting that this terminology reflects the language most used by most autistic people in real world contexts. EPs operate as practitioners in real world applied settings, so the terminology of ‘masking’ is prioritised here to reflect this. When directly discussing research that uses alternative terminology, such as camouflaging, the language of that research will be used.

Within this review, identity-first language is used (e.g., autistic person) and the term ‘autism’ is preferred, reflecting the preference of most autistic people (Kenny et al., 2016) and a more neuro-affirming approach (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021).

2.0 Literature Review: Aims and Strategy

This review explores contemporary perspectives on the conceptual basis of masking and with a particular focus on CYP in education. By synthesising current research, this chapter aims to inform the practice of educational professionals, including EPs, whilst simultaneously identifying avenues for future research. The literature review was guided by the following questions:

- How does the research literature conceptualise masking considering psychological theory, motivations and impact for the individuals who mask?

- What is known about how these factors relate to children and young people who mask in the context of school-based education?

A narrative approach was adopted for this review as it is effective for identifying themes and reviewing the state of knowledge on a topic (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). This approach is suitable for topics which are conceptualised in varying ways throughout the research (Snyder, 2019) as is the case for masking (Petrolini et al., 2023).

Starting in September 2024, searches of the literature were conducted to identify relevant research using the following databases: EBSCO, APA PsycINFO and Google Scholar. A final search was conducted in February 2026. Table 1 shows the search terms that were employed in various combinations to explore the literature base. When searching the databases many results were returned from unrelated academic fields which also used terms like 'mask' or 'masking'. Therefore, exclusion criteria were employed during searches to limit the number of unrelated results.

Table 1

Search Terms and Exclusion Criteria for Literature Review

Search Terms	Exclusion Criteria
Masking OR camouflaging	covid-19 OR coronavirus OR 2019-ncov OR sars-cov-2 OR cov-19 OR pandemic
School* OR education* OR classroom* OR student* OR pupil or pupils	audiology OR hearing OR audiometry

Paper abstracts were reviewed and were included in the review if they made explicit reference to the search terms and were relevant to answering the guiding questions of the review. A 'snowballing' strategy was also used whereby key literature was identified by following the references made in already identified papers allowing for debates within the literature to be followed. The literature included in the review was sourced from published, peer-reviewed academic journal articles, but grey literature was also included where particularly relevant such as doctoral theses, editorials and books, as well as webpages which provided complementary lay perspectives. Most of the included literature comes from a UK based context. The international research originated predominantly from similarly western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010) such as Australia, United States of America and Spain.

The first part of this review (sections 3.0 and 4.0) aims to understand how the concept of masking is conceptualised theoretically within the literature to help contextualise the second

part of the review (section 5.0) which explores specific factors of the masking construct in relation to CYP who mask in school. Only a limited number of papers investigated and discussed school-based masking specifically, and these studies use limited participant groups. Therefore, this review also draws upon research within adults and CYP not in the context of education to provide greater understanding of the masking construct.

3.0 Conceptualising Masking

Petrolini et al. (2023) observe that the masking phenomenon is characterised inconsistently throughout the research literature, failing to provide a cohesive perspective. Various researchers emphasise different aspects of the concept, partly because of the recent growth of research but also because masking is characterised by complexity and heterogeneity of individual experience. Some central themes are observed in the masking literature which are summarised here to provide context for the review.

A sample of grey literature including blogs and information from advocacy groups on the topic of masking was reviewed to consider lay understanding and public discourse of the concept. In some cases, the association with autism is stronger, being seen as strategies used by autistic people to appear non-autistic such as mirroring facial expressions, modulating speech or tone of voice, and planning in advance what to say, coined 'scripting' (National Autistic Society, n.d.; Nirode, 2019). Other sources also note masking of mental health conditions or other conditions including ADHD (Psychology Today, n.d.) which is reported by SEND advice groups to relate particularly to masking in school (Kids, n.d.). A shared neurodiversity approach (Dwyer, 2022) is commonly used to frame masking across these lay understandings, in addition to much of the academic literature, whereby masking is used by neurodivergent individuals to manage within a largely 'neurotypical' world.

3.1 History of the Masking Concept and Research

The phenomenon of masking has been experienced and spoken about by individuals who experience it longer than it has been considered within the academic literature (Sedgewick et al., 2022). As the internet and social media has facilitated the sharing of ideas, people who mask have been able to share their experiences more easily (for example Nirode, 2019) leading to increasing discussion on the topic (Sedgewick et al., 2022).

According to Sedgewick et al. (2022), the idea that autistic individuals 'mask' their autistic identity has a genesis in Lorna Wing's work (1981) which has since come to be known as the 'camouflage hypothesis'. To account for sex differences in the prevalence of autism identification, Wing proposed that autistic females outwardly present with better social skills

than they actually possess leading to more difficulties identifying their autistic profile in comparison to autistic males. The concept was later developed by subsequent researchers who described the apparently competent but ultimately superficial social communication of some autistic girls (Kopp & Gilberg, 1992). The camouflage hypothesis has been a primary motivator for recent research into masking and a focus on masking within autistic females predominates even as the applicability of the concept has broadened (Sedgewick, 2022).

The last decade has seen masking research gather momentum using both qualitative (Hull et al., 2017) and quantitative self-report measures primarily amongst autistic adults, such as the 'camouflaging autistic traits questionnaire' (CAT-Q) (Hull et al., 2019). Masking has subsequently been explored within autistic young people, particularly autistic female adolescents (Halsall et al., 2021), and in non-autistic adults and young people (Lei et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2021). Petrolini et al. (2023) recognise that self-report measures are ineffective at investigating unconscious masking and masking in younger children. Therefore, observational and multi-informant approaches have also been used in school contexts (Dean et al., 2017; Halsall et al., 2021).

3.2 Who Masks?

Influenced by the Camouflage hypothesis, the research has often considered the relevance of gender and autism to masking. Empirical findings have linked increased masking to autistic females in both adulthood (Cook et al., 2021) and CYP (Wood-Downie et al., 2021). Goscicki et al. (2025) propose that this is particularly pertinent in schools where girls face unique social pressures. However, to avoid under-recognition in males Bradley et al. (2021) caution against viewing camouflaging as an exclusively female coping strategy. Indeed, some findings amongst autistic adolescents found no difference in camouflaging between males and females (Jorgenson et al., 2020) although there is limited literature which explores masking amongst CYP (Petrolini et al., 2023) which could explain ongoing gaps in contemporary understanding.

There is debate as to whether autistic masking should be understood as a qualitatively distinct phenomenon experienced by autistic individuals in particular. Compared with typical experiences of adjusting one's self-presentation, autistic masking has been considered as hiding the 'true self' to a greater extent (Pearson & Rose, 2021; Sedgewick et al., 2022). Other perspectives position masking as an extension of ubiquitous self-presentation behaviours, like impression management (Petrolini et al., 2023), differing in degree of effort and scope (Ai et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2021).

Masking in Autism

The challenges experienced by autistic individuals extend to understanding relationships, responding in ways deemed appropriate by others, initiating and maintaining conversation and sharing interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Masking is strongly associated with autism as the use of cognitive and behavioural strategies by autistic people to conceal difficulties or autistic differences and navigate discrepancies between their social communication style and their predominantly non-autistic social environment (Cook et al., 2021). Masking often results in individuals appearing behaviourally alike to their neurotypical peers despite underlying differences (Wood-Downie et al., 2021).

An exploration of 38 specific masking behaviours in a sample of autistic adults is provided by Cook et al. (2022), the most common of which were:

- forcing eye contact;
- limiting the amount of time speaking about oneself;
- purposeful use of gestures in what is perceived as a neurotypical style;
- carefully selecting conversation topics;
- making sure to ask one's social partner questions;
- feigning social understanding;

Masking is a complex phenomenon and employed with varied motivations across different contexts (Petrolini et al., 2023). Chapman et al. (2022) note that masking is “something multifaceted, emotionally and psychologically rooted, which develops partially subconsciously within a social-environmental context” (p.13). That masking operates at varying levels of consciousness (Cook et al., 2021) adds to the conceptual complexity. Given the heterogeneity of the construct, there is likely to be significant variety in the specific cognitive and behavioural coping strategies individuals employ.

Atkinson et al. (2025) studied self-reported camouflaging and school belonging in 72 secondary-aged autistic children, in which only one third felt they could be their “real self” at school whereas two thirds felt they could not, suggesting that school-based masking is widespread but not universal amongst autistic CYP, likely depending upon on individual circumstances. Descriptions of masking by autistic adolescents extend beyond the camouflaging of just autistic traits, such as in the suppression of emotions, sensory sensitivities, opinions, and broader aspects of identity like gender and class (Chapman et al., 2022). This raises the question of whether the concept of masking applies beyond the boundaries of autism.

Masking Beyond Autism

Multiple researchers assert a dimensional view of autism where the diagnostic category represents one end of a continuum of traits extending throughout the general population (Cook et al., 2021) and that masking is similarly experienced beyond the boundaries of diagnostic categories (Bernardin et al., 2021b).

Masking has been considered beyond autism as experiences of concealing one's identity and adapting behaviour to navigate social situations (Ai et al., 2022; Sedgewick et al., 2022) where the phraseology of 'mask' and 'masking' has been used to describe these adaptations to outward presentation, including in the concealment of emotional distress by adolescents in school contexts (Flett, et al. 2018). The concept of school-based masking has been extended generally to CYP with SEND who can feel unable to be themselves as well as pressure to conform and conceal aspects of identity at school, especially when feeling emotionally unsafe (Porter & Ingram, 2021).

Qualitative investigations reveal that both autistic and non-autistic adults mask for similar reasons and experience comparable consequences, though distinct autistic experiences included suppressing 'stimming' and an association between masking and suicidality (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2021). Participants from all groups traced back the development of masking to childhood and for some masking behaviour had previously operated unconsciously. Specific behavioural masking strategies are reported across autistic and non-autistic CYP and adults including forcing eye contact, using conversational scripts, social mimicry, varying one's vocal tone and facial expressions, and copying body language or facial expressions (Cook et al., 2021; Jorgenson et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021).

Jorgenson et al. (2020) found that self-reported levels of camouflaging were high in both neurotypical and autistic adolescents, and aspects were higher in the former. The authors propose that high levels of camouflaging persist in adolescence regardless of neurotype due to the importance of identity formation at this stage and exaggerated social pressures to fit in. Alternatively, it is suggested that the novel findings are the result of limited research into masking in CYP. Other authors propose that masking is experienced sooner in autistic young people than non-autistic peers (Bernardin et al., 2021a).

Bernadin et al. (2021a) and Lei et al. (2024) investigated the association between camouflaging and internalising mental health conditions in both autistic and non-autistic adolescents. Camouflaging behaviours were found across both groups and were associated with levels of social anxiety rather than autistic traits. These authors conclude that masking of

the true self is not exclusively associated with autistic differences in adolescence and that the construct is highly relevant to CYP who experience elevated levels of anxiety.

Findings from the literature demonstrate that masking has particular, but not exclusive, relevance with autism (and autistic females specifically), though there is a large degree of heterogeneity of the construct that applies across boundaries of gender, age and neurotype. The following section explores theoretical accounts of masking that emphasise different aspects and with relevance to these different groups. Some accounts explore the overlap between masking and existing constructs, such as passing to avoid stigmatisation; impression management to foster positive views of the self in others; and anxiety safety behaviours to avoid negative social evaluation threats.

4.0 Theoretical Accounts of Masking

This section explores various theoretical accounts for masking. Table 2 presents a summary of the conceptual accounts of masking described in this section.

Table 2

Theoretical Accounts of the Masking Construct

Theoretical Conceptualisation of Masking	Summary of Account	Key references
Camouflage Hypothesis	Autistic females mask their autism more than males making identification of autism more challenging.	Wing (1981)
Social Camouflaging	Camouflaging behaviours are split into compensation, masking and assimilation. Associated with camouflaging autism but experienced below clinical threshold for autism diagnosis.	Hull et al. (2017, 2019)
Compensation	Cognitive compensation strategies for neurodevelopmental disorders. Strategies can be shallow or deep.	Livingston Happé (2017)
Masking as Passing	Acting as neurotypical to pass and avoid stigma.	Perry et al., 2022
Masking as Impression Management	Spectrum of typically experienced modifications to self-presentation of which masking is an exaggerated example of.	Ai et al. (2022)
Masking as Anxiety Safety Behaviours	Masking is a response to social anxiety and the behaviours enacted to manage evaluation threats.	Lei et al. (2024)
Masking as Counter-dispositional behaviour	Individuals feeling pressure to act counter to their personality or disposition leading to feelings of inauthenticity.	Godfrey & Koutsouris, (2024)

The first two of these, social camouflaging (Hull et al, 2017; 2019) and compensation (Livingston and Happé, 2017), are descriptive, inductive understandings that are informed by experiential accounts and formulated as specific models for the phenomenon. Various scholars have sought to further understand masking by applying psychological theory and drawing parallels with existing constructs, including ‘passing’ and ‘impression management’. Some have considered the construct validity of masking altogether and whether it is theoretically distinct enough from the construct of anxiety safety behaviours (Cook et al., 2021; Fombonne, 2020). In the last part of this section a novel connection is drawn between masking and counter-dispositional behaviour.

4.1 Social Camouflaging (Hull et al., 2017, 2019)

Hull et al. (2017, 2019) provide a model of ‘social camouflaging’ of autism, which is commonly referenced throughout the literature. A three-factor structure of behaviours make up the overall camouflaging construct: *compensation*, *masking*¹ and *assimilation* (Hull et al., 2019). This understanding of camouflaging began with qualitative explorations of autistic adult experiences (Hull et al., 2017) informing the development and then validation of the CAT-Q (Hull et al., 2019) which, through administration to 354 autistic and 478 non-autistic adults, led to the identification of the three-factor structure. The components of camouflaging are summarised in table 3.

Table 3

Types of Social Camouflaging Behaviours (Hull et al., 2019)

Camouflaging subcomponent	Summary	Example behaviours
Compensation	The use of explicit strategies to make up for social and communication difficulties	Learning social cues from media.
Masking	Concealing of behaviours, autistic traits or parts of one’s identity	Adjusting the face and body to appear interested in others.
Assimilation	Associated with feeling uncomfortable in social situations and attempting to fit in regardless without this discomfort being obvious to others	Feeling the need to put on an act.

¹ Note that in Hull and colleagues’ (2017, 2019) model, the overall construct is referred to as ‘camouflaging’ within which ‘masking’ describes particular sub-behaviours. This is different from the way some authors use the word masking in reference to the overall construct.

Petrolini et al. (2023) conceptualise *compensation* and *masking* as positive and negative camouflaging behaviours respectively. Compensation is additive, consisting of engagement in behaviours beyond one's natural behavioural repertoire. Masking is concerned with suppressing an aspect of identity, such as a trait associated with autism. Petrolini et al. (2023) caution against interpretations of distinct and discrete dichotomy, noting that camouflaging likely includes various aspects of compensation, masking and assimilation simultaneously.

Motivations for social camouflaging, identified through qualitative research, ranged from pragmatic, such as helping the individual gain employment, to relational reasons as individuals compensated for social difficulties to achieve connection with others (Hull et al., 2017). Camouflaging is also understood in relation to the avoidance of harm, particularly as a response to perceived social expectations for social behaviour and pressure to fit in and conform. Autistic individuals mask to avoid social isolation as well as stigmatisation and mistreatment from others which is perceived to result from showing 'unmasked' identities (Cook et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2017).

Although principally an account of autistic masking, the authors of the social camouflage model recognise common experiences either side of diagnostic boundaries. The CAT-Q was developed for autistic and non-autistic samples to measure the same constructs across these groups (Hull et al., 2019). CAT-Q scores were found to correlate positively with autistic-traits regardless of diagnosis, and as the camouflage hypothesis would predict Hull et al. (2020) found that female autistic adults had higher CAT-Q scores than autistic males. This supports the notion that masking is not exclusively experienced within the clinical boundaries of autism, but adults with more autistic traits and who are women, can experience greater degrees of camouflaging.

Amongst adolescents the association between camouflaging and autism may be more complex, however. Jorgenson et al. (2020) administered the CAT-Q and a measure of autism traits to 140 autistic and non-autistic 13–18-year-olds. For the *compensation* subscale, no significant difference was observed between the autistic and non-autistic adolescents. For the *masking* component neurotypical participants reported significantly higher levels than autistic peers. Adolescence is characterised by increased social demands and self-awareness which could account for the high levels of camouflaging reported at this stage regardless of diagnosis, which highlights the potentially unique function of masking amongst CYP. Jorgenson et al. (2020) also found that age influenced camouflaging scores suggesting the influence of

developmental factors. These results caution that results in adult populations do not necessarily translate to CYP. It is important to note that the CAT-Q was originally created and validated using an adult sample population (Hull et al., 2019) but has been used by Jorgenson et al. (2020) to investigate masking amongst CYP. Given the developmental differences between CYP and adults, the CAT-Q may not be a valid measure of the masking construct in the former, especially where factors such as literacy could affect accessibility and confound the results.

4.2 Compensation (Livingston & Happé, 2017)

Compensation, as described by Livingston and Happé (2017), relates to how individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions might compensate for cognitive difficulties by using alternative cognitive routes, and differs subtly from how Hull et al. (2017) use the term. Compensation is commonly considered synonymous with the overall concept of camouflaging or masking (Petrolini et al., 2023) although the compensation construct places particular emphasis on cognition and the cognitive routes used by an individual to modulate their behaviour (Cook et al., 2021).

Livingston and Happé (2017) consider that compensation can be either more *shallow* or more *deep* in referring to the extent of cognitive processing involved behind the behaviour. Empirical support for this conceptualisation is provided by Livingston et al. (2019). The experiences of 136 autistic and non-autistic adults using compensatory strategies were qualitatively analysed and details of shallow and deeper strategies were identified. Shallow compensation strategies were considered more superficial and inflexible changes to how one navigates the world, such as mimicking other's behaviour or laughing in response to joke cues without understanding the joke. These were understood to rarely improve social cognitive skills and did not transfer well to novel contexts. Deeper compensation refers to comprehensive, and sometimes effortful cognitive strategies and might extend to changes in the underlying social cognition behind the behaviours. Other cognitive strengths, such as memory, might be recruited to support social navigation through alternative cognitive routes. One such example given by Livingston et al. (2019) is using pattern detection to better understand how others are feeling (e.g., gesture + facial expression + context = a particular mental state).

In findings that closely resemble those of Hull et al. (2017), Livingston et al. (2019) report that motivations to engage in compensatory behaviour were to develop meaningful relationships, managing one's reputation and achieving life goals but were linked with poor mental health. The compensatory strategies used were qualitatively similar between autistic and non-diagnosed adults who experience social difficulties.

4.3 Masking as Passing: Response to Stigma

Autistic masking has been conceptualised as a form of ‘passing’ and stigma management (Pearson & Rose, 2021; Perry et al., 2022). The concept of passing, developed by Goffman (1963), describes how members of various disadvantaged or stigmatised groups might attempt to be perceived and treated as members of more advantaged groups, which can come at a cognitive and emotional cost. This understanding of masking is aligned with qualitative research which describes motivations to mask as being avoidance of stigma, bullying and discrimination (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Miller et al., 2021), which can be cognitively and emotionally costly (Summerhill & Summers, 2025).

A Social Identity Theory framework has been used to understand masking as passing in response to autism-related stigma (Pearson & Rose, 2021; Petrolini et al., 2023). Social identity theory asserts that one’s identity and self-perceptions are situationally dependent, leading to different aspects of identity being emphasised depending on the social group context. When an individual, or their social group, is stigmatised they attempt to maintain a positive sense of self through modifying their identity and group associations (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). Where neurotypicality is perceived as a higher-status group, autistic people may attempt to obtain membership to this group by passing as neurotypical, hiding aspects of their autistic identity through masking. Perry et al. (2022) investigated the association between autistic masking and stigma by applying a social identity theory framework. 223 autistic adults self-reported levels of camouflaging, stigmatised status and use of social identity management strategies. Camouflaging was found to be a predicted consequence of autism-related stigma showing that camouflaging was a response to othering and pressure to conform.

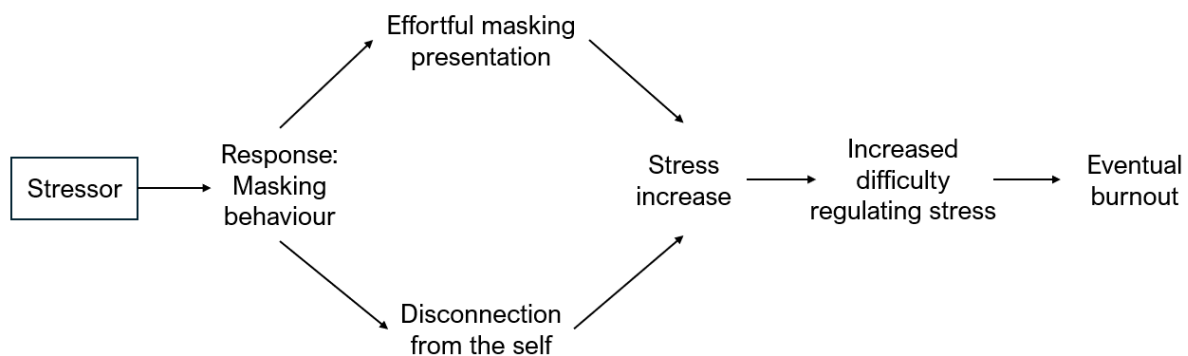
To further understand the negative impact that masking, as a form of passing, has on emotional wellbeing, Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019) apply Disconnect Theory (Ragins, 2008). It is proposed that by altering behaviour to conceal stigmatised identities (i.e. masking) one’s self-presentations across contexts become disconnected, leading to stress and identity fragmentation. Empirical support for this was garnered by Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019) who found that adults who camouflaged highly or partially between formal and interpersonal contexts showed higher symptoms of stress and anxiety than those who were considered ‘low camouflagers’.

Building upon Cage and Troxell-Whitman’s (2019) findings, Pearson and Rose (2021) argue that discrepancies between the self and masking presentations lead to cognitive dissonance which when continuing to mask through is proposed to increase stress and draw significantly upon psychological resources. Pearson and Rose (2021) also recognise the

relevance of Emotional Labor Theory to account for emotional suppression within the masking phenomenon. The authors propose that these factors contribute towards negative wellbeing outcomes, like autistic burnout, that result from masking. Figure 1 shows this proposed relationship in which a stressor (such as stigma) provides motivation for a masking response which is effortful to sustain, increases disconnection from the self which, along with the effort required to maintain the presentation, raises stress levels. Regulation of stress becomes increasingly difficult due to emotional suppression and disconnection from internal cues, eventually leading to autistic burnout.

Figure 1

Adapted from Pearson and Rose (2021).



Petrolini et al. (2023) caution against overstretching the analogy between autistic masking and passing to avoid conceptualising the phenomenon too narrowly, arguing that it does not reflect masking in all instances. Passing relates to concealing core aspects of identity and therefore being autistic would need to be “integral to one’s identity”. Although true for some, this might not be the case for all autistic individuals who mask. Furthermore, masking as passing wouldn’t account for those who don’t hold a stigmatised identity, such as those not yet diagnosed with autism, or indeed for individuals who identify as neurotypical and still mask (Miller et al., 2021). Although it is possible that these individuals hold another stigmatised aspect of their identity other than being autistic.

4.4 Impression Management & Self-Monitoring

Impression Management, taken from another area of Goffman’s work (1959), has been connected to masking by various authors (Ai et al., 2022; Hull et al., 2019). Impression management, also described as self-monitoring (Jorgenson et al., 2020), represents a generally experienced human motivation to monitor and adapt behaviour to foster positive

impressions of the self in others. Ai et al. (2022) recognise that autistic individuals are not alone in carefully monitoring and modifying their behaviour during social interactions and therefore argue that the masking of autistic traits is a specific form of a broader human experience of impression management. This conceptualisation of masking is relevant to autistic and non-autistic groups who mask reflecting a more universal view of masking (Miller et al., 2021). The motivations of masking and impression management are similar across neurotypes including desire for friendship, facilitating acceptance, and mitigating thwarted belonging and stigmatised identity (Ai et al., 2022). Ai et al. (2022) argue that masking being a form of impression management explains why measures of masking (CAT-Q) do not reliably differentiate between autistic and non-autistic experiences, particularly in CYP as demonstrated by Jorgenson et al. (2020). The conceptualisations of masking as impression management and as passing overlap significantly, especially as avoidance of stigma through self-monitoring and adjusting identity.

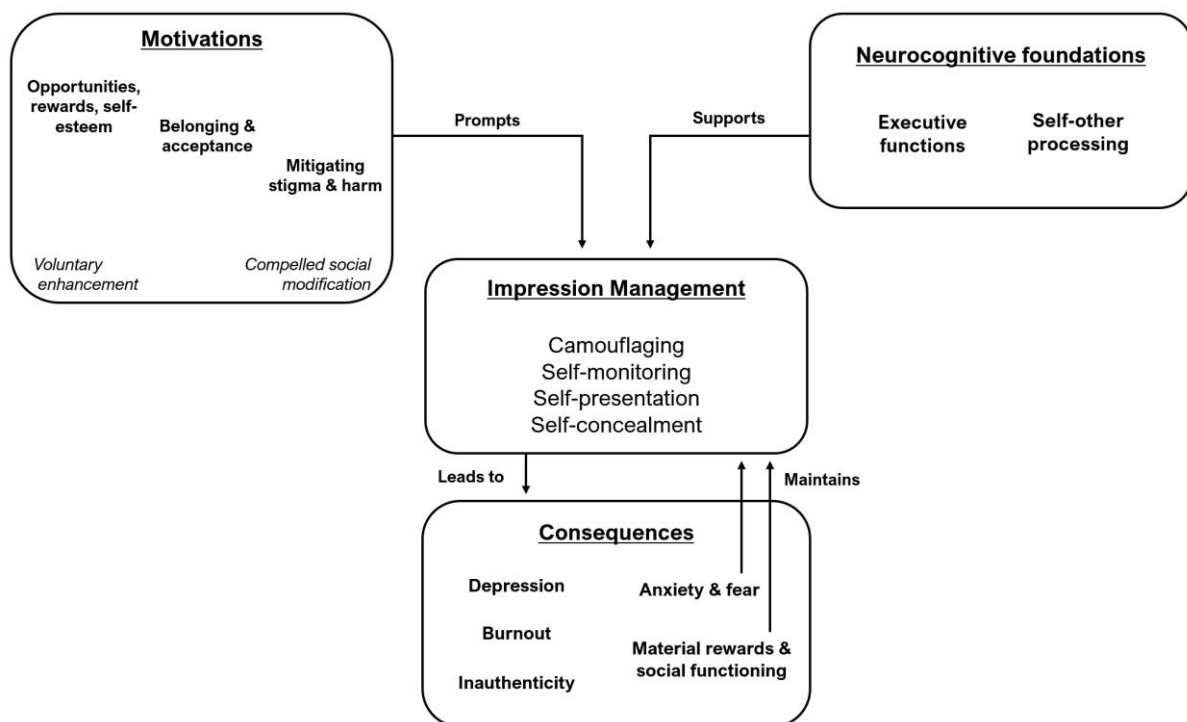
Impression management is explained by Goffman (1959) through a dramaturgical analogy of performance in which the ‘actor’ (person engaging in masking) manages their behaviour for an ‘audience’ (Ai et al., 2022). Depending on the context, certain presentations are shown by the individual, particularly in line with a desired self-image, whilst other traits that would disrupt this performance are suppressed. This requires self-monitoring and regulation of the discrepancies between presentations and the concealment of aspects of identity. As is consistent with descriptions of masking above, the actor conforms to social expectations and uses impression management as a coping response to stigmatisation, aligning with qualitative accounts of masking (Hull et al., 2017). Experiences and motivations for impression management exist on a spectrum from voluntary self-enhancement to compelled social modification. Marginalised groups, such as autistic individuals, may experience more social pressure to use impression management (i.e. mask; Ai et al., 2022).

Bernardin et al. (2021a) assert that self-monitoring is a typical part of identity formation beginning as young as six years old which, as children age and are exposed to more complex social landscapes, becomes an increasingly active process as they attempt to form connections and an identity. To consider self-monitoring as part of the masking phenomenon explains why increased levels of masking are reported in young people regardless of diagnosis (Jorgenson et al. 2020). Masking, as a form of self-monitoring and impression management, may be particularly active in pre-adulthood (Bernardin et al., 2021b), which has direct relevance to the practice of educational psychologists.

Figure 2., adapted from Ai et al. (2022), shows a multilevel framework that maps camouflaging onto impression management and other related constructs in the centre. Possible motivations that feed into impression management are shown. Marginalised groups, including autistic individuals, experience less choice and for whom impression management is more compelled. Neurocognitively, Ai et al. (2022) hypothesise that shifting between self-presentations as part of impression management requires executive functioning capacity (e.g. flexibility, inhibition, working memory or planning). Although impression management relates to some social benefits, it is also associated with negative consequences as shown below. A bi-directional relationship is shown in which consequences (positive and negative) can reinforce and maintain impression management/camouflaging.

Figure 2

Adapted from Ai et al. (2022)



Ai et al. (2022) recognise that some aspects of autistic impression management are unique. Because autistic individuals function within a broadly neurotypical world, they experience less neurotypical favourability. Furthermore, due to the social communication difficulties they experience, impression management may be less intuitive and more effortful for autistic individuals than for other marginalised but non-autistic people. Considering these differences, some autism unique experiences of impression management are proposed by Ai et al. (2022) within the following areas:

Motivations:

- Bidirectional misunderstanding between individuals;
- Power Imbalance;
- Compelled to act without complete understanding of neurotypical conventions;
- Differences in social processing and needs;

Neurocognitive foundations:

- Recruitment of alternative neurocognitive routes;
- Aspects of autistic cognition with hinder impression management processing;

Consequences:

- Endure greater psychological toll;
- Social skills interventions could have further repercussions.

Authenticity

Tied to impression and stigma management is the construct of authenticity. Stigmatised groups can be compelled to conceal the true self through masking processes, which is considered to contrast with authentic self-presentation. The act of camouflaging has been associated with subjective feelings of inauthenticity, feeling deceptive (Hull et al., 2017) and interfering with identity formation (Miller et al., 2021).

According to Bernardin et al., (2021a) the construct of self-monitoring has previously been associated with positive wellbeing and helping individuals to alleviate loneliness. However, in their own research the authors found that camouflaging, which has been considered akin to self-monitoring, was associated with negative mental health conditions in both autistic and non-autistic adolescents. Therefore, Bernardin et al., (2021a) suggest that this difference in outcomes is where the constructs of self-monitoring and camouflaging could diverge, and that feelings of authenticity mediate this relationship between self-monitoring and wellbeing; when authenticity is high self-monitoring is positively related to wellbeing, possibly by affording the individual the benefits of impression management behaviours without an impact on sense of self. Conversely, camouflaging may involve concealing aspects of the self to a greater extent therefore being associated with lowered authenticity and resulting in more negative consequences for wellbeing.

Cook et al. (2023) asked autistic adults to qualitatively contrast experiences of camouflaging with authentic-feeling socialising. In contrast to camouflaging, feelings of authenticity were fostered by understanding and accepting qualities in others, and were associated with decreased self-monitoring plus increased self-disclosure of needs and

differences. Consequently, authentic interactions were less emotionally and cognitively demanding, leading to increased feelings of connection. In a separate study (Chapman et al., 2022), autistic teenagers reported feeling able to be their most authentic self around other autistic individuals and where sense of belonging was high. Therefore, authentic self-expression may be an alternative to masking when the environment suits the individual.

These findings align with broader interpersonal research beyond the autism-focussed literature, emphasizing how crucial social contexts are for facilitating and supporting feelings of authenticity, and likely reducing masking, particularly amongst those with stigmatized identities (Ryan & Ryan, 2019). Cook et al. (2023) highlight the systemic and interactional nature of masking; rather than just being a within person phenomenon it is also the product of actions of the social partner and context, which either increases or alleviates pressure to mask. Amongst autistic individuals this is understood through the quality of mixed-neurotype interactions as the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012).

4.5 Anxiety & Safety Behaviours

The association between masking and anxiety has been reported throughout the literature but a directional relationship between the two is yet to be established by largely cross-sectional research. Some accounts position anxiety as a consequence of engaging in masking behaviour (Hull et al., 2017) whereas others suggest that masking could be driven by high levels of social anxiety (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019) through increased self-awareness of how one presents (Petrolini et al., 2023) recalling ideas of masking as extreme self-monitoring. Social anxiety also manifests in similar ways to masking, including rehearsing conversations before they occur or moderating the use of eye contact.

In qualitative descriptions by autistic adolescents, social anxiety drove the development of masking which was described by participants as less volitional and more an anxiety response (Chapman et al., 2022). The association between camouflaging and internalising mental health symptoms, like anxiety and depression, was investigated quantitatively by Bernardin et al. (2021a) in which 140 autistic and non-autistic adolescents completed measures of autistic traits, camouflaging and internalising symptoms. Camouflaging behaviours were found across both groups and was associated with anxiety and depression for both autistic and non-autistic adolescents. The authors note that camouflaging might lead to poorer mental health, but equally, poor mental health could prompt individuals to camouflage; those experiencing anxiety might monitor their behaviour more closely around others which drives masking behaviour.

The association between masking behaviours and anxiety has led some to question the construct validity of masking, and whether masking can instead be understood as anxiety safety behaviours (Fombonne, 2020; Williams, 2022). In Clark and Wells' (1995) cognitive model of social anxiety, safety behaviours are strategies that are used in perceived socially threatening situations with the aim of eliminating social evaluation threats. These are similar to masking strategies in that both masking and safety behaviours share the motivation of presenting in line with other's expectations (Lei, et al., 2024).

