Exploring Autistic Girls' Experiences of the Transition from Primary School to Secondary School: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Study

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Overview

This thesis consists of an introduction, then three chapters: a literature review, an empirical paper, and a reflective chapter. First, the thematic literature review provides an overview of the literature relating to the transition from primary school to secondary school for autistic children, including their experiences and the transition support offered. The review is then narrowed to specifically consider the experiences of autistic girls, who were identified as significantly underrepresented in the literature (e.g. Stack et al., 2021; Peters & Brooks, 2016). The empirical chapter presents the empirical study undertaken by the researcher, exploring autistic girls' experiences of the transition from primary school to secondary school. This transition is explored from the perspective of five autistic girls attending mainstream secondary schools in one Local Authority. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and utilised child-friendly resources. Data analysis occurred through interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2022). Individual summaries for each participant were presented, and four out of five participants took part in member checking of the researcher's initial analysis of their transcripts. Then cross-case analysis occurred. Six Group Experiential Themes emerged from the data: attempting to feel prepared with mixed success; adapting to the new high school context; navigating peer interaction and relationships; the need for support and understanding from adults; the transition of self; and how to better support autistic girls. The empirical chapter concludes by considering the strengths and weaknesses of the study as well as the contribution to the literature and implications for Educational Psychologists' practice. The final reflective chapter presents the researcher's reflection on their research journey, exploring decisions made at various points of the research process. Furthermore, the impact of the research process on the researcher's personal skill development and dissemination is discussed.

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Key Abbreviations

APA American Psychiatric Association

ASD Autism Spectrum Disorder

BPS British Psychological Society

CAFA Children and Families Act

CoP Code of Practice

COVID-19 Coronavirus Disease 2019

CYP Children and Young People

DfE Department for Education

DoH Department of Health

DSM-V Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fifth Edition)

EHCNA Education Health Care Needs Assessment

EHCP Education Health and Care Plan

EP Educational Psychologist

ERIC Education Resources Information Center

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation

GET Group Experiential Theme

HCPC Health and Care Professions Council

IPA Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

KS Key Stage

LA Local Authority

NAS National Autistic Society

NSACYPA National Strategy for Autistic Children Young People and Adults

NICE National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

PE Physical Education

PET Personal Experiential Theme

RTA Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RQ Research Question

SDQ Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

SEND Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

STEP-ASD Systemic Transition in Education Programme for Autism Spectrum Disorder

TD Typically Developing

TEP Trainee Educational Psychologist

UEA University of East Anglia

UK United Kingdom

Introduction

This thesis is comprised of three chapters: a Literature Review, Empirical Paper, and Reflective Paper.

Chapter 1 starts by outlining the researcher's positionality and conceptualisation of autism, aligning with the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) and the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006). Then the focus moves to the current body of literature and theory on the topic of interest, the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic pupils. A thematic literature review was chosen as the most appropriate method for reviewing the literature, as the aim was to synthesise findings across a large, broad body of literature and identify gaps in knowledge. While referring to psychological theory throughout the review to critique findings, the researcher chose not to use a specific theoretical underpinning for the Literature Review to ensure they were being led by the findings of the literature. Therefore, this scoping review took a 'bottom-up' approach and supported the researcher in identifying emerging themes in the experiences of autistic pupils across the literature inductively and then identifying key gaps, such as the revelation that the voices and experiences of autistic girls had been largely underrepresented.

Chapter 2 presents the empirical paper, where the researcher explored the transition from primary school to secondary school for autistic girls to gain knowledge in this under-researched area. This involved an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology (Smith et al., 2022) to explore the experiences of autistic girls individually, followed by cross-case analysis. This resulted in summaries being written for each participant and then the identification of six group experiential themes. Again, this chapter was not underpinned by a particular psychological theory; rather, utilises the principles of IPA methodology to ensure the researcher stayed true to the data, describing and analysing the participants' experiences. This occurred through 'bracketing' preconceptions of the phenomenon (i.e. the transition), so the essence of the phenomenon from participants' lived experience could be uncovered (Smith et al., 2022). The Discussion then considers the findings within the context of existing literature and theory, and the limitations of the research are presented. The researcher used Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to support them in applying the findings to implications for Educational Psychologists' (EP) practice. This earlier version of Bronfenbrenner's theory was selected rather than the later version (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) because of its focus and applicability for considering the EP role in working across the systems that impact the transition for autistic girls. Whilst Bronfenbrenner's later bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)

places greater emphasis on understanding how individual characteristics interact with contextual factors and developmental processes over time, the original ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was considered more appropriate for the present study as it provides a clearer framework for developing implications and recommendations aimed at changing environmental factors and structures within and across the systems that shape autistic girls' transition experiences. This version supports the researcher in arguing that EPs should prioritise supporting inclusive transitions for as many autistic girls as possible by intervening in systemic work and focusing on environmental factors rather than only working at the individual child level (Young et al., 2019). This also aligns with the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006) and the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), as the impetus for intervention and adaptation is placed on environmental factors within these systems to be adapted so the transition can become more inclusive.

Finally, Chapter 3 presents the reflective paper, where the researcher shares reflections and insights into their research journey. To support their reflections on their personal and professional development from conducting the thesis, the researcher used Howell and Fleishman's learning model (1982) to consider perceived competence and different stages and how their competence evolved throughout the project.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter begins by considering ways autism has been understood and conceptualised within research and society, and how autism will be conceptualised within this research. Following this, literature on the transition from primary to secondary school in the UK will be introduced, before arguing the importance of a focus for research regarding autistic children. This is to establish why the transition experiences of autistic children require exploration. Within this section, grey literature, including legislation and policy impacting autistic children, is highlighted and analysed.

Next, a summary of the empirical evidence and literature related to the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic children is presented. This large body of research includes the views and experiences of many stakeholders in the transition, including parents, education professionals, and autistic children, as well as psychological theory adopted by researchers to explain and critique their findings. Particular attention is paid to the experiences of the children (although often reported by parents and teachers), rather than the impact of the transition on parents and teachers. This is because the children directly experience the transition, so their experiences are key to examining and improving the process (e.g. Stack et al., 2021; Neal & Frederickson, 2016). From the body of existing literature, themes are drawn regarding the transition experience, including: change impacting emotional wellbeing, social interaction and belonging, and individuality of strengths, needs and experiences. Furthermore, themes about support are identified, including transition planning, strategies and interventions. Through critically interpreting these findings, the implications for autistic children are discussed, and the significant gap in the literature, experiences of autistic girls, is uncovered and explored in the final section.

Positionality

Autism and Neurodiversity:

This section examines key concepts and definitions of autism and neurodiversity. This is essential due to the different understandings and conceptualisations of autism, often associated with or highlighted by the language used by researchers, practitioners, parents and children and young people (CYP).

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (APA, 2013) uses the term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), stating ASD is characterised by "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts." These "deficits" include a lack of social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviours during social interaction, and developing, maintaining and understanding relationships (APA, 2013). Furthermore, "restrictive, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities" may occur through movement, speech, adherence to routines, fixated interests and hyper or hypoactivity to sensory input (APA, 2013). This medicalised conceptualisation of autism argues that there can be differing severity of presentations from early development, but presentations can also become more prominent later in childhood as social demands increase or an individual "masks" symptoms using learnt strategies (APA, 2013). However, this deficit-focused conceptualisation of autism does not present a full and accurate picture for autistic individuals, as there is no consideration of how their strengths may function as an advantage depending on the circumstances (Kapp, 2019). For example, in their study interviewing autistic adults, Russell et al. (2019) found that the ability to hyperfocus, give attention to detail, strengths in memory, as well as qualities relating to social interaction (e.g. honesty, loyalty and empathy for animals and other autistic individuals) were considered advantageous or disadvantageous depending on the social context (e.g. working in a busy restaurant vs the army). This suggests the conceptualisation of a behavioural presentation as a 'deficit' or a strength depends on the circumstances in which it occurs, meaning the medicalised conception of autism could be considered reductionist.