Exploring this construct overlap, Lei et al. (2024) assessed levels of social anxiety, social anxiety related safety behaviours, autistic traits, and camouflaging behaviours using questionnaires in 115 autistic and non-autistic adolescents. *Masking* (subcomponent of social camouflaging) was significantly associated with levels of social anxiety rather than autistic traits. The authors suggest that camouflaging is analogous to increased self-focussed attention central to cognitive models of social anxiety. These findings indicate that amongst CYP, masking serves as an anxiety-driven coping strategy to avoid negative evaluation. Whilst the authors propose that this mechanism is not autism-specific, they note that the cognitive effort is uniquely compounded for autistic individuals by factors such as a reduced tolerance for uncertainty and the double empathy problem within predominantly neurotypical social contexts. Bernardin et al. (2021a) also highlight that internalising symptoms, like anxiety, are higher in autistic groups which could contribute to increased masking in these groups.

4.6 Counter dispositional behaviour

A novel conceptual relationship not yet made in the literature is proposed here between masking and counter-dispositional acting amongst school pupils. The traits of extraversion and introversion have attracted frequent attention in the field of personality research but often overlooked by educational psychology according to Godfrey and Koutsouris (2024) who qualitatively explored school experiences of 11 students with an introverted personality style. The findings reflected many aspects of masking, particularly in relation to acting counter to one's personality.

It was noted that an extravert ideal exists within schools which stigmatises more introverted personalities. The introverted pupils in Godfrey & Koutsouris' (2024) study felt pressure to conform and experienced anxious emotions in the school environment. Akin to descriptions of masking, these pupils attempted to hide their authentic presentations through counter-dispositional acting which, like masking, can result in reduced feelings of authenticity and increased tiredness (Jacques-Hamilton et al., 2019). Counter-dispositional behaviour of introverted school pupils has many similarities to descriptions of masking as an attempt to alter

the external presentation in response to stigma resulting in feelings of inauthenticity and exhaustion (Hull et al., 2017) and offers a novel and overlooked way for educational psychologists to understand school-based masking.

4.7 Summarising and Integrating Theoretical Accounts

The above sections have explored conceptual accounts of masking as social camouflaging, compensation, passing, impression management, anxiety safety behaviours, and as counter dispositional behaviour. Those described each emphasise different characteristics of masking and in doing so associate the phenomenon with different groups based on gender, autism diagnosis, identity and mental health. It is important to evaluate these perspectives so that when applied to CYP clarity on the school-based masking construct can be gained.

Despite emphasising different aspects, these accounts are not mutually exclusive and ultimately present substantial conceptual overlap, which is highlighted here. There is consistency in the motivations and behaviours of social camouflaging, compensation, passing, impression management, anxiety safety behaviours and counter-dispositional behaviour. Furthermore, these accounts consistently point towards masking being particularly experienced by CYP who have (or perceive) stigmatised or marginalised identities including, but likely not limited to, CYP with neurodevelopmental conditions (Livingston & Happé, 2017) including autism (Hull et al., 2017), mental health conditions like anxiety (Lei et al., 2024) or introverted personality styles (Godfrey & Koutsouris, 2024). All accounts suggest that these CYP are motivated by ubiquitous desires to be perceived positively by others in line with an ideal self as well as to avoid negative social harm, utilising a variety of behaviours to adjust how they present to others. Masking appears to occupy an extreme position on a continuum of behavioural adaptation that is a common human experience but associated with being more compelled than voluntary (Ai et al, 2022; Chapman et al., 2022) and associated with low feelings of authenticity and negative outcomes for wellbeing. Specific aspects from the separate conceptualisations are also aligned, such as increased self-monitoring within impression management (Bernardin et al., 2021a) resembling heightened self-awareness as a facet of anxiety (Petrolini et al., 2023).

Therefore, each of the conceptualisations described is deemed an account of the same broad phenomenon. Individual theoretical accounts can be applied to understand motivations, aims and consequences of masking for specific CYP and circumstances. For example, masking can be viewed through the lens of compensation (Livingston & Happé, 2017) to understand cognitive strategies employed by a child to mask their difficulties and the depth at

which these occur; or as passing (Perry et al., 2022) and impression management (Ai et al., 2022) to highlight the social pressure and stigma the child might perceive in relation to this difficulty which motivates them to mask by putting on an ‘performance’. The specific difficulty or difference which the child perceives to be stigmatised might be their personality (Godfrey & Koutsouris, 2024) which they seek to adjust through counter-dispositional behaviour, behaviours which might also be represent anxiety safety behaviour in response to heightened levels of social anxiety and perceived social threat (Lei et al., 2024).

5.0 Relevant Factors to School-based Masking

This section explores empirical research findings with relevance to school-based masking. Appendix A shows the ten papers which were identified in the literature review with particular relevance to school-based masking and which are focused on in this section of the literature review. Only limited research has investigated masking in a school-based context. The identified research has also sampled limited groups of CYP, particularly autistic, adolescent female pupils. Therefore, findings from the adult literature are provided to develop a more comprehensive picture of each domain. Findings amongst studies with adults cannot necessarily be applied to CYP (Petrolini et al., 2023) as some research suggests developmental changes in masking (Jorgenson, 2020). However, in a systematic review of camouflaging for both autistic adults and youth, Klein et al. (2025) concluded that autistic adults and youth experience broadly similar motivations, strategies and consequences.

This section is organised into the following areas based on the pertinent themes identified within the literature to present a holistic account of school-based masking, from motivations to intervention:

- Motivations for masking;
- Masking behaviours;
- Context for Masking;
- How masking impacts the individual;
- Masking as perceived and influenced by adults;
- Supporting children who mask in school

5.1 Motivations for Masking

It is important to review motivations of masking to understand what personal factors drive the phenomenon. Qualitative self-report studies with autistic adults (Cook et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2019) identify a variety of motivations for masking such as:

- social pressure to conform and meeting perceived social expectations;

- the desire to feel accepted;
- the avoidance of stigma, bullying, isolation and mistreatment from others that would otherwise occur if the 'unmasked' self is presented;
- achieving personal goals, such as obtaining employment;
- and facilitating the formation and maintenance of relationships.

In a systematic review, Klein et al. (2025) concluded that the motivations amongst CYP are broadly consistent with those in adults. However, the school environment which generally affords CYP less agency than adults present unique drivers, including academic masking (Halsall et al., 2021). The motivations for specifically school-based masking are organised here into the following categories: social, academic and emotional to reflect themes in the school-based masking literature, although these are recognised to overlap and be interconnected. For example, the social motivation to avoid bullying or mask academic difficulties could link to emotional motivations and sense of belonging.

Social Motivations

Social motivations to mask in school can be framed as either seeking positive experiences (e.g. facilitating positive relationships with peers) or avoiding negative ones, like avoiding social harm. However, the line between these is often unclear. Examples of seeking positive outcomes from masking amongst autistic adolescent females included seeking social acceptance, fitting in amongst peers and making friends at school (Cook et al., 2018; Halsall et al., 2021; Nelson & Lichwa, 2025). This was similarly found in interviews with non-autistic adolescents in general contexts (Bernardin et al., 2021b). This is understandable given that adolescence in particular is characterised by increased self-awareness and consideration of how the self is viewed by others, which Jorgenson et al. (2020) propose drives increased masking in adolescents regardless of diagnosis. It was also noted by Bernardin et al. (2021b) that some non-autistic individuals camouflaged to help others feel included, such as forcing laughter at other's jokes.

On the other hand, masking is more strongly linked to the preventing of harm. Bernardin et al. (2021b) report that avoiding negative perceptions and bullying motivated both autistic and non-autistic adolescents to mask, but autistic participants were more likely to frame masking solely as harm avoidance. For some this consisted of specifically hiding autistic traits or an autism diagnosis from peers. Amongst autistic adolescent girls, motivations included avoiding bullying or humiliation and response to perceived pressure to present like their peers or else face social isolation (Halsall et al., 2021; Pearson et al., 2025a). Autistic school pupils reported fear of negative evaluations from peers and bullying should they present the true self

(Atkinson et al., 2025; Lynam et al. 2024), some of whom had previously experienced bullying when showing the true self and so masking was a purposeful and learned strategy to avoid this in the future. Atkinson et al., (2025) report an internalised sense of stigma amongst the autistic school pupils which drove masking and the sense that it is easier to hide difficulties from others than express them. These descriptions of masking in education as social coping strategies developed to avoid bullying and negative evaluation align with masking as the avoidance of stigma.

Academic Masking

Masking motivations can also be academic in nature, a unique aspect of masking in the school-based masking literature. In Goscicki et al. (2025) autistic teenage girls reported camouflaging to look “smarter” and Halsall et al. (2021) report that camouflaging extended beyond purely social interactions into learning behaviours. Girls were seen to hide their academic difficulties from peers and adults, and it was noted that the pressure to do so increased as academic demands did so. This broadens the concept of masking beyond the hiding of autistic identity for the sake of social communication to encapsulate the concealment of academic challenges within school to manage social reputation.

A negative cycle relationship between self-presentation, anxiety, and learning was recognised by mothers and educators; in trying to camouflage their difficulties with learning, the girls experienced increased anxiety, disrupting learning and leading to further academic challenges. It is reasonable to assume that, as academic difficulties are not exclusively experienced by autistic girls, other children mask their academic challenges in school. Another potentially unique aspect of school-based masking is the greater reliance CYP have on adults, as part of their development and when coping with challenge. Atkinson et al (2025) report that some students observed that teachers were too busy to help them develop their confidence therefore leaving masking as the alternative coping strategy left to them.

Emotional Masking

It has been noted that some CYP mask their emotional difficulties from others so as not to stand out (Lei et al., 2024). Flett et al. (2018) describe CYP who conceal their distress in the context of education behind a façade and rarely seek help or confide in others. This is linked to CYP who experience high levels of self-consciousness or self-monitoring who match their outward presentation depending on the context in a way that might not show the ‘real self’.

Belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) is another relevant emotional factor to understand school-based masking. School belonging is a “multidimensional construct related to a student’s affiliation to their school” (Atkinson et al., 2025. p. 2) and relates to feeling

accepted, respected, and supported at school (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Qualitative reports by autistic adolescents link a low sense of school belonging to fear of being disliked or feeling unable to be oneself and a consequent need to conceal difficulties and differences (Atkinson et al., 2025; Nelson & Lichwa, 2025). This was supported quantitatively by Atkinson et al. (2025) who found a significant mediation relationship, in which low feelings of school belonging prompted CYP to camouflage, with a knock-on effect of increased anxiety.

Masking Broad Aspects of Identity

Beyond masking of domain specific aspects of identity, CYP mask broader aspects of identity such as class, gender and personality (Chapman et al., 2022; Halsall et al., 2021). It is possible that CYP who engage in school-based masking conceal various difficulties or differences simultaneously and that these incidences of masking could accumulate, transcending the social, academic and emotional domains presented here, so that a broader sense of identity is masked. This might also be the case when masked autism is central to one's autistic identity (Sedgewick et al., 2022). This possibility aligns with masking as disruptive to identity formation (Miller et al., 2021).

5.2 Masking Behaviours

This section explores the behaviours and strategies that constitute school-based masking. Further examples of masking behaviours are provided in section 3.0. In a systematic review Klein et al. (2025) summarise these behaviours amongst autistic CYP using Hull and colleagues (2019) camouflaging model: CYP demonstrate *compensation* behaviours including imitation, copying facial expressions, and researching behaviour to use. Reported *masking* behaviours include faking understanding during conversation. Lastly, *assimilation* behaviours include changing their personality amongst certain individuals and adapting the language they use. Specific examples of school-based masking behaviours are discussed below and are summarised as behaving in unnatural or uncomfortable ways at school (Pearson et al., 2025a).

Parent participants in Cook et al. (2018) viewed masking of autistic characteristics as partially successful, helping them to fit in and cope in some school-based situations. This ranged from the girls adapting their speech to changing their personality. However, Halsall et al. (2021) found that the strategies used by autistic girls were inconsistently effective. The autistic girls commented on self-developed camouflaging behaviours, but parents recognised that these were sometimes unsophisticated or not flexible enough. Some simpler strategies were identified, such as attempting to appear busy on their phone. By contrast more complex strategies were identified such as pre-planning conversation scripts, camouflaging interests that might be deemed immature by others, and researching more normative interaction styles

to use. These descriptions align with Livingston and colleagues' (2019) descriptions of *shallow* and *deep* compensation strategies. These findings not only highlight the heterogeneity of masking strategies, but also the variability in success of masking, an insight gained through the Halsall and colleague's (2021) multi-informant approach that provided adult's observational perspectives. For those CYP who mask less successfully, it is reasonable to assume that they nonetheless experience the negative effects of engaging in masking behaviour but with the added consequence of failing to avoid negative experiences such as bullying.

5.3 Context for Masking

This section explores the contextual influences on masking which are a pivotal factor seeing as the phenomenon is motivated by desire to fit in. Atkinson et al. (2025) concluded that environmental and relational factors influence camouflaging in school over within person factors. Contextual factors are especially important for school-aged CYP who typically navigate and transition between two systems foundational for their development: the home and school (Dowling & Osborne, 1994).

Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019) propose that individuals utilise context-specific information to inform their actions and outward presentation, leading to varying self-presentations through camouflaging, meaning that masking behaviour is likely mediated by whether the child is in the home or school context (Petrolini et al., 2023). Research indicates that the immediate environment directly influences masking motivations and difficulty. Adults reported increased pressures to compensate when meeting new people and those who possess good social skills themselves, an effect retrospectively noted to be stronger in adolescence (Livingston et al., 2019). Increased sensory or social demands also limited individuals' ability to mask effectively. Contexts where individuals felt a reduced need to mask were with family and friends, where there were greater similarities with an interaction partner, and when in the context of people who accept and understand them. A similar pattern has been noted between the home and school contexts for autistic CYP (Goscicki et al., 2025; Halsall et al., 2021). Autistic teenage girls self-report increased camouflaging in mainstream classes alongside neurotypical peers and least in the home context. Specifically, these respondents camouflaged most to adults and peers they did not know as well. The home and family contexts were reportedly a "haven" contrasted with the school context which required the girls to "perform".

The type of school context has also been identified as a moderating factor in CYP's masking. A comparison between mainstream and specialist settings was made by Cook et al. (2018) who identified that the autistic female participants engaged in more masking in

mainstream settings. The girls in Halsall and colleagues' (2021) attended both an additional resource base and mainstream classes and adults perceived that the need to camouflage was lower in the former compared to the latter, although the girls themselves reported camouflaging in all school contexts. These findings demonstrate changes to school environments reduce or increase the perceived need to mask.

Halsall et al. (2021) demonstrate the influential role different adults play across contexts, highlighting primarily a shared consensus amongst parents, TAs and autistic girls of a reliance upon TAs. The girls masked most when interacting with class teachers which was perceived to inhibit class teachers from fully understanding the girls' needs, creating a gap between what a child seems capable of and the girls' own sense of self-efficacy. However, the TAs acted as mediators between the girls' needs and the class teacher's expectations because of strong, understanding relationships between them and the girls. Therefore, it appears that support staff can play an important role in bridging the relational gap between masking CYP and class teachers. These studies which investigate masking in specialist school settings are helpful for showing that these contexts can reduce levels of masking in CYP (Cook et al., 2018; Halsall et al., 2021). A limitation, however, is that they do not represent most children who are educated solely in mainstream contexts.

Masking might not arise due to the influence of immediate context, but also in response to broader socio-cultural demands. In their research on masking by black autistic girls in education, Nelson and Lichwa (2025) apply Disability Critical Race Theory to interrogate power and influence that operates within the education system to drive masking, such as the idea of 'normalcy'. To avoid being excluded, the girls reported feeling compelled to suppress or reshape their authentic self in response to societal norms that operate within the school, including racial, gender and neurotypical norms. This captures an important factor seldom referenced in the literature but highlighted by Chapman et al. (2022) that masking can occur at the intersection of societal demands on different aspects of (potentially stigmatised) identity including race and gender.

The findings described in this section show expected differences in masking behaviour between the home and school contexts. However, different patterns of masking can occur. Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019) qualitatively examined the relationship between self-reported camouflaging across 'formal' (such as with colleagues) and 'interpersonal' (such as with family or friends) contexts in adults. 68 participants engaged in little camouflaging, 78 individuals camouflaged highly across contexts, and 78 switched between levels of camouflaging depending on context. The latter reflects many experiences detailed in school-

based masking research (Cook et al., 2018; Goscicki et al., 2025; Halsall et al., 2021) but Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019) found an equally large group of adults who camouflage highly in all contexts. Previous studies have relied upon differences in presentation and levels of masking between the home and school to understand school-based masking (Putnam et al., 2024; Halsall et al., 2021) but some children might present consistently across these contexts, but are nonetheless still engaging in more pervasive masking, and may not be identified as such when adults look out for changes in presentation.

5.4 How Masking Impacts the Individual

A substantial portion of the masking literature is directed towards the consequences of masking for the individual employing masking strategies. Below the positive and negative consequences of masking are explored in detail.

Positive Consequences

Positive consequences frame masking as an adaptive coping mechanism (Petrolini et al., 2023). Amongst adults the following is reported. Camouflaging helped autistic individuals feel more confident and a greater sense of control during interactions (Hull et al., 2017), affords individuals' greater access to social contexts, and enables them to develop relationships with others (Bradley et al. 2021). These advantages were viewed through the neurodiversity paradigm in which autistic individuals are obliged to function within environments suited towards neurotypicality and camouflaging can afford them access to neurotypical advantages (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Bradley et al. (2021) report greater resilience as a result of camouflaging for some, allowing individuals to feel more confident and to cope in situations. Petrolini et al. (2023) assert that distinguishing between positive "internal" and "external" consequences of masking is difficult because of their reciprocal effects on each other. For example, increased social contact because of masking might alleviate loneliness and improve overall wellbeing.

Livingston and colleagues (2019) considered 'deep compensation' to result in lasting improvements in social cognition and 'could become "second nature" with time' (p. 770). Compensation was reportedly a worthwhile process for some individuals by increasing opportunities for employment, confidence and connection with others. Some respondents recognised that despite these benefits, respite from engaging in compensation was necessary. Compensation was retrospectively seen by participants to support academic success in school. For some the use of compensatory strategies led to improvements in quality of life from childhood to adulthood as social situations became more manageable via compensation.

Similar findings are reflected in research with CYP in an educational context. Masking is perceived by some CYP in the context of education to support them in achieving their interpersonal goals (Klein et al., 2025) and was reported to lead to increased friendships for some girls (Pearson et al., 2025a). Some autistic girls preferred to not be labelled and so masking their autistic identity could help them feel included in some friendship groups. Sometimes masking offered a solution to social difficulties helping girls to fit in and form relationships, but it did not fully alleviate social communication difficulties (Cook et al., 2018) and did not necessarily increase feelings of belonging because it was an inauthentic self rather than the *true self* that became included (Pearson et al., 2025a).

Examples of masking being socially protective are reported, being seen by autistic female teenage participants as essential for navigating otherwise inhospitable school environments and avoiding bullying (Goscicki et al., 2025; Halsall et al., 2021). Fitting in with idealised neurotypical interaction styles (including factors like eye-contact and small talk) were seen as essential for achieving life goals, although often in response to bullying and pressure to conform from a young age (Livingston et al., 2019). Adults who reported being unable to mask, both autistic and non-autistic, experienced increased victimisation and bullying (Miller et al., 2021). Bradley and colleagues (2021) question whether these reportedly 'positive' consequences of masking represent thriving or surviving. In both adult (Miller et al., 2021; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019) and school settings (Halsall et al., 2021) escape from bullying, discrimination and from stigma were consequences of masking. Bradley et al. (2021) consider these to be experiences of 'survival' and escape from harm rather than positive consequences. These findings suggest that individuals experience a social expectation to adapt and mask in order to simply gain acceptance and, at worst, avoid harm. This characterises masking as often compelled rather than elective self-improvement behaviour.

Negative Consequences

Engaging in and maintaining masking is reported as stressful and exhausting for autistic and non-autistic adults resulting in the need for recovery time following social situations, or ultimately leading to burnout (Bradley et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021). In both groups, one's sense of authentic identity is affected as individuals report a loss of sense of self and disconnection with others, described by Livingston et al., (2019) as a performance that results in an uncertain or diminished sense of self. Further consequences reported by Bradley et al. (2021) are physical ill health, emotional 'meltdown' and consequent degradation of mental health, particularly feelings of depression and anxiety. Bradley et al. (2021) discuss the concept of "when the masks slips" (p. 325) leading others to perceive behaviour changes in the

individual which can negatively disrupt relationships. Hull et al. (2021) demonstrated the association between masking and poor mental health for autistic adults; scores of generalised anxiety, social anxiety and depression were significantly positively predicted by levels of camouflaging.

The impact of contextual masking and outcomes was investigated by Cage & Troxell-Whitman, (2019) who found that autistic adults who camouflaged across all or some contexts experienced significantly higher stress than those who did not engage in camouflaging behaviour. The authors propose that the self-regulation required to camouflage is draining and contributes to disconnection from one's identity. Crucially, anxiety was higher in persistent camouflagers compared to those who switched between levels of camouflaging across contexts, suggesting that the latter pattern offers protective 'unmasking' opportunities to relieve some level of distress.

Unmasking as a protective factor reflects qualitative accounts which depended upon access to a safe space to authentically express one's identity (Hull et al., 2017). Livingston and colleagues (2019) reported that individuals who balanced the use of compensatory strategies with seeking suitable and compatible environments for their characteristics had the best outcomes. Although the home and other locations might offer CYP a safe space to unmask, they likely have less agency than adults to choose and adapt their environments whilst in school, presenting them with a unique challenge.

The literature that explores school-based masking reflects the findings described in adults, focussing most heavily on the negative consequences of masking. Halsall et al. (2021) identified consequences of camouflaging in education that are wide ranging including impacting social interaction, learning and mental health. Cook et al., (2018) propose that masking of difficulties led to the internalisation of problems, reflecting the association between masking and internalised mental health problems like depression and anxiety in adolescents (Bernardin, 2021). Autistic girls who mask in school have reported this to be cognitively draining subsequently leading to feelings of exhaustion, anxiousness and potentially burnout (Goscicki et al., 2025; Pearson et al., 2025a). Halsall et al. (2021) found that engaging in camouflaging could induce further anxiety as the CYP experienced uncertainty and worry about whether their attempts to camouflage had been successful.

In addition to internalisation, the consequence of externalised distress, colloquially called 'meltdowns', is highlighted in the school-based masking literature. This is reported to occur commonly when a child moves from a context of high masking into a context where they feel able to unmask and express their distress, such as moving from a mainstream class to a

specialist hub within a school or transitioning from the school to home context (Bassett, 2022; Halsall et al., 2021). Emotional dysregulation after masking has also been associated with consequent exhaustion (Halsall et al., 2021) and limitations to impulse control (Dighton & McAloon, 2026).

Masking in school can lead to a loss of identity alongside feelings of inauthenticity and dishonesty (Bernardin et al., 2021b; Goscicki et al., 2025; Halsall et al., 2021) impacting identity formation in CYP (Jorgenson et al., 2020). There is a desire for CYP to be seen for their authentic selves, but social pressure and lack of understanding of their needs drives masking behaviour; some autistic girls reported subsequent self-blame following masking for not being understood by others. (Pearson et al., 2025a). Experiencing a strong and positive autistic identity was a protective factor against identity loss (Goscicki et al., 2025) but this raises questions around the impact of masking for CYP who do not have an autistic identity with which to bolster their sense of self who may need additional support with developing a positive sense of self and confidence. A sense of internal conflict that CYP experience is expanded upon by Goscicki et al. (2025) and Halsall et al. (2021): some autistic female participants reported feeling not quite “normal enough” to fit in but not feeling different enough to not want to integrate in mainstream setting.

Klein et al. (2025) recognise that mental health issues can be motivators and consequences of masking behaviour. Although qualitative research suggests that camouflaging contributes towards the development and maintenance of mental health problems (Hull et al., 2017), the direction of causal relationships between masking and mental health conditions has not been determined and could flow in the reverse direction (Hull et al., 2021; Cage & Troxell-Whitman., 2019). This recalls the conceptualisation of masking as anxiety safety behaviours.

The final negative consequence of school-based masking presented here is the increased risk of unmet needs. Amongst adults, the masking of difficulties can lead to needs being unnoticed and invalidated by others (Livingston et al., 2019). This effect is particularly important for CYP in context of education who are more reliant upon adults to understand their needs and respond. It is noted by Cook et al. (2018) that masking led to delays in parents and teachers identifying children’s needs and therefore missed opportunities for educational support or diagnosis (Cook et al., 2018). Pearson et al. (2025a) report that autistic girls frequently found it difficult to stop masking in school which resulted in staff and peers being less able to understand their needs and notice their emotional or psychological distress. Because others failed to appreciate the concealed difficulties the girls faced, they

demonstrated lowered responsiveness and the girls were less likely to receive support and have their emotional needs met. Pearson et al. (2025a) argue that masking reduces access to support systems and presents safeguarding concerns for staff's ability to understand pupil needs and respond appropriately.

To conclude this section, masking has variable consequences for individual CYP. Summerhill and Summers (2025) conducted a systematic literature review of quantitative and qualitative research into the consequences of camouflaging for autistic adults. Reflecting a dual nature of masking (Miller et al., 2021), they concluded that it affords the individual short term, positive benefits at the expense of potentially notable negative consequences. Across the literature the latter of these is most emphasised. Adaptive benefits included increased connectedness and supporting individuals to communicate in ways that were previously more difficult. These are contrasted with lasting negative consequences to mental health, challenges to an individual's identity, and delayed or misdiagnosis for autistic individuals, leading to additional consequences for wellbeing and identity as a result (Summerhill & Summers, 2025).

Some authors emphasise an adaptive view of masking. Livingston et al. (2019) conclude that the negative aspects of compensatory behaviour are over-emphasised in previous research noting that "compensation was fundamental to fulfilling life experiences" (p. 776) for adult participants, and not all CYP report negative consequences to masking (Bernardin et al., 2021b). Summerhill and Summers (2025) suggest that for some camouflaging is an adaptive social strategy that can become a natural, subconscious part of one's identity over time and not negatively impact one's mental health and wellbeing. However, in the context of education masking has been repeatedly associated with notable negative consequences for the individual CYP who engage in this behaviour, from internalised and externalised distress, loss of identity and reduced access to support. The different outcomes reported across the research reflect the heterogenous nature of the phenomenon and the different characterisations of masking taken by various researchers (Petrolini et al., 2023). Summerhill and Summers (2025) assert that practitioners, such as EPs, supporting those who mask need to consider and work to mitigate the potentially significant long-term negative effects of masking whilst bearing in mind the positive functions it can have.

5.5 Masking as Perceived & Influenced by Adults

The masking literature is dominated by self-report studies to understand the motivations, behaviours, contexts and consequences of masking, making use of qualitative interviews with CYP or quantitative self-report measures such as the CAT-Q. There are limitations to these approaches. The use of interviews with autistic adolescents, such as by

Cook et al. (2018) and Goswicki et al. (2025), requires a level of communication skills to participate, therefore underrepresenting those with greater social communication difficulties. Additionally, an interview scenario may have hindered the extent to which participants were able to express themselves given their autistic communication differences. Diverging from the rest of the research, Pearson et al. (2025a) personalised the interview process using participatory, arts-based methodologies which the authors hoped would support different ways of communicating with autistic young people. An alternative method was employed by Atkinson et al. (2025) in the use of online questionnaires to gather both quantitative (e.g., CAT-Q) and qualitative data about autistic adolescent's experiences of camouflaging in school. The authors hoped that the online survey approach would induce less pressure to mask than a face-to-face interview, therefore eliciting otherwise masked experiences. However, a fully online approach requires a certain level of literacy proficiency to participate, therefore excluding certain individuals from participation, for example those who experience academic challenges which form part of their school-based masking experience.

Whether online or in person, qualitative or quantitative, none of these approaches could fully remove the potential effect of young people masking during their participation. This is further complicated when considering that behavioural or cognitive masking strategies might be employed at a more unconscious level (Pearson & Rose, 2021; Cook et al. 2021) which is inherently difficult to investigate using self-report measures. Furthermore, younger children are excluded from investigation using these methods as they might be less conscious of their masking and less able to engage in necessary introspection (Petrolini et al., 2023). It is therefore helpful to review research which considers masking from the perspectives of adults.

Using playground observations, Dean et al. (2017) found that the social challenges of autistic elementary-school girls were less obvious than those of autistic boys. The female social landscape, in which girls stayed in close proximity allowing for superficial access to social opportunities, was deemed to facilitate masking, whereas boys were more obviously separated from the more structured play of male peers. Consistent with the camouflage hypothesis, Dean et al. (2017) concluded that the social communication difficulties of girls in particular can be masked leading to reduced likelihood of receiving support.

The one study to sample teacher perspectives of children masking did so quantitatively, comparing parent and teacher ratings of autistic traits for children aged 4-18 (Putnam et al., 2024). Discrepancies were noted between parental and teacher ratings of autistic traits, with parents of autistic female children rating their child as having significantly more autistic traits than teachers did. Putnam et al. (2024) were not directly investigating masking, but their

findings were interpreted as evidence for school-based masking. The researchers recognised the key role held by both parents and teachers in the education of children, especially those with SEN, such as contributing to individualised education plans.

Although the analysis and subsequent paper by Putnam et al. (2024) are more contemporary, the data set from which these are based was collected between 2008 and 2010. The authors point out that the children were identified as autistic based on the DSM-IV as opposed to the contemporary DSM-V, in which the diagnostic requirement of language delay was removed as well as the inclusion of sensory behaviours, which could lead to differences in how children's autistic profiles are now identified. Furthermore, changes in autism awareness and teacher training since the data was collected could affect how these results are now interpreted. For instance, lower rates of teacher-reported autistic traits could reflect a deficit in teacher awareness of autism and autistic traits amongst school children rather than active masking of these traits by the children. The authors propose that this effect may now be less prevalent due to advancements in autism research and public knowledge, as recognised by the authors.

The studies by Dean et al. (2017) and Putnam et al. (2024) do little more than to suggest the presence of masking in CYP in the context of education, contributing little to understand this phenomenon at depth. For example, within their playground observations, Dean et al. (2017) interpreted time alone as an indication of social communication difficulties related to autism. However, the authors recognised that observations could not discern the difference between this and a child being solitary because they enjoy time alone. Dean and colleague's (2017) purely observational methods do not illuminate the underlying motivations of children's solitary engagement, or indeed their masking behaviour.

Greater insight into children's masking in school is provided by qualitative approaches with parents and educators of autistic girls. Using a multi-informant approach, Halsall et al. (2021) investigated the camouflaging strategies of secondary age autistic girls attending resource bases attached to mainstream schools by gathering their experiences alongside those of their parents and educators (teaching assistants and a senior school leader). Adults in this study perceived their own efforts to support the girls could consequently encourage camouflaging through the teaching of social skills (e.g. conscious use of eye contact during conversations).

Petrolini et al. (2023) recognise the potential for masking induced by social skills interventions. Firstly, they consider that some camouflaging behaviour is more spontaneous, developing organically to mask social difficulties, such as children from a young age regularly

feigning understanding of questions by responding “yes” to in effect mask their lack of understanding. As the name suggests, socially driven camouflaging by contrast is induced by agents in the child’s environment. Petrolini et al. (2023) draw upon work by Vygotsky (1978) to observe how social regulations can become self-regulations in the development of camouflaging and that this process could be particularly active through the implementation of social skills intervention programmes in which a child is taught how to act and continues to demonstrate this as an effortfully learned response, rather than a spontaneous aspect of social communication over time. Although the extent to which this becomes ‘deep’ (automatic and nuanced) or ‘shallow’ (inflexible) depends on the individual circumstances (Ai et al., 2022; Petrolini et al., 2023).

Parents have observed how autistic girls present differently between the home and school contexts; in the latter generally quieter and subdued (Bassett, 2022). Parents recognised a range of camouflaging strategies including the use of jokes and with a complex picture of advantages and disadvantages of masking being reported (Boyle, 2022).

Not only are adult perceptions helpful for understanding masking, but they also have an influence in the phenomenon and its consequences. Nelson and Lichwa (2025) highlight that to understand masking is to consider the child’s behavioural presentation plus how that is interpreted and acted upon by others. These authors recognise the positive influence some adults have in cases of school-based masking, including the crucial role of parents in challenging marginalising practices, the value of understanding and acceptance, and the significant positive impact teachers can have on well-being by offering emotional support. However, adult influence of masking can be related to misinterpretation and dismissal of needs and distress.

The contextual basis of masking presentations might lead parents to observe increased difficulty or distress in the home compared to school, leading to a divergence in views with teachers and perceived dismissal of parental concerns. This is reflected in Cook and colleagues’ (2018) findings where girls seeming ability to cope led to scepticism from school staff about parental concerns. Parents have reported that they encounter barriers advocating for their children and feelings of frustration that their concerns for their child are devalued or dismissed by school staff leading to missed educational and social support as well as delayed diagnosis of neurodevelopmental conditions (Bassett, 2022; Boyle, 2022; Halsall et al., 2021). However, the perspectives of educational professionals were largely unrepresented in this research; the other side of this parent-professional dynamic, which appears central to school-based masking, is missing from the research.

5.6 Supporting Children who Mask in School

Given that engaging in masking behaviour is associated with negative wellbeing outcomes and reduced access to support for CYP in school, it is important to review the literature for support that can be offered to these individuals. Bernardin et al. (2021a) assert that the use of camouflaging behaviours should be investigated at an individual level to understand the unique benefits and consequences. Practitioners should take time to understand students as individuals to personalise support (Goscicki et al., 2025) and according to Summerhill and Summers (2025) practitioners should work to mitigate the potentially significant long-term negative effects of masking whilst bearing in mind the positive functions it can have.

Masking, and its association with internalisation, is viewed by Sedgewick et al. (2022) as a significant barrier to accessing support in school because needs are less likely to be recognised in the first place. Most of the strategies presented below rely upon school staff to identify needs and implement the recommended adaptations, which may be challenging in the context of needs that are masked. Some maintain that awareness of masking in education is lacking amongst school staff (Sedgewick et al., 2022). Without research into the knowledge of teaching staff knowledge, approaches currently used to support masking, or barriers to practice, it is challenging to assess fully how appropriate these recommendations are.

Training and Whole School Approaches

Based on the perspectives of students, multiple authors have identified staff awareness and knowledge of masking to be limited (Goscicki et al., 2025) and so advocate for increased training amongst school staff on neurodiversity (Bassett, 2022). Flett et al. (2018) similarly promote the need for awareness of masked mental health concerns in schools (Flett et al., 2018). Wood-Downie et al. (2021) recommend that educational psychologists should reflect gender difference trends in autism and masking in training to school staff. Sedgewick et al. (2022) advocate for increased staff awareness of masking and for an understanding of difficulties presented at home as interconnected needs across both the school and home contexts.

Pearson et al. (2025a) highlight the importance of whole school approaches that promote positive relationships, an inclusive culture, and school connectedness as a protective factor. This includes neurodiversity informed school policies that emphasise acceptance of difference (NICE, 2022). This is consistent with Bassett's (2022) proposal for increased neurodiversity acceptance in schools to increase belonging and self-advocacy and reduce the need to mask for children. To support masked emotional needs, Flett et al. (2018) advocate for

heightened awareness and normalisation of mental health difficulties and help seeking amongst CYP. However, the authors note that simply raising awareness should not be done without also providing additional support for disclosed needs.

Environmental Adjustment

Sedgewick et al. (2022) encourage school staff to be perceptive to the needs of quieter children that might otherwise be missed and to provide safe opportunities for children to ‘drop the mask’. The authors describe factors that promote masking which should be managed within schools to reduce the need to mask, including:

- Peer bullying which enforces the perception that children should blend in lest risk becoming a target.
- The operation of rules, such as where lunch must be eaten despite, for example, sensory overwhelm.
- Well-meaning adult interaction which encourages masking such as social skills interventions or providing social feedback in line with social norms.

Adolescents who engage in school-based masking have reported in multiple studies the need for time alone in school which offers opportunities to unmask and recover from the effort involved (Bassett, 2022; Bernardin et al., 2021b; Goscicki et al., 2025). Similarly, Pearson et al. (2025a) advocate for the use of respite spaces that would benefit a range of pupils in school, as well as giving pupils some agency to change their environment and distance themselves from stressors. Other adaptations that CYP report to be helpful include wearing headphones and personalised support from staff (Atkinson et al., 2025). Bassett (2022) promotes the use of proactive sensory adjustments for neurodivergent learners.

Interventions

To support emotional masking, Flett et al. (2018) propose that preventative measures are necessary, such as incorporating resilience training into the curriculum. Goscicki et al. (2025) state that teachers should “empower students to explore, identify, and communicate their autistic needs” (p. 12). Recommendations around social skills interventions are mixed, with some concerns that social skills training practically promotes masking behaviour (Lai et al., 2021). Within Goscicki et al. (2025) social skills classes were rated as less helpful by the pupil participants which the authors highlight as noteworthy, given that interventions for autistic groups often focus on social skills. Bernardin et al. (2021a) argue that teaching of social skills might benefit autistic CYP, and that these skills, which would be more naturalistic, would be distinct from masking behaviours which are driven by anxiety. Chapman et al. (2022) conclude

that social skills training for autistic CYP increase stigma and promote masking. Instead, they focus on the need for groups that foster the development of a self-acceptance and authentic identity (Bernardin et al., 2021a; Chapman et al., 2022). Professionals should exercise caution in utilising social skills interventions so as not to inadvertently promote inauthenticity and masking.

Promoting Friendship and Belonging

In their qualitative analysis of autistic pupils' belonging in relation to masking in school, Atkinson et al. (2025) identified that belonging was reduced when CYP felt that staff cared only about academic outcomes, so it is recommend that settings go beyond an academic focus to foster belonging, manage anxiety and reduce the need to mask. This could be achieved through being around people with similar differences to reduce social discomfort (Cook et al., 2018), having access to a designated safe space, experience of positive relationships with staff and peers who show kindness and empathy, (Bassett, 2022; Nelson & Lichwa, 2025) and focussing on the person rather than grades (Pearson et al., 2025a), all of which help CYP to feel they can be their true self (Atkinson et al., 2025). Parents of autistic pupils highlighted the important role school staff play and the need to build positive relationships and have a good understanding of autism (Boyle, 2022). Atkinson et al. (2025) conclude that school belonging is an important protective factor against the need to camouflage and the associated negative mental health consequences.

6.0 Conclusions to Literature Review

Connecting Theoretical Accounts to School-based Research

This section integrates the theoretical conceptualisations of masking discussed in section 4.0 with the empirical school-based masking explored in section 5.0 to draw conclusions about current knowledge of school-based masking. Previous researchers have asserted that the current masking literature lacks a unified consensus at a conceptual level (Petrolini et al., 2023) and a lack of clarity may be unhelpful for practitioners, such as EPs, working in applied school settings. Although each theoretical conceptualisation emphasises different aspects of the phenomenon, when considered together there is notable overlap. It is possible to reach an integrated understanding of masking by focussing on these commonalities, with each specific conceptualisation contributing more individualised perspectives of school-based masking that have relevance to particular instances of masking for individual CYP.

Theoretical frameworks have been largely informed by self-report studies with adults. Klein et al. (2025) suggest that many factors of adult masking are broadly reflected for CYP, but others have pointed out possible developmental dimensions (Jorgenson et al., 2020) highlighting an importance of research amongst CYP.

A high degree of heterogeneity is noted in masking motivations and behaviours but theoretical perspectives are aligned in masking being the behavioural adjustments enacted by CYP with perceived stigmatised or marginalised identities who are motivated to avoid social harm and achieve personal goals. This is reflected in the groups of CYP to whom masking is attributed, including autistic pupils (Atkinson et al., 2021), pupils with SEND (Porter & Ingram, 2021), or CYP who experience emotional distress at school (Flett et al., 2018). Further domains of masking have been identified in CYP, such as academic masking (Halsall et al., 2021) and the masking of broader aspects of identity like class and gender (Chapman et al., 2022).

Empirical findings of school-based masking have shown that it can be highly context dependent, particularly between the home and school. As CYP navigate these key contexts, empirical findings suggest that the general pattern is for them to experience greater perceived pressure to mask in school compared to home (Halsall et al., 2021), leading to a different presentation in school compared to home. This is aligned with viewing masking as impression management which interprets the phenomenon as a curated performance for particular audiences (Ai et al., 2022), which can be further understood by considering the influence of stigma in the school context, such as stigmatised personalities (Godfrey & Koutsouris, 2024), or perceived threats of social evaluation (Lei et al., 2024), therefore leading a child to feel compelled to conform and pass as something else when at school.

For CYP, school-based masking has been shown to have mixed outcomes (once again highlighting heterogeneity) but notable adverse outcomes for mental health, identity development, and reduced access to support make this a critical area of consideration within EP practice. Masking can also offer individual children a route to overcome difficulties and solve problems. This complexity highlights a need for further research to clarify the construct (Bernardin et al., 2021b).

Reviewing Evidence of School-based Masking

Limited research with CYP has been undertaken in a school-based context (Halsall et al., 2021) but that which has is concentrated on a narrow range of CYP. The literature that focusses on school-based masking (summarised in appendix A) is dominated by qualitative self-report studies with autistic adolescents (eight out of ten key papers identified) within which there is a focus particularly on female pupils. There is limited research within pre-adolescent

children despite retrospective accounts that masking starts early in childhood (Miller et al., 2021), and Goscicki et al. (2025) assert that more research is needed to explore camouflaging across neurotypes in CYP. Limited participant diversity has been noted for other characteristics. Goscicki et al. (2025) acknowledged that their participant group were largely homogenous in being the girls of middle-class, well-educated and married parents. In addition, Pearson et al. (2025a) and Goscicki et al. (2025) recognised that their participant groups were largely made up of white girls, which makes Nelson and Lichwa's (2025) exploration of black autistic girls' school-based masking helpful for better understanding the phenomenon and its intersection with a range of racial identities.

Some studies have used quantitative means to investigate CYP's school-based masking, particularly the CAT-Q scale. As mentioned above, this presents a potential weakness for this area of the literature base considering that the CAT-Q was validated for adult populations, in addition to the fact that the scale has been employed inconsistently. Halsall et al. (2021) adapted the CAT-Q by simplifying the wording, pairing this with visual cartoons and removing repeated items to make the scale more accessible and applicable to CYP's school-based masking. This impacts the validity of the scale, but the girl's responses were not formally scored, instead being used to inform qualitative follow up questions. Jorgenson et al. (2020) have formally used the CAT-Q to draw conclusions about levels of camouflaging in autistic and non-autistic CYP despite the fact that it is not validated for this group. Atkinson et al. (2025) also used the scale but further adapted the questions used by Halsall et al. (2021) which additionally jeopardises the scale's validity. These factors bring into doubt the extent to which these studies reliably measure the same construct.

Whilst self-report studies with school pupils have provided valuable insights into school-based masking, it has been necessary to pair these with the perspectives of adults because children's masking can operate unconsciously, or a child's masking behaviour itself might confound self-report approaches. Furthermore, younger children would likely struggle to engage with introspective self-report methods (Petrolini et al., 2023) which reflects a dearth of literature exploring school-based masking at the primary school age. Existing research that has sampled the views of adults has prioritised parental perspectives over those of teaching staff; of the six studies that explored adult perspectives just one included school staff (Halsall et al., 2021) consisting primarily of support staff. Therefore, the distinct perspectives of classroom teachers remain absent from the literature.

Whilst contemporary research frequently recommends staff training and environmental adjustments to mitigate masking, the baseline confidence of teaching staff in this area remains

unknown, as does the existence of barriers teachers might encounter when implementing these interventions. Furthermore, it has been suggested that teaching staff can be dismissive of concerns around school-based masking (Bassett, 2022) but their views on this dynamic are as yet unknown. Goscicki et al. (2025) conclude that current understanding of masking in school is limited. Future research might explore the gaps outlined in this section.

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

Abstract

School-based masking involves strategies used by children and young people to hide differences and navigate social contexts, which can have notable consequences for wellbeing. Previous research has focussed primarily on adolescent, autistic females in secondary schools leading to gaps in the literature and understanding of masking in primary aged children across neurotypes. In addition, the perspectives of educational professionals who respond to school-based masking is limited. The present study investigates school-based masking in primary aged children (4 – 11 years old) through the perspectives of Educational Psychologists (EPs) and Teachers based on how they understand and respond to the phenomenon. Qualitative data was collected, first through a focus group of five EPs followed by seven individual semi-structured interviews with primary school teachers. Data analysis was conducted in two separate reflexive thematic analyses to produce three and four themes for the EP and teacher analyses respectively. The EP themes were *(un)certainty & (dis)agreement on masking*; *Masking: What You See isn't What You Get*; and *The Importance of Working Together*. The teacher themes were *Flying Under or Over the Radar in School*; *Powerless and Overstretched*; *It Takes Teamwork*; and *A Need for Safety and Connection*. The implications that these themes highlight are discussed in the analytical narrative, including the barriers faced by professionals in understanding masking at a conceptual level and recognising the needs of children that are masked. The importance of collaboration and shared understanding, particularly between teachers and parents, was highlighted in both analyses to support children's school-based masking. Implications for EP practice are made based on these findings. To support applied EP practice across multiple domains, a definition and model of school-based masking is proposed that aids the conceptualisation of the construct. To support EP consultation and assessment, prompts pertaining to key areas of the model are provided.

1.0 Introduction

Masking generally refers to behavioural or cognitive strategies individuals use to navigate social contexts by compensating for their difficulties, hiding differences and assimilating into such social contexts (Cook et al., 2021). This section provides an overview of the existing literature on the topic of masking amongst CYP in the context of school-based education.

Masking is variously defined and recognised to represent complex and heterogeneous experiences such as masking being employed with varying degrees of consciousness (Petrolini et al., 2023), masking being conceived as more automatic and adaptive or more effortful and compelled (Livingston et al., 2019; Ai et al., 2022), or as having positive or negative consequences for the individual (Summerhill & Summers, 2025). Although primarily researched amongst adults, masking is also experienced amongst CYP (Klein et al., 2025) and reported by adults to begin in early childhood (Miller et al., 2021). Masking is commonly linked specifically to autism in which masking (also called social camouflaging) is the processes by which autistic individuals conceal their autistic identity and attempt to manage within their social world (Sedgewick et al., 2023). Masking of one's true self is also experienced by non-autistic CYP (Lei et al., 2024) although more research is needed to explore masking in a range of neurotypes amongst CYP (Goscicki et al., 2025).

Motivations to mask amongst CYP range from avoiding rejection and negative perceptions by others to developing and maintaining friendships (Klein et al., 2025). Many masking behaviours are reported in the literature, but a selection reported amongst CYP in school include preplanning conversation scripts, hiding personal interests and altering one's personality (Halsall et al., 2021; Cook et al., 2018). School-based masking is primarily linked to concealing social communication differences but is also associated with hiding academic difficulties (Halsall et al., 2021) or internalising emotional distress (Flett et al., 2018).

Masking has been linked to existing theories and constructs which provide different perspectives on the causes, including: masking as impression management (Goffman, 1959) to foster a positive perception of the self in others (Ai et al., 2022); passing (Goffman, 1963) to avoid stigma or hiding a marginalised identity (e.g., passing as neurotypical to conceal an autistic identity) (Perry et al., 2021); and masking as a form of anxiety management by behaving in a way to avoid negative social evaluations by others (Lei et al., 2024). Masking amongst CYP in education also has similarities to counter-dispositional acting, behaviour which is at odds with one's personality and disposition (Godfrey & Koutsouris, 2024).

Context is important in moderating the extent to which individuals engage in masking behaviour. Individuals report masking less with people they feel comfortable with and more in formal contexts compared to interpersonal contexts (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019), such as autistic CYP reporting increased masking in school compared to home, and more in certain contexts within school (Goscicki et al., 2025).

Within the research literature, masking is strongly linked to the positive and (most emphasised) negative consequences for the individual (Summerhill & Summers, 2025). In the context of education masking has been linked to helping CYP gain and maintain friendships (Pearson et al., 2025a; Goscicki et al., 2025), navigate social difficulties (Cook et al., 2018) and avoid bullying (Halsall et al., 2021). On the other hand, masking has been reported as cognitively draining, inducing exhaustion and feelings of anxiousness (Goscicki et al., 2025; Pearson et al., 2025a). A pattern of emotional distress externalised in the home environment following engaging in masking behaviour at school is recognised (Halsall et al., 2021; Bassett, 2021); some autistic girls worried if their attempts to mask had been successful leading to increased feelings of anxiety. Masking in school is also associated with a loss of identity and feelings of inauthenticity (Halsall et al., 2021; Goscicki et al., 2025). As masking is associated with a managed external presentation and often the concealment of personal difficulties, it is linked as a cause for missed opportunities for educational support or diagnosis (Cook et al., 2018; Pearson et al., 2025a). These potential consequences highlight the importance of understanding both the masking phenomenon itself and sources of support for CYP experiencing school-based masking.

Masking has been investigated specifically in school contexts although with a limited range of participant characteristics. Playground observations (Dean et al., 2016) and discrepancies between parental and teacher rating of autistic traits (Putnam et al., 2024) have been used to identify that CYP engage in masking whilst in school. The perspectives of CYP have been directly sampled in qualitative studies. These studies are dominated by autistic adolescent female participants (Bassett, 2022; Goscicki et al., 2025; Cook et al., 2018; Halsall et al., 2021; Nelson & Lichwa, 2025; Pearson et al., 2025a) in secondary school settings. Atkinson et al. (2025) sampled adolescent autistic males and females. The genesis for much of the masking research is the camouflage hypothesis, that autistic females tend to be more skilled than autistic males in masking their autistic traits. This accounts for the predominant focus within the literature on autistic females. Yet, theoretical and empirical accounts of masking demonstrate that it is experienced more broadly than this, such as within autistic males (Hull et al., 2017), amongst individuals from a range of neurotypes (Jorgenson et al.,

2020; Goscicki et al., 2025), and is retrospectively reported to begin in early in childhood (Miller et al., 2021). Regarding school context, it has been suggested by Boyle (2021) that the primary school environment presents certain protective and risk factors for masking that are distinct from secondary school where school-based masking research has predominated. Therefore, there is a need for research into school-based masking amongst primary aged children with a broader focus on different profiles of children.

Recognising the importance of understanding adult perspectives, some studies have also sampled parental views of school-based masking (Bassett, 2021; Boyle, 2021; Halsall et al., 2021). This has not extended to the inclusion of teacher's views, however. The only known study to explore in depth school staff perspectives was Halsall et al. (2021) who focussed on members of support staff. Although teachers have been discussed with relevance to school-based masking, such as implementing educational recommendations and working with parents, little is known of teacher's own knowledge of masking, how they understand it and how they currently respond.

1.1 Context of Research

This research takes place in England with educational psychologists (EPs) and primary school teachers. In England, primary school includes children in Reception, Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7) and Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11). Amongst CYP in a school context, masking has been associated with autism and social communication difficulties. It has also been linked to mental health challenges and learning needs.

The current context for the education system in which this research takes place is one characterised by the 'SEN Crisis' (Education Committee, 2025) in which schools face budget constraints in face of perceived rising special educational needs that strain inclusive school systems (BBC, 2026). Concurrently, SEND reforms are being implemented in England partly to address these systemic challenges (Department for Education, 2026). A dramatic increase in request for EHCPs reflects a rising need for specialist support within schools and reflects increasing pressures on the EP workforce (Pearson et al., 2025b). Simultaneously, rising levels of emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) have been observed in recent years (Pearson et al., 2025b) which might link to children struggling to cope in education whilst experiencing significant challenges that could be masked.

2.0 Rationale and Aims of the Present Study

Masking has been associated with some positive but mostly negative outcomes for CYP. EPs work to support the education and development of CYP, including those with autism

(Birch & Frederickson, 2024) and mental health concerns (Birch & Gulliford, 2024). As such, school-based masking is directly relevant to their role. Despite this, limited research has been conducted with direct relevance to EP practice. Masking is not conceptualised coherently in the research literature (Petrolini et al., 2023) and does not provide conceptual clarity for educational professionals working in applied settings such as EPs and teachers. According to Bernardin et al. (2021b) future research is needed to clarify the construct. This research aims to explore masking through the perspectives of educational professionals (EPs and teachers), extending this understanding into the primary school context.

There are benefits to exploring masking through the perspectives of adults noted by Boyle (2021) including insight into masking amongst children which is less conscious. Boyle (2021), Halsall et al., (2021) and Bassett (2021) sampled parental perspectives for this purpose. These studies all recognised the importance of teachers, and their relationship with parents, but did not include teacher perspectives, although Halsall et al., (2021) did include members of support staff. The current research aims to contribute towards a holistic understanding of masking by contributing the voices of teachers to those of CYP and parents.

Previous research into school-based masking has focussed on secondary aged children, as well as autistic females. Goscicki et al. (2025) highlight that knowledge of masking in schools is limited and recommend that more research needed to explore camouflaging behaviours and the impact of this across neurotypes in children. Therefore, within the current study the experiences being explored relate to primary aged children with unspecified needs or differences (including but not limited to autistic children) to understand this construct across a range of neurotypes and profiles.

In summary, this research aims to contribute to the growing literature on school-based masking, to accompany previous explorations amongst autistic adolescents in secondary schools and their parents by investigating masking in primary school contexts through the perspectives of educational professionals, adding to a more holistic understanding of school-based masking. The current research aims to provide increased conceptual clarity and applied understanding on the construct of masking in the context of education to facilitate educational support, communication and the practice of EPs and other educational professionals.

EP and teacher participants were initially recruited based on their experience with school-based masking in KS2. This is because previous literature has focussed on adolescents in secondary school and this research intended to extend the enquiry down into the preceding age group. However, both EPs and teachers all had and shared experiences of masking across the primary school age range which has subsequently become the focus of the research.

2.1 Research Questions

There is limited research on primary school-based masking, and the perspectives of educational professionals are largely absent from the research literature, both of which aim to be addressed in the current research.

The research questions for the current research are:

1. How do educational psychologists understand and respond to masking in primary aged children?
2. How do teachers understand and respond to masking in primary aged children?

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm

This section aims to outline the research paradigm, the philosophical assumptions underpinning the thesis (Robson, 2024). A Critical Realist position was taken, consisting of ontological realism and epistemological relativism (Pilgrim, 2020). Stutchbury (2022) summarises this approach as undertaking research on something real that one can find out about (realism) whilst recognising that “different people will come to know different things in different ways” (p. 113) (relativism). The current research paradigm assumes a researcher-independent reality, knowledge of which is construed through social experiences, including language and culture (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This research focusses on school-based masking of children. It is assumed that CYP’s experiences of masking ‘exist’ within a single ‘reality’ but there will be multiple perspectives of this reality, such as diverging parent and teacher interpretations.

Knowledge of masking as an overall concept is assumed to be relativist. ‘Masking’ is therefore seen as a construct that represents a summation and interpretation of individual’s real experiences. In the critical realist paradigm these two things differ; in the words of Braun and Clarke (2021) “Reality and representations of reality are *not* the same” (p. 169). To avoid an epistemic-ontic fallacy, the construct of ‘masking’ is not seen as an ontological truth. To use Pilgrim’s (2020) analogy, the knowledge and theory on masking that this research yields is seen as a ‘map’ for the terrain (the researcher-independent reality).

Critical Realism assumes that not only the empirical is real, but also the ‘invisible’ generative mechanisms (Stutchbury, 2022) that give rise to empirically verifiable experiences and events (Pilgrim, 2020). This research assumes that CYP’s internal experiences act as generative mechanisms for the masking behaviour EPs and teachers observe. Robson (2024) notes that realist research aims to formulate postulated mechanisms that can explain the

phenomenon in question, and that those well placed to identify potentially relevant mechanisms are practitioners, people with intimate knowledge of a situation, and researchers with whom this knowledge is shared. In this research EP and teacher experiences contribute to an understanding of school-based masking and underlying mechanisms. Critical realism affords the researcher *judgemental rationalism*, to cautiously weigh up likelihoods and ‘truth’ – some accounts may have more value, providing a better insight into reality, rather than viewing all perspectives as a set of equally valuable narratives (Pilgrim, 2020). In this study, the perspectives of EPs and teachers are deemed to provide a valuable perspective.

Through a critical realist lens children’s experiences of masking constitute an intransitive aspect of reality that is independent of adult’s perceptions. However, how adults perceive school-based masking, how they communicate about it and their actions shape the transitive aspects of reality, consequently influencing the trajectory of the phenomenon (Pilgrim, 2020).

To conclude this section, this research is concerned with the masking of children in primary education. It is assumed that masking represents a real-world phenomenon and that insight into this (and the not always empirically verifiable mechanisms which drive it) can be gained through the perspectives of educational professionals. However, individual variation in how it is defined and understood as an encompassing construct represents the relativistic nature of the knowledge that can be generated about the phenomenon of school-based masking.

3.2 Design

In the present study a sequential, qualitative design was employed in two phases of data collection. The first phase consisted of a semi-structured focus group of EPs. This served to contribute towards the first research question but also functioned to yield a working definition of masking in school. Teachers were then recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews to contribute towards addressing the second research question.

Formulating a working definition of masking via the EP focus group was deemed necessary as a suitable definition of masking amongst children of primary school age, and across neurotypes, did not exist. Without a clear definition it would have been difficult to explain to prospective teacher participants what experiences the research was an enquiry into. By formulating a working definition from an EP perspective, it was ensured that teachers could be recruited who all have experience of a similar construct. However, it is acknowledged that there may be other aspects of the masking construct that are not represented in this definition and the transferability of any definition would need to be investigated in future research. Upon the

collection of all data, in the first and then second phase, each data set was fully analysed separately but simultaneously using RTA.

3.3 Phase One

EP Participants

The inclusion criteria for EP participants were as follows: having a professional interest in and/or experience working with children of KS2 age who mask in school. A purposive sampling approach was used. Recruitment information including an information sheet and recruitment flyer (Appendix B) was emailed to educational psychologists within a single EP service in England. Individual EPs were then able to view the recruitment information and consent to participate in the focus group by completing an online consent form. A total of six EPs from the single EP service consented to the study and five EPs attended the online focus group. Demographic information is shown in table 4. The focus group was comprised of a range of roles and levels of experience. It is recognised that with the EPs working in the same EPS the views expressed could be localised to this one context.

Table 4

Demographic Information for EP Focus Group Participants

Educational Psychologist	Number of Years Experience as an EP	Role and Area of Specialism (if Applicable)
EP 1	20 - 25	Senior EP & SEMH Specialism
EP 2	20 - 25	Senior Specialist in Early Years
EP 3	< 5	Main Grade EP
EP 4	5 - 10	Autism Strategy Team Secondment
EP 5	5 - 10	Main Grade EP

EP Focus Group

In July 2025 the online focus group was facilitated by the researcher with the five participant EPs via the Microsoft Teams platform. The use of an online focus group allowed for efficient collection of qualitative data (Underhill & Olmsted, 2003). Group discussion also facilitated the elicitation of views whilst enabling the consistency of professional views within the group of EPs to be assessed (Robson, 2024). A semi-structured schedule was used by the researcher (Appendix C) providing a basic structure for the discussion. Included were prompts relating to defining the construct of masking in education, previous experience working with

children who mask in primary school, relevant psychological theory, and the response of EPs to these needs. The virtual focus group audio and video was recorded using functionality within the Microsoft Teams Platform and subsequently deleted once the data had been transcribed verbatim. Any identifying information was redacted from the transcript.

Formulating Focus Group Based Definition

The qualitative data from the focus group and semi-structured interview data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Between the first and second phases a preliminary RTA was conducted on the focus group data to yield a working definition of masking in a school context. This analysis followed the phases of analysis described in section 3.7. The transcript was coded relating to the enquiry of defining masking based on EP understanding. Candidate themes were formulated from the focus group data to describe the masking construct and were then synthesised with key aspects from the literature into a short, usable definition (see appendix D). This working definition was intentionally kept short for its practical use in the second phase of recruitment. As this research was interested in experiences with school-based masking across neurotypes and profiles of need, the definition was intentionally kept broad so as to sample those who have worked with a range of children who mask.

The candidate themes identified for the working definition became Theme 2 'Masking: What You See isn't What You Get'. The definition was amended to that shown in section 7.1 as findings from the teacher analysis were incorporated.

3.4 Phase Two

Teacher Participants

The recruitment information included an information sheet and recruitment flyer (Appendix E) both of which included the working definition of masking formulated in the first phase of the research. To recruit primary school teachers, the same recruitment information was distributed via three routes: directly emailing headteachers as gatekeepers within primary schools, positing on specialised education and SEN social media pages, and requesting EPs to forward the details to their link schools. The recruitment flyer and participant information sheet contained a link to an online consent form. Eligible participants (defined as teachers with experience supporting children who mask in school according to the study's working definition) consented via this form to participate in a semi-structured interview regarding their experiences.

A total of nine responses were received to participate in the study. Seven of these responses resulted in participation as two responders failed to attend scheduled interviews or respond to correspondence. The demographic information for these seven teachers is shown in table 5 below. These teachers were recruited from across England. Demographic information was collected at the start of the interviews.

Table 5

Demographic Information for Teacher Participants

Teacher	Number of Years Experience as a teacher	Current Teaching Role Details
Teacher 1	10 - 20	Class Teacher & Subject Lead (mainstream primary)
Teacher 2	20 - 25	Head Teacher & Director of SEND and Inclusion (mainstream primary)
Teacher 3	< 1	Class Teacher (mainstream primary)
Teacher 4	20 - 25	Class Teacher (SEMH Specialist setting, primary and secondary)
Teacher 5	< 1	Class Teacher (mainstream primary)
Teacher 6	20 - 25	Class Teacher & Subject Lead (mainstream primary)
Teacher 7	10 - 20	Class Teacher, previously SENCo (mainstream primary)

Teacher Interviews procedure

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted online between December 2025 and February 2026. Guided by an interview schedule (Appendix F), conversations focused on how teachers understand and respond to masking and follow-up questions were used to explore emergent topics. The final portion of each interview evaluated the study's working definition of masking. Participants provided feedback on how well it aligned with their school-based experiences and suggested potential amendments.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of East Anglia School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee (Appendix G). The design of the research and associated ethics application was completed in accordance with the British

Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (BERA, 2024).

Informed consent was gained from all participants who were made aware of their right to withdraw during data collection or thereafter. Participant data, including recordings and transcripts were stored on the University of East Anglia One Drive system until analysed and then deleted in line with the University's Research Data Management Policy and the Data Protection Act (2018).

Following data collection, transcripts were anonymised by redacting identifiable information and assigning each participant a numerical identifier. Prior to analysis each teacher was provided with their anonymised transcript to review and request amendments, if necessary, although none were. The EPs were not afforded this opportunity as altering joint focus group data would compromise the collective discussion. The EPs were informed of this beforehand and were instructed to maintain confidentiality, avoiding any disclosure of any personal information during and after the focus group. Participants were provided with a verbal and written debrief (Appendix H) following participation in the research.

3.6 Data Analysis

The transcript data from the focus group and semi-structured interviews were analysed separately using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The authors state that RTA is theoretically flexible, and it was deemed an appropriate method within the critical realist research paradigm. The critical realist research paradigm asserts that the researcher has reflexive agency in the research process. RTA aligns well with these philosophical assumptions by recognising the active role of the researcher in producing research findings and provides mechanisms for noticing, rather than avoiding this influence, such as through the process of keeping a reflective research journal. Extended reflections on the research are provided in chapter 3.

Aligned with a critical realist paradigm, RTA offered insight into school-based masking by sampling the contextualised experiences of education professionals. The inductive and deductive flexibility of RTA allowed for the current research to connect participant experiences with existing theory, facilitating a broader conceptual understanding of the school-based masking construct.

The analysis consisted of the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2021):

1. Familiarisation
2. Coding

3. Generating initial themes
4. Developing and reviewing themes
5. Refining, defining and naming themes
6. Writing the analytic narrative.

Braun and Clarke (2021) note that these are phases, not steps; although they were generally followed sequentially the progression was not solely linear and time was spent returning to previous phases throughout the analysis. For example, referring to familiarisation notes during the development of themes to assess how well the themes fit the data set, or returning to refine the coding of the EP focus group data following time spent analysing the teacher interview data. It is therefore the case that the two analyses had influence on each other.

Influence between the two analyses was unavoidable given that the same researcher was involved in both phases. This inherent aspect of a human being actively researching other human beings is part of psychological research, and recognised within the critical realism paradigm (Pilgrim, 2020) and in the big-Q qualitative research of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Rather than attempt to maintain a strict analytical separation between the two phases, this influence was made more explicit by keeping a reflexive journal. This consisted of thoughts and feelings that were noticed during the research process. An example of a reflexive journal entry around analysing the data sets simultaneously is shown in appendix I. Chapter 3 provides further reflections on the analysis process.

Familiarisation

The first phase of the analysis consisted of familiarisation with the data through the immersion and critical engagement. Braun and Clarke (2021) describe the former as involving closeness and familiarity whereas the latter requires distance to begin engaging with *data* rather than just information. Immersion in the data began from the moment of data collection whilst facilitating the focus group/interviews and then during the transcription process. Although Microsoft Teams generated a rudimentary transcript from the recordings, for the sake of accuracy it was necessary to manually check and amend these thoroughly against the audio recordings.

The process of familiarisation was further facilitated by following Braun and Clarke's (2021) recommendation to create 'familiarisation doodles' for each data set. This required the researcher to read through the transcripts and note down key ideas that were noticed in the data and potential patterns. One doodle was created for the EP focus group (Appendix J) and one for the teacher interviews (Appendix K). To develop the understanding of the teacher data

set as a whole, a single familiarisation doodle was created using different colours to represent the data items (individual teacher interview) from which each idea originated. This was particularly helpful for developing a sense of recurring patterns across the whole data set which up until this point had existed as separate interviews and transcripts.

Braun and Clarke (2021) provide a set of useful prompts to consider at this stage, including questions about the data (e.g. ‘Why might they be making sense of things in this way?’) as well as questions about oneself (‘Why might I be reacting to the data in this way?’). Considerations such as these were central to the reflexive nature of the analysis, details of which are provided in chapter 3. In a recursive fashion, it was helpful to refer back to the familiarisation doodles, and raw data throughout the analysis to check if codes or candidate themes were a good fit for the data.

Generating Initial Codes

The next phase as described by Braun and Clarke (2021) focussed on coding segments of the data based on how they related to the research questions. Code labels were ascribed using the comments function in Microsoft Word (see appendix L for an example coded transcript). The coding process utilised both semantic and latent coding, capturing more explicit surface level and implicit meanings respectively. Through multiple cycles of coding and re-coding, individual codes were adjusted to capture the evolving analytical idea that the codes represented, or new codes were generated where it was deemed that a novel idea was identified. Successive coding also enabled more latent meaning to be identified (Braun et al., 2016) although achieving more latent coding was not the intended goal and is not necessarily better than more semantic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

An example coding process was as follows: the quote “sometimes schools are still very much ‘well we don’t see it at school so it’s not our problem’ I think sometimes it still varies by school” was initially coded as *Teachers think ‘can’t see it, can’t fix it’*. Whilst this first code captured the surface level idea that school staff don’t respond to a concern about a child masking because it does not manifest in school, on a subsequent round of coding this was amended to reflect the more latent and emotive impression that school staff are being dismissive of concerns in these scenarios: *We don’t see it at school so it’s not our problem*.