The DSM-5's definition is reflected in the World Health Organisation's (2018) definition of ASD and in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidelines (2017). These organisations' definitions are frequently referred to throughout the existing research and strongly align with the medical model of disability by projecting autism as a 'disorder' with 'deficits' and 'symptoms' rooted within individuals (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000). NICE (2025) reports an estimated 1.1% of adults in the UK are autistic, making "ASD one of the most common childhood-onset neurodevelopmental disorders." The proportion of males to females being diagnosed with ASD is commonly quoted at 4:1; however, it is recognised this is likely an inaccurate representation due to biases preventing girls and women from being diagnosed. Autism is being under-recognised in girls, 'verbally able' children, and children who have masked elements of a typical autistic presentation due to having effective coping mechanisms or support (NICE, 2017). NICE (2025) suggests environmental and societal biases can impact the recognition of autism in individuals when they do not outwardly present with the 'deficits' described within the medical model. This is problematic, as if autistic people camouflage their difficulties/differences, so do not receive a

diagnosis, their needs and difficulties may not be supported, with studies suggesting this especially applies to autistic women/girls (e.g. McQuaid et al., 2022).

While the medical definition is useful for understanding some of the difficulties experienced by autistic individuals, researchers have found the deficit-focused medical paradigm has been increasingly rejected by the autistic community (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). In contrast, the National Autistic Society (NAS) states autism is a difference that impacts how people communicate and interact with the world (NAS, 2026). This aligns with the neurodiversity paradigm, referring to the broad diversity of neurobiology both structurally and functionally (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). While many individuals fall within a neurodevelopmental range considered 'typical'/'neurotypical', others, including autistic individuals, are within the 'neurodivergent' range. The neurodiversity paradigm holds the assumption that 'divergent neurodevelopment' is neither a flawed nor preferable development compared to 'typical neurodevelopment' (Walker, 2012; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), as diversity within a society is valuable and contributes to a stronger ecosystem (Amundson, 2000). For example, as already stated, observed strengths and difficulties are often context-dependent, therefore, neurodivergent individuals bring different strengths that are valuable to different aspects of society (Russell et al., 2019). Nevertheless, difficulties of autistic individuals are not diminished, and obstacles to inclusion are recognised. The neurodiversity paradigm strongly aligns with the social model of disability (den Houting, 2019; Shakespeare, 2006), which suggests environmental and social barriers to inclusion have resulted in autistic individuals facing difficulties in society. Therefore, while a medical model conceptualisation of autism may invite deficit-focused intervention and 'treatment' aiming to lessen autistic traits (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), the neurodiversity paradigm and social model of disability reject the view that neurodivergence is a flaw requiring treatment or correction (Walker, 2012). Instead, a strengths-based approach to intervention and support is considered 'best practice', alongside changes to the physical and social environment to meet the individual needs of autistic individuals (den Houting, 2019).

A further term requiring consideration is 'diagnosis', as receiving a formal autism 'diagnosis' can result in conflicting feelings for those within the autistic community. In Wilson et al.'s (2023) meta-synthesis of qualitative studies where autistic participants reflected upon their diagnosis, some participants felt a diagnosis brought a sense of relief, validation, understanding of their evolving identity, and supported others to better understand them. However, others experienced anger, grief, feeling different from their peers, and continued to be misunderstood by others (Wilson et al., 2023). Fletcher-Watson (2023) has also

commented on how receiving a diagnosis can be dual-natured, claiming a diagnosis can enable access to the autistic community (supporting a sense of belonging), relieve judgement (from themselves and others) and enable access to services, intervention, and support. However, they also commented on how a diagnosis can reinforce the pathology of autism, contrasting with the aims of the neurodiversity movement (Chapman, 2020), as the medical term 'diagnosis' originated from being associated with deficits. Nonetheless, within current systems (e.g. health, education), the term 'diagnosis' is widely recognised by those outside and within the autistic community, often framed as a way to identify and bring greater understanding of differences, the evolution of neurodivergent identity and as a means to access support (Rodríguez-Zafra & Garcia-Molina, 2026). Therefore, within the current research, the commonly used and understood term 'diagnosis' highlights that the individual has received a formal recognition of autism by professionals. This is important due to the presence of a diagnosis impacting the experiences of autistic individuals (for the better or worse), for example, in their access to services, their understanding of self and evolving identity. Nevertheless, likely associated with barriers to diagnosis discussed in previous sections and a move away from a medicalised understanding of autism, it must be noted that self-identification of autism is becoming more prevalent. Self-identification is when individuals identify as autistic without a formal diagnosis from professionals, which can be a means to meaningful understanding of oneself, including experiences, strengths, and challenges within the world (Newton et al., 2025). While self-identification is being increasingly recognised in personal and research contexts (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022), current powers held by medical systems mean self-identification can often be considered a prerequisite for formal diagnosis, dismissed, and support/adjustments can be gatekept, meaning diagnostic criteria continue to play a central role (Newton et al., 2025; Ostaszewska et al., 2025). Therefore, when attempting to analyse and make sense of the experiences of autistic individuals, it is important to note where there has been formal diagnosis by professionals or self-identification, as this can impact their interactions with professionals and others, and therefore their experiences.

The Researcher's Positionality:

The researcher's positionality has evolved throughout their educational and professional experiences. During the researcher's undergraduate studies, teacher training and the early stages of being a primary school teacher, autism was often presented from a deficit perspective as described in the previous section and referred to as a 'neurodevelopmental disorder'. During teacher training, the researcher was informed that tasks for autistic pupils would require differentiation, and at times it was implied that lower

expectations for academic and social learning for autistic pupils would be appropriate. However, the contrary was true within the researcher's experiences. The researcher found that knowing the pupils well so that elements of the classroom environment and teaching style could be adapted, as well as recognising and utilising their strengths, enhanced engagement and learning. Once the researcher became a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), they were introduced to the social model of disability (den Houting, 2019; Shakespeare, 2006). Upon further reading, the researcher realised this aligned with their positionality as an educator and now a practitioner and researcher interested in removing barriers to inclusion to support children and young people, families and the professionals supporting them. Similarly, the researcher was also more formally introduced to the neurodiversity paradigm as a TEP through teaching at university and further reading. This changed the way the researcher conceptualised autism, shifting from understanding autism through a deficit lens to conceptualising autism as a natural variation in neurology, and so a difference. The researcher found this aligned well with their interest in considering how environmental factors can be adapted to support inclusion, which influenced their assumptions about the literature reviewed, data analysed and reflections throughout their research.

The following literature review, empirical paper and reflective chapter were approached through the lens of conceptualising autism using the neurodiversity paradigm, and consider challenges faced during the transition in line with the social model of disability. Furthermore, care has been taken to include and prioritise research gaining views from the autistic community to ensure the most up-to-date and preferred terminology is used. While there are differences of opinion within the autistic community, a large UK study found most autistic people preferred identity-first language, such as the term "autistic person" or describing themselves as "autistic" rather than "person with autism" (Kenny et al., 2016). This suggests autism is not separated from the individual; it is a part of their identity, aligning with the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2012). Therefore, identity-first terminology will be used throughout the following sections.

Transition from Primary to Secondary School

In this review, "transition" refers to the transition from primary school to secondary school unless stated otherwise. This section outlines the transition process in the UK and how this might be experienced by children with and without Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

In the UK, primary school is completed in Year 6 when most children are aged 10 or 11, and they transition to secondary school for Year 7 at age 11 to 12. During Year 6, their parents apply for secondary school places and rank their preferences. However, the final decision of school placement is made by the Local Authority (LA) (Department for Education [DfE], 2021).

The transition can be challenging for children, their parents and educational professionals supporting them (Bagnall et al., 2020). From an ecological perspective, this transition is thought to be a key event in a child's educational journey, where pupils anticipate academic, emotional, social, and structural changes and difficulties (Coffey, 2013; Waters et al., 2014). These changes include navigating a new, usually much larger secondary school where many more pupils are attending (Coffey, 2013). Often, children encounter a new social group, leading some children to fear bullying (Zeedyk, 2003). They must also adapt from having one key class teacher to lessons with many teachers who may have different teaching styles, and increased academic expectations (Anderson et al., 2000). These factors, combined with developmental and hormonal changes due to the onset of adolescence (Peters & Brooks, 2016), mean this transition is regarded as one of the most difficult transitions in pupils' educational journeys (Zeedyk, 2003).

Transitions for pupils with SEND:

In the UK, pupils who are assessed as presenting with a level of need beyond expected SEND support for mainstream settings receive an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) to support their development (Children and Families Act, 2014). Over half of pupils with an EHCP (56.2% in 2025) attend mainstream schools (DfE, 2025a). The percentage of pupils receiving EHCPs peaks at age 11 (DfE, 2025a), which is around the same time as the transition from primary to secondary school. This perhaps suggests pupils with SEND require more support at this point in their education.

Unfortunately, researchers have found that children with SEND can find the transition more difficult than their peers (Hebron, 2017). They can be more vulnerable to anxiety, bullying, low self-esteem and poorer psychosocial outcomes during transitions (Hughes et al., 2013). Furthermore, according to recent UK statistics, suspension and permanent exclusion are disproportionately higher in pupils with SEND (DfE, 2025b). School absence is also disproportionately higher for pupils with SEND, with the "persistent absence" rate being 34.28% for those with an EHCP and 27.82% for pupils receiving SEN support, compared to 14.73% of pupils with no identified SEN in the 2024/25 school year (DfE, 2026a). While there

was little difference between Year 6 and Year 7, the persistent absence rate increased from 13.05% to 22.22% between Year 6 and Year 8, perhaps suggesting pupils with SEND struggle to attend school following the initial period of transition. Therefore, the transition for pupils with SEND warrants investigation to understand how they can be better supported.

Transitions for Autistic Pupils:

One in three pupils in receipt of EHCPs have an identified "primary need" of "autism spectrum disorder" (DfE, 2026a). Therefore, autistic pupils represent the largest population of pupils with EHCPs experiencing the challenges described in the previous section. Despite the many strengths of autistic children (Mandy et al., 2016), studies have shown they can experience difficulties in mainstream settings. For example, autistic children have been found to be at greater risk of social exclusion and bullying (Sterzing et al., 2012) and emotional and 'behavioural problems' according to teachers (Kaat et al., 2013). Some may consider these findings likely associated with difficulties with social communication and interaction attributed to autistic individuals in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). However, considering the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) and social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006), perhaps a lack of understanding of the differences in the way autistic individuals may communicate and the adjustments they may need to feel comfortable in a school environment could have also contributed to these findings. This coincides with autistic pupils being vulnerable to school exclusion for 'disruptive behaviour' (Donno et al., 2010), rather than staff recognising that perhaps their needs are not being met and they are communicating this through their behaviour (perhaps in a different way to neurotypical pupils). Therefore, further investigation must occur to better understand the experiences of autistic pupils and how they can be better supported to be included in mainstream settings.

Finally, transitions disrupt robust routines and relationships, which can be particularly difficult for autistic pupils compared to their non-autistic peers, resulting in increased anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and bullying, likely linked with differences in social communication (Tobin et al., 2012). Given the potential difficulties identified for this group, this literature review focuses specifically on the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic pupils.

Thematic Literature Review

A thematic literature review was deemed the most appropriate method for reviewing the current literature on the transition for autistic pupils due to the complex and multifaceted nature of transition, considering social, emotional, structural, academic and systemic aspects (Coffey, 2013; Waters et al., 2014). The current literature is also broad, methodologically diverse, and involves multiple stakeholder perspectives. Therefore, a thematic review was conducted to enable patterns across the literature to be identified, including exploring areas of convergence and divergence. This scoping review of the literature resulted in emerging themes being identified to better understand what we know about the transition for autistic pupils and how that knowledge has been attained. Then, the purpose was to identify gaps in knowledge where further investigation is warranted.

Search Strategy:

A scoping literature search was conducted between July 2024 and December 2025 using the University of East Anglia's library search tool. Through EBSCO host, the following databases were selected: Academic Search Ultimate, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, British Education Index, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, eBook Academic Collection, ERIC and Open Dissertations. Furthermore, two key practice journals regarding EP Practice in the UK were included: Educational Psychology in Practice, and Educational and Child Psychology. Grey literature impacting the topic, such as government policy, was also reviewed. The following keywords were used to identify relevant papers for this literature review: "school transitioning OR school transition OR transition", "autism OR ASD OR autism spectrum disorder", "secondary school OR high school OR secondary education", "primary school OR elementary school OR primary education". The inclusion criteria required papers to be peer-reviewed and written from 2014 onwards. The decision to exclude previous studies from the initial search was due to the introduction of the Children and Families Act in 2014 describing the most up-to-date transition process for many pupils with the introduction of EHCPs. This search was further refined by screening articles based on their title and abstract to ensure they were relevant to the literature review, including information about the transition from primary to secondary school. In addition, key papers cited in multiple papers from the literature in the initial search were also included. This included a few papers outside of the 2014 parameter. Doctoral theses directly related to the topic were also analysed. Once the experiences of autistic girls were identified as a key gap in the literature, a second search investigating "the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic girls" was completed using Google Scholar and papers referenced within

the few papers about the experiences of girls were also reviewed. This produced a further two papers discussed in the final section of the review.

The Legal Landscape

While there is no specific legal documentation regarding the transition for autistic pupils, this section explores current legislation and policy where either the transition for autistic pupils in the UK is considered or the actions outlined impact the transition. The relevant legislation and policy include the Children and Families Act (2014), SEND Code of Practice (2015), the National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults: 2021 to 2026 (DoH & DfE, 2021) and SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023).

Children and Families Act (2014) and SEND Code of Practice (2015):

The Children and Families Act (CAFA) (2014) introduced EHCPs, promoting integrated support across Education, Health and Social Care. While the CAFA (2014) does not specifically mention autistic CYP, autism is considered under the umbrella of SEND. The CAFA (2014) explicitly states the LA must give regard to the "views, wishes and feelings" of CYP with SEND and their parents, enabling them to take part in decision-making about their education. Furthermore, CYP should be supported to participate in mainstream schools unless this is incompatible with the CYP's and their parents' wishes or their educational needs mean they require a more specialist setting.

To support the implementation of the CAFA (2014), the SEND Code of Practice (CoP) (DfE & DoH, 2015) suggests SEN support includes "planning and preparation" (p. 102) for transitional periods between phases of education. The SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) states adults working with CYP should work together to support a "smooth transition" (p. 50) into the next setting and ensure CYP and their parents are well informed. This includes the current school sharing information with the new setting. Furthermore, EHCPs must be reviewed and amended before a child moves to a new educational phase to allow the new setting to prepare appropriate support. Parents of CYP with an EHCP have the right to name an educational institution they would like their child to attend (DfE & DoH, 2015), highlighting the decision-making of parents at the forefront of current legislation. However, the LA ultimately determines if the setting is suitable for the CYP's needs in consultation with the named setting, which may contradict parental views and therefore parental autonomy in decisions regarding their child's education. Nevertheless, parents can appeal disagreements

about the provision specified in an EHCP using tribunal processes, providing a further opportunity to have their views heard.