A second dimension of the coding process described by Braun and Clarke (2021) relates to how meaning is noticed, being either more inductive (data-driven) or deductive (theory-driven). As the authors describe, the coding process can make use of both types of identifying meaning. The participants’ words were used to code repeated meaning inductively, such as in the phase “flying below the radar”. In other instances, codes made connections

between the data and existing theory through codes like “compensation behaviours” from Hull and colleagues’ (2019) model.

The qualitative nature of RTA recognises that the researcher cannot be purely inductive and without perspective, especially after immersion in the literature prior to and during the analysis, and in the researcher’s dual role of applied trainee educational psychologist. The positionality of the researcher therefore influenced the deductive coding and what latent meaning was noticed. The cessation of coding occurred when a set of broad codes that richly captured the relevant aspects of each data set were generated (Braun et al., 2016). See appendix M for examples of codes relating to data extracts.

Generating Themes

Themes, the core analytic component of RTA (Braun et al., 2016), were developed by clustering codes into patterns of shared meaning across the data sets as relating to the research questions. For the EP focus group this meant clustering codes from across the focus group data. For the teacher interviews this was a separate process of clustering codes from across the individual interviews. Each candidate theme was constructed with a central organising concept in mind but at this stage they were not fixed (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Visual thematic mapping was used in this, and the following two phases, to illustrate the evolving analytic ideas and demarcations between initial candidate themes. Appendix N shows a sequence of thematic maps for the EP analysis showing the development of the themes.

At this stage place-holder names were given to candidate themes, such as “the blind leading the blind” initially used to describe a lack of clarity on the part of professionals relating to the concept of masking. The names, as well as the boundaries and content of themes were further developed in the following phases.

Reviewing Themes

The candidate themes were reviewed and amended multiple times to align with Braun and Clarke’s (2021) criteria for good themes:

- built around a central organising concept;
- illustrate diversity and richness;
- are distinctive from other themes.

The continued use of thematic mapping, this time for individual themes, aided a process of recursively shaping the themes and re-engaging with the data to check the themes for fit with the data. The candidate theme “the blind leading the blind” was deemed too narrow and was incorporated into a richer but broader analytic idea summarised in the Theme 1

“(un)certainty and (dis)agreement” that more effectively captured the repeated meaning across the data set. This theme was then divided into sub-themes (1a & 1b) to represent difficulty experienced in both professional practice and in conceptual understanding of the masking construct.

Defining and Naming Themes

This phase focused on crystalising the evolving candidate themes into clearly defined, unique contributions to the analysis that are represented by a clear name. Although each theme was considered distinct, some links between them were noted, as to be expected (Barun & Clarke, 2021), and these links helped tie the themes together within the analytical narrative.

Various theme name options were trialled and chosen for fit with the conceptual essence of each theme. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2021) guidance, names were chosen that are catchy and concise but informative. In Theme 4: “Flying under or over the radar in school”, the radar analogy was adopted from the accounts of multiple teachers as an example of more inductive, data-driven naming. The sub-themes (4a, 4b, 4c) were named more deductively by applying conceptual categories identified in the literature: social, academic, and emotional forms of school-based masking.

The Write Up

This stage represents the final stage in the sequence of the reflexive thematic analysis, the production of an analytical narrative. Braun and Clarke (2021) are clear that RTA is non-linear and recursive; this stage was not simply a summary of the stages that had come before, but a continuation of the analysis process as theme names and boundaries continued to be refined through the process of writing.

A separate narrative is presented for the EP and teacher data sets consisting of three and four themes respectively. These accounts contain the analytical interpretation for each group alongside data extracts that evidence these interpretations. The findings, discussion and connections to existing literature are integrated together as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021). Following further loose guidance from the authors, a similar amount of analytic commentary to data extracts are presented. The themes are numbered across both analyses one to seven to aid comparison and referencing of themes in the conclusion.

4.0 Presentation of EP Themes with Analytical Narrative

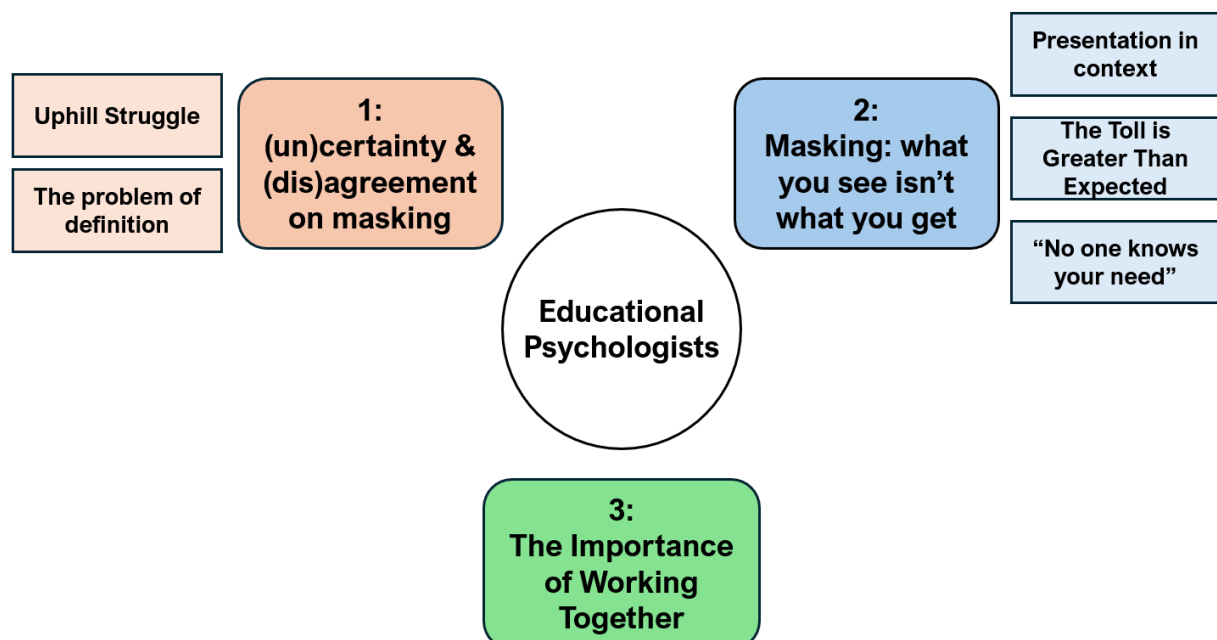
For the EP focussed analysis three themes were created and are reported. Also shown in figure 3, these are:

1. (un)certainty & (dis)agreement on masking
2. Masking: What You See Isn't What You Get
3. The Importance of Working Together

The first theme is *(un)certainty & (dis)agreement*, organised around the central concept that the various adults surrounding a child who masks often lack a shared understanding, of both the child and the construct of masking generally. The second theme *What You See Isn't What You Get* represents how EPs understood school-based masking, that there is a necessary difference between a child's internal experience and their external presentation across contexts. The last theme reported from the EP focussed analysis is *The Importance of Working Together* which describes the way EPs respond in cases of school-based masking by promoting connection between the adults surrounding the child, and between the child and these adults.

Figure 3

Thematic Map for EP Analysis



Theme 1: (un)certainty & (dis)agreement on masking

This first theme, reflected across the focus group data set, pulls together the sentiments expressed by the EPs that they, and the adults they work with to support children who mask in primary school, lack a shared understanding of both masking generally and of the specific children who mask in school. In identifying barriers to work in this area, this theme also points towards what improved practice amongst EPs, teachers and parents might look like.

Subtheme 1a: Uphill Struggle

This subtheme reports on the barriers the EPs experienced in cases of school-based masking; the intrinsic nature of which evoked the idea of an uphill struggle. The EPs observed that a child who masks inherently presents in variable ways depending on their context, particularly between the home and school settings as noted in previous research (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Goscicki et al., 2025), which can conceal their needs from supporting adults. As parents and teachers make varying observations, it is difficult for them to develop a common understanding of a child's difficulties which hinders coordinated and effective support, particularly within stretched school systems.

School staff were observed by the EPs to lack the confidence and capacity to effectively understand masking and respond. From individual teachers up to the whole school level, school-based masking presents inherent challenges when children's needs are concealed as the following EPs observe:

EP 4: I think schools can still feel quite deskilled when they come up with someone who's masking because it's a bit like 'well, if they're not showing anything at school what can I do?'

EP 5: I think sometimes schools are so overstretched and so stressed they want to keep lids on things, they're like 'But what if you know this opens up everything?'

These views are contextualised within the current 'SEND crisis' and a straining education system (Education Committee, 2025). Masking as a need must compete for funding, energy and empathy in a climate characterised by decreasing resource and capacity, and because of its inherent invisibility it is likely to be disregarded. The following description by EP 5 evokes the idiom of 'burying one's head in the sand'.

EP 5: There's a SENCo who, we were talking about it, like getting kids to write their emotions during the day, she's like 'But what if they're always in red? What if every child is in red?' It's like, well, you kind of want to know, they won't be, but you want to know if they are, that's important information, but her panic of 'but what if they all say they're really anxious?'

When children's needs are masked, they can go unnoticed without inquiry, which has a limited impact on the wider school system. The picture here is of masking being a stone that under-resourced SEN departments would rather leave unturned, lest they become aware of yet more need they feel equipped to meet.

The EPs reported that a lack of school staff knowledge not only impacts on their confidence to meet needs that are masked but also hinders identification and reduces subsequent referrals for EP support. Masking has been associated with missing unmet support needs in school and delayed referrals, usually for an autism diagnosis, in previous research (Cook et al., 2018; Halsall et al., 2021). The current findings extend this to delayed access to specialist support from an EP.

In addition to schools being stretched systems, EPs noted that the attitudes of individual staff members towards masking presents a barrier, further contributing towards the notion of an uphill struggle. This suggests some distinction between teachers who are willing to help but feeling deskilled because masking does not overtly present in school, and education staff who are dismissive of masking in the first place. The latter is described in the following quotes.

EP 2: If the child was behaving beautifully at school and parents were having trouble then, you know, the attitude of the teachers would often be 'well it's not my problem then is it?'

EP 3: Schools might be quite dismissive and say 'everything's fine in school'. But I think in our role we can almost legitimise what the parent is saying.

In the EP's experience school staff could be unbelieving of parental reports of a child's experience outside of school or simply viewing this as not being their problem as it did not present in the school context. Similarly dismissive attitudes from education professionals in cases of school-based masking have been noted from the perspective of parents (Cook et al., 2018; Bassett, 2022). This functions to invalidate parental concerns and impede collaborative practice by making it harder for parents to advocate for their child.

[...]

EP 5: Schools can be very supportive but equally I get schools saying to me 'well, you know, they're really anxious parents aren't they that's causing a lot of it' as an off the cuff comment to someone they hardly know. And you just think, wow, that's not a collaborative approach and they need a lot of that reframing around of course the parents are really anxious. This is really stressful.

EP 4: But nobody believes them. I think I would be quite anxious too.

EP 5: I *can't* imagine why they're stressed. To think that no one understands their kid and the feeling that, yeah, and the stress that's going on around that as well for them at home is huge

[...]

In this quote, parental stress that is associated with a child masking was legitimised by the EPs who perceived their approach as seeking to understand, as opposed to staff views which could be dismissive or characterised by blaming. In considering the varying perspectives and consequent actions of adults, EP approaches suggested the application of attribution theory. Attribution theory addresses how individuals interpret causes for phenomena, and how these cognitions affect their behaviours (Gulliford & Miller, 2024). Some of the EPs' observations appear to align with studies suggesting that teachers commonly blame parents and home circumstances for CYP's school-based behaviour (Miller, 1995). Parental attributions can be diametrically opposed to that of teachers who locate the problem primarily in school (Gulliford & Miller, 2024; Miller, 2003). Attribution theory is often applied in EP practice where different causal attributions are made between staff and parents; the focus becomes uncovering barriers to intervention like blaming (Gulliford & Miller, 2024). As school-based masking is characterised by differences in a child's presentation between home and school, attribution theory is particularly relevant to future practice.

As a response to the uphill struggles associated with school-based masking, including low staff confidence and unhelpful differences in key adults' attributions, EP 1 and EP 4 described their professional niche for bringing clarity to these contexts through training delivery and raising awareness.

EP 1: So, it's about education, I mean we're always trying to educate and train and skill up school staff and it's a really key part of our role in this area.

EP 4: And also I think education for schools that they're not powerless, it's not the case that because they're not showing symptoms in school that you, they

can't do anything. You know very much they have a lot of influence in this situation

Subtheme 1b: The Problem of Definition

Beyond lacking consensus in individual cases of school-based masking, this subtheme relates to a commonly held perception amongst the EPs of a fundamental lack of shared conceptual understanding of masking between school staff and parents.

EP 4: I don't necessarily know that there's a very shared understanding of a definition of masking, particularly between school professionals and parents.

Some EPs also extended this to their own practice, recognising conceptual and theoretical ambiguity and a resultant lack of confidence in their applied practice. For EP 4 this impacted their ability to support teachers and parents.

EP 4: I suppose there's the difficulty. I mean, we as a group of psychologists struggle to define it, and there's a difficulty of knowing what the cut off is for socially adjusting to be appropriate to your setting versus masking and do we know what that cut off is? So how can we then advise parents or when the cut off is or what situations it's applicable to?

It is unsurprising that EPs should lack confidence on the topic given that the research literature fails to give a cohesive account of masking (Petroliini et al., 2023). As a result, there was inconsistency in the profiles of children the concept was applied to. For some EPs masking was a neurodivergent experience, being attempts to appear neurotypical, which aligned with many literature-based definitions linking masking to autism (Cook et al., 2021). EP 3 also connected masking to an anxiety response, reflecting similar conceptualisations in the literature (Lei et al., 2024). EPs' experiences were consistent in the observation of masking across the primary age range, from Reception through to Key Stage 2, and that this was not always deemed conscious particularly in younger children, as discussed in the literature (Cook et al., 2021).

EP 2: How young can you say that someone is masking? With very young children you can't say they're doing it deliberately. But on the other hand, imitating the behaviour of the other children you see around you. That starts very young, so I really don't have the answer. When do you start calling it masking?

This quote by EP 2 reflects a lack of certainty around the boundaries of the masking concept and therefore applying the concept more broadly than to autism exclusively. Multiple EPs conceptualised masking as an extension of common experiences, like impression management (Ai et al., 2022) but as a result, there was ambiguity in what is deemed 'masking' as something distinguishable from generally experienced modifications of self-presentation. The EPs struggled to delineate the limits of the construct with certainty. EP 2 elaborates on the difficulty differentiating between masking and experiences of impression management.

EP 2: I find it very difficult to define because I mean every one of us, if we go into an unfamiliar situation has to learn how to behave and spend some time observing other people. And this can be demanding. So, to define masking properly, you would have to define exactly how is it, how is it different? You know how is it when a neurotypical person does that, how is that different from when somebody who's, you know, maybe autistic, does it?

By viewing the construct as being quantitatively, not qualitatively, distinct from other experiences of behavioural adaptation, this conceptualisation of masking is aligned with Ai and colleagues' (2022) understanding of masking as part of a continuum of human experience, an exaggerated form of impression management characterised by extremes in effort or impact (as discussed in theme 2). This view is reflected by EP 4:

EP 4: It's a shared human experience, even if not for the intensity. But yeah, sometimes that's unhelpful. Sometimes that's a hindrance to supporting people's understanding, isn't it?

In this quote, EP 4 names a concern that recognising masking as an extreme form of ubiquitous impression management might lead to dismissive attitudes about the validity construct. The term 'masking' was therefore seen to have utility as distinguishing from most typical experiences by giving a name to the construct and therefore promoting consideration and discussion, as explained here:

EP 4: Sometimes when you use the term it then helps people look more closely at the child, they're not going 'well they're sitting there very quietly. We're not having any issues. We'll leave at that'. If someone sees this as 'masking' they're then looking more closely, what's going on underneath for that child and they're thinking more deeply about the child's experience

A minority of EPs expressed a desire for a concrete definition to facilitate conversation between parents, school staff and themselves, but there was an inherent tension between recognising that masking is a continuum whilst wanting a clear and distinct definition to streamline practice. EP 1 expressed that without a clear definition the term masking was being overused, leading to the meaning being diluted:

EP 1: I think a common understanding and definitely clearer agreed definitions of what we mean by masking and what type of need we're referring to as well, because I think [...] it's becoming a bit of a diluted term that's used more loosely and more widely than previously, and I'm mindful that's not always helpful. It's always helpful for the young people where the definition or the term should be used more appropriately.

An alternative viewpoint was that a clear delineation was not needed or could not be made:

EP 5: Does it need a definition? And it's, like you say, that it's a continuum.

Theme 2: Masking: What You See isn't What You Get

This next theme draws together EP conceptualisations on the nature of masking, therefore addressing subtheme 1b 'The Problem of Definition'. The central organising concept of this understanding of school-based masking is that in school-based masking a child's external presentation varies and does not necessarily reflect their internal experience. There are three subthemes to this theme, representing how this is context dependent; leads to greater emotional consequences than would otherwise be expected; all whilst obscuring need from an adult's perspective.

Subtheme 2a. Presentation in Context

This subtheme represents the EPs conceptualisation that masking is context dependent, leading to shifting external presentations. This subtheme explores how the EPs categorised masking behaviours for children in school and how they understood masking motivations to be contextual. This understanding is adult centred, understanding masking through the presentation of the child as observed by adults across home and school contexts.

Initially masking was conceptualised as the suppression of an aspect of self-expression in the school context as a way of coping with school-based demands:

EP 5: It's suppressing a part of you, isn't it, to kind of to be able to manage in the world, you know, you're covering up something that you find hard.

However, the group of EPs subsequently considered that this only captured half of the masking phenomenon. In addition to that which a child might conceal about the self, they might present in ways that are additional to their natural behaviours:

[...]

EP 3: I wonder if it sort of happens on a continuum with suppressing being one extreme at one end with, you know, adaptive behaviours at the other perhaps.

EP 5: Or modification that leads to higher levels of stress and exhaustion, is it? Like you say suppression kind of suggests putting it down, which they are, but they aren't, but maybe modification. Maybe modifying is a more accurate term for what they're doing because they're modifying.

EP 4: There's a lot of it, might be like, you know, kind of social mimicry, you know, in that sort of watching how other people interact or how they, you know, present and copying movements, copying interests. It's like, you know. By engaging in novel behaviour, children draw upon social mimicry.

[...]

School-based masking was therefore understood as changes in behaviour to cope with perceived context dependent demands, on a spectrum from suppressing or limiting identity-expression to engaging in novel behaviours. These changes in behaviour were perceived as being beyond the authentic range of self-expression, as is consistent with other conceptualisations of masking (Chapman et al., 2022). This conceptualisation of masking also strongly reflects Hull and colleagues' (2017) model of 'social camouflaging', generally applied to autistic masking, in which behaviours are categorised as more subtractive or suppressive (*masking*) or as those that are additional and beyond the child's natural behavioural repertoire to manage in social situations, (*compensation*) (Petrolini et al., 2023). This model of masking was developed from autistic adult experiences and aligns with the observations and experiences of EPs in school settings. Hull and colleague's (2017; 2019) model may therefore be a particularly useful one for applied EP practice.

The difference between home and school contexts was observed to be the most influential factor in determining changes in children's behavioural presentation. In the EP's experience the child engages in masking behaviour particularly in the school context meaning

that parents and teachers observe vastly different behaviours from the same child. This contextual pattern of masking is reflected in previous research (Halsall et al., 2021; Goscicki et al., 2025). This difference in presentation feeds into differences in adult attributions, as noted in theme 1.

EP 5: The parent, as I said recently, she had no teachers say anything and she'd say 'things are happening at home', and teachers say 'so we don't see anything at school'.

The EPs noted that motivations to mask can depend on the demands and expectations of each context and the child's varying aims relating to these. Aligned with previous research (Cook et al., 2018) the EPs noted that 'fitting in' and meeting perceived social demands were common overarching motivations for school-based masking. Individual goals for children related to their individual difficulties, such as neurodivergent children masking to appear neurotypical:

EP 4: I normally say you know anything that they might be doing in an attempt to appear neurotypical

Also noted were children who are feeling anxious hiding this fact:

EP 3: I've noticed it with young people who experience very high levels of anxiety, for example, that they're neurotypical, but they feel a need to suppress some of their anxious behaviours they might engage in or seem not anxious in a certain environment

As well as children who experience sensory differences masking these differences:

[...]

EP 5: And managing sensory things they're finding really hard. So, they might find the classroom completely overwhelming, but they're not showing that because they're modifying their behaviour rather than, you know, leaving or

EP 4: Yeah. They might be looking around saying 'OK no one else is being driven absolutely crazy by that clock ticking. So I don't mention it either'"

[...]

Although the masking of sensory sensitivities or sensory seeking behaviour has already been reported amongst CYP (Chapman et al., 2022), it has previously received less attention within the school-based masking literature specifically, a connection which is made by the EPs.

Chapman et al. (2022) describe that suppressing and masking sensory 'stimming' behaviour robbed autistic CYP of an essential method of emotional regulation.

Masking was understood in relation to a desire to fit in or not stand out as different, which presents particular challenges to education professionals who seek to intervene. For a child who is preoccupied with not standing out, receiving additional attention from an adult could compromise this and not necessarily support them. EP 4 described a similar challenge when working with school staff.

EP 4: A staff member told me that they had a conversation with a mum who wanted her to support her child but not let her child know that she was supporting her because she didn't want to appear different and she was like 'OK, I'm ninja supporting well, how am I supposed to do this?'. You know, maybe having a more explicit conversation between everyone might be more helpful.

Subtheme 2b: The Toll is Greater Than Expected

This subtheme represents the (generally negative and generally emotional) impact on a child that was synonymous with masking. The EPs conceptualised masking as being an extension of a broader human experience whilst recognising a distinct and atypical negative emotional impact which was primarily externalised in the home through emotional dysregulation or feelings of exhaustion.

A strong pattern of experience was identified across the focus group of supporting children who having masked at school demonstrate the consequences of this most obviously upon returning home.

EP 5: I've actually worked with lots of primary school children recently who've done masking [...] who show a lot of dysregulation and exhaustion at home and hold it all together throughout the school day.

Consequences were broadly understood using a conceptual spectrum of stress responses, from internalisation of distress in school to externalisation in the home. The child's 'mask' is linked to the internalisation of emotions in the school and was viewed as an inauthentic presentation of feelings. This is contrasted with an externalised expression of this distress in the home context, repeatedly reported in the research (Halsall et al., 2021; Bassett 2021) or sometimes at school, and was viewed as the child's truer form of emotional expression. But this was not a strict dichotomy with some examples of 'unmasking' in school and some internalising responses to masking, as recounted by EP 5 and EP 3 respectively:

EP 5: I Remember observing the year 2 boy and he was getting on with his work quite happily and the teacher came over, put a hand on the table and he literally put his head on her hand and started sobbing. And you think, wow, you've just been holding all that in for the last 20 minutes.

EP 3: I've come across children who maybe it could be quite internalised so that they come home and sleep or be very withdrawn and quiet.

Previous research has primarily focussed on an association between masking and internalising mental health symptoms like anxiety (Bernardin et al., 2021a) but here and in the school-based masking literature masking is related to externalised distress, which Dighton & McAloon (2026) propose is brought on by diminished impulse control following incidences of masking.

In comparing the perspectives of parents and school staff, EPs noted that the former can observe the child 'unmask' more readily, gradually developing an understanding of the underlying need and accumulative toll of masking. In contrast, schools rarely see the emotional toll that the child faces until these difficulties are entrenched or reach a crisis point.

EP 4: family stories are always really sadly similar. 'I brought this up years ago and they didn't get noticed because they internalise it and you know they just coasted through. No one noticed they were struggling until it you know tipped over' [...] And then the narrative came out of 'no at home, they've been really struggling, increasingly, you know, more and more externalising behaviours. And then it's culminated in this'

Consistent with findings reported in the literature (Bassett, 2022; Pearson et al., 2025a), the EPs observed that prolonged experiences of school-based masking could lead to burnout and emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). Such difficulties are recounted in these quotes:

EP 4: In a lot of my EHC cases this year that just are no longer able to attend school, almost the whole, all the stories are 'they were masking, they were masking, they were masking' reached autistic burnout, school related trauma can't go back.

EP 1: [relaying parental report] where it's almost very close to burnout or absolute exhaustion or high levels of dysregulation at home as soon as they get in, or in the car.

EP 5: I think of an EHC I did recently she's in school, but she's late almost every day because it's just hard that she finds school so overwhelming she wouldn't know it when you saw her. But she finds it so overwhelming that actually getting into school is really hard.

The EPs were particularly confident in their understanding of the negative consequences of masking which may reflect the fact that the literature has a strong focus on the negative consequences (Summerhill & Summers, 2025) but also reflects their conceptualisation that these negative consequences are central and defining features of masking. In cases of school-based masking, the emotional impact for the child was considered greater than expected, firstly, because the child generally does not present with emotional distress whilst in school, where their masked presentation predominates, any emotional dysregulation experienced at home is unexpected for school staff.

EP 2: they don't know that it's much harder for them than it is for everybody else to behave the same as everybody else.

[...]

EP 4: There is definitely something about that kind of intensity and the longevity of it as well, because of course we all we all modify our behaviours to be professional or whatever. But I always say to staff like 'imagine you were having an interview for a job you really, really wanted and that lasted all day every day'.

EP 5: Yes, it's the, it's the, it's the energy it takes, isn't it, almost? About the sheer level of energy, it takes. Emotional toll it has is huge. Yeah.

[...]

Previous research has connected school-based masking to experiencing emotional distress (Halsall et al., 2021; Bassett 2021). To the EPs, negative consequences were therefore viewed as an intrinsic element of school-based masking and were considered helpful markers for identification. The basic assumption held by the EPs was that school should typically not result in extreme exhaustion or emotional dysregulation, burnout or stress and therefore the presence of these experiences for a child who, from a school perspective seems to be okay, indicates a level of masking. EPs considered negative consequences to help differentiate

masking from concepts like impression management; in this conceptualisation the utility of the term ‘masking’ as something distinct from impression management grows as associated emotional wellbeing in these cases declines. Similarly, Bernardin et al. (2021a) proposed that the constructs of masking and self-monitoring diverged in the presence of increased negative and positive wellbeing consequences respectively.

The assumption amongst EPs was that masking is (almost) always negative and seen as a potential special educational need. This view appreciated less the potentially adaptive aspects of masking described in the literature, such as improved peer connection (Klein et al., 2025). Summerhill and Summers (2025) propose that practitioners should recognise the potentially socially supportive elements of masking whilst working to eliminate the negative consequences.

To an extent, EPs and school staff relied upon internalised distress being externalised at home and then reported by parents to identify masking. There may be flaws in this approach. Previous research has identified some individuals who mask more completely in all contexts with greater emotional costs (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019) and who may not externalise their distress in any context for others to observe (Flett et al., 2018). Self-report measures like the CAT-Q (2019) may prove a useful additional tool for EPs, although this is yet to be standardised for CYP.

Subtheme 2c – “No one knows your need”

This subtheme is concerned with the idea that by its very nature masking makes the identification and subsequent support of masking, or difficulties being masked, a challenge for educational professionals. The underlying need that is concealed by masking was understood to vary, including sensory, social or emotional difficulties as noted in the previous subtheme. The key part of this subtheme is an inherent difficulty for schools to identify and intervene because the child’s outward presentation in school is typically one of apparent coping.

EP 5: I think when you are masking [...] no one knows your need so that it’s harder to address the need and meet the need because people aren’t always aware of your level of distress.

Parents or other trusted adults were perceived as having a unique insight into the child’s needs as they are the ones who see the child’s ‘authentic self’, or a closer version of this.

EP 4: You could argue that's just the nature of masking and that parents will notice it first because obviously in school they're presenting fine.

EP 5: Sometimes they mask so well, so completely at school, unless you've got relationship with the parent or the parent shares that, the school has no idea.

There is an assumption that the child can be 'authentic' in some places, but school is often not such a place.

EP 2: You can't say with certainty that they're distressed or anything, but they are they are not showing their most authentic their most joyful side when they're in school.

The ways in which children were understood to conceal their needs included the temporary suppression of emotional expression, concealing experiences of difficulty, not advocating for themselves, and behaving in line with perceived social norms. EP 5 explains a perceived link between inauthentic compliance and difficulties being overlooked:

[...]

EP 5: When they're not showing their authentic self, maybe? With this girl, gosh, she hated anyone touching her, anyone being near to her, but she would almost that kind of fawn response in school, she had very long hair, would let people touch it and she wouldn't tell them not to. She'd just kind of like hold it together and mask it and then get home and wouldn't come into school for a week afterwards. So, it's that it's the impact that it has on them. In that moment they're not saying this, they're not advocating themselves 'this is too much for me' or showing in any way, but they show it later. It's that the impact that that masking has on them later?

EP 2: I think that's a good word about not advocating for themselves.

[...]

In this case the EP applies the concept of the 'fawn response' to understand a child's masking. The fawn response is part of an expanded model of stress responses: fight-flight-freeze-fawn. The fawn response is associated with compliance and avoidance of conflict in a stressing context (Zingela et al., 2022). This further evokes the understanding that masking is different from more externalised responses to stress such as fight or flight. A fawn response can present as socially desirable behaviour or compliance in school settings, in a similar way to how masking is described, which mirrors EP and literature (Klein et al., 2025) descriptions of masking. A child showing compliance and putting other's needs before their own may be

perceived as a 'good child' in school, whose needs are hidden in plain sight and whose behaviour might be interpreted as agreeableness and therefore celebrated and encouraged (Clayton, 2025). EPs did not assume masking to be explicitly encouraged in schools, but a masked presentation could be less disruptive than other stress responses and therefore go unaddressed. These descriptions also recall the experiences of secondary school children with an introverted personality style described by Godfrey & Koutsouris (2024); these CYP reported feeling worried or frightened in school contexts linked to perceived pressure to conform and reluctance to express their authentic views for fear of how they would be evaluated by peers. These students also expressed feeling overlooked by teachers who invested time into peers with more externalising presentations. This connection potentially links masking to personality theory for relevance to understanding school-based masking which Godfrey & Koutsouris (2024) contend is under considered in EP practice.

Lastly, the EPs emphasised the role that adult's perceptions of masking have of child outcomes:

EP 4: And because of the nature of masking that it often doesn't get noticed until it's at the point of burnout. I don't think we have any idea how many of our pupils in our schools are masking and how many of them will ultimately lead to long term problems, which is alarming to me.

In this Theme, masking and the outcomes of this behaviour are not isolated within the child. Rather, an eco-systemic (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) framework for EP practice can be applied to understand the importance of multiple factors: the child's internal experience and behavioural presentation, the influence of shifting contexts upon these, the actions of adults around them and how these influence the child's need to mask, and adult's ability to understand the child's difficulty, communicate about it and respond. As the current subtheme emphasises, often the problem can be located in the challenge adults have in understanding the child's internal state. An eco-systemic view is consistent with findings from the literature. Pearson et al. (2025a) report that masking influenced how staff perceived of autistic girls' needs, which were less noticed and were met with lower responsiveness. In addition, Atkinson et al. (2025) concluded that environmental and relational factors, rather than within-child factors, had the biggest influence of school-based masking. This encourages practitioners to view a child's masking in context and respond in a similarly systemic way.

Theme 3: The Importance of Working Together

This theme details how the EPs responded in cases of school-based masking, principally by connecting the home and school systems. The EPs advocated for a joined-up

response from both the home and school systems, and for greater collaboration and relationship building with the child themselves. It is in direct response to the challenges schools and parents are likely to face in understanding the needs of a child who masks that EPs advocate for closer collaboration between these systems. Here, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) is used to structure this theme with EP responses at the following levels: direct interaction with the child in school, within the individual micro-systems around the child (the school and family), and in the meso-system between the school and family. This was applied instead of the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) because the EPs perspectives themselves are situated within the systems surrounding the child and insight into biological, within-child factors was therefore limited and less relevant to the analysis. Instead, the emphasis remains on the relationships between the systems around the child. Furthermore, there was negligible discussion of involvement with children over an extended period making the chronosystem, a latter addition to Bronfenbrenner's theories, less relevant.

Firstly, EPs advocated for intervention directly with the child, one way being to facilitate the child's ability to advocate for themselves. A tension was present between giving a child more tools to cope and advocate for themselves, and the perceived risk of encouraging masking behaviour. This connection between skills-based interventions and the development of masking in CYP has been made conceptually (Petrolini et al., 2023) and reported on empirically by parents and educators who reported facilitating camouflaging through social skills teaching (Halsall et al., 2021). Some literature characterises such efforts as non-neuro-affirming, particularly for autistic individuals, as the expectation is on the individual to change their way of being in order to be accepted (Hull et al., 2017; Halsall et al., 2021). Conscious of this, the EPs advocated for a neurodiversity approach in which individuals are not expected to conform to neurotypical standards whilst recognising a pragmatic need for children to develop certain social communication skills for their benefit. They recognised some less appropriate skills to encourage, such as forcing eye contact, but advocated for the considered development of skills so that CYP have increased social and life skills. EP 4 explains an approach which empowers a child whilst respecting neurodiversity.

EP 4: I had a really powerful speaker at a conference who spoke about teaching them to talk neurotypical, which I love. When I put in reports now, you know, we're not. Yeah, we're teaching them how to operate within a neurotypical world. It's not because that's the right way to do it, yeah or better.

To support the child's influence and agency within their microsystems it was considered important to promote the child's voice, assumed to have otherwise been masked. EP 5 promoted person-centred practice.

EP 5: It's that it's that child led, isn't it? Is that child at the centre knowing what what's meaningful for them, what they want?

In the experience of the EPs, it was important that the child's capacity to communicate was increased. EPs saw their role in supporting this process through assessment practices that promote the child's voice or supporting the school to do so.

The attention of this theme now turns towards the home and school microsystems surrounding a child who is masking. Recalling an earlier theme, the EPs recognised that select adults will be more able to identify masking, particularly those who foster a sense of safety with the child, as EP 3 describes:

EP 3: It usually comes from someone else that is attuned to them or knows them well enough to sort of spot the behaviours.

EPs then assumed that greater insight would aid the school to identify and respond to masking as a concern. EPs viewed positive staff relationships and an associated safe atmosphere as important strategies for the child to present 'authentically' and not have to mask, if only for a period. This was seen to relieve the accumulative toll of masking on the child throughout the day. The following quotes describe the perceived benefit of 'unmasking' in certain contexts:

EP 2: When the behaviours that they've been modifying or suppressing comes to the fore. And that's a relief rather than you know that invisible distress.

EP 1: Yeah, safe spaces as well. Or safe sort of secure calming sensory based places where they can go so that they could have an outlet for and being more as they would be themselves rather than holding things in.

Sedgewick et al. (2022) advocate for unmasking opportunities during the school day, which the EPs were aligned with, but this required modifications to the child's immediate environment. ELSA was identified as an approach well suited to facilitating authentic self-expression:

EP 5: I sometimes see it with, I think in my ELSA supervision, the ELSAs sometimes the kids will go in there and cry in there and then go back to class and kind of like back in modifying suppressing mode.

In advocating for safe relationships and spaces that allow a child to 'unmask' throughout the day, the EPs alluded to their assumption that masking is the inauthentic self-expression mediated by environment. Almost always for EPs it was the school environment where masking occurred and where change needed to occur to increase feelings of emotional safety. This aligns with previous findings which indicate that CYP masked more in school compared to the home (Halsall et al., 2021; Goscocki et al., 2025). EPs recognised that schools might not feel equipped to meet these needs and so viewed their role to facilitate this relational practice.

EP 4: I think education for schools that they're not powerless, it's not the case that because they're not showing symptoms in school that you, they can't do anything. You know very much they have a lot of influence in this situation.

Attention now turns to the other important microsystem, the family. EPs considered parents as the primary identifiers of masking under the assumption that the home context is the child's safe space where they show an authentic self and therefore where needs are best understood. Beyond this the EPs gave less consideration to the home micro-system and any direct role it plays in the child's experience of masking.

EP 3: We seem to have identified that in many instances it's the parents that pick up or notice and sort of share about the masking that they see. So sometimes I think a provision that I will often recommend is like a very enhanced level of communication between home and school.

As the quote by EP 3 shows, EP responses were also targeted within the meso-system by connecting the home and school micro-systems. As masking was understood to be context dependent, an increased need for collaborative practice that incorporates perspectives from these varying contexts was recognised.

EP 4: If you have that shared understanding, which I appreciate we're banging on about a lot. So, [facilitator], I hope you talk a lot about shared understanding

EP 5: That difference between how they're presenting at school or how they're presenting at home or how they're even within school they might mask in certain environments and let it out other times.

The primary tools the EPs used were consultation and collaborative formulation. In some instances, simply holding space for a conversation between the home and school systems was seen as interventive.

EP 5: There's something about as EPs if we're doing sort of joint parent teacher consultations or even gathering parent views that we kind of bridge that gap a little bit.

EP 4: It was just allowing the parent to share the narrative with the SENCo about what happens at home. And the SENCo had no idea, and the parent described how that child was getting home, stripping off all of their clothes and melting down for two hours every day after school. And for the SENCo to hear that was so powerful, and I almost didn't need to be there, apart from to say 'so, tell us what happens after school' and then it all kind of unfolded amongst them because once you hear that, you don't need much external input, do you, to sort of see that something needs to change.

Three EPs reported using solution-oriented questioning during consultation to understand when where and with whom the child feels most safe, comfortable and energised, and what that looks like. The aim of this questioning was to establish, across contexts, where the child is more authentic or masking more.

Based on the findings that attribution theory would be helpful to EP practice in the realm of masking, in future practice EPs might also consider utilising attribution theory during joint home-school consultation. Based on the existing practice described by EPs, the use of ecosystemic consultation (Miller, 2003) and joint systems consultation (Dowling & Osborne, 1994) would fit well in supporting schools and parents with school-based masking. These approaches offer EPs collaborative consultation involving key adults from the home and school environments to "explore perspectives, establish common ground, and develop solutions" (Gulliford & Miller, 2024, p. 198). Some EPs expanded this idea of greater connection in the mesosystem by advocating for consultation that includes class teachers and parents, not just the SENCo. This can be seen as EPs looking to include the most accurate problem holder in the school (Monsen & Frederickson, 2016).

5.0 Presentation of Teacher Themes with Analytical Narrative

Four themes are reported from the teacher analysis. Also displayed in figure 4 below, these are:

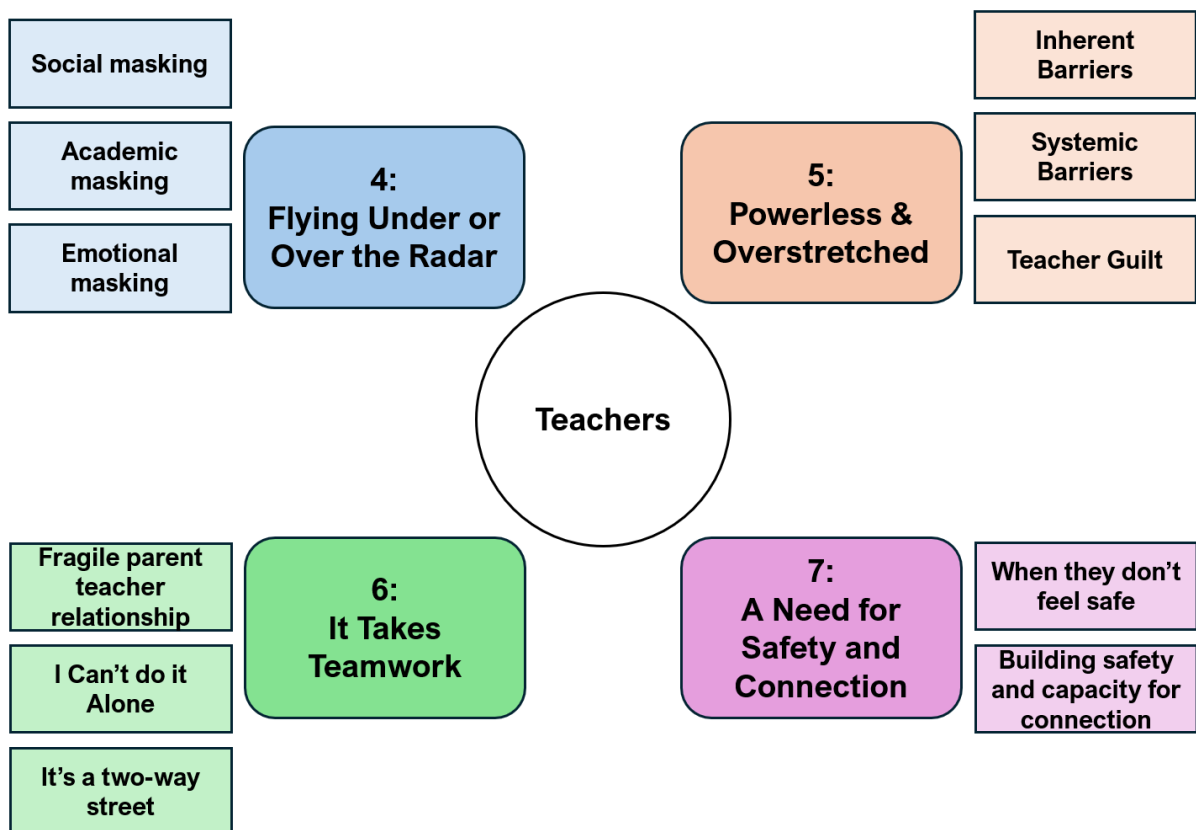
4. Flying Under or Over the Radar

5. **Powerless & Overstretched**
6. **It Takes Teamwork**
7. **A need for Safety and Connection**

Theme 4 *Flying Under or Over the Radar* describes how teachers conceptualised school-based masking as a behavioural presentation causing the child's needs (or the child themselves) to go unnoticed. Theme 5 *Powerless and Overstretched* reports on the barriers the teachers experienced to working effectively with children who mask in school, some inherently linked to masking itself, and others linked to wider systemic pressures in the education system, both of which interact. This then leads to negative self-evaluations of practice and feelings of guilt by the teachers. The next theme is *It Takes Teamwork* which, similar to Theme 3 in the EP analysis, highlights the importance of collaboration between parents, teachers and other professionals to support school-based masking. The final theme for the teacher analysis is *A Need for Safety and Connection* which explores how low feelings of emotional safety in school are seen to drive masking and subsequent consequences, but this offers a route for intervention.

Figure 4

Thematic Map for Teacher Analysis



Theme 4: Flying Under or Over the Radar in School

In this theme the teachers understood masking as a presentation which results in the child's feelings, needs or identity being hard to notice or understand. This was summarised by multiple teachers using the analogy of 'flying under the radar'. This was also paired with a less commonly evoked idea that some masking behaviour draws more attention or diverts attention to obscure an underlying difficulty, i.e. flying over the radar. Both flying under and over the radar function to make the child's needs or vulnerabilities less knowable to the teacher.

Teacher 2: She comes across as very compliant, able, always really quiet. But she would put her hand up or she would answer questions and do her work without seemingly having any difficulties.

A central part of this theme encapsulated in this quote is that a child who masks in school appears to cope ensuring they are less likely to be flagged by teachers as experiencing a concern. A child appears to be managing the normal demands of school but as the following quote by Teacher 6 demonstrates the child's behavioural presentation does not tell the teacher the whole story:

Teacher 6: For me, it's those children who kind of perhaps are feeling a certain way or who want to express a feeling but don't and can't, they might pretend everything's fine, they might put on an act, whether that's a silly act or whether that's a 'I'm a super good student act' kind of thing. And just probably have got a really high level of anxiety behind that facade. And it's, you know, probably struggling with either the work or the school day or just different aspects of life.

One function that masking serves a child in this theme was to explicitly avoid the teacher's attention by simply blending in amongst peers or particularly to avoid negative attention from adults, as described by the following teachers:

Teacher 4: She's mortified if she gets into trouble. She really doesn't want to get into trouble. She wants to slip under the radar. She doesn't like the attention on her. So, I think that's why she's masking.

Teacher 2: It's almost like that they become invisible, so they sort of can become quite, as you say, compliant and they don't want to get told off [...] They don't want to stand out. It is that thing of not wanting to be seen as different.

The behaviour was considered masking when it successfully leads to the child or their difficulties going unnoticed, as the quote below indicates. However, this perspective might fail to appreciate attempts at masking made by CYP that are unsuccessful as recognised by Halsall et al. (2021) where underlying difficulties are not concealed but might nevertheless require significant effort to attempt.

Teacher 1: They're very good at masking, aren't they? You know, if they weren't, if the children weren't good at masking, we would see it more.

The teacher's interpretation of the child's behaviour, not just the behaviour itself, is therefore just as much a factor in whether the difficulty goes unnoticed by the teacher. Teachers continuously interpret children's behaviour but in the case of masking they might take the outward presentation at face value therefore making erroneous assumptions about the child's internal experience. Most teachers did report being able to infer some level of masking or masked difficulty depending on the child, their relationship with that child and how well they are informed about the child. For example, a growing awareness of potentially masked need for a child is described by Teacher 2:

Teacher 2: Adults around her have got better at being able to not sort of assume, "yeah, she's okay, she's fine at school" you know, but making sure that they are giving her things that she needs in case she needs them.

A central element to teacher experiences with school-based masking was a substantial contrast in presentation between school and home contexts. Whereas the child and their difficulties were seen to 'fly under the radar' at school, a child's presentation at home was most often reported by parents to include emotional dysregulation and overt presentations of distress.

Teacher 7: Once they go home, they're then not able to cope in their situation. So, we think they're absolutely fine at school. We think they're doing really well. And then they go home and we get an e-mail from parents going 'they're really not okay. What can we do at school to support that?'

Teacher 1: For example, you'll get a child at school who it looks as if they're taking everything on board. They might even be a model pupil to you doing 'Yes, miss, I'll do this, that' and so forth. But when they get home, they blow up.

This apparent difference in presentation was a rare sign for teachers that everything is not as it seems for their pupil, as Teacher 6 describes:

Teacher 6: She would have gone under the radar if people, if you know mum hadn't sort of been on the case there.

These descriptions align with the pattern generally observed by EPs of emotional internalisation by the child at school contrasted with externalisation at home, which is also consistent with existing descriptions of school-based masking amongst autistic girls (Halsall et al., 2021; Bassett, 2021). The EP and teacher perspectives diverged in one aspect. To the teachers some children mask not by avoiding the teacher or peer's attention all together but by diverting or attracting attention. The same function of making difficulties less known to others applies here as described by Teachers 6 and 4:

Teacher 6: I've definitely had boys who I feel like have presented in a more class clown silly way and I'd say that's usually when they've maybe found the work hard or when they're really struggling with resilience and they're scared, scared of failure, scared they're going to get it wrong. And so, they kind of instead of trying, they'll be silly and act up and try and be the class clown. And that's their way of, it's almost like just diverting attention, isn't it, from what the real issue is to maybe something else.

Teacher 4: I was thinking about the other day with the boys in my current class. Oh, they have a mask. [...] He pretends to be the alpha male of the class. And that's the perception that other teachers actually have of him as well. I can see why they do, because he does pretend to be this like alpha male, but he's just a scared boy. And actually, when you talk to him, he's so kind and caring and funny, and just really low self-confidence and really scared, but he's put on this mask, because that's what he believes a man should look like or should be like.

Between all seven teachers there was a broad range of experience regarding the profiles of children who 'fly over or under the radar' and the difficulties or differences which were masked. Autism and social communication difficulties were commonly noted by all teachers to be masked by children. Most teachers also had experience with children diagnosed with ADHD who masked traits of inattentiveness and hyperactivity. Additional aspects of identity which were perceived to be masked were: children who are anxious in school and other SEMH needs, children who are young carers, children who have experienced a

bereavement, specific learning difficulties and general academic challenges. The interviews focussed on experiences with children in KS2, but masking was attributed to children in KS1 also. An observation made by some, but not all, teachers was that masking became more prevalent in older year groups as social demands increase, an observation consistent with findings of high levels of masking amongst adolescents (Jorgenson et al., 2020).

Teacher 5: I think mum said it's happened previous years, but it's kind of getting worse for her as she gets older.

This theme is further divided into three sub-themes: social masking, emotional masking and academic masking. These subthemes represent main domains of masking that were recognised. It was recognised by the teachers that these all relate to and influence each other.

Subtheme 4a: Social Masking

A prominent pattern of masking behaviour related to managing the social aspects of the school day; children were observed to mask for particular 'audiences' in different social contexts. This reflects Goffman's dramaturgical analogy for impression management (Goffman, 1963) which is applied to understand masking (Ai et al., 2022). The child, as an actor, masks (performs) in a particular way depending on the audience. The two primary audiences that the children masked for were teachers and peers.

Teacher 6: She kind of makes me feel like she's just really not feeling she can be herself in certain situations. And yeah, just that she obviously feels like she's got to conform in something. I think sometimes children mask in the sense that they're masking for you as a teacher, I think, and being that 'I'm a really good person, good student, I'm a good whatever' but I feel like for her she's more doing it for a peer group.

Here, both masking for the teacher or for peers was understood in relation to conformity and managing one's external presentation, demonstrating alignment between the EP and teacher conceptualisations of masking. Performing for a peer group was connected to peer pressure by Teacher 2:

Teacher 2: But we've noticed girls are struggling more recently [...] I think a lot of that has to do with such a massive amount of peer pressure and nowadays with social media and how, you know, they're meant to behave and what they're meant to be doing and what they're meant to be wearing and what they're meant

to be watching. And I think, you know, it's hard enough being a teenager and growing up in that respect anyway, let alone having to sort of pretend to not be yourself during the day.

Existing literature connects a desire for peer acceptance as motivation for school-based masking (Pearson et al., 2025a), however, the connection between social media facilitated peer pressure driving masking is a novel one. The importance of peer interactions as for CYP's development as well as their susceptibility to peer influence and peer pressure has been long considered in educational psychology (Connor, 1994; D'Lima & Higgins, 2021). Connor (1994) asserts that CYP can be particularly vulnerable to peer pressure when they have a need for attachment to peers or have low self-esteem, which parallels masking in association with stigmatised or marginalised identities (Ai et al., 2022). Driven by a desire to belong, social media use is linked to an increased influence of peer pressure and conformity in primary-aged pupils (D'Lima & Higgins, 2021) in a way that resembles the motivations and behaviours of masking. Additionally social media has been linked to increased self-consciousness in primary-aged children (Children's Commissioner, 2018) which is also characteristic of masking (Petrolini et al., 2023). This suggests that social media use may be a factor that promotes masking via increasing peer pressure to conform.

One teacher described in depth the masking of an autistic girl, the intended audience of which was seen to be her peers.

Teacher 6: This year she's really looking at what the popular girls are doing. She's changed the way her hair is. She's changed the way the clothes that she wears. She's really trying to be like the kind of popular crew. And you can see her watching and thinking about it and kind of trying to do what they're doing, trying to say what they're saying, but at the same time, she is quite clunky and clumsy with it [...] we recently found in a tray, a huge stack of almost like a diary where she's been writing down all her very tweenage thoughts, she's very much 'I don't understand this, why is this happening? Why does so and so do this?' and then she's been writing things like, 'I have to remember to act normal in the dinner hall' or 'I have to remember to do XYZ'. And I think she kind of makes me feel like she's just really not feeling she can be herself in certain situations. And yeah, just that she obviously feels like she's got to conform in something

This description can be compared to Livingston & Happé's (2017) compensation model which considers the depth of cognitive processing behind the behaviour. Some of these

elements reflect shallow compensation as strategies that are somewhat superficial, not resulting in increased understanding. Other elements may be seen as deeper compensations, which are associated with increased effort and improvements in social cognition, such as writing down notes on how they want to behave and what to remember.

On a limited number of occasions masking in children was associated with other constructs, such as shyness, and a hesitance to express views and feelings in certain social contexts, exemplified in the following quote by Teacher 3:

Teacher 3: He struggles, because he's quite quiet, he struggles to sort of get in there and say what he'd like to play or why he's feeling a little bit left out. But also on the flip side of that, often, so he goes to after school club as well and these ELSA sessions as well. And everyone tells me what a different child they see as well in different settings as well.

These descriptions echo the connection between masking and personality style (Godfrey & Koutsouris, 2024) made earlier.

Subtheme 4b: Academic Masking

The next subtheme in this section summarises the masking of academic difficulties or learning needs, as noticed by teachers. The notion of masking academic or learning needs in school has received less attention than the masking of social difficulties but was noted amongst autistic female students who masked to “look smarter” (Goscicki et al., 2025) and camouflage learning needs (Halsall et al., 2021).

Teacher 3: For those who mask academically, it's more difficult for me to pick up any misconceptions that I maybe need to teach again or teach again to a smaller group or just support them a little bit more.

Teacher 4: Oh, they're really clever. They'll find, they'll find ways around, they'll find ways around making it look like they can do the work, but they don't really understand it.

These quotes were interpreted as teachers feeling a reduced sense of self-efficacy to meet these learning needs as it can become more difficult to identify and then respond to them. A viscous cycle of academic masking was identified: masked difficulties are less likely to be supported meaning that the child makes less progress, further raising their anxiety and disrupting their learning. This reflects a similar effect reported by Halsall et al. (2021) who also

identified a link between intensifying camouflaging as academic demands increased. As the next theme describes, the teachers in the present study also noted an association between the demands of the curriculum and masking.

Subtheme 4c: Emotional Masking

This last subtheme in the theme of 'Flying Over or Under the Radar' concerns children masking their internal emotional state whilst in school so that teachers struggle to recognise any distress that is in fact experienced.

Teacher 5: And it's really surprising because you just see her smiling and putting her hands up occasionally, but not very much. I think she's very, very shy.

Teacher 2: That's one of the things when they mask at school, they don't ask for help. They keep their feelings in all day. And then obviously they have this outburst at home.

As the quotes above and demonstrate, masking was often linked to a difference between behavioural presentation in school and the child's internal experience. Emotional masking specifically is conceptualised here as the concealment of existing discomfort or emotional distress.

The opposite directional relationship is emphasised in the school-based masking literature in which masking leads to emotional distress. Mechanisms for this include masking being exhausting and cognitively draining (Goscicki et al., 2025; Pearson et al., 2025a) leading to emotional dysregulation after instances of masking at school (Halsall et al., 2021; Bassett, 2021), and experiences of anxiety about whether attempts at masking have been successful after the fact (Halsall et al., 2021). Here, the teachers recognised that distress itself, or emotional discomfort, can be the difficulty that is masked. Some literature recognises this pattern, that masking could be driven by emotional distress such as anxiety (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). The important implications for the concealment of emotional distress in education have been previously discussed by Flett et al. (2018). Therefore, existing emotional distress could prompt masking, which may itself further increase distress. Highlighting this suggests a bi-directional relationship between masking and emotional distress.

Similar to the EPs, the teachers treated the presence of distress as a common identifying feature of the masking construct, although their behavioural presentation was

equated with 'pretending to be fine'. For some children this appeared to be them trying to live up to adult expectations to cope in the school context as described by Teacher 6:

Teacher 6: You could suggest to him 'do you want to go just take 5 minutes and go and take your reading book and go quietly listen to your music or whatever you want to do?' Sometimes he'd be kind of like 'no' because he really wanted to almost prove that he could be in the classroom and he wanted to do what, you know, he sort of thought he was meant to do.

As described with social and academic masking, the teachers noted that it becomes increasingly difficult to identify and meet the emotional needs of a child who masks these difficulties.

Teacher 7: This particular girl, she didn't tell us that she was uncomfortable in assembly, but there were so many tears about it at home. So we didn't have any clue at all.

Pearson et al. (2025a) state that staff being unable to recognise the signs of adolescent poor mental health because of masking represents a safeguarding concern in secondary schools. Findings in this subtheme suggests that this would also apply in the context of primary schools as this quote from Teacher 5 shows:

Teacher 5: Even just not communicating that they're unhappy in any way means it's difficult to then understand how you can get them to a good place. If there's any mitigating factors, you won't know about them necessarily, unless you spend time looking, you know, getting the child to open up to you. And that includes learning things going on at home, whatever is causing that the child to feel that they need to protect themselves, that they're not safe. What is it that's triggering them not feeling safe to be themselves? It's just understanding, isn't it? Until you can understand, you can't offer solutions, so part of the process is getting past that lack of communication to get that understanding to be able to provide those solutions.

A link with anxiety was noted in particular by some teachers, reflecting a connection made by some EPs and by the literature (Lei et al., 2024). In this way, masking has similarities to anxiety safety behaviours.

Teacher 5: I think it's a fear of... A fear of failure, a fear of standing out, a fear of getting it wrong, a fear of being judged by peers. But very much anxiety based.

Theme 5: Powerless and Overstretched

The theme described here relates to the barriers to effective practice the teachers encountered in this area, and the personal and professional repercussions associated with this (subtheme 5c). These barriers are separated into inherent challenges in working to support children who mask (subtheme 5a), recalling Theme 4, and systemic barriers that exacerbate these difficulties (subtheme 5b).

Subtheme 5a: Inherent Barriers to Supporting Masking

As masking was characterised as 'flying under the radar' all teachers recognised difficulties noticing and addressing underlying needs (social, academic or emotional). As a result, the teachers expressed low self-efficacy in meeting the needs of a child who masks. It was recognised by some teachers that this has a knock-on effect for early intervention, involvement of external agencies and potential diagnosis.

Teacher 1: Masking does have a great effect because either it slows down a diagnosis and it also stops that early intervention.

Teacher 4: [as part of a paediatrician assessment] They would ask us to fill out information and forms about what we see in school and you're just not seeing any of it sometimes. And it's almost like you're trying to think really hard. You're like, "I must have seen something". But yeah, it's really, really tricky as a teacher, especially when you don't know all the information.

As the quote by Teacher 4 illuminates, some teachers felt conflicted when providing information for a diagnostic assessment or external agency, wanting to be supportive but not seeing any notable behaviour in the school context. This exemplifies how masking can conceal need and lead to reduced access to support for CYP in school (Cook et al., 2018; Pearson et al., 2025a). The following quotes by Teachers 5 and 3 demonstrate how features of masking negatively impact teacher confidence to support these children.

Teacher 5: I think this is part of the problem is that it is very difficult to notice those masking behaviours because it is so...the whole point is not drawing attention to yourself. So, a child that's masking is seeking to hide that they might not feel confident, capable, but don't want to show negative behaviours, so they

want to show willingness and engagement. But without drawing any attention to themselves, so in my experience so far, I've been very reliant on having that input from parents to draw me to that attention.

Teacher 3: And it was really difficult to hear because it's such a shame because like I say in school, you don't see that at all. And I almost feel like I want to support him more, but it's so hard to do that when you don't see what he's like at home and you don't see what it is you actually need to support with.

When applied to teaching, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) has been linked to teaching resilience when facing setbacks, teaching approach, and also outcomes for students (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). In the domain of children masking, teacher descriptions suggested low feelings of self-efficacy, which was reflective of perceptions made by EPs of teacher confidence in this area. The teachers commonly shared the feeling that they had a lack of knowledge in this area and sought support through training just as the EPs saw themselves as well placed to provide.

Teacher 6: So yeah, I'd definitely change the amount of training and learning that you get. Making sure it's sort of a uniform practice. Because you know, you're not taught. Everything I could have said to you today could be absolute nonsense, you know what I mean? I might not even know what all the signs are. I might have missed, I might still be missing children who are masking. You've got an awareness of it, but it still might not be best practice.

There is consistency here with previous research; from the perspective of autistic girls who camouflage in school, Goscicki et al. (2025) report that teachers lacked knowledge on how to support their needs.

Subtheme 5b: Systemic Barriers

In addition to the specific, inherent difficulties the teachers experienced when working to support children who mask in school, these were contextualised within broader challenges within education and teaching. These included but were not limited to curriculum and attendance demands, funding concerns and high pupil to staff ratios in the classroom. These interacted with barriers described in subtheme 5a, leading to the needs of children that are internalised or masked being lost amongst competing demands and scarce resources. This theme demonstrates alignment in how teachers and EPs perceive some schools to have a

limited capacity to effectively meet the needs of school-based masking within the context of the 'SEN crisis'.

Firstly, the teachers observed competing demands and expectations upon them and the school as a system which can limit their responsiveness to children who mask. The first of these noted by Teacher 7 were the attendance expectations placed upon the school.

Teacher 7: Obviously, if we've got the child in school, that's our priority. In that sense, and academically, that's what we're judged on. That's our pressures from the school environment. We have to get attendance to a certain level because those are the pressures on us. And then at the same time, we're trying to balance the actual need of the child.

This quote speaks to a feeling that focussing on attendance targets prevents the teacher and school from responding in a child-centred way which can feel dismissive of parental concerns when a child is presenting with emotional distress at home. Paired with this, teachers denounced large class sizes.

Teacher 5: because I've got 32 children in my class, so you can't always spot in the moment that a child is struggling because you've got eyes across the classroom.

Thirdly, an overburdening curriculum which was seen as excessively academic and content heavy promoted perceived academic masking.

Teacher 7: They're not able to access the curriculum so it's creating, they're just overwhelmed when it comes to everything that they've got to do. There's too much pressure on them. And so they start pretending that they're absolutely fine in school because everyone else is okay and they get home and they're really not [...] If there was a way for us to be able to change the curriculum so that the children were comfortable, they are learning the core skills instead of learning how to put adverbials into sentences and whatnot when they're six. I think get the core basics right at the early stages so that they're just more comfortable and they're not needing to have to mask.

The combination of high children to adult ratios and curriculum expectations acted as a barrier to understanding individual children's needs and responding relationally, which was seen as essential in cases of school-based masking.

Teacher 4: There's an awful amount to cover in the curriculum. There's no time. You don't get any time for more PSHE lessons. [...] Lack of funding is a big barrier because we don't have specialists in mainstream. To inform teachers, head teachers, even SENCOs, you know, you can't get ed psych time [...] So, funding, curriculum, and then the other one is training.

As the quote by Teacher 4 depicts, the teachers expressed that they and their schools were under-resourced, both financially and in lacking support staff who were seen as vitally helpful. The notion of under-resource also extended to aspects of practice like lacking knowledge of masking, as described earlier. It was commonly expressed that the ideal form of practice would be to respond relationally to children who mask and get to know them, but teachers felt unable to do this because of competing demands and lacking capacity. Teachers 5 and 6 express this feeling of physical and relational under-resourcing:

Teacher 5: I found that really challenging that you just need a second pair of hands sometimes that you just don't have. Just having opportunities to build those relationships. As teachers are stripped back, more and more children in the class, less and less support, that ability to build those important relationships is makes it harder because you just cannot split yourself amongst your class [...] Yeah, just people really, just not enough people that they can talk to.

Teacher 6: Support. Same as everything in schools, money and support. Yeah, we don't have enough people in school to support the needs of all the children that we have. So again, those children who are quieter and not kind of actually disrupting learning for everybody might, not consciously, but not get support because when you're considering the needs of the entire class, you probably need to support the child who's most vocally stopping everyone from learning.

As Teacher 6 recognised, the needs of a child who masks or internalises must necessarily compete with the needs of other children in a context where there is only limited adult time or energy to go around. It was therefore described by some teachers that they are forced to choose where to focus their energy, which is usually towards children whose distress is externalised and disrupts the school system most. All the while, the children who have a higher propensity to mask are less likely to be noticed and receive support.

Teacher 1: Those behaviours that flag up quicker in a way, because obviously it will then undoubtedly affect peers within the classroom and likely to have more interactions with the different adults on the playgrounds. You know, as a school, you know you have your duties and so forth, whereas [child] who is inattentive and doesn't really show it, is going to kind of go under the radar [...] If the behaviour is physical or for a better word, in some ways negative in a way it's more likely to flag up before the other.

This recalls the EP idea of masking as a fawn response, as contrasted with fight or flight responses which in comparison presents less disruption to the school system and does not communicate the presence of an underlying need as overtly, possibly leading to less responsiveness from adults. This also aligns with descriptions in the literature. A participant in Atkinson et al. (2025) reported that “the teachers have to concentrate on disciplining naughty children, rather than helping me to be confident in who I am” (p. 9). In Pearson et al. (2025a) a young person recognised that limited teacher time and energy limited capacity to provide individualised, child-centred support. Atkinson et al. (2025) identified that belonging was reduced when CYP felt that staff cared only about academic outcomes, so it is recommended that settings go beyond an academic focus to foster belonging, manage anxiety and reduce the need to mask. However, Teacher responses here suggest that it is not for a lack of desire to build relationships on the part of teachers, but competing priorities and pressures limit their practice. This suggests that change would need to come at a wider systemic level, rather than just teacher attitudes, shifting some the focus (to an extent) of education away from academic outcomes to relationships, wellbeing and holistic development.

Subtheme 5c: Teacher Guilt

This last subtheme ‘Teacher Guilt’ in the theme 5, Powerless and Overstretched, represents the negative evaluations the teachers made of their own practice when unable to overcome the barriers described.

Teacher 5: We just felt so much for them because they were struggling so much and they were seeking help. We're trying to provide support, but only so far you can go that they needed so much more help. But it did feel like that we were failing them in some way, even though we were doing the best.

Teacher 7: It's quite depressing that you feel as though its sand falling through your fingers and you can't control it as you're going through. It's a horrible process to watch because you just want to be able to help the family.

These feelings of guilt were intrinsically linked to the difficulties teachers had in identifying if a child is masking and in feeling a lack of capacity to address these challenges. Other reflections focussed on historic practice when teachers were less aware of masking amongst their pupils and a sense of having let pupils down:

Teacher 6: Certainly, earlier on in my career there will have been children in my classroom who have masked well enough for me to not notice them. So, consequences for them will probably have been awful that they, you know, didn't feel like people noticed them and that their worries and anxieties could potentially have got worse.

Teacher 4: They completely slip under the radar really. And knowing that now I look back at some of the students I've taught. And, because I didn't know enough about it makes you, I don't know, it makes you feel a bit guilty in a way that those students were sat in your class struggling but because they masked so well you didn't know that. And then it was only if you spoke to the parents or the parents came to you and said "I think child A is really struggling. At home, we're experiencing these behaviours and she's always talking about this going on in school" and it's almost like they're talking about a different child.

This finding of teacher guilt in relation to school-based masking is unique amongst the existing literature, possibly because no research has yet sampled the qualitative perspectives of teachers in this area before. Previous research has noticed that teachers struggle to meet these needs (Atkinson et al., 2025; Pearson et al., 2025a) and it is unsurprising that as members of a helping profession teachers might feel a sense of professional failure as a result.