National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults: 2021 to 2026 (DoH & DfE, 2021):

The National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults: 2021 to 2026 (NSACYPA) (DoH & DfE, 2021) outlines a 5-year strategy for improving autistic people's lives in England. This policy builds on the Autism Act (2009), which only applies to adults, by also considering autistic CYP, including improving their access to education and supporting positive transitions into adulthood (DoH & DfE, 2021). This is to be achieved by schools providing more inclusive support.

While the transition to secondary school is not specifically mentioned, and the focus is on the post-16 transition into adulthood, the findings and suggested goals impact the secondary school transition period. For example, the report found many autistic individuals experience a long wait for their diagnosis and do not always receive support tailored to their needs whilst at school. This finding is especially concerning for autistic girls who are often diagnosed much later than males (Driver & Chester, 2021), suggesting support is less likely to be available during the transition to secondary school. Furthermore, it was highlighted that less than 5 in 10 teachers felt confident about supporting autistic CYP, stating a lack of teacher understanding led to autistic CYP having difficulties at school. Therefore, the policy suggested further training for teachers, including material considering challenges around the identification of needs and support for autistic girls. Furthermore, the policy recognised the benefit of preventing an escalation of needs, suspensions, and permanent exclusion by creating autism-inclusive cultures within schools, particularly mainstream settings. This includes setting up anti-bullying programmes and providing support through Mental Health Support Teams, with the acknowledgement that autistic CYP can experience bullying and poor mental health whilst in education. This largely aligns with the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) and the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006) as there is a focus on intervening in the systems surrounding autistic pupils (e.g. increasing teacher awareness and understanding to impact school culture) and providing support where necessary rather than attempting to change the neurodivergent presentations of autistic pupils to fit the environment. Therefore, while this policy does not specifically mention the transition between primary and secondary school, many of the pledges are likely to be supportive of this period.

SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023):

The SEND and Alternative Provision Green Paper (DfE, 2023) explored underlying issues within the SEND system and set out government proposals to improve outcomes for CYP and families. This plan began to explore the importance of earlier transitions, suggesting that transitions between all stages of education should be well-planned to be successful. However, there was a strong focus on post-16 transitions. During the consultation for this plan, CYP, families, and professionals shared their experiences around the late planning and decision-making regarding the CYP's next educational stage, and, similar to the NSACYPA (DoH & DfE, 2021), many reported the right support was not in place at the right time.

Conclusions from the Legal Landscape:

While all the legislation and policy described in this section mention transitions between all school phases, there is a strong focus on the transition to post-16 settings and adulthood, suggesting this transition is currently being prioritised. While planning for post-16 education and adulthood is of great importance to CYPs' employment, independent living and participation in society (DfE & DoH, 2015), researchers have found experiences of earlier school transitions can impact the outcomes of later schooling and transitions to post-school settings (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2017). Therefore, this earlier transition warrants further attention as it can impact later transitions and long-term outcomes. Furthermore, it is clear from the policy documents that failures within the SEND system, such as teacher knowledge about meeting autistic CYP's needs, and late planning and decision-making by the LA (DoH & DfE, 2021; DfE, 2023), have led to a lack of appropriate support during transitions, which have been detrimental to CYPs' education. However, since all the legislation and policy examined was written during the previous Conservative Government's leadership, the current Labour Government may make changes and amendments. While no tangible changes have occurred at the time of this literature review, the Every Child Achieving and Thriving White Paper (DfE, 2026b) was recently released. Among many aims, they stated intentions to improve the transition between Key Stage (KS) 2 and 3, so "children are engaged and grow in capability and confidence." (p. 31). This is to be achieved through several initiatives, including an improved universal offer through staff training, communication between settings, greater access to specialist multiagency support and inclusion bases in mainstream schools. It will be interesting to see whether and how this comes into fruition, and encouraging that the transition to secondary school is being specifically considered.

Summary of Empirical Findings

This section provides a summary of empirical evidence and literature relating to the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic pupils. Researchers' use of theory is explored first to present the underpinning psychology influencing the interpretation and understanding of the findings. Then, a summary of the empirical findings is presented thematically and critiqued.

Theories of Transition Utilised Within the Literature

Many studies did not specifically name an underpinning theory or conceptual framework for their research. However, several theories were named within papers to support researchers in making sense of the data and interpret participant responses about the transition, including: the Medical Model (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979), Life Course Theory (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The way these theories/frameworks were utilised within the research will now be examined.

The Medical Model:

A large majority of the studies began by defining autism using the APA's (2013) definition and used the term ASD throughout their study (e.g. Mandy et al., 2016a; Richter et al., 2020; Nuske et al., 2019). While not explicitly stated, this perhaps suggests a preference within the literature for conceptualising autism through the medical model (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000), taking a deficit approach to how autistic presentations might impact the transition. For example, Deacy et al. (2015) described autism as being associated with a "Dyad of Impairments" (p. 293), including social interaction/communication deficits and restrictive and repetitive behaviours. This could explain why researchers like Whelan et al. (2024) were surprised their findings were inconsistent with their expectations of the transition being extremely difficult for autistic children. Considering the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), perhaps they overlooked the strengths and positive qualities autistic children hold and how important the secondary school environment is to the success of their transition. It is important to consider this conceptualisation when evaluating the relevance of the findings to the true experiences of autistic individuals.

Ecological approaches:

Some researchers named Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979) to support their understanding of the transition, while others claimed to understand the transition from an 'ecological' perspective. For example, Mandy et al. (2016a) described the transition as an ecological shift, impacting social, emotional, academic and organisational aspects of pupils' lives, and Mandy et al. (2016b) referenced Bronfenbrenner (1979), suggesting adapting to a new environment does not just depend on the child's personal qualities, but also their interaction with elements of their environment (i.e. teachers, peers, school systems). This idea was used to explain the success of an intervention for the transition, focusing on adjusting the child's environment through training the people supporting the child (i.e., parents and teachers in the child's microsystem) (Mandy et al., 2016b). One might question why the researchers referenced the first version of Bronfenbrenner's theory rather than the final iteration. Perhaps, with the purpose of the study being to examine a transition intervention to support autistic children, the first version is more appropriate for discussing where the intervention should occur, which in this case is in the systems surrounding the child rather than the child themselves. This aligns with the researchers' arguments that environmental interventions could have a positive impact despite the focus of research often being child-focused interventions (e.g., building social skills) (Mandy et al., 2016b; Wong et al., 2015). Hebron's (2018) research also acknowledged the impact of ecological systems, including school system factors such as culture, provision and other contextual differences, but did not directly reference Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory. This suggests some researchers took the view that there are wider influencing factors impacting children's development and experience of the transition than simply their individual characteristics.

Also considering the broader ecological context in which the transition occurs, Whelan et al. (2024) utilised Life Course Theory (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003) as a lens to understand the transition. Life Course Theory suggests people's lives dynamically unfold through interactions with social contexts and are punctuated/influenced by points of transition. This theory connects individuals with their physical and social environment, therefore understanding development throughout transitions ecologically (Brenner, 2011). This means individual characteristics, a pupil's resources and personal experiences, their family, school and sociocultural context, have the potential to contribute to transition outcomes (Brenner, 2011). However, while considering the transition ecologically, a strong component of Whelan et al.'s (2024) study was measuring the individual's 'severity' of autistic traits, which fits into a more medicalised understanding of autism. This may have contributed to Whelan et al.'s (2024) hypothesis that autistic traits would be associated with

a lower quality of life, mental health and school belonging following a transition, and their surprise that their findings presented the opposite. Therefore, it seems that while some researchers claimed to take an ecological view of the transition, the individual characteristics of autistic individuals seem to have been understood through a deficit model.

Self-determination:

Webster et al.'s (2022) research, determining different types of support employed for autistic pupils during transitions in Australian schools, was the only study to view the transition through a self-determination lens (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The concept of motivation was considered, where key psychological needs, including autonomy (being involved in decisions impacting your life), competence (knowledge about the situation/environment) and relatedness (a sense of belonging) must be met to achieve ideal psychological health (Davids et al., 2017). Webster et al. (2022) were particularly concerned about the contribution of the children to their own transition planning, arguing that increasing students' autonomy, competence and relatedness when transitioning to a new environment is important for encouraging self-determination and therefore optimal psychological health (Webster et al., 2022).

This section has highlighted the psychological theory adopted by different researchers to frame and understand the transition itself and the experiences of participants. These theories will be referred to when critiquing the literature. The following section considers the transition experiences of autistic children.

Further consideration of Theories of Transition

Despite the theories discussed in the previous section, the researcher was surprised to find the literature did not further discuss theories of transition. Therefore, it was deemed important to directly consider how theories of transition could be applied to the transition to secondary school for autistic pupils. This section will explore Bridges' Transition Model (2009) and Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development (1950). While there are many transition theories, these theories were chosen because they address procedural, emotional and developmental aspects of transitions and can be applied to the transition from primary to secondary school.

Bridges' Transition Model:

Bridges' (2009) Transition Model conceptualises transition as an internal psychological process that occurs as individuals adjust to new situations brought about by change. This process involves three stages of transition.

The first stage is 'Endings', where it is determined what is being left behind or lost. When applying this to the primary-to-secondary school transition, this likely involves the loss of their familiar learning environment, including strong routines, well-known peers and adults. Coming to terms with these changes could be a barrier for autistic pupils who may prefer predictability to support their regulation (Moyse & Kolatsi, 2024) and therefore have difficulty leaving a setting where they are familiar with the context. Nevertheless, there could also be aspects of primary school that autistic children would like to leave behind, especially if they have had difficult experiences (e.g. bullying) (Tobin et al., 2012). Therefore, the 'ending' may act as both a barrier and/or protective factor for their education and wellbeing. The second stage is the 'Neutral Zone'. In this stage, the old is gone, but the new context is not yet fully up and running. For the transition, this stage could be during the summer holidays, once primary school has ended, or within the first few weeks of secondary school. This is likely a time of many unknowns and ambiguity, which may cause anxiety, not only over the environmental changes but also the anticipation of a new identity as they become older and move into a new phase of education. Alternatively, this may be a time for preparations to take place to support pupils to gain experience or knowledge of their next setting. The final stage is 'New Beginnings', where individuals begin to express their new identity. For the transition, this could be translated to pupils finding their place within their Year 7 peer group and taking part in secondary school routines.

Therefore, Bridges' Transition Model (2009) can be used to highlight potential practical and emotional processes taking place for individuals within the transition to secondary school. Through this lens, it can be recognised that the transition is not a single event, but an extended process with many elements, such as excitement, grief and uncertainty. Furthermore, each of the stages could bring potential risk and protective factors that come with transitioning to secondary school. However, this model does not provide detail about the developmental factors influencing children's transition experiences specifically between primary and secondary school. Therefore, Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development (1950) provides a further developmental and social lens which can be used to understand the experience.

Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development (1950):

Erikson's framework proposes that development and human growth occur in eight stages, where each stage is characterised by a psychosocial conflict. These stages are: Trust vs Mistrust, Autonomy vs Shame and Doubt, Initiative vs Guilt, Industry vs Inferiority, Identity vs Confusion, Intimacy vs Isolation, Generativity vs Stagnation, and Integrity vs Despair. The primary-to-secondary school transition falls between two stages. At the start of the transition period, children are more likely to be in the Industry vs Inferiority stage, where they are learning social/emotional skills within their school contexts and building competence. Potentially, the transition could add further challenge during this phase, as the sense of competence (e.g. academically, socially) they may have built in one setting could be challenged upon entering a new setting. If this conflict is not resolved, it can leave the child feeling a sense of inadequacy. The following stage is Identity vs Confusion, where children work to establish a sense of self through social relationships. Similarly to the previous phase, the transition results in a child considering their identity within a new setting with many emerging social relationships. If this phase is not resolved, the child can question their role and place within the world.

A potential criticism of this framework could be that perhaps not all children, especially those who are neurodivergent, fit into a linear developmental model. However, Erikson proposed the epigenetic principle, which suggests earlier stages can resurface when later ones are threatened. Therefore, it is important not to consider a child who revisits earlier stages upon the transition as 'regressing', but rather re-experiencing unresolved elements within their new context. Therefore, when also considering the Bridges Transition Model (2009), perhaps autistic children may spend a prolonged period within the 'Neutral Zone' as they are not only entering a period of contextual uncertainty as they move into their new setting, but also negotiating developmental tasks associated with competence and/or identity.

Conclusion:

While there are many transition theories and frameworks, this section has explored two theories that can be applied to the primary-to-secondary school transition in a way that considers risk and protective factors, as well as how the transition experience interlinks with child development. These theories are also referred to throughout this review to make sense of the information gathered from the literature.

The Transition Experiences of Autistic Children

This section explores the transition experiences of autistic children documented within the literature. The characteristics of autistic children described within the medical model (APA, 2013) seem to have led some researchers to predict the transition would bring increased challenges for autistic children (e.g. Mandy et al., 2016a; Hebron, 2018; Webster et al., 2024). However, both difficulties and opportunities around transition were identified in the literature. Some studies found the transition is very similar for autistic and non-autistic pupils, as adapting to a new school environment can be difficult for any pupil (Hebron, 2018). In fact, autistic children from Richter et al.'s (2022) study expressed that they considered the transition to be a normal part of their school career involving many changes. Furthermore, some studies suggested the challenges faced by autistic pupils were no different to those experienced by their non-autistic peers, including getting lost, an increased workload and making new friends (Richter et al., 2022; Hebron, 2017). Nevertheless, it was widely accepted the difference was the intensity of the difficulties felt by autistic children (e.g., Hebron, 2018), and therefore the preparation and intervention they might need was of a higher quantity and depth through a more individualised, stepped approach, compared to non-autistic peers (Stack et al., 2021; Makin et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2019). The following sections will explore the experiences and views of autistic pupils, parents and educational staff in greater detail, considering the concerns and opportunities posed by the transition.

Changes Impacting Emotional Wellbeing

A strong theme across the literature was the transition forcing a change to embedded routines, impacting emotional wellbeing. Some studies outlined the concerns and difficulties this caused the child, while others presented the opportunity and positive impact of a change of school and routine.

Concerns:

Key studies in this area included Richter et al.'s (2019) and Nuske et al.'s (2019) reviews of the literature, presenting an international picture of the transition experiences of autistic children. Nuske et al. (2019) reviewed 27 studies including data collected from autistic children, parents and teachers. They found children felt anxious about the changes they would encounter when starting secondary school, especially having to learn and participate in new routines. Pupils found the environmental factors of entering new and often much larger buildings loud and disorienting, and experienced anxiety about transportation to

their new school. Richter et al.'s (2019) literature review of the perspectives of CYP, families and teaching staff supports these findings, also identifying navigating a secondary school as a potential barrier to inclusion due to frequent classroom changes and the fear of getting lost and being late for lessons. Both studies considered their multi-perspective analysis a strength due to the triangulation of the data to form their findings. Multi-perspective accounts align with a more ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of how the transition impacts the child, those around them and how they impact upon each other.