Both the EPs and teachers observed two groups of teacher colleagues. The first were those who are dismissive of masking as a need and whose practice might be supported through raising awareness. Secondly, the EPs also recognised teachers who are wishing to help in cases of school-based masking but feeling unempowered; this was generally how the teacher participants identified. What the EPs perhaps had not considered with this second group of teachers were the potentially intense negative feelings of powerlessness and guilt reported here. In future practice EPs and parents should take an understanding and empathetic approach when consulting with teachers, recognising their potentially low self-efficacy in this area and inherent difficulties in supporting needs that are masked in school. A form of joint consultation which avoids judgement and blame, like ecosystemic consultation (Miller, 2003) and joint systems consultation (Dowling & Osborne, 1994) would be fitting.

Theme 6: It Takes Teamwork

This theme relates to the relationships and collaboration with other adults that teachers saw as pivotal for their practice with school-based masking. Key collaborators were parents, with whom some differences in perspective and priorities were noticed, and teaching assistants. There were many parallels between this theme and EP Theme 3 'Working Together', highlighting that both professionals value the perspectives held by different adults across contexts and the need to coordinate these. This also suggests that the ideal approaches of EPs and teachers would align well with similar commitments to collaborative practice.

Subtheme 6a: Fragile Parent Teacher Relationship

The important role of parents in cases of children masking in school was commonly noted amongst the teachers. However, the relationship between the teacher and parent had the potential to be fragile. Teacher 6 describes the challenge of feeling unable to validate parental concerns when the observations they each make of the child across contexts vary greatly:

Teacher 6: I've probably been guilty of it in the past, you know, parents coming and saying, 'we think our child is neurodivergent, I think our child is...', and us being, you know, in school saying, 'well, we don't see any of that.'

There was a distinction, showing in the following quote by Teacher 6, between those teachers who characterised themselves as those struggling to navigate the inherent challenges that school-based masking presents compared with teacher colleagues who can be unhelpfully dismissive of masking related concerns which exacerbated difficulties working with parents. This distinction recalls those made by EPs in Theme 1 and teachers in Theme 5.

Teacher 6: I think there's schools where staff wouldn't even consider that there was children masking, especially the ones who were masking in that, the sense we talked about being a good student.

Therefore, teachers particularly in more leadership positions, like EP 2, saw their role to shift their colleague's perspectives.

Teacher 2: So, I've done a lot of work with sort of staff attitudes to masking because staff can be very much like, "well, they don't do, they're fine, they're fine at school".

However, despite taking what was considered an understanding approach, some teachers experienced the relationship with parents to degrade, as described by Teacher 5:

Teacher 5: There's a lot of suspicion almost around how a teacher supports the child. So, I think parents don't always see that teachers very much want to support. At the same time, it must be very hard to feel like you're advocating for your child and don't feel heard because you're having to fight for whatever needs they have.

Parent and teacher views were seen to easily diverge in cases of school-based masking due to the child's context-dependent presentation, which could facilitate suspicion as Teacher 5 reflected. A divergence in views on a child's needs led teachers to characterise parental responses as disproportionate. According to Teachers 1 and 2 this could place increased pressure on teachers:

Teacher 1: There might be they reach a point where there'd be an interaction with the parent. There'd be something like. 'How did you speak to that child? Or, what actually happened?' sometimes the parents can be quite overprotective because they know for a better word the triggers the child has.

Teacher 2: [parents] can seem overprotective and they can be the sort of parents that you sort of think 'oh, here they go again'. You know what they mean and where they're coming from, but obviously they're looking out for their children and that's it.

These quotes recall EP theme 1a and how teacher attributions of parents contribute to their sense-making of children's masking. These quotes are examples of teachers partially locating the problem within parental 'over reactions' and 'misinterpretation' of the child's needs. But Teachers 1 and 2 do not completely disregard parents, recognising their ability to understand the child's stressors and desire to advocate for their child.

Differences in perspective extended into the conceptual understanding of masking, which was discussed mostly by Teacher 7. In this case, parent and teacher views diverged regarding how much masking was an expected or typical experience and therefore a natural form of coping. The overprotective characterisation of parents continues here.

Teacher 7: I'd like to tell them that masking is okay sometimes. It's a natural thing that we all do, but it's not OK when it becomes too much.

So to let some parents know that it's okay if school is a little bit too much, it just can't get too much.

Teacher 7 reported that some parents sought to remove all stressors from the child's environment, which included removing the child from contexts in which they masked. Whereas the teacher advocated for building resilience to maintain access to these various contexts, with the implicit assumption that the child will continue to mask as a coping strategy. This characterised masking as (sometimes) an appropriate way of coping with typically expected demands. The literature is inconsistent in support of this view and whether masking is adaptive or detrimental; amongst autistic and non-autistic adolescents negative consequences were not universally experienced highlighting the individuality of experience (Bernardin et al. 2021b). Extended masking can lead to burnout in some cases over time (Hull et al., 2017) but does offer people increased access to rewarding and important life experiences (Livingston et al., 2019). Summerhill and Summers (2025) recommend that practitioners should take a balanced view of mitigating long-term negative effects whilst bearing in mind the positive functions masking can serve.

Subtheme 6b: I Can't do it Alone

A salient theme expressed by all teachers was that they alone could not identify and meet the needs of a child masking in school. They relied upon parents, other teachers and support staff colleagues in schools to do this effectively.

Firstly, teachers saw a collaborative relationship with parents as vital. Although teachers were able to identify some aspects of masking or masked needs in school, they were largely dependent upon parents to identify and raise the issues. This related closely to the notion that masked problems are externalised more in the home and therefore more identifiable in that context.

Teacher 5: It's very much hidden and I'm reliant on mum giving me the feedback that she's not, that she's struggled on a particular day or a particular environment.

Teacher 4: Because they're masking, you don't know. And so, my experience is speaking to the parents. So actually, you'd learn more from the parents, you'd learn more about what the child was really like and what their struggles are by speaking to their parents, because as the teacher in a class of 30 students, it

was really hard to pick up those students who were masking [...] So, what I used to do was I believe the parents, obviously.

This quote by teacher 4 alludes to a school climate where believing parental reports about a child's needs outside of school is not guaranteed, recalling the previous subtheme. However, the teachers here generally validated parental experiences and valued their unique skills as reported by Teacher 2:

Teacher 2: I remember one child she used to get blotchy when she wasn't happy with something or she perhaps wouldn't look in your eyes kind of thing. You'd go 'OK, I'll need to talk to mum about this because she didn't like something about the day'. But I can't unpick what it was.

Teachers also considered collaboration with colleagues as vital, such as gaining additional information from a child's previous teacher. Support staff, such as TAs, LSAs and ELSAs were especially valued. In many ways support staff were seen as having greater capacity to respond in the necessary relational fashion to support school-based masking. This is outlined in detail by Teacher 6:

Teacher 6: It could be that those children get missed. You can put things in place as the teacher within the classroom, but that if they did need that more personalised one-to-one approach, just even the time to talk or us being able to delve a bit deeper, it's often lacking just due to constraints of support assistants. Across the board support assistant hours are cut times and you know when someone leaves, they're not replaced. It seems the story kind of across the board really. And often they're the people who we rely on to really get to the bottom of things because they're often the people children can build a really strong relationship with, that's a bit different to their relationship with us. And they kind of tend to be people that they spill their secrets to and, you know, with that trust and time [...] there's probably no point in a week where you can take a student for an hour on their own to really talk about all the things that are upsetting them, as much as you would want to. So, you rely on those other adults who are able to do that, certainly they don't have an hour either, but you know, like they've got that time to.

This corroborates the reported value of support staff by Halsall et al. (2021) by autistic girls, parents and TAs themselves. A very similar relationship was observed in this study in

which girls who masked depend upon the TAs who were able to act as mediators between the girls and their class teacher and were better able to see through the girls' masking behaviours to understand their underlying needs. The findings in the present study suggest that the teachers are constrained by competing demands but aware of their deficit in ability to build relationships with children who are masking compared to support staff. This further endorses the separate but important role of support staff in supporting children who mask in school from a teacher's perspective. Highlighting the key role of support staff in any coordinated approach of support around a child has implications for EP practice; any joint-systems consultation or approach that EPs might use in these cases would be best placed to include any key support staff, and not just the SENCo or teacher.

The teachers sought support to develop their knowledge through training, reflecting the ways that the EPs already chose to respond. The teachers were also aligned with the ways EPs respond by valuing a consultation approach that would help them problem solve on an individual basis.

Teacher 4: It would be great if EPs had the time to go into school and teach the teachers and, you know, train the teachers on the latest research. You know, if you're thinking about masking, it would be great for an EP to have the chance to go in and tell the teachers what masking is, what it might look like in the classroom, why students are doing it and the impact on those students, not just academically but emotionally and their future.

Here Teacher 4 is speaking hypothetically, as this ideal was not realised. EPs were perceived as inaccessible due to budget restrictions and other priorities, echoing the systemic barriers reported in subtheme 5b. Of all teacher participants who were asked as part of the interview process if they had been supported by an EP for school-based masking, only one teacher had been supported as part of an education, health and care needs assessment.

Subtheme 6c: It's a Two-way Street

This subtheme encapsulates the teacher's perspective that masking is tied to both the home and school contexts, and that both offer routes for intervention. The previous subtheme described how teachers rely on the support of parents, whereas in the current subtheme teachers saw a role for themselves in supporting the parents in the home by providing advice and information.

Teacher 2: We are supporting them out of school with masking as well, because obviously the impact of masking all day impacts homely life when they get home. So, you know, we've offered family support workshops, to deal with masking and how to deal with children who become dysregulated and sort of the anxiety related outbursts at home [...] how to deal with that sort of the backlash from that when they get home [...] I don't think people realise how much energy it takes for them to actually mask all day. And, making sure that we're aware of that so that when they do go home, they've got strategies to help them recover really, because it can cause burnout, it can affect their mental health as well.

Teacher 2 recognises an emotional toll of school-based masking and sought to assist the home system in facilitating the child's recovery from this. Recovery time alone has been suggested to relieve masking in school (Bassett, 2022; Goscicki et al., 2025). Hull et al. (2017) suggest that this is a possible strategy to enable individuals to want to continue masking to do so therefore maintaining access to school environments. Schools could utilise time alone, in conjunction with recovery time at home, to help children who mask to cope with the associated emotional demands, although practical limitations regarding staffing and space will likely be relevant. Alongside other environmental adjustments, this represents a pragmatic approach across home and school contexts to help the child maintain access to school and improve emotional regulation upon returning home. However, other researchers have characterised these types of adjustments as coercive by simply facilitating masking, and the exhausting consequences, to continue over time. Schneid and Raz (2020) instead emphasise time alone as an end in itself for some autistic individuals who mask, rather than a tool to perpetuate masking.

Teachers felt that adjustments should be made in the home and that the home environment should be factored into understanding the child's masking behaviour. Teacher 7 sought external professional support for this:

Teacher 7: We have the behaviour support team through our local authority as well that comes in and runs parental workshops to try and help parents understand as well. And then again, it's just a lot of talking and a lot of discussion because quite often we find that parents just need to offload as well. And that then that helps settle, and just come up with ideas so that they're not in panic mode.

Ongoing collaboration between teachers and parents was viewed as supportive for teachers, parents and ultimately outcomes for the child. Teacher 2 reports the sharing of consistent practice between the home and school. The example used in this quote recalls a reported use of 'anxiety mapping' in the EP focus group:

Teacher 2: We did a little map of the school and we looked at places where she felt safe and places where she was comfortable. And we sort of mapped that out. And then mum and dad did something similar at home. So she had a calm corner or someone she could go to if she was dysregulated at home and bits and pieces. That seemed to have worked well for her, knowing that she's got these strategies and these sort of this provision at school as well.

A subset of teachers sought to support masking in the home and school simultaneously and did not assume that the school was the only context where intervention could, or should, occur, demonstrating joint-systems working. These teachers considered their own perspectives on the presenting issues as valid, whilst still maintaining varying degrees of collaboration with parents. This generally differs from the approach taken by the EPs who focussed on intervention within the school and generally emphasised the role and expertise of parents. In comparison these teachers reported greater propensity to intervene in the home context, therefore enacting the joint-systems approach (Dowling & Osborne, 1994) that was previously recommended. This is encapsulated in this quote by Teacher 2:

Teacher 2: And then I think just being really, really honest and open with that dialogue between parents and school of knowing that, you know, what happens at home then affects, because it's a cycle, isn't it? What happens at home affects in school and then when they leave school it affects at home to try and stop that sort of, that mad like, meltdown and stuff, you know, that restraint collapse that happens when they get home.

Some teachers considered a reversed pattern of masking behaviour, characterised by more compliance or internalisation in the home compared to school.

Teacher 1: Or sometimes it can be the other way if they're perhaps their home life is not as consistent or stable. Sometimes school might actually be their safe place, or sometimes they show their true nature at school rather than at home kind of thing.

Theme 7: A Need for Safety and Connection

This final theme represents the teacher's conceptualisation of masking in relation to the child's sense of emotional safety in school, with a low sense of safety associated with driving masking whilst offering an avenue for support.

Subtheme 7a: When They Don't Feel Safe

School-based masking was viewed by some teachers as a survival strategy where conforming to perceived norms represents a way to avoid harm.

Teacher 2: What we see in school and what parents tell us is happening at home are two different things. So that's, you know, for us, it's being really aware of, you know, they are conforming and they're conforming for a reason because that's how they deal with what they need to deal with to get through the day.

This conceptualisation aligns with various theoretical accounts of masking as passing to avoid stigma (Perry et al., 2022), as a form of impression management that is socially compelled rather than voluntary (Ai et al., 2022) and as anxiety safety behaviours employed to avoid social evaluation threats (Lei et al., 2024). Empirical findings also support this understanding of school-based masking, which is reported amongst CYP with SEND in response to feeling emotionally unsafe (Porter & Ingram, 2021), and as essential for navigating inhospitable school environments and avoiding bullying (Goscicki et al., 2025; Halsall et al., 2021).

In considering masking as a threat response, this recalls Bradley and colleagues' (2021a) proposal that experiences of masking to avoid harm represents survival rather than thriving, but this masking response inhibited teachers from identifying any threat. Teachers reported that they could become more aware through reports from other adults, or when the child's problems become so entrenched that the consequences eventually become more noticeable.

This pattern resembles one observed by the EPs where a child's long-term mask suddenly 'slips' as their capacity to suppress distress is overwhelmed. Whilst this can be surprising for school staff, this might not be the case for parents who have regularly witnessed the unmasked distress and a gradual decline in wellbeing. In this sense, the problem outgrows the child's capacity to mask it, and a lack of emotional safety is then obvious to teachers, as described by teachers 5 and 7:

Teacher 5: I think she just, lots of crying when she comes into school. She's very clingy, doesn't want to come in, very hesitant to come through the door. We've tried coming into a quiet space and she's coped a lot better since we've been doing that. I think it's just that reluctance, not enjoying school. And it's really surprising because you just, you just, you see her smiling and putting her hand up occasionally.

Teacher 7: I've seen their academics really drop. Um, their attendance lowers which then obviously means they're not accessing the material that we're teaching, their attendance drops, and it's a vicious circle down. At that point, they become emotional-based school avoiders and then move into the homeschooling route.

The teachers associate prolonged cases of school-based masking (driven by reduced feelings of safety) with increased risk of EBSA and academic difficulties. Reflecting the current findings, a negative feedback cycle of academic masking was previously described by Halsall et al. (2021) in which concealing learning difficulties led to less teacher support, increased anxiety around learning needs and ultimately increased learning challenges. A similar negative feedback cycle for emotional masking is shown in the teacher's experiences: the masking of emotional distress leads to a reduced response from school staff and unmet need, resulting in potential exacerbation of distress and ultimately leading to difficulties attending school. Some association between masking, autism and absenteeism is noted in the literature (Bassett, 2022; Cook et al., 2018). It is possible that experiences of stress, exhaustion and eventual burnout linked to school-based masking (Pearson et al., 2025a) could significantly contribute towards the development of EBSA, and could have particular relevance to rising levels of EBSA (Pearson et al., 2025b).

Subtheme 7b: Building Safety and Capacity for Connection

Recognising a need for an increased sense of emotional safety for children who mask in school, the teachers reported that their ideal response would be to build connection with the child and develop the child's capacity to communicate their needs.

Teacher 5: It's so important to build a relationship with that child. So, a relational approach is so important. That child needs to feel safe in the school. And you would make adaptations as much as you can for that child, based on what their parents have said.

Teacher 4: I also feel that the students don't mask as much. Because we're trauma-informed, we're very much built on a relational approach. So, it's really important that for the teachers, the therapists and the pupils to all have and build really strong relationships.

Firstly, the teachers saw relationship building with the child as essential for identifying if a child is concealing difficulties, or masking, and for relieving the need to mask. This relational approach aligns with previous research showing that the need to mask was lower for autistic students when interacting with well-known compared to unfamiliar teachers (Goscicki et al., 2025). This effect is mediated by a sense of belonging which teachers can help to foster. Autistic children reported in Atkinson et al. (2025) that teachers who are caring and help them feel safe foster a sense of belonging which in turn can reduce the perceived need to mask. Linking to the subtheme 6b the teachers recognised the important role support staff colleagues have in fostering a sense of emotional safety amongst children who mask.

Teacher 3: We have an ELSA, who this boy now has one intervention a week with her. And again, he absolutely loves that in feedback from mum and dad. [...] In class, he's very, very quiet, quite academically able, but he struggles with his mental health and he struggles as well with social interaction. [...] because he's quite quiet, he struggles to sort of get in there and say what he'd like to play or why he's feeling a little bit left out. But also on the flip side of that [...] everyone tells me what a different child they see in different settings. So, he can be quite loud and quite funny as well, which we don't see a huge amount of in the classroom. But actually, since he started those ELSA sessions and since I started checking in more consistently with him I definitely have seen a difference in his happiness and engagement within lessons as well.

There is also a parallel here with EP observations that ELSA provides unmasking opportunities (Sedgewick et al., 2022) for children, building a sense of authentic self-expression.

However, teacher's ideal responses were contextualised within the systemic and inherent barriers described in subtheme 5b that limit staff responsiveness in the real world. For example, multiple teachers reported not having the school budget or staff to provide an ELSA intervention and noted how an intervention like ELSA would, or had previously, made a huge difference for school-based masking.

Developing a child's emotional literacy skills, such as through an ELSA intervention, was deemed helpful for increasing the child's capacity to communicate their feelings and needs, as Goscicki et al. (2015) advocate, therefore promoting adult's ability to understand their difficulties. As masking can be linked to a desire to fit in, providing adaptations and support in school presents a notable challenge for teachers to not embarrass pupils. Aware of this, strategies recommended by the teachers related to discrete ways of communicating a need to adults, which is important considering reports by autistic children who disliked having to use a pass or card to access a quiet space or communicate needs explicitly to a teacher which made the children stand out and feel embarrassed (Pearson et al., 2025a). In the present study, some teachers explained how adaptations were made universally throughout their class, including access to sensory objects or ear defenders so that these adjustments did not make any individual child stand out. These findings suggest teachers should collaboratively identify discreet methods for children to communicate distress. However, implementing this might be challenging for a classroom teacher whose attention is divided among an entire class, once again underscoring the vital role of support staff.

The last aspect of this theme reported here is the perceived utility of PSHE lessons for supporting the social and emotional development of children in a way which is supportive of school-based masking.

Teacher 4: And that's why lessons like PSHE are really important because that's where people who, children who have this, idea of what they should be like need to learn that it doesn't have to be like that and that everybody is different and, you know, and strategies for managing that and, you know, if you're not fitting in, how to how to manage that. That's actually really hard to teach in mainstream in particular

This sentiment is also reflected in two studies into school-based masking as a potential protective factor against the need for children to mask (Pearson et al., 2025a; Atkinson et al., 2025). Like teacher 4 recommends, it is suggested that PSHE lessons could be used to normalise autism, and potentially other forms of difference, increasing acceptance and reducing the perceived need for CYP to mask.

6.0 Conclusions

Whilst previous qualitative research has explored school-based masking through the perspectives of adolescents and their parents (Goscicki et al., 2025; Cook et al., 2018; Atkinson et al., 2025; Nelson & Lichwa, 2025; Pearson et al., 2025a; Halsall et al., 2021), the current

study extends this enquiry to the primary school context through sampling educational psychologist and teacher experiences. Previous research has discussed the role of teachers in this area, such as parents viewing teachers as dismissive of masking concerns (Cook et al., 2018; Bassett, 2022) and making recommendations made for teachers supporting school-based masking (Sedgewick et al., 2022). Yet, the perspectives of teachers have until now been underrepresented. Similarly, limited research has discussed school-based masking with direct relevance to EP practice. This research has given voice to educational professionals involved in the dynamic of supporting CYP who mask in school, highlighting barriers and avenues for improved practice.

6.1 Research Question 1: How do educational psychologists understand and respond to masking in primary aged children?

Broadly, the EP analysis reports that school-based masking is an area fraught with challenges for education professionals, families and children to navigate. Within Theme 1 EPs recognised that schools inherently struggle to meet children's needs which do not present in the school context, especially in a climate of reduced resources. Schools felt deskilled to meet the needs of children that are internalised in the school context, as was central to the phenomenon of masking. EPs also noted that some school staff could be dismissive of parental concerns, as suggested by previous research (Bassett, 2022; Cook et al., 2021). Simultaneously to these inherent challenges, a perceived lack of conceptual clarity in defining the construct of school-based masking contributed to challenges working to support these children, discussed in subtheme 1b. The EPs grappled with the conceptual boundaries of the construct, which is not surprising given a lack of coherence in the literature (Petrolini et al., 2023).

In response to a lacking definition, EP understanding of the school-based masking construct is largely represented in Theme 2, summarised as 'what you see isn't what you get'. In a link with Theme 1, it was recognised that adults across contexts can develop disparate understandings of the child and their difficulties because masking is inherently associated with presenting differently depending upon context (usually between the home and school; subtheme 2a). The masking strategies that EPs identified aligned with Hull and colleague's model (2017, 2019) of social camouflaging; some strategies were associated with suppressing natural behaviours or aspects of identity, whereas others related to engaging in novel behaviour that is beyond the child's natural forms of expression. This suggests that Hull and colleagues' (2017, 2019) model applies well to EP practice to describe children's school-based masking. The EPs understood masking primarily as an extension of typical impression

management behaviour (Ai et al., 2022), occupying an extreme end of a continuum without clear parameters. This was observed to apply mostly to children who experience high levels of anxiety or hold a perceived stigmatised or marginalised identity, such as autism, suggesting that the concepts of passing (Perry et al., 2021) and anxiety safety behaviours (Lei et al., 2024) are also helpful theories for conceptualising masking amongst CYP in education.

Some EPs considered that a definition would be helpful for validating the construct whilst also appreciating masking as part of a continuum without clear boundaries. As a unique contribution this research provides a synthesis of literature and current findings to propose a conceptualisation and definition of school-based masking – see section 7.0. This was informed largely by how the EPs understood school-based masking.

The presence of negative emotional wellbeing was considered a marker and a semi-defining feature to demarcate masking from more adaptive forms of impression management (subtheme 2b). This impact on wellbeing was to a much greater extent than would be typically expected for a child navigating the school day. In essence, for the EPs, if the impression management results in significant negative consequences for wellbeing, then it is worth distinguishing from typical experience and therefore becomes aligned with the construct of masking. It was recognised that the consequences of masking are often externalised at home as distress, and so school staff rely on parental reports. However, some children might explicitly mask their distress or mask completely across contexts meaning adults cannot use a difference in presentation to identify it. Therefore, alternative methods, such as self-report measures might be helpful for EP practice. Overall, a consequent negative feature of school-based making was the difficulties professionals have inferring the child's needs and therefore meeting them (subtheme 2c).

EP responses to cases of school-based masking, described in Theme 3, came through consultation, assessment and training (Atfield et al., 2023). Outcomes for these approaches focussed on increasing connection between adults surrounding a child (principally parents and teachers) and between those adults and the child. EP responses were organised at different systemic levels, coming at the level of an individual child, at a school level and lastly in facilitating connection and collaboration between the home and school systems through joint-systems consultations. Also reported were assessment practices to gather and promote the child's voice. EPs also responded at a school level through staff training and raising awareness but responses at a wider local authority (LA) level were not identified.

6.2 Research Question 2: How do teachers understand and respond to masking in primary aged children?

In reflecting upon their experiences working with children who mask in school, the participant teachers identified inherent and systemic barriers to their practice which had a personal emotional effect on them. To respond, the teachers relied heavily upon teamwork with parents and support staff.

In Theme 4 the teacher's understanding of masking had many conceptual similarities with that of EPs, as well as findings in the literature. A central theme was that school-based masking results in children 'flying under the radar' meaning that they blend in and their underlying difficulties go unnoticed by teachers. Recalling the EP analysis and literature findings (Halsall et al., 2021) this tended to differ from the home context where difficulties were more externalised (i.e. less masked) which through parental reports was the primary way teachers became aware that not all was as it seems.

Masking motivations and behaviours were often recognised as social, reflecting research which has focussed heavily on the masking of social communication differences associated with autism (Hull et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2018). A unique finding here was the potential for peer pressure to drive masking as conforming, mediated by social media use. Another unique aspect to school-based masking is the concealment of learning challenges, recalling Halsall et al. (2023). The teachers in the current study also noticed the masking of emotional needs or difficulties which aligns with previous discussions of internalised distress amongst CYP in education (Flett et al., 2018).

In Theme 5 the teachers reported low feelings of self-efficacy to respond in cases of school-based masking because needs are inherently concealed making identification and intervention challenging. Even when parents made them aware, there were reported feelings of powerlessness to make a difference and subsequent guilt. Systemic barriers, such as high child to adult ratios and pressures from the curriculum, were perceived to limit teacher ability to respond in an ideal relational way with pupils who mask. Because of this, teachers saw support staff as particularly well placed to spend time and energy fostering a sense of safety for children who struggle to communicate their needs (subtheme 6b), corroborating a similar finding by Halsall et al. (2021). To support their practice, the teachers sought training and consultation approaches from EPs, but it was noted that access to EP support is limited.

Building upon the previous Theme 5, Theme 6 describes how teachers value teamwork to support their practice, including appreciating the vital perspectives of parents. However, it was recognised that important parent-teacher relationships could be fragile when a child

presents differently between contexts and where priorities diverge (subtheme 6a). All teachers generally sought to collaborate with parents, also by utilising their own expertise to support parents in the home context through information sharing (subtheme 6c). Here, professional priorities between EPs and teachers diverged; whereas EPs generally sought adaptations primarily in the school context to support school-based masking, teacher practice that sought to affect change in the home environment which represents practice more closely aligned with a joint-systems approach (Dowling & Osborne, 1994).

Lastly, Theme 7 frames masking in school as response to low feelings of emotional safety which reflects findings that children with SEND mask when feeling emotionally unsafe and is aligned with accounts of masking as a stigma avoidance (Perry et al., 2021) or an anxiety response (Lei et al., 2024). This presented an avenue to respond to these concerns through building a sense of belonging in school and facilitating the child's ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings authentically.

7.0 Implications for EP practice

This section discusses implications for EP practice, starting with addressing conceptual ambiguity of the construct and then moving on to professional responses to support school-based masking.

7.1 Conceptual Clarity on School-based Masking

A unique and important finding from the EP and teacher analyses was a lack of confidence defining and conceptualising masking in school. Bernardin et al. (2021b) recommended that future research continues to clarify the construct; this section provides a definition and conceptual understanding of school-based masking to inform EP practice.

Defining School-based Masking

This definition of masking is proposed here to give educational professionals, parents and even CYP greater clarity on the factors affecting school-based masking. In some instances, a concise definition is helpful, such as to aid discussion and collaboration, but might be reductive or fail to capture the breadth of individual experience. How school-based masking should be understood as a continuum rather than a discrete phenomenon is expanded upon in the next section.

An initial working definition of school-based masking was formulated from the EP focus group (primarily Theme 2) and findings from the literature (see appendix D). During the interviews each teacher was asked to review the working definition of masking. All teachers considered that the definition of masking provided matched with their experiences. The one

amendment suggested was a greater emphasis on the role of anxiety by teacher 5. The working definition was amended to incorporate teacher perspectives and further reviews of the literature, resulting in the following key evidence informed features of school-based masking:

- School-based masking is the use of cognitive and behavioural strategies or social modifications to natural behaviour by a child to make their difficulties and differences less apparent to others. These could relate to social, sensory, academic and emotional challenges. The process can function at varying levels of consciousness.
- Masking is often motivated by a desire to fit in by individuals who perceive themselves to have a marginalised or stigmatised identity.
- Masking is a response to perceived context-based demands, threats or a low sense of belonging and can be driven by anxiety. It often results in different behavioural presentations depending on the context, especially between the home and school environments.
- Example behaviours might relate to masking in the following areas: social (include forcing eye contact, using rules to follow in conversation), academic (pretending to understand), emotional (CYP might internalise their emotional feelings and sometimes externalise these later in a different context, often the home), and sensory (suppressing sensory seeking behaviour).
- To observers this can be seen as CYP showing compliance, not advocating for their needs and internalising distress. Consequently, CYP's needs are more difficult to identify by adults. Alternatively, adults make different observations and form different impressions of the child across contexts. School staff may only know about these concerns following parental reports.
- Masking is an extension of typical human behaviour to foster positive impressions of the self in others and avoid perceived harm. Where masking can differ from typical experiences is in the significance of emotional impact on the CYP, including exhaustion, stress, or burnout and often in ways deemed unexpected by adults who observe the masking presentation. This may be associated with low feelings of authenticity.
- Simultaneously, masking can help CYP achieve some personal social goals and cope with challenge.

Conceptual Background to Definition

The conceptual understanding underpinning the proposed definition is elaborated upon in this section, which has been informed by findings in the current research and existing

literature. Multiple theoretical accounts of masking have been outlined in Chapter 1, section 4.0, each emphasising different aspects. To integrate current understanding, EPs would be best to conceptually locate masking as an extension of typically experienced impression management to foster positive impressions (Goffman, 1959; Ai et al., 2022) that is particularly enacted by CYP with a marginalised or stigmatised identity to avoid harm. A distinct boundary between what is considered ‘masking’ and typical experiences of impression management is not possible to define. Although the continuum view does not provide clear demarcations for what might be considered masking, there are certain factors which associate more strongly with masking compared to adaptive forms of impression management and are helpful to distinguish. These are:

- Adjustment to self-presentation which is more compelled than voluntary (Ai et al., 2022);
- Negative consequences for the individual, particularly to emotional wellbeing including exhaustion, anxiety and associated with feelings of inauthenticity;
- Emotional distress can be a driver for masking;
- Aspects of identity which are masked are often difficulties, or stigmatised differences in identity;
- Individuals are less likely to receive support for these difficulties, or the intensity of these difficulties are underappreciated by others because of masking behaviour.

The phenomenon of masking represents a high degree of heterogeneity of individual experience and masking can also relate to positive outcomes (Summerhill and Summers, 2025) and may operate in both helpful and detrimental ways simultaneously for an individual.

A Conceptual Framework of School-based Masking

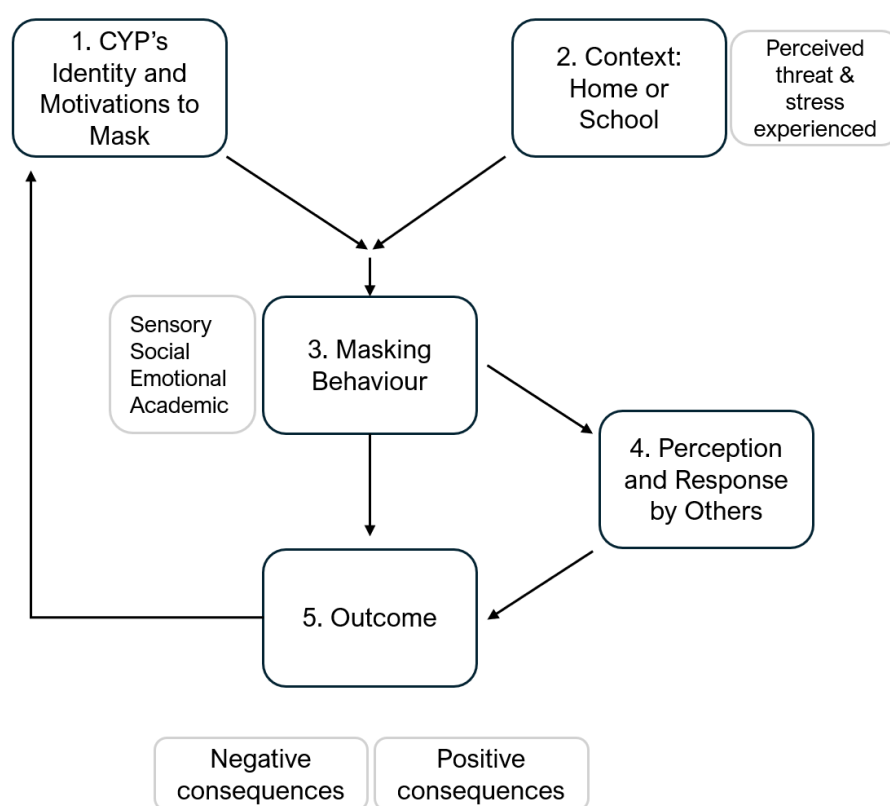
To support future EP practice, a model of school-based masking is presented here which highlights the following key aspects and relevant factors of the construct: CYP’s identity and motivations to mask; context; masking behaviour; perceptions and responses of others; and outcomes. Figure 5 proposes how the following factors operate and interact.