However, East (2024) noted a large majority of the data from Nuske et al.'s (2019) review came from adults rather than children. The perspectives of children can be different to those of their parents and teachers (Dann, 2011). Therefore, while gaining the views of different stakeholders can contribute to a more holistic picture of the transition (e.g., Richter et al., 2020; Nuske et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2022; Makin, 2017), some researchers have argued each stakeholder's views represent their perception of the event and should not be considered a direct understanding of the experience of the child (e.g., Peters & Brooks, 2016; Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016; Tso & Strnadová, 2017). This brings into question the extent to which Nuske et al.'s (2019) study presents authentic experiences of autistic children, as it heavily relies on supporting adults' perspectives and interpretations of events.

Stack et al.'s (2021) research is a valuable addition as they are one of the few review studies specifically highlighting the voice of autistic children. In their systematic review of children's perspectives of their transition, mainly including UK studies, they found pupils had concerns about adapting to new school rules, discipline procedures, an expanded curriculum, and organising themselves with differing expectations from their new teachers. This implies elements of daily routines, self-organisation and independence that pupils had not previously experienced were at the forefront of their self-reported concerns. For example, some pupils experienced organisational barriers such as remembering to bring personal effects such as their PE kit. Similarly, Richter et al. (2019) reported a theme across all stakeholders questioning if the children could cope with this increased independence and expectations of organisational demands. So, perhaps unsurprisingly, pre-transition uncertainty and impending change were found to cause stress and anxiety for children and their parents across the research (e.g. Tso & Strnadová, 2017; Neal & Frederickson, 2016) and for some, a drop in mental health and wellbeing (Nuske et al., 2019). Many studies also commented on frustration and anxiety felt by parents and children around the introduction of more homework in secondary school (Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Stack et al., 2021; Makin et al., 2017) due to this activity blurring the boundary between school and home (Hebron, 2017) and children being exhausted after the school day (Richter et al., 2022). Furthermore,

unstructured times of the day in secondary school were very stressful for some autistic children (Richter et al., 2022; Richter et al., 2019), including the commute to school, PE lessons, break and lunchtime and transitioning between classes (Peters & Brooks, 2016). Again, it is important to note many of the studies within the review involved parental perspectives, as this made up a large portion of the literature. However, the few child voice studies do support the findings about anxiety around change (e.g., Stack et al., 2021).

Higher academic expectations were also found to cause stress and anxiety among children and parents (Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016), and were also recognised by teachers (Deacy et al., 2015). For example, parents in Peters and Brooks (2016) study reported anxiety surrounding expectations led to educational disruption for one of the girls in their study, and they noticed boys and girls had different manifestations of stress and anxiety. While boys were reported by their parents to have outwardly visible 'meltdowns', the girls experienced symptoms such as constipation and incontinence, which are examples of more internalising behaviours (Peters & Brooks, 2016). However, only three out of 17 parents who took part in Peters and Brooks' (2016) study had daughters, and they acknowledged girls' experiences have been largely overlooked in the literature and require further investigation.

Positive Aspects:

Despite many studies stating concerns of different stakeholders about the changes negatively impacting autistic children, Neal and Frederickson's (2016) mixed-methods, strengths-based study is a key paper in the body of research, as the participants were autistic children who were deemed to have had positive transition experiences. In this study, pupils reported many benefits of secondary school, which they preferred to primary school. This included more space to move around and increased resources (e.g., a library), meaning interests could be explored. Furthermore, the perceived increased discipline in secondary school was viewed by some participants as fairer. While studies in the previous section commented on the organisational changes being anxiety-inducing for pupils, Neal and Frederickson's participants (2016) found having multiple teachers and lessons meant not having to spend the entire day with an unliked teacher and reported enjoying the variety of lessons offered. Similar findings were reported in Richter et al.'s (2020) study seeking the views of parents and children, where the structured learning of secondary school and the variety of lessons and teachers were preferred to primary school. This could be linked to the positive impact 'Endings' (Bridges, 2009) can have for some autistic children as they leave behind aspects of primary school they did not enjoy when they transition to secondary school. Therefore, these findings suggest that despite the dominant narrative in the literature

being that beginning secondary school is more difficult for autistic children, there are many benefits children report they enjoy more than primary school.

Neal and Frederickson's study was one of the few strength-based studies from the literature, highlighting successful transition experiences from the child's perspective. However, the study had a small sample of only six children, meaning further investigation of positive experiences is an area requiring further research. Nevertheless, other studies, at least in part, support their findings. For example, while pupils in Richter et al.'s (2022) study acknowledged the difficulties they faced when transitioning, they found many of the difficulties, such as getting lost and adjusting to new routines, were often short-lived, and they quickly adapted using strategies they had developed (e.g. following others to the next lesson). Furthermore, Mandy et al.'s (2016a) longitudinal observational study suggests the transition to secondary school does not necessarily exacerbate difficulties faced by autistic pupils. Nevertheless, it should be recognised that while levels of psychopathology did not increase for pupils during this study, their levels were already high, which persisted across the transition (Mandy et al., 2016a). This suggests the wellbeing of autistic pupils should be monitored throughout the transition, as they might be experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety even if their transition is considered successful.

Social Interaction and Belonging:

Social interaction and the need for belonging were consistently spoken about by stakeholders across the research. Again, while many studies reported challenges with social interaction faced by autistic individuals, others captured more positive experiences of forming friendships, all of which are further explored in this section.

Social Interaction Differences and Bullying:

Considering the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), autistic children can have differences in their social communication and interaction compared to their peers. While international literature suggests many autistic pupils seek peer interaction and want to develop personal relationships due to a strong desire for friends (Nuske et al., 2019; Hebron, 2017; Richter et al., 2020), autistic children can experience difficulty forming new peer relationships (Nuske et al., 2019) and are more at risk of peer victimisation (Peters & Brooks, 2016). With a social model of disability lens (Shakespeare, 2016), barriers to forming friendships are likely due to how their differences are received by others and misinterpretations, rather than a 'deficit' in their communication.

Bullying was a common theme in the literature, leading to loneliness and social isolation (Makin et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2020; Hebron, 2017). Concerningly, bullying described included physical attacks, social exclusion, name-calling, and teasing (Hebron, 2017; Richter et al., 2020). Stack et al. (2021) found pupils reported negative expectations of forming relationships in secondary school due to experiences of bullying during primary school. Similarly, Hebron's (2017) case studies, focusing on school satisfaction and inclusion, stated all participants had experienced teasing or bullying at some point in primary school, and half had experienced bullying from peers in Year 7. While there were only ten pupils included in the case study portion of Hebron's (2017) research, data were collected from multiple time points, and qualitative interview data led to the discovery that bullying was often reported by peers or parents, suggesting the autistic pupils were perhaps unaware they were being bullied or unsure of how to seek support at secondary school. Furthermore, it was uncovered that while many participants experienced bullying, participants in the case studies (parents, children, and teachers) had been responded to promptly and appropriately by the school, highlighting the power of meaning-making through qualitative elements of research.

When considering why bullying and social exclusion formed such a prominent theme within the literature, it was surprising that researchers did not consider the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012), also known as the double empathy gap, despite its prominence in autism research outside of this transition literature (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2021). This theory suggests that due to the different experiences, dispositional viewpoints and interactions between autistic and non-autistic individuals, there can be differences in understanding by both parties during interactions (Milton et al., 2023). This theory does not project a deficit on the part of the autistic individual, but a "break in mutual understanding" (p. 83) by both the autistic and non-autistic parties (Milton et al., 2023), leading to misunderstandings and different interpretations of the interaction, so aligning with the social model of disability and neurodiversity paradigm (den Houting, 2019; Shakespeare, 2006). At the time of transition, pupils are introduced to many new peers. This could contribute to explaining why, across the literature, there were concerns from parents and pupils around autistic pupils forming and maintaining new relationships due to a strong desire to 'fit in' (e.g. Stack et al., 2021; Peters & Brooks, 2016). However, further research needs to occur, considering the double empathy problem and its impact on social interaction during the transition.

Greater consideration has been given to masking/camouflaging during social interactions (Alley, 2019). Richter et al. (2022) discussed how some autistic pupils might feel

forced to mask their typically autistic presentations to adapt to a new school environment. They reported two of their participants rejected their autism diagnosis, attempting to 'fit in' amongst peers, so masking behaviour could have been present, impacting the findings. This perhaps aligns with Erikson's (1950) Identity vs Confusion stage as some autistic pupils appear to have experienced conflict in establishing their sense of self and identity upon entering the secondary school context. Masking/camouflaging is also discussed as one of the key reasons autistic women and girls are under/misdiagnosed (Allely, 2019). Ayirebi and Thomas' (2024) study, which was one of the few papers specifically investigating the experiences of autistic girls in high school, including the transition, suggested girls are more likely to mask in the school environment, which could explain the findings of the few female participants from other studies. For example, masking could explain the findings from Fortuna's (2014) study, where one of the girls was reported to have a negative transition experience overall according to an amalgamation of data gathering methods (e.g. SDQ, pupil diary, semi-structured interviews), despite the school staff and the pupil reporting positive ratings of the transition. This suggests she could have been masking her negative feelings towards the transition at school. However, this avenue was not discussed by Fortuna (2014), perhaps reflecting the oversight of the experiences of female autistic pupils in transition literature. Peters & Brooks (2016) also suggested autistic girls are more likely to internalise anxiety so do not exhibit what school staff might consider to be 'challenging' or 'aggressive' behaviours. While this appears to describe masking, they too did not name this in their research. This suggests the experience of autistic girls, with consideration of them perhaps being more likely to mask their discomfort and difficulties, requires further in-depth investigation.

A fresh start and success stories:

Some of the research has centred on more positive stories of the transition. Despite the difficulties around social interaction described in the previous section, research has found that this does not mean autistic pupils should be considered incapable of making friends. For example, despite bullying already discussed in Hebron's (2017) study, many pupils also described having several successful friendships from primary school which persisted into secondary school, and half of the participants had new friendships by the end of Year 7. It was stated these friendships were highly supportive and based on mutual interests. Furthermore, in their strengths-based study, Neal & Frederickson (2016) found pupils' social experiences were generally positive, and they made new friends. While this study has a positive bias, this was thought to be due to the increased number of pupils, meaning there were greater opportunities for making friends, an idea also suggested by

Cridland et al. (2014). Furthermore, it was suggested by Richter et al.'s (2022) longitudinal study that autistic pupils can and will make new friends in high school, but can require more time to form and solidify these friendships. This is a potential criticism of Makin et al.'s (2017) study, which contributed to findings in the previous section, as post-transition data collected during the child's first term of secondary school could explain the highly negative responses of social isolation, as there may not have been enough time for friendships to develop.

Other studies found social interaction and friendships improved following the transition. For example, Whelan et al.'s (2021) prospective observational study of 51 pupils found higher autistic traits were associated with lower school belonging in Year 6, however, this was no longer the case at secondary school. While Whelan et al.'s (2021) study was quantitative and focused on autistic traits, so included data from pupils who were not autistic, a strength was the ecological approach to understanding the transition through the application of Life Course Theory (Brenner, 2011). Whelan et al. (2021) understood the transition as a punctuating change point in the children's lives, impacted by interactions with social contexts, and similar findings have been found in other papers. For example, Richter et al. (2019) suggested that for autistic pupils who had negative experiences with peers in primary school, the move to secondary school was considered an opportunity for a 'new start' without prejudice. This could be because the child's reputation, previous behaviour, and autistic label were not known to new peers (Hebron, 2017). This is supported by Mandy et al.'s (2016) longitudinal observational study across the final year of primary school to the second term of secondary school, where peer victimisation fell for autistic pupils following the transition to secondary school. Therefore, while the potential difficulties with peer relationships should be recognised and prepared for, the literature suggests that autistic pupils can benefit from the 'new start' secondary school offers to build new friendships with like-minded peers with similar interests (Cridland et al., 2014).

Individuality of Strengths, Needs and Experiences

Despite many authors identifying themes of the transition in their data, a golden thread running through the literature was the importance of recognising each child as an individual with their own strengths, needs and experiences (e.g. Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016). Fortuna (2014), for example, in their research on the 'emotional functioning' of autistic pupils during the transition, explicitly described how autistic pupils have different transition experiences based on support offered. This strongly aligns with the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006), as it is indicated that factors external to the individual (i.e., support)

impact the individual's experience. Furthermore, Hebron (2017) noted that whilst she identified themes with "cautious generalisability" (p. 88) within her literature review, multiple studies strongly suggested there were individual differences in the experiences and needs of pupils throughout the transition. While this could be considered unsurprising, perhaps the influence of the medical model, which seems to have underpinned some researchers' studies within this literature review, led researchers to predict the transition would bring increased challenges due to 'deficits' held by this group (e.g. Whelan et al., 2024). However, recognising neurodiversity and considering autistic children as individuals with their own strengths and difficulties within different contexts, both difficulties and opportunities from the transition were identified within the current literature review, showing the nuances within transition experiences. Other researchers who have used a social model framing have suggested individual differences must be recognised and adhered to by professionals and researchers to support the best outcomes (e.g. East, 2024).

Strategies and Interventions

School-based Strategies and Intervention

Much of the literature is centred on strategies employed to support the transition, which is unsurprising given some of the difficulties identified in the literature already discussed. A range of strategies and interventions were described by pupils, parents, and educational staff, and commonly occurring strategies to support pupils are explored in this section. This section is framed by Nuske et al.'s (2019) prominent international systematic review of the research literature and supported by accompanying literature. While difficulties from Nuske et al.'s (2019) study associated with the transition have been described in previous sections, their review also explored strategies to support the transition, triangulating data from autistic CYP, parents and teachers to gain a holistic view of what was deemed difficult and supportive. Different domains of support were deemed important for pupils, including planning, visual supports, social supports and self-regulation.

Planning/Practicalities:

While Stack et al. (2021) discovered many children felt transition preparation activities heightened anxiety, in Donnelly's (2025) thesis, conducting qualitative, participatory research with autistic pupils, participants shared a desire for familiarity and a sense of predictability achieved through preparation. This is supported by Neal & Frederickson's

(2016) study, which suggested assemblies and class/group discussions about the positive aspects of secondary school were reassuring. Nuske et al. (2019) found the opportunity for pupils to visit their new school was a popular strategy for adapting to a new school building, routines and meeting staff to reduce anxiety and stress, which was supported by countless studies (e.g. Stack et al., 2021; Deacy et al., 2015). However, some considered sole visits insufficient (e.g. Nuske et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2022) and that additional visits to what would usually be offered to all children could mitigate transitional difficulties (Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016; Tso & Strnadová, 2017; Hoy et al., 2018). Furthermore, in Tobin et al.'s (2012) study, parents suggested visiting the school individually rather than during a general open day was helpful, as open days could be overwhelming for children who become overstimulated by unexpected stimuli. Many studies, including those gaining only pupil views (e.g. Stack et al., 2021; Neal & Frederickson, 2016), found extra visits reduced anxiety as the children could become familiar with the school building and begin to build relationships with key members of staff who could reassure specific concerns (e.g. Hebron, 2017; Webster et al., 2022). Nevertheless, in Webster et al.'s (2022) study, few parents actually described multiple visits occurring, perhaps indicating an individualised approach was not taken. However, it was not clear in this study why further visits did not take place and whose responsibility it was to organise them. This exposes the ecological aspect of transition preparations, as without clear organisation and communication between parents and school staff, the appropriate support may not be given.