Central to understanding masking is the child themselves, their characteristics, identity, difficulties and differences (1.). These factors interact with their context (2.), either the school, places within the school, or home, resulting in the manifestation of masking behaviour (or reduced pressure to mask). This masking behaviour (3.) can manifest in various ways and could relate to masking social, academic, emotional or sensory aspects of identity. As a result, adults or peers will interpret this behaviour and respond in kind (4.). The trend that is characteristic of masking is that difficulties are concealed in school leading staff to

underappreciate the presence of this without further knowledge. The outcomes (5.) of the masking behaviour can be positive or negative for the CYP, including either helping them achieve goals or having a negative toll on wellbeing. Outcomes are also influenced by other's responses, such as receiving less support for a masked need or reduced bullying for masking a stigmatised difference. Consequences therefore affect the child (1.) and the motivations to mask in a reciprocally deterministic way, such as by contributing to emotional distress which is a further aspect of identity which the child masks.

Figure 5

Key Factors of School-based Masking



The following sections explore each factor in more detail. Informed by evidence from the present study and the literature (see chapter 1), this framework can inform all areas of EP practice (Atfield, 2023) by:

- Informing the design of training provided by EPs on the topic of school-based masking;
- Underpinning interventions to support school-based masking by highlighting driving factors and routes for support;
- Identifying areas for further research;

- Contributing to educational psychology consultation and assessment by providing a framework for areas of enquiry.

In the following sections a selection of relevant consultation prompts is provided, organised under the key areas of the framework, to support applied EP consultation practice. Masking represents a wide degree of heterogeneity and so the detail included in each area of cannot be exhaustive or representative of every CYP's experience of school-based masking. Bernardin et al. (2021a) assert that the use of camouflaging behaviours should be investigated at an individual level to understand the unique benefits and consequences. During casework EPs should explore each area with a high degree of individuality, through consultation, assessment and to inform intervention.

1. Identity and Motivations to Mask

To understand individual cases of school-based masking, EPs should consider the child's identity, their self-perceptions and characteristics, and how these might motivate masking of these characteristics. Masking can be associated with marginalised or stigmatised identities. This has particular relevance to autistic CYP who mask social communication and other differences, but also CYP with a broad selection of differences and difficulties. Masking can be motivated by a desire to fit in amongst peers, foster a positive impression of the self in others and avoid social harm, and their self-perception can lead them to feel unable to be themselves, driving masking (Atkinson et al., 2025).

For those with a marginalised identity, masking is associated with responses to avoid stigmatisation, as an act of passing (Perry et al., 2021), or social evaluation threats, as a form of anxiety safety behaviours (Lei et al., 2024). For neurodivergent CYP masking can link in particular to attempts to appear neurotypical. Lastly, the application of personality theory to educational psychology could support EPs to consider the traits and consequences associated with masking and potential parallels to introverted personality styles and behaving counter to one's natural disposition (Godfrey & Koutsouris, 2024).

Consultation prompts

- In what ways might the CYP be marginalised or stigmatised?
- In what ways might they perceive themselves to be marginalised or stigmatised?
- Are there aspects of their identity that are associated with masking (e.g. autism, SEND, considering personality, mental health)?
- Do they show autistic traits?

- Are there multiple aspects of their identity which intersect and prompt them to mask?
- Are the child's self-perceptions and views known? Do the child's views need to be explored in more depth?

2. Context: Home & School

An important consideration in the process of masking is the influence of context, in particular the home and the school. Masking behaviour can be understood to arise from an interaction between the child's identity, described above, and contextual social demands meaning that their behavioural presentation will likely vary depending on the context. Masking may be particularly linked to perceived threat in a particular context, or is socially compelled (Ai et al., 2022) leading to conformity. Masking might be particularly enacted in contexts where CYP feel low levels of emotional safety and belonging, where relationships with others are less familiar, and where vulnerability or authentic self-expression are perceived to be less accepted. Some individuals might mask more completely across contexts meaning a differences in presentation are not observed (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

Consultation prompts

- How does the child present in home compared to school? How do they present in different contexts within school?
- What factors might the child be fearful of in this context? Does the child perceive a threat in this context?
- Why might the child feel a need to conceal aspects of themselves in this context? Who is present at these times?
- How secure is the child's sense of belonging across contexts? What can be done to improve this?
- Can they show their authentic self in this context? In which contexts do they show their most authentic self? In which contexts are they most joyful?
- What works in contexts where they present authentically? What can be replicated elsewhere?
- What environmental adjustments can be made considering, sensory overwhelm, time alone/unmasking opportunities?

3. Masking Behaviour

An interaction of contextual and individual child factors results in the enactment of diverse masking behaviours, which can be categorised into the following key areas of difficulty or difference:

- Social masking
- Academic masking
- Sensory masking
- Emotional masking

This language might be helpful to specify the masking behaviour, although it is assumed that these domains will interact with one another. Another helpful term might be 'autistic masking' to give name to this particular construct which is generally linked to concealing social communication differences, and which research suggests has some unique features. The phrase 'social camouflaging' does already exist in the literature for this construct.

A common pattern is for CYP to mask and internalise distress at school and externalise this in the home (Halsall et al., 2021). Observations of behaviour across context are likely to differ. Not all cases fit this pattern, however. EPs might consider some masking behaviour to divert or distract from difficulties, rather than avoid attention. Some cases of masking may not be identified through differences in presentation (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019) and so EPs should also have alternative methods of identification, such as self-report measures. The CAT-Q (Hull et al., 2019) represents a potential tool but is yet to be standardised with CYP.

EPs can organise specific masking behaviours using Hull and colleague's model (2017; 2019) into additive (engaging in actions beyond the natural behavioural repertoire) and subtractive (suppressing elements of identity or natural behaviour) subcomponent behaviours. This could be combined with Livingston & Happé's (2017) compensation model (see figure 6) which considers whether the cognitive processing behind the behaviour is shallow (superficial) or deeper (relying upon changes to underlying social cognition) to understand masking behaviours along these two dimensions.

Lastly, EPs might consider the success of masking behaviour. Successful masking is likely to lead to concealment of need. Alternatively, masking might be less successful in some cases in which needs might not be concealed but consequences still arise.

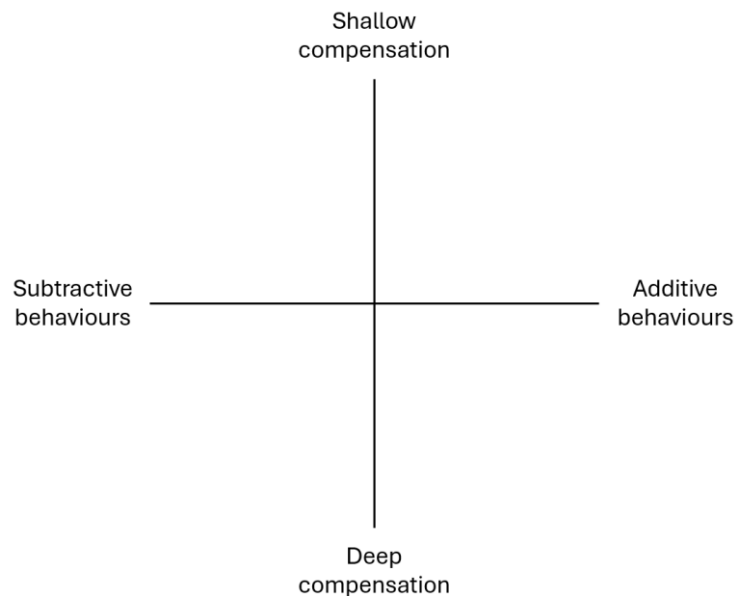
Consultation Prompts

- Is the child engaging in behaviours beyond their natural behavioural repertoire?
What function might this serve?
- Is the child suppressing natural behaviours? What function might this serve?
- Do these behaviours allow them to achieve goals? How effortful is it for them?
- Do these behaviours transfer well to novel situations?

- To what extent does this behaviour represent improvements to underlying social cognition?

Figure 6

Proposed Model for Categorising Masking Behaviours



4. Perception and Response by Others

Regardless of how a child presents, outcomes are inevitably shaped by how others interpret and respond. This section reminds practitioners that masking is inherently contextual and shaped by social interactions. Particularly relevant are the perceptions of adults, including teachers, on the outcomes of school-based masking. Teachers can have significant difficulties understanding the child's needs when they mask in school, limiting their ability to support them in any of the domains described above. Masking has been linked to delayed diagnosis, reduced responsiveness from others and dismissal of need (Atkinson et al., 2025). Alternatively, teachers can recognise the presence of masking but be unempowered to intervene. Therefore, a vicious cycle can develop where a child masks their difficulty which is less likely to be supported and therefore becomes more entrenched. At other times, when a child's masking is unsuccessful (Halsall et al., 2021) adults may fail to recognise both the underlying effort and consequences for these attempts.

Consultation Prompts

- How is the child perceived by different adults, in school and between home and school?

- In what ways are home and school views pulling in opposite directions? In what ways are views aligned about the child?
- What do parents and school staff attribute emotional dysregulation in the home to?
- How can teachers be supported to feel more confident in this area? Is there expertise in the home that can be applied in school?
- Are there things that work well in school that can be used at home?
- How can teachers and parents develop a sense of trust despite the fact they make different observations of the child? How can home-school communication be facilitated?

5. School-based Masking Outcomes

A key element for understanding the masking construct relates to consequences for the CYP. The outcomes can be more positive or negative, although the complexity and individual nature of the construct means consequences are likely to be multifaceted. In some instances, masking helps CYP achieve their social goals of fitting in. Adaptive outcomes exist alongside negative outcomes for mental health, identity and access to support (Summerhill & Summers, 2025; Klein et al., 2025).

School-based masking is often associated with emotional distress which, although often internalised at school, is expressed in the home context. The presence of these negative emotional wellbeing outcomes can act as a helpful distinguishing factor between adaptive experiences of impression management and masking; when these adverse effects occur, the phenomenon shifts from helpful social adaptation to potentially detrimental forms of masking, signalling a need for intervention. In school, masking can be framed in relation to SEN, either because an additional need is being masked, or because by masking the child experiences detrimental impact to learning and wellbeing as a result, or both. Several routes by which school-based masking is associated with emotional distress are presented below:

1. Emotional distress can result as a consequence of engaging in masking behaviour. Masking can be exhausting and stressful to execute, cognitively draining, lead to a loss of identity, and can induce anxiety, particularly when CYP worry if their attempts at masking were successful (Halsall et al., 2021; Goscicki et al., 2025).
2. CYP who engage in emotional masking experience existing emotional distress. These feelings are internalised and masked so that others are unaware of this distress in some, or all, contexts. Internalised feelings might then be externalised in a particular context, or not (Flett et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2018).

3. CYP whose difficulties in a particular area are masked can be less likely to receive support for these needs. As a result, these difficulties can become exacerbated leading to a vicious cycle of masked need, unresponsive support and growing difficulties. Where the need is itself an emotional one, masking can exacerbate this. Masked needs in other areas, such as those associated with learning, can lead to emotional distress as the difficulties continue to grow placing increased pressure on the CYP (Halsall et al., 2021; Pearson et al., 2025a).
4. Masking is often enacted by marginalised individuals who experience pre-existing mental health difficulties and so the phenomena simply co-occur (Bernardin, 2021).

Masking can affect the child's sense of self negatively, through feelings of inauthenticity and disconnection with the self, or positively by way of increased confidence and resilience. EPs should still be mindful of the potentially socially adaptive elements of masking; Summerhill and Summers (2025) maintain that practitioners should aim to mitigate the potentially significant negative consequences of masking whilst remembering the positive functions it can serve.

Consultation Prompts

- How significant is the impact of masking for the child?
- Does the child experience underlying emotional distress that is internalised?
- If the child externalises their distress, do they do this at particular times?
- How does engaging in masking enable them to achieve their goals in school?
How can we support them to achieve these goals in another way?
- Can the adaptive benefits of the child's masking behaviour be maintained whilst managing the negative consequences?
- Where or how does the child replenish the energy it takes to mask at school?
What factors drain their energy and which replenish it?

7.3 EP Response to School-based Masking

This research has explored professional responses to school-based masking. The previous section has provided prompts to inform EP consultation. Here the findings, in combination with those from the literature, are organised to inform intervention practices.

A key and consistent finding from the current research was of the perceived importance of joined up working between teachers and parents in cases of school-based masking. When working at the level of the individual child, EPs would be well placed to use consultation approaches that facilitate collaborative working between the home and school

systems, such as Joint School-Family consultation (Wagner, 2017), but making sure to include the teacher within these processes. Furthermore, the application of attribution theory (Gulliford & Miller, 2024) and consultation methods that avoid blame whilst exploring perspectives, common ground and solutions would be appropriate, such as ecosystemic consultation (Miller, 2003) and joint systems consultation (Dowling & Osborne, 1994). This is particularly true considering the finding in the present study that teachers experienced low feelings of self-efficacy in this area and consequent guilt. These consultations could be guided by the framework presented in the previous section along with the specific consultation prompts that have been suggested.

To relieve pressure to mask, EPs should support settings to focus on increasing levels of emotional and relational safety and developing a sense of school belonging. At an individual child level, teachers reported that support staff have unique capabilities to build relationships and respond relationally with children who mask in school, a capacity which they themselves lacked. A similar picture was reported by Halsall et al. (2021). The effectiveness of ELSA as a specific intervention was often cited in the present study. ELSA sessions can provide unmasking opportunities and build upon the child's capacity to communicate their needs. The uniquely important role of support staff also advocates for their inclusion within joint home-school consultations facilitated by EPs.

Support for schools can also be provided at a school wide level. The teachers in the current research reported low levels of confidence and knowledge on masking. The EPs in the current study perceived themselves well placed to meet the teacher's apparent need for increased confidence and knowledge, particularly through training which is a core function of the EP role (Atfield et al., 2023). These findings from both the teacher and EP groups suggest that this support would be both feasible and well received by school staff. The current research did not explore the EP role at a wider systems level, such as within local authorities, to support school-based masking, which could be a focus for future research.

EPs can also support school-based masking through facilitating environmental adjustments in schools and using approaches at a whole school level. Recommendations from the literature are summarised in chapter 1, section 5.6. Findings from the present study are aligned in the need to foster school-belonging, emotional safety and acceptance so that CYP can present authentically and without pressure to mask. The current research contributes to this area by highlighting potentially low confidence within teachers in this area and the desire for training from EPs, who are well placed to provide it. Teachers also advocated for a greater

emphasis on PSHE lessons to facilitate acceptance of diversity, as well as a reduced focus on purely academic outcomes which is aligned with Atkinson and colleague's (2025) findings.

In the present study, teachers more than EPs reported working at the level of the home system when supporting children who mask. This included making recommendations for regulation activities in the home and sharing information through parental workshops. EPs may be well placed to work similarly, using a joint systems approach to inform parents as well as school staff, and work to support masking from the home as well as school context. EPs could be particularly well placed to do this considering the teachers in the current research reported low levels of confidence in this area.

As part of the semi-structured data collections, EPs and teachers were asked which approaches they apply when supporting children who mask in school which informed the theme development. Appendix O shows a list of reported approaches.

8.0 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

In this section the current research is evaluated. Because of the unique and diverse considerations that are necessary within qualitative research, particularly compared to quantitative research, Yardley (2000) propose the following characteristics of good qualitative research: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and lastly impact and importance.

A thorough review of the literature was undertaken to increase the researcher's sensitivity and rigorous engagement with the theoretical and research context of the topic of masking (Yardley, 2000). An initial review was conducted prior to the study being designed, but continuous reading of the literature was undertaken throughout the research process. This included the use of updated literature searches in February 2026 to contextualise the current research within contemporary findings and perspectives.

The theoretical understanding of masking was considered to be lacking in coherence making it challenging to define masking in order to recruit adults with experience of this phenomenon. Therefore, the methodology was designed to be sequential, first exploring masking amongst EPs (who have specialist knowledge in areas of education and psychology) to create a working definition of masking to use for recruiting teachers. However, the use of this particular definition of masking may have influenced the range of teachers who self-selected to participate in the study. With this in mind, the definition used at this stage was kept broad so as not to restrict the range of experiences open to enquiry, whilst also grounding it in

the literature to maintain closeness to the phenomenon under enquiry and how it is conceptualised within the literature.

Continuing on the topic of participant recruitment, because both phases relied upon purposive sampling and self-selection of participation for professionals with experience and interest with school-based masking, it is likely that the EPs and teachers who chose to participate were those with positive views of their own practice and who were sympathetic to the topic of masking and its relevance to education. It was less likely that professionals were included who were critical of the concept of masking with relevance to education. A possible strength was the broad range of experiences that were sampled in both groups, which included a range of EP and teacher roles as well as a range of years' experience. It is noted however that in line with qualitative methodologies in general (Yardley, 2000) and Reflexive Thematic Analysis specifically (Braun & Clarke, 2021) there was no intention for these samples and subsequent findings to be generalisable to broader populations of EPs and teachers.

The recruitment strategy and professional experiences of the EPs in particular may have affected the data collection, analysis and findings. The EPs were recruited from within a single EPS meaning that all five participants had existing professional relationships with each other. As the data collection took place within a focus group, these pre-existing relationships might have influenced the interaction dynamics as well as the experiences and views that individual EPs were willing to share. A broad range of professional experience was held across the focus group, which could have induced a sense of professional hierarchy between more and less experienced EPs. Attention was given to the group dynamics as part of the group facilitation, such as ensuring participants had equal turns to speak. No overt interactions that would have limited participants ability to share were recognised; however, it is unknown if the presence of colleague still influenced individual EPs' responses. In addition to potential group dynamics, the fact that the EPs work across an age range of 0 – 25, not just with primary aged children, may have affected their responses. It was possible that they reflected upon experiences with secondary school aged children, for example, when giving responses, therefore broadening the scope of responses and findings beyond the research questions.

Consideration was given to sample sizes ensuring that a rich qualitative study could be conducted with a manageable amount of data (Fugard & Potts, 2015). The current study included a focus group of five EPs and seven individual interviews with teachers. The research aimed to include at least six EPs in line with recommendations for focus group sizes (Robson, 2024) however practicalities and participant circumstances limited this number to five. A

sample of at least six interviews is recommended for qualitative research by Guest et al. (2006) which the current research was able to include.

Commitment to rigour was established through developing competence in the methods used, here being focus groups and individual interviews analysed through RTA. Guidance for facilitating focus groups and interviews, including those on the moderator role, were followed at the data collection stage (Robson, 2024). To increase transparency coherence (Yardley, 2000) accounts of each of the six phases of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021) were provided in section 3.6 and in chapter 3. Data extracts are provided in the analytical narrative to transparently present the analytical interpretation in context of the data. Following loose guidance from Braun & Clarke (2021) the analytical narrative contains similar amounts of data extracts and novel interpretation.

Transparency was also promoted through researcher reflection and reflexivity, a core component of RTA. A reflective research journal was kept throughout the process (see appendix I for an example) and a full reflective chapter is included in this thesis.

This research contributes to the practice of educational psychology, ensuring the research is impactful within an applied, professional context (Yardley, 2000). The research draws upon the empirical findings and integrates them with existing research and theory to propose theoretical perspectives and identify practice-based implications for educational psychology on the nature of school-based masking. Barriers to practice in schools are identified and recommendations for improved practice are made.

Chapter 3: Reflective Chapter

1.0 Introduction

This first-hand account presents my reflections on various points in this thesis research journey, from deciding on the topic of research to the production of the written thesis. This chapter discusses my decision making throughout, the challenges encountered and lessons learned.

Reflective practice is an integral part of my intertwined roles of trainee EP (TEP) and postgraduate researcher, reflecting EP's role as scientist-practitioners (Sedgwick, 2019). The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) maintains that psychologists have a social responsibility to be self-reflective in the generation of psychological knowledge, a shared standard of proficiency for practitioner psychologists in applied practice (HCPC, 2023). The process of reflexivity (the critical reflection on my role as a researcher within the research process) was also central to the method of analysis: reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Throughout the research I kept reflective notes on my assumptions, choices and actions. My reflexivity was also supported through discussion with my research supervisor. Within Schön's model of reflection (1983) this chapter represents 'reflection-on-action' as an overall, retrospective account of the research process. This chapter is also informed by 'reflection-in-action'; my thoughts and actions that occurred throughout the research and recorded in my reflective journaling.

2.0 Choosing a Research Topic

My decision to explore the topic of masking was influenced by a professional interest in the concept and by my experience across multiple roles in education. I first became familiar with the concept in an applied context when I worked as a learning support assistant (LSA) in a mainstream secondary school. Masking was a concept used by colleagues to make sense of some children's special educational needs, although it seemed to me that it was applied non-specifically. Then, as both an assistant psychologist in an EPS and as a TEP I worked with children whose presentation varied greatly between the home and school contexts. I returned to the idea of masking in my psychological formulations although my knowledge and confidence applying this psychological concept was limited. In these cases, I observed unique challenges experienced by the parents, teachers and most notably the children, and the influence that disparate views held by various stakeholders had. In some cases, discussions on the topic seemed quite reductive, especially where the term was used freely and perhaps applied haphazardly to children, or in other cases, when masking was considered a certain sign of undiagnosed autism.

These experiences inspired me to better understand this phenomenon overall and bring a stabilising influence to these situations in future practice, prompting me to consider the topic for my thesis. I was further encouraged by anecdotal evidence, both from my own practice and when talking with colleagues, suggesting that masking is currently a common concern in many schools

3.0 Reviewing the Literature & Identifying Research Focus

As I began to engage with the literature in the summer of 2024, certain reviews (Petrolini et al., 2023; Cook et al., 2021) were helpful in providing insight into the state of masking research. Rather than encountering certainty, my exploration uncovered a burgeoning literature base characterised by debate and discussion.

At this stage I was interested in the debate around the conceptual basis of masking, reflecting questions I had previously had during my own practice-based experiences. Different perspectives variously emphasised masking as being partly beneficial or more detrimental to the individual (Summerhill & Summers, 2025), as being attributed more or less exclusively to autistic individuals (Petrolini et al., 2023), or in relation to existing social psychological theory (Pearson & Rose, 2021), all primarily amongst adults. I was curious about how these factors might extend to CYP in education-based contexts as my impression was that the literature provided little clarity for educational professionals. I was left with further questions, such as, is masking always harmful for children in school, to which CYP does this concept apply, and how different is masking from widely experienced impression management? The existence of a burgeoning literature base characterised by debate which my own research could contribute to encouraged me to settle on this as a research topic.

My review moved from exploratory to a thematic approach as I began synthesising and organising the literature helping me to identify potential areas for further enquiry. I identified early on that the existing literature focussed heavily on the experiences of adults and some authors explicitly called for more research amongst CYP (Petrolini et al., 2023). I identified only a small number of papers specifically exploring school-based masking including some educational psychology theses. I conducted searches in relevant EP journals such as *Educational Psychology in Practice* and *Educational and Child Psychology*, but there was a dearth of literature relating directly to EP practice in schools.

In my assessment of the school-based masking literature, there was limited attention given to the perspective and responses of teachers as well as minimal exploration within primary school contexts. The limited research which did exist focussed heavily on autistic adolescent experiences, which might only capture a narrow cross section of children who

mask in school, especially considering that masking might apply more diversely across age and neurotypes. These apparent gaps motivated me to continue with this topic of enquiry as there seemed to be a disparity between the level of discourse about masking in applied school settings and in the research literature. Exploring this topic through EP and primary teacher perspectives was how I aimed to address the shortcomings of the literature.

I continued to engage with the research literature throughout the research process which crucially enabled me to identify multiple highly relevant papers published during the course of my research and which contributed greatly to the final review (Atkinson et al., 2025; Goscicki et al., 2025; Nelson & Lichwa, 2025; Pearson et al., 2025a).

4.0 Researcher Positionality

Researcher reflexivity was an important process that spanned my whole research journey, particularly during the analysis. Once I established masking as the focus of research, I began the process of explicit reflection upon my own personal characteristics and initial assumptions. Firstly, masking is a phenomenon strongly associated with autism, which forms an area of professional and personal interest for me. This is partly influenced by having an autistic family member with whom I discussed their experiences of masking in the early stages of the research.

My researcher positionality was influenced by critical realist philosophical assumptions which also describes my philosophical approach to applied practice, which Pilgrim (2020) describes as equipping psychologists with the tools to do their job well. A key concept which I returned to throughout the research was *not mistaking the map for the terrain*, otherwise known as avoiding an ontic-epistemic fallacy. I assumed that our knowledge and models (psychological or medical) are helpful shorthand for understanding the world but do not represent reality themselves. So, concepts like masking might be bounded for the purpose of utility (as indeed my research attempts to do by providing a definition) but the boundaries of these constructs are defined by human action, as tools to help us understand reality.

This aligned with a neurodiversity approach that assumes “continuums of neural variability” (Dwyer, 2022, p.81) even though discrete categories of neurodevelopmental difference (e.g. autism) are useful constructs. I was therefore sceptical when reading the literature of masking definitions which proposed rigid boundaries rather than recognising a degree of shared human experience and porosity between the boundaries of such constructs. Through my reading of the literature and my own research I came to understand masking in a similarly dimensional way.

A helpful framework to aid my reflexivity as a researcher was Burnham's (2012) Social Graces, which prompted me to consider different aspects of my identity and how they related to my researcher role. Those which felt particularly pertinent were my *Ability*, *Education*, and *Employment*. Prior to the research, I had generally associated masking with autism. As I read the literature on masking, I reflected on my own *ability*. Although not being autistic myself, I had previously wondered to what extent I had personal experience of masking. The findings amongst adults (Miller et al., 2021) and adolescents (Jorgenson et al., 2020) that masking is experienced across neurotypes prompted me to reevaluate some of my own experiences, from adolescence to adulthood, more explicitly as a form of masking; some of the motivations, behaviours and consequences of masking that I read in the literature or heard discussed during my own research resonated with my own experiences. It was important to notice this but not possible to fully separate myself from the research process. This is recognised with the qualitative, critical realist paradigm that "psychologists study other human beings but they are human beings themselves" (Pilgrim, 2020, p. 11).

My *education* and *employment* were inherently relevant to the research process which was itself a requirement as a trainee educational psychologist to achieve qualified status. I felt these aspects of identity most strongly during the data collection phase when considering how I would be perceived by participants. Being a trainee interviewing qualified EP participants I noticed in myself a sense of hierarchy, but there was also a shared identity between us within a shared profession. This was not necessarily the case when interviewing teacher participants. I considered if I might be positioned in a place of authority by teachers, given my role as a trainee specialist. Therefore, throughout the interview process I emphasised to them my interest in hearing their valued experiences and expertise.

4.0 Research Design and Ethical Considerations

I considered various designs for this research. One proposal consisted of recruiting triads of children, teachers and parents where the child masks in school, therefore providing a multi-systems perspective on the presenting concern. However, this design seemed fraught with potential challenges. Firstly, I judged that it would be very difficult to find, recruit and gain consent for all individuals of appropriate triads. This method could also have posed ethical difficulties around participants sharing their (possible negative) thoughts of the other members of the triad. Lastly, it is noted by Petrolini et al. (2023) that self-report methods of investigating masking are less appropriate for use with children, whose masking might be more unconscious and who may find the necessary self-reflection more difficult to engage with.

For these and other reasons I chose to investigate masking through the perspectives of unrelated educational professionals plus parents and completed an ethics application for this design. I planned to begin with the EP and teacher participant groups, given they were underrepresented in the research. The inclusion of parents in the research design would offer me flexibility; if I had the time I could add a third participant group, or if recruitment with one of the other groups failed, I could substitute this for the parent group without amending the ethics application. Ultimately, I did not include a parent group in the research due to time constraints.

5.0 Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

5.1 Educational Psychologists

The recruitment of participants and data collection occurred in two phases. Proving the least stressful of the two, in the first phase I recruited a group of EPs from my practice placement via email after gaining gatekeeper consent from the principal EP. The reason for beginning my recruitment efforts within this one practice placement EPS was that this provided me an efficient opportunity to contact roughly 40 EPs and arrange a date for the focus group. I was conscious that the findings from this group of EPs all from the same service could represent a localised perspective of masking, but generating generalisable findings was not the intention for this piece of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

I was able to recruit six EPs for a focus group which was in line with my target (Robson, 2024) however one EP was unable to attend on the day. Although fewer participants than I had hoped for, five EPs proved a suitable number for promoting a rich discussion given their professional expertise and interest in the topic, plus their experience discussing psychological topics. I had to be mindful and clear of my role as researcher, not colleague, during this time. This reflects the dual roles of scientist practitioners (Sedgwick, 2019) and the reflexivity required to navigate them. Facilitating the focus group was enjoyable and went smoothly.

It was next necessary to create a working definition of masking (Appendix D) based on the EP data. Given their profession I assumed that the EPs would be familiar enough with the masking concept for the purpose of recruitment. I provided only a brief description of masking in the recruitment flyer (Appendix A) drawing upon research. However, for teachers I could not count on this. Seeing as masking escapes a common definition (Petrolini et al., 2023) it was necessary to use a working definition of school-based masking that would allow me to explain to prospective participants what experiences I was interested in exploring. I also integrated features from the literature to maintain a connection to the construct as already understood

more broadly. A possible limitation of this approach is that it likely influenced which teachers and experiences were sampled. However, it was necessary to aid recruitment and ensure that experiences of the same or similar underlying phenomenon were being investigated. The initial definition was treated as a working definition and I asked all teachers to comment openly its suitability, allowing me to amend it where it was not aligned with teacher experiences.

5.2 Teachers

Subsequently, I started recruiting teachers for individual interviews. This phase of the research posed the biggest challenges of the research process, requiring me to alter the recruitment strategy multiple times. My initial strategy, agreed through the initial research ethics application, consisted of me emailing the recruitment information (appendix E) directly to school headteachers (as gatekeepers) with the request to share the information with the school's teachers. Initially, I individually emailed each mainstream primary school the region of my placement EPs which was very time consuming and only received consent from one teacher to participate.

At this point I discussed alternative recruitment strategies with my research supervisor. Anticipating that I would need to contact a large volume of schools in order to recruit just a small number of teacher participants, I made an amendment to the research ethics application so that EP colleagues could share the information on my behalf. Hypothetically, this allowed the recruitment information to reach every primary school in the county for greater reach in a more time efficient manner. Despite this change and after a few months, still no more teachers had consented to participate in my research.

By the start of the spring term, I was becoming increasingly conscious of the delays this was making to the thesis. I made a second amendment to the recruitment strategy and ethics application, this time to use social media platforms to share the recruitment information even more widely. I focused on posting in relevant professional pages and groups, including those relating to educational psychology, hoping that interest in this research might be higher amongst teachers interested in the field. Concurrently I continued to email schools directly and broadened my reach to include primary schools across England. This strategy of maximising volume and reach began to pay off as I gradually began receiving consent from teachers via the online consent form in the early part of the spring term.

Ultimately, nine teachers consented to the study, more than the six I had aimed for. Although I had anticipated challenges in recruiting teachers, I did not foresee the difficulties of setting up the interviews after this point. Multiple teachers did not respond to any correspondence to set up interviews and in other cases scheduled interviews resulted in non-

attendance. This caused further delays and at times felt beyond my control to address, all of which I found stressful.

Teachers are recognised as particularly time poor professionals (Creagh et al., 2025) and I assumed that the recruitment challenges I experienced were attributable to this. Of the teachers with interest or experience with masking who saw the research advertisement, the majority very likely have lacked the time to participate. Similarly, those who consented to take part but did not engage any further in the process might have had many competing professional demands and high volumes of emails to contend with, making it easy for my correspondence to be missed. When encountering these difficulties, I considered changing the focus of my research to parents or extending the data collection with EP participants. Ultimately, I persevered with the teacher focus, viewing this as a valuable opportunity for the voices of time-poor teachers to contribute to the research base, if I could just get the interviews completed.

Eventually I was able to coordinate and complete seven interviews, six of which I scheduled around the February half term, being considerate of teacher availability during term time. I found the process of facilitating six interviews on similar topics over a few days to be cognitively taxing as the conversations seemed to blur into one another. Some of my practice-based consultation skills proved helpful whilst facilitating the interviews, including active listening and summarising what I had heard back to the interviewee.

Although there were distinct individual contributions, I recognised some key ideas in the data at this early stage, such as expecting parental collaboration to feature prominently in the analysis based on my interview conversations. As expected, all teachers were curious about the topic and all provided highly valuable insights. Notably, two teachers were also parents of children whom they considered to mask, which contributed to discussion about the role of parents.

6.0 Analysis and Findings

Prior to conducting this research my experience with qualitative methodologies, and RTA specifically, was limited. I therefore approached the analysis as a key learning opportunity. The text *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (Braun & Clarke, 2021) proved an invaluable resource throughout the analysis journey.

The analysis began with the creation of familiarisation doodles (appendices J & K), as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021). I was conscious that some analytical ideas had begun to form at this point, such as identifying loose patterns of meaning and conceptual links

to the literature. However, following the methodological guidance I knew that considering themes at this stage would prematurely bypass crucial stages of the analysis. So, I made explicit notes of these analytic ideas in my journal to help me separate them from implicit influence on later stages of the analysis. How these initial views differed from the developed themes is explored below.

The use of familiarisation doodles was a novel and useful research technique for me as someone who values creative and visual approaches. These doodles became invaluable tools throughout the analysis by providing an accessible synthesis of each data set. Yet, it was important to recognise that these were not impartial representations of the data and so returning to the raw data throughout the analysis was necessary.

Reflexivity during the coding and theme construction phases of the analysis was key. Braun and Clarke (2021) provide a set of reflective prompts which I held in mind as I made analytical decisions, such as coding an item of data in a particular way or choosing to group certain codes to make candidate themes. Particularly helpful prompts were:

- Why might I be reacting to the data in this way?
- What ideas does my interpretation rely on?
- What different ways could I make sense of the data?

(Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 44)

Returning to reflections on my social graces helped me reflect on my decision making. One example of this, as outlined in chapter 2, related to my role as a TEP. Within the EP analysis I identified and coded some data as “teachers can’t see it so can’t fix it” to reflect the idea expressed that teachers feel unable to support masking when it naturally presents as coping. However, after spending time engaging with the teacher data set, I revisited this code with a different perspective and re-coded the data to reflect more emotive elements: “If it’s not in school it’s not my problem”. This captured a sense of dismissiveness that EPs attributed to teachers and which I had initially overlooked. Being a TEP I identified closely with the EP colleagues, because of which I may have initially disregarded this latent and slightly more emotive interpretation. After engaging also with the teacher data and returning to the EP analysis I felt more familiar with the methodology and able to identify and name the latent meaning, whilst recognising potential influence that comes from being a situated researcher.

Based on my initial impressions of the data I recognised a lack of confidence and coherence amongst EPs and teachers in conceptualising masking, which reflected literature-based commentaries (Petrolini et al., 2023). However, I did not anticipate how central this would feature in the EP analysis, becoming the sub-theme 1b, and was seen as detrimental to

collaborative practice between EPs, teachers and parents. It is possible that the EPs focussed more heavily on the theoretical essence of the construct, given their psychological profession, compared to the teachers. Therefore, I hope that in offering an evidence-based conceptualisation of masking specifically for education in my own research (by synthesising perspectives from the literature and present study's findings) the practice of educational professionals will be enhanced.

Another aspect which I did not anticipate being so salient was the importance of support staff (LSAs and TAs) and a corresponding sense of guilt amongst teachers. Halsall et al. (2023) identified the key role of support staff regarding school-based masking, a finding which recalled my own experiences as an LSA supporting children with similar profiles. In the current study, teachers strongly endorsed the unique and valuable role of support staff (shown in subtheme 5b), contrasting this with their own perceived limitations, often accompanied by a sense of guilt (captured in theme 5c). Whilst it is unsurprising that teachers, as members of a helping profession, would regret limitations in their practice, I was surprised by how strongly and emotively feelings of guilt were evoked by teachers who felt unable to fully support children who mask their difficulties in school. The current research findings should empower support staff by highlighting their valuable role in schools. Simultaneously, I hope that teachers who feel a low sense of self-efficacy in supporting school-based masking are supported by these research findings, by drawing upon recommended strategies and working collaboratively with parents and EPs. Hopefully these unique findings will also inform the perspectives of other stake holders, such as parents and EPs, to consider the challenges faced by teachers.

Overall, I enjoyed the analysis process. Initially I felt daunted with responsibility to do justice to the participants' voices but through engaging in the RTA methodology I became more comfortable and confident with this. By the end of the analysis, I had noticed a development in my analytical skills and confidence with the RTA methodology which I hope will aid me in future research opportunities as a qualified EP.

7.0 Learnings from the Research

Conducting this research has not only taught me a lot about the topic of masking itself, but also many lessons about conducting research more generally and about my personal role as a researcher. The biggest barrier to completing this research was recruitment. The recruitment processes which I wrote into my initial ethics application, such as not using social media, were too narrow which limited me. Aware of the difficulties recruiting participants for research, in future I would consider a comprehensive recruitment strategy from the start that makes use of all the tools at my disposal.

My confidence in using qualitative methodologies, and particularly RTA, has grown considerably through conducting this research. Before I would have struggled to create themes that were not simple responses to the research questions or ‘topic summaries’, as is criticised by Braun and Clarke (2021). Through an extended and recursive process of analysis I learned to not rush to conclusions, to take my time at each phase, explore the latent meaning in the data, and evolve themes as my analytic ideas changed which meant becoming comfortable with discarding early candidate themes.

Lastly, conducting this research has also been a process of self-reflection, both professionally and personally. The methodology demands a high level of reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019) which has become more natural for me over time and will undoubtedly be a valuable skill as an applied psychologist. This has also been a process of managing uncertainty, responding to stress, and seeking support. As lessons learned these have relevance to both my professional and personal life. From a professional practice perspective, the findings have highlighted to me the value of a joint-systems approach (Dowling & Osborne, 1994) which I aim to take forwards into qualified practice.

Lastly, conducting this research has changed the way that I look at masking. At the start of the research process, I sought a sense of certainty about masking. However, I have become comfortable understanding ‘masking’ without clearly delineated boundaries and as a dimensional construct, aspects of which all of us experience to an extent. As I came to view masking this way, beginning with the literature review and continuing through my own research, I wondered if this stance was dismissive of significant or detrimental experiences of masking that some live with, particularly within the autistic community where masking has historically been strongly associated. I have since come to see a value in recognising a shared humanity in psychological constructs that helps diverse ranges individuals to empathise with and begin to understand each other, and I think that masking is no exception.

8.0 Future Research Directions

Although this research has extended exploration of masking into primary schools, it did not directly sample the views of primary school children who mask. Future research should capture the voices of these children, although the use of alternative data collection methods, such as arts-based methodologies used by Pearson et al., (2025a), would be helpful to engage younger children in self-reflection and expression. These could be used to test the transferability of the proposed masking definition.

Findings in the current research suggest a link between school-based masking and EBSA, which is a rising concern in EP practice and education more generally (Pearson et al.,

2025b). Future research should explore this association more explicitly and whether the recommendations made in the current study help to promote school belonging, reduced masking, and ultimately school attendance.

Lastly, this research highlighted the current and recommended roles for EPs supporting masking at the individual and whole school level. This research did not explore how EPs could work at a wider systems level (Atfield et al., 2023) such as within local authority children's services in the area of school-based masking.

9.0 Dissemination

Seeing as this thesis research is part of my journey to become an applied psychologist, it is important that the research has an impact in the real, applied world of EP practice. I also feel an imperative to disseminate the voices of the participants who chose to share them with me, many of whom expressed a strong interest in hearing the findings and implications of the research. I plan to present my findings to educational psychologists and other allied professionals within two EP services at separate research events in the summer and autumn of 2026. Also, within my current practice placement EPS, the education service has created training for schools on masking. I plan to seek out opportunities for collaboration and possibilities for updating the training based on the findings of this research. In addition, when entering my next EPS as a qualified EP I intend to formulate my own training for education professionals on the topic of masking. Lastly, I hope to contribute further to the research literature on school-based masking by publishing this research in a relevant academic journal.

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Appendices

Appendix A: School-based Masking Studies Identified in the Literature Review

Study	Study Focus	Participants	Summary or Methodology
Goscicki et al. (2025)	Experiences of autistic females in inclusive school settings.	31 female autistic adolescents plus mothers	Mixed methods: interviews with girls and mothers featuring open and closed questions about camouflaging.
Cook et al. (2018)	Experiences of autistic females in mainstream and specialist schools.	11 autistic girls aged 11-17 years plus parents	Qualitative: Separate semi-structured interviews with girls and parents.
Halsall et al. (2021)	Autistic female experiences attending specialist resource classes attached to mainstream schools of education and camouflaging.	8 adolescent females ages 12-15 8 mothers 6 teaching assistants 1 senior member of staff	Qualitative: Separate semi-structured interviews with girls, parents and educators.
Atkinson et al. (2025)	Experiences of school belonging, camouflaging and anxiety for autistic students attending mainstream school.	72 adolescent autistic students plus parents.	Mixed methods: Parents: Closed question survey rating child's autistic traits. Students: Closed question surveys on belonging, anxiety and camouflaging. Open questions surveys on camouflaging and belonging.
Nelson & Lichwa (2025)	Black autistic females Reflecting on their educational experiences and the impact of masking and camouflaging in UK education.	4 girls aged 16-17	Qualitative: semi-structured interviews.
Pearson et al. (2025)	Experiences of belonging in mainstream school amongst autistic adolescents	18 autistic adolescents assigned females at birth aged 12-18	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews with girls and use of arts-based methodologies.

	assigned female at birth.		
Putnam et al. (2024)	Comparing parental and teacher reports of autism traits in children aged 4-17.	Parents and teachers of 388 autistic pupils aged 4-17 years	Quantitative: Comparing parent and teacher ratings of autistic traits.
Dean et al. (2016)	Playground observations of autistic children attending mainstream school.	96 autistic and non-autistic children in fifth grade (US)	Mixed methods: Playground observations of children.
Thesis			
Boyle (2021)	Experiences of parents of children with an autism diagnosis who attend post-primary school.	56 parental questionnaires, 7 parental interviews	Mixed methods: Quantitative surveys and semi-structured interviews.
Bassett (2022)	Educational experiences of autistic girls in secondary school, and their parents.	11 females aged 11-21 6 parents	Qualitative: Focus groups with parents Focus groups and interviews with daughters

Appendix B: EP Recruitment Flyer

How Adults Understand Masking in Primary School Children

Research Opportunity

Are you an EP with experience and an interest in **Masking**?

This research aims to understand masking in schools by sampling EP experiences and perspectives.

What is the research about?

Masking has been variously conceptualised but is generally understood as social strategies that help people navigate their social environment and attempt make any social communication difficulties they have less apparent to others (Bernadin et al., 2021). Masking strategies which might be used include forcing eye contact, developing rules to follow in conversations and suppressing sensory seeking behaviour (Hull et al., 2017). Current definitions of masking do not contextualise masking in schools or with direct relevance to educational psychology practice.

Not much research has considered masking in schools – this research aims to understand KS2 children's experience of masking by speaking to educational psychologists as well as parents/carers and teachers.

What does it involve?

The study involves an online focus group lasting **1 hour** with other EPs to explore your perceptions of masking and experience working with children where this is relevant. This focus group will be **anonymous** meaning that those who read the research will not know your identity.

Who is conducting this research?

My name is Tom – I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia. Please contact me to volunteer for this research or to find out more: tom.bayer@uea.ac.uk

The School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee has granted ethical approval for this research; ETH2425-1574

If you would like to take part, please complete the online consent form by following the link or QR code.
<https://forms.office.com/e/iAiHzvFAFf>



Please read the 'participant information sheet' – If you have not seen this, please email me for a copy: tom.bayer@uea.ac.uk

Appendix C: Semi-structured Focus Group Schedule

Experiences

- What are your experiences of working with children where they exhibited masking.
- What age were the children?
- What was your involvement?
- Who considered the child to be masking?

Theoretical links

- How did masking relate to the overall psychological formulation?
- What psychological theory do you or might you draw upon in your work regarding masking?
- What recommendations have you made, or might you make in such cases?

Broadly - Definition

- How would you define masking in an educational context?
- What are the defining features of masking in an educational context?
- How would you identify masking?
- What support can be put in place?
- How ubiquitous is masking?
- Based on your practice experience, how related is masking to different needs?

Misc.

- What would be helpful for schools and parents to know about masking?
- What works with the way you and others understand masking?
- What issues are there with the way you or others understand masking?

Appendix D: Initial Working Definition of School-based Masking

Masking has been conceptualised in different ways. Research has linked it to social strategies used to make social difficulties less apparent (Bernadin et al., 2021) such as forcing eye contact, using rules to follow in conversation and suppressing sensory seeking behaviour (Hull et al., 2017). In the context of school masking by children might link to the following features:

Masking in school is characterised by the following features:

- Attempts to fit in, showing compliance, not advocating for themselves.
- A child modifying how they behave in school or suppressing their emotional expression for extended periods.
- This may be conscious or unconscious.
- Consequently, meaning that needs/difficulties are not easily identifiable by school staff.
- Difficulties that are masked could be social, sensory or otherwise.
- Leading to greater impact than would be expected, such as exhaustion, stress, burnout or emotional dysregulation likely presenting in the home.
- Different presentation and behaviour between home and school.
- You might only know about a child masking because another adult (e.g. parent/carer) has concerns.

This definition was informed by a focus group of Educational Psychologists.

Appendix E: Teacher Recruitment Flyer

How Adults Understand Masking in Primary School Children

Research Opportunity

Are you a teacher of Key Stage 2?
Do you have experience working with a child or children who 'mask' in school?
Do other adults, like parents, think a child you work with masks in school?

What is the research about?

Masking has been conceptualised in different ways. Research has linked it to social strategies used to make social difficulties less apparent (Bernadin et al., 2021) such as forcing eye contact, using rules to follow in conversation and suppressing sensory seeking behaviour (Hull et al., 2017). In the context of school masking by children might link to the following features:

- Attempts to fit in, showing compliance, not advocating for themselves.
- A child modifying how they behave in school or suppressing their emotional expression for extended periods.
- This may be conscious or unconscious.
- Consequently, meaning that needs/difficulties are not easily identifiable by school staff.
- Difficulties that are masked could be social, sensory or otherwise.
- Leading to greater impact than would be expected, such as exhaustion, stress, burnout or emotional dysregulation likely presenting in the home.
- Different presentation and behaviour between home and school.
- You might only know about a child masking because another adult (e.g. parent/carer) has concerns.

This definition was informed by a focus group of Educational Psychologists.

Research into masking in schools is limited – this research aims to understand KS2 children's experience of masking by speaking to teachers as well as Educational Psychologists and parents/carers.

If you think that you have experiences working with children that align with this description, you are invited to take part in this study and contribute to its findings.

What does it involve?

The study involves an online interview of up to an hour to explore your views and experience of masking as relating to children you have worked with. This interview will be **anonymous** meaning that those who read the research will not know the identity of any participant.

Who is conducting this research?

My name is Tom Bayer – I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia. Please contact me to volunteer for this research or to find out more: t.bayer@uea.ac.uk



The School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee has granted ethical approval for this research; ETH2425-1574

If you would like to take part, please complete the online consent form by following the link or QR code.

<https://forms.office.com/e/hh3Rx.jpA3A>



Please read the 'participant information sheet' – If you have not seen this, please email me for a copy: t.bayer@uea.ac.uk

Appendix F: Teacher Semi-structured Interview Schedule

- 1) What are your experiences of working with children who have masked in school?
 - a) What age of children?
 - b) Who considered the child to be masking?
 - c) Any patterns of groups of children?
 - d) What role do parents play?
- 2) Based on your experience, what is masking in an educational context?
 - a) What were the key features of what masking is/was for them?
 - b) Is/was the child and their masking perceived in the same way by adults?
 - c) What separates masking from other behaviour?
- 3) What were the consequences children masking?
 - a) Learning
 - b) Social
 - c) Etc.
- 4) How did you/do you respond to and support the child?
 - a) What did you find to be helpful?
 - b) What could be different in this regard?
- 5) What issues do you see in this area? What is currently working more generally?
 - a) What do you think schools and parents need to know about this topic?
- 6) Have you been supported by an Educational Psychologist in this area?
 - a) What support might you seek from an Educational Psychologist?

Appendix G: Confirmation Letter of Ethical Approval



University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich. NR4 7TJ

Email: ethicsmonitor@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Study title: Investigating masking behaviours of primary school children through educational psychologist, teacher and parent/carer perceptions.

Application ID: ETH2425-1574

Dear Tom,

Your application was considered on 2nd May 2025 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **31st August 2026**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Victoria Warburton

Appendix H: Example Written Debrief

Dear (participant name),

Thank you for taking part in this research study. You have shared your experiences of masking as a Teacher.

This research aims to explore how adults, like yourself, who work with and surround primary school children understand and respond to masking when it is exhibited by them.

Without your participation, this research study would not have taken place, and your views are central to the research aims and outcomes.

Now the interview process is complete, what are the next steps?

The information you provided will be anonymised meaning you won't be identified from the data going forwards.

If you indicated that you would like the opportunity to review your transcripts when consenting to the study, you will be emailed the interview transcript for you to do this. If you have any comments or concerns about the content of the transcript please email the researcher within two weeks of receiving the transcript. Amendments will be made where possible.

Your participation in the study continues to be voluntary. If you decide to withdraw from the study, your data will be removed from the study records and will not be used in the results. However, once the data has been analysed or published this will not be possible. This will include the submission of the research project as a thesis for assessment.

If you indicated that you would like to receive feedback about the overall results of the study, these will be emailed to you once the project is complete by Autumn 2026.

If you have any questions or concerns, or if you wish to withdraw your data from the study please contact the researcher:

Tom Bayer

t.bayer@uea.ac.uk

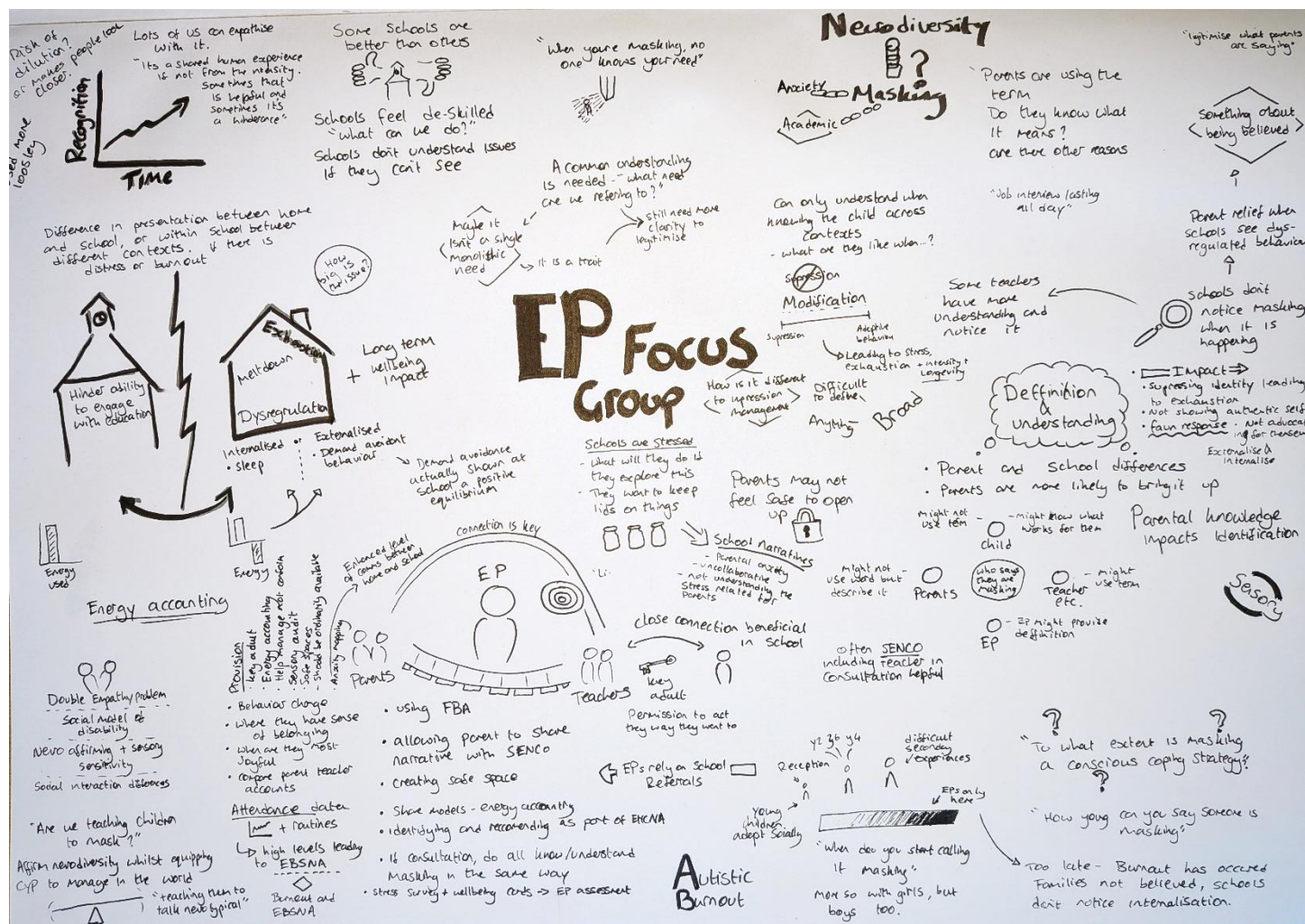
Appendix I: Example Reflexive Journal Entry

I returned to the EP analysis after spending some time coding the Teacher transcripts. This time I have noticed some differences in the meaning of some coded data items within the focus group transcript.

Initially I coded "Teachers think 'can't see it, can't fix it'" when EPs spoke about teachers not responding to some instances of masking. However, this time around I have coded some of these items as "If its not in school it's not my problem". This appears to be a more latent reading, but also picks up on a more emotive attribution made by the EPs who said these quotes. My original coding did not capture a sense of dismissiveness that EPs attribute to teachers that I am now noticing. I considered using the phrase "not school's problem" to depersonalise it and represent the school system being unable/unwilling to meet need. But I decided to keep it on teachers as this specification was reflected in EP quotes and references the specific inter-professional relationships that play out during EP work.

I think that I initially avoided or did not see the emotionally charged, latent reading of what EPs said. As a trainee EP I have a stake in the profession and initially might have overlooked that the EPs said. I had more insight after familiarisation with the Teacher data which allowed me to sit more outside of my trainee EP position hopefully.

Appendix J: EP Data Familiarisation Doodle



Appendix K: Teacher Data Familiarisation Doodle



Appendix L: Example of Coded Data

- EP 5: I think it's also [Ep 2], like what you asked [facilitator] it's again that close communication that the child has someone they feel they can talk at school so they can kind of drop the mask and share how they're really feeling and have that connection with someone so they feel able to share their lived experience rather than just covering their distress all day. Quite helpful, isn't it?
- EP 2: I think there are some children who don't know they are masking though. You know, I mean, you know, children are particularly younger ones who, you know, go to school, try to behave like everybody else, and they don't know that it's much harder for them than it is for everybody else to behave the same as everybody else.
- EP 3: Such a good point. Yeah, to, to what extent is masking a conscious coping strategy versus something that they're doing and not really being aware of? Um, it's interesting what you said [EP 5] about having that key adult in school. And I've found that often that's when staff become aware of the masking because of the relationship with that key adult that adult has seen them, the child, in different contexts within the school and can say 'I know the child well enough to know I can see they're masking in a certain group context or a certain classroom or or situation'. Otherwise, I think prior, prior to that relationship being built err being built, it's sort of the parents that give the insight isn't it and sort of unpicking and understanding what what's like, like [EP 2] said, what's their evening like? What sort of rituals might a child engage with after school? How do they present in terms of their regulation? And I think it's that conversation that starts to open up the realisation that maybe masking is going on in the school setting.
- EP 5: Yes, that exhaust sometimes it's about that exhaustion, they come home and just sleep, don't they? And.
- EP 5: And not showing anything.
- EP 3: Yeah, I've. Although, I've come across children who maybe it could be quite internalised so that they come home and sleep or be very withdrawn and quiet, or it's the sort of the opposite and they're very externalised and almost got to let out all those feelings of frustration that they've they've sort of bottled up through the day.

Tom Bayer (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Opportunities to "drop the mask" help
@mention or reply

Tom Bayer (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Relationships important to relieve masking
@mention or reply

Tom Bayer (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Temporary suppression of emotional expression
@mention or reply

Tom Bayer (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Unconscious masking
@mention or reply

Tom Bayer (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Age impacts self-awareness of masking
@mention or reply

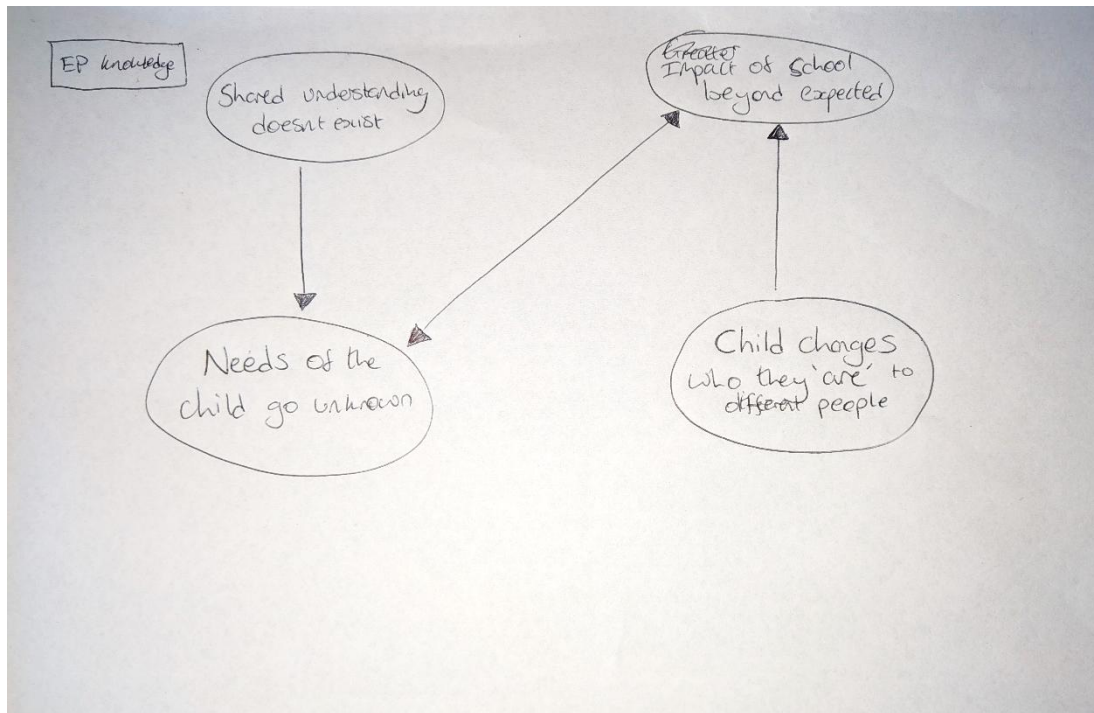
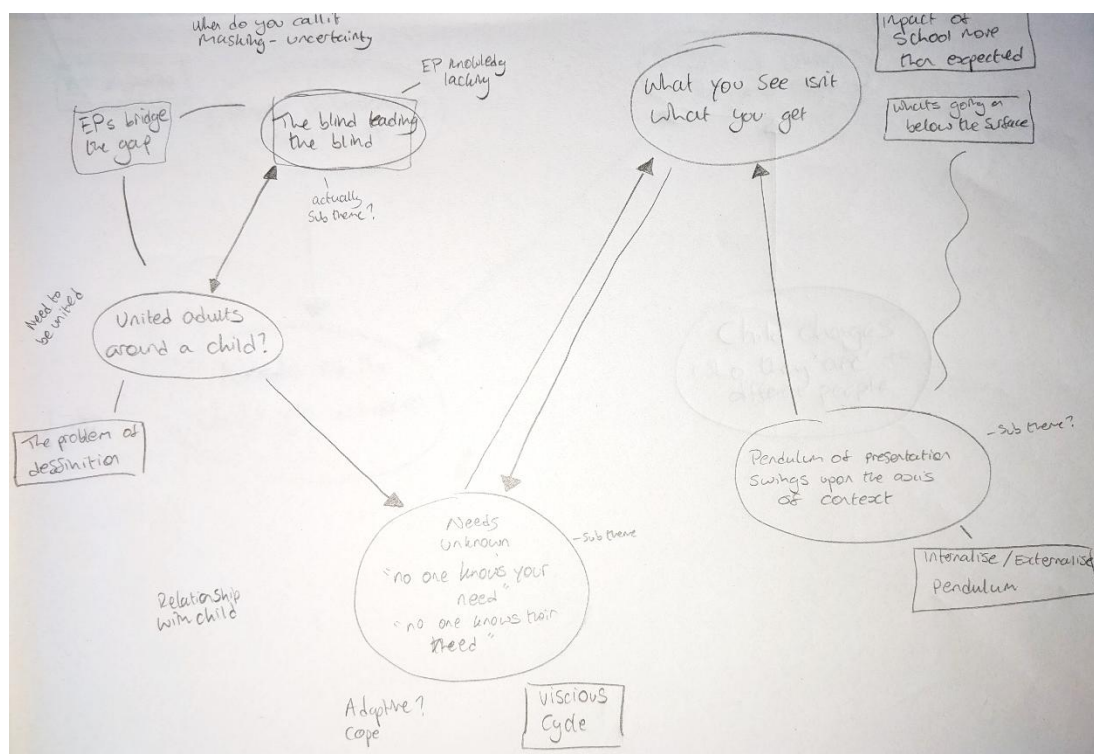
Tom Bayer (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Impression management
@mention or reply

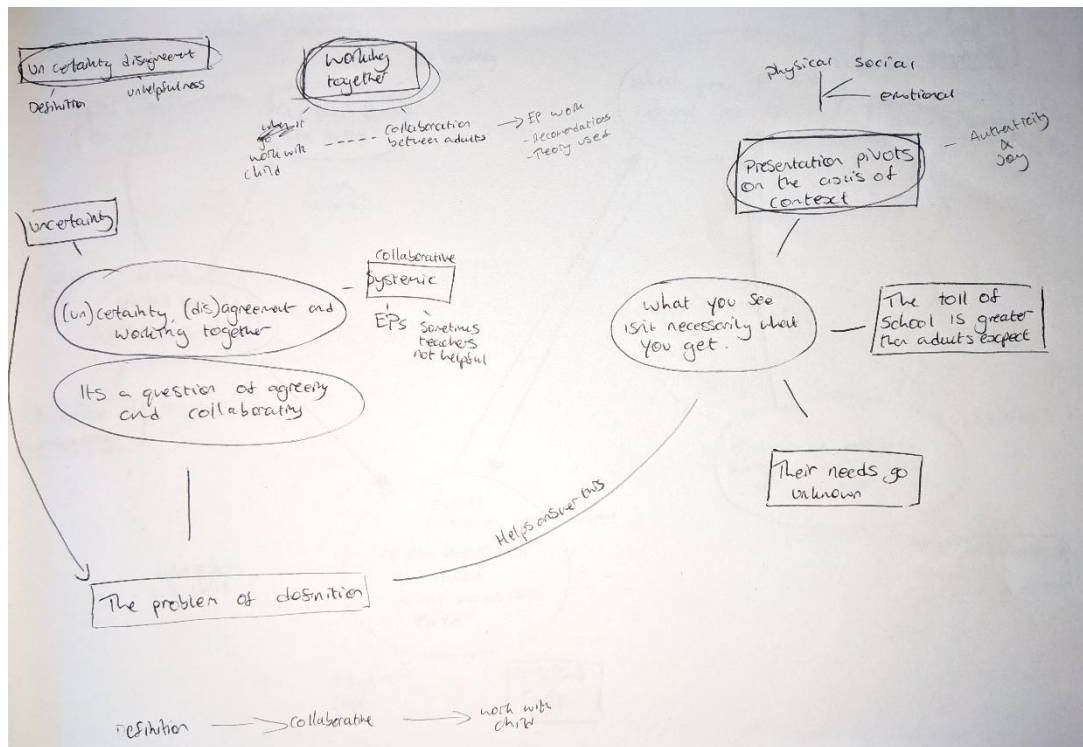
Tom Bayer (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Masking as trying to fit in
@mention or reply

Appendix M: Examples of Code Clusters

Code	Example Data Extracts
Leads/linked to EBSNA	<p>EP5: She'd just kind of like hold it together and mask it and then get home and wouldn't come into school for a week afterwards.</p> <p>EP4: In a lot of my EHC cases this year that just are no longer able to attend school, almost the whole, all the stories are 'they were masking, they were masking, they were masking' reached autistic burnout, school related trauma can't go back.</p> <p>EP5: So I think of an EHC I did recently she's in school, but she's late almost every day because it's just hard that she finds school so overwhelming she wouldn't know it when you saw her. But she finds it so overwhelming that actually getting into school is really hard.</p>
We don't see it at school so it's not our problem	<p>EP5: sometimes schools are still very much 'well we don't see it at school so it's not our problem'</p> <p>EP1: I often hear schools saying 'well, they're they're absolutely fine in school, there's no concerns or issues. I don't understand what the worries are'</p> <p>EP3: schools might be quite dismissive and say 'everything's fine in school'. But I think in our role we can almost legitimise what the parent is saying</p> <p>EP2: the attitude of the teachers would often be 'well it's not my problem then, is it?'</p>
Home-school communication as mediating factor for child's masking	<p>EP3: provision that I will often recommend is like a very enhanced level of communication between home and school because that dialogue needs to be ongoing in order to know that there's masking going on and how to respond and support the child</p> <p>EP4: I think what [EP 2] mentioned earlier about FBA like in that communication between home and school to then be looking for patterns, you know, to get the about what's happening in school versus child's presentation at home.</p> <p>EP5: But I think they have a close communication with parents. I think that there's not relationship with parents. But like you were saying, [EP 4], sometimes they don't have that shared understanding of what things are like for the parents</p> <p>EP5: but sometimes they mask so well, so completely at school, unless you've got relationship with the parent or the parent shares that the school has no idea</p>

Appendix N: Evolving Thematic Maps





Appendix O: Examples of Professional Responses to School-based Masking

Reported Theories Applied in EP Practice:

- Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012)
- Social Model of Disability
- Neurodiversity approach (Dwyer, 2022)
- Sense of Belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)
- Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn Responses

Approaches to support school-based masking reported by EPs & Teachers:

- Neuro-affirming approaches and psychoeducation
- Functional Behaviour Analysis
- Unmasking opportunities
- Person-centred practice and emphasising the child's views
- Sensory audits, sensory breaks and sensory diets
- Energy Accounting (Toudal & Attwood, 2024)
- Anxiety Mapping
- Key adults and safe spaces
- Social skill development
- Family support workshops on particular concerns, e.g., emotional regulation
- Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA)
- Transitional objects
- Teacher check ins
- Universal emotional literacy support
- Soft transitions
- Enhanced home-school communication
- Psychological consultation approaches