Visual Supports:

Secondly, Nuske et al. (2019) found visual supports, including a school map, photographs of the school building and teachers, and calendars/diaries provided by the school before transition were viewed as important by students, parents and teachers. This is corroborated by Richter et al.'s (2019) prominent study cited throughout the research, stating visual supports assist navigation of the school building and organisation, and other studies suggested these supports prepared the child so they knew what to expect (Deacy et al., 2015; Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Hoy et al., 2018).

Social Supports:

A further strand was the importance of social support from adults and peers. In Donnelly's (2025) thesis, this emerged as the theme 'importance of feeling seen and heard by adults', expressing the participants' desire to feel acknowledged, understood and supported by school staff. Nuske et al. (2019) found social supports, including strong

relationships with staff, often including a ‘key/safe’ adult, were essential to pupils feeling supported in their new learning environment. Building trusting relationships with school staff was crucial for supporting emotional regulation and wellbeing across the research (e.g., Richter et al., 2022; Deacy, 2015; Webster et al., 2022). Furthermore, in line with the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), school staff having knowledge and understanding of differences associated with autism (Makin et al., 2017), but also knowing students as individuals and attending to their individual difficulties was key (Hebron, 2017; Hoy et al., 2018; Stack et al., 2021).

However, many studies reported autistic children often have strained relationships with members of staff due to a lack of understanding and knowledge about autism and the needs of individuals, which undermines pupil wellbeing (Richter et al., 2019; Tobin, 2012; Hebron, 2017). Some literature has identified parental concern related to teachers accepting their child in a mainstream setting (Tso & Strnadová, 2017; Richter et al., 2020; Nuske et al., 2019) and school staff not fully understanding their child’s needs (Nuske et al., 2019; Richter et al., 2019). In Yates et al.’s (2023) study, parents were concerned that teachers did not understand how their child’s autism might impact their behaviour when their sensory needs are not met, leading to a lack of trust in school staff. Ayirebi and Thomas (2024) highlighted how this is particularly dangerous for autistic girls as they may go unnoticed by staff, decreasing opportunities for appropriate intervention and support and making them susceptible to mental health difficulties.

Nuske et al. (2019) also highlighted the importance of support with peer interaction through the introduction of peer buddies or social skills groups. This was partly supported by Webster et al.’s (2022) study and children from Stack et al.’s (2021) study who felt mentoring from older children was helpful. However, whilst social skills groups were mentioned in multiple studies (e.g., Makin et al., 2017), they were not mentioned as a helpful support in any of the studies that only collected child views. As previously stated, each stakeholder’s views represent their perception of the transition and should not be considered a direct understanding of the experience of the child (e.g. Peters & Brooks, 2016; Yates et al., 2023). Therefore, further research should be conducted to understand the children’s perspective on how helpful social groups are to their transition, rather than relying on the views of teachers and parents.

Self-Regulation:

Multiple researchers also commented on the importance of intervention/strategies to support self-regulation during the transition, especially when starting secondary school. One method was being allowed to leave lessons five minutes early, so they missed the busyness of lesson changeovers (Hoy et al., 2018). A particular strength in Hoy et al.'s (2018) study was the use of photovoice to support the collection of the children's views. The children all took a picture of the communal spaces as something they did not like about the school, which led to uncovering that being allowed to leave five minutes early was helpful for avoiding the busy and noisy crowds. Nuske et al. (2019) found giving autistic pupils allocated time/space to decompress or learn regulation strategies was supportive. An example of how this worked in a mainstream secondary school was 1:1 sessions, where autistic pupils could talk with learning support staff (Hoy et al., 2018). This was considered a successful practice by pupils for supporting the transition. Such check-ins were also described in Webster et al.'s (2022) study, again presenting the importance of the child's relationship with at least one adult at secondary school whom they can trust. However, considering Webster et al. (2022) viewed the transition through a self-determination lens, they were concerned that continued 1:1 support was found to increase dependence, leading to a lack of competence. Therefore, they favoured structured teaching of self-regulation strategies so the pupil could be empowered to support themselves.

Academic:

A further strand of support is the academic domain. While Nuske et al. (2019) did not state this as a theme from their literature review, this was an important finding from multiple studies (e.g. Hebron, 2017; Neal & Frederickson, 2016). For example, in Neal and Frederickson's (2016) study, adapting the primary school environment by increasing the level of academic work and personal responsibility supported pupils in managing their anxiety, drawing links with Webster et al.'s (2022) views around competence. Furthermore, Neal and Frederickson (2016) found 'booster' classes and support from outside agencies, including Maths groups, reflecting the support they might receive in secondary school, were thought to be useful and ease anxiety around an increase in the level of academic work. It was clear most of the children in this study valued the transition support they received and provided evidence that autistic children can experience successful transitions to secondary school. While Neal and Frederickson's (2016) study was biased as only pupils who were deemed to have had a positive experience by their teachers were included, this study sheds

light on some of the strategies which can ease the transition for autistic pupils in a body of literature that is saturated with documenting the difficult experiences.

The usefulness of support in the academic domain is an important addition as it came directly from the pupils themselves. While Nuske et al.'s (2019) study helps outline themes from across international research, the lack of acknowledgement of the usefulness of academic support has perhaps highlighted the criticism made earlier in this review, where children's voices may have been overpowered by the adults. For this reason, the supporting studies in this section, especially Neal and Frederickson (2016) and Stack et al.'s (2021) studies, gaining pupil views, are key to highlighting strategies pupils found supportive. It is also important to highlight that many of the helpful strategies discussed by participants were congruent with the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & Den Houting, 2022) and social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006). Such strategies considered the potential differences in the experiences of autistic pupils compared to their peers, and the intervention was often an adaptation to make the environment more inclusive (e.g. timely access to communal spaces, knowledge and understanding of school staff), rather than an attempt to change the child.

Transition Intervention Programmes

A few studies highlighted more formalised transition intervention programmes for stakeholders, which will be discussed in this section.

Mandy et al. (2016b) evaluated the Systemic Transition in Education Programme for Autism Spectrum Disorder (STEP-ASD). This involves a collaborative meeting between school staff, parents, and the child to create an individualised transition programme using a pack of strategies to address specific needs. Mandy et al. (2016b) reported teachers found the STEP-ASD intervention feasible and the resource pack improved their knowledge of autism. This perhaps combats the concerns shared by children and parents described in previous sections about teacher knowledge (e.g. Yates et al., 2023). Furthermore, the children involved showed a large reduction in school-reported 'emotional and behavioural difficulties'. However, Mandy et al.'s (2016b) study relied on parent and teacher-reported Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) to measure outcomes. Firstly, the decision to use a quantitative approach means the nuances in how the intervention was useful or not useful were not documented, which would have been helpful when evaluating an intervention claiming to cater to individual needs. Secondly, while included in the initial meeting to discuss the transition plan, the children have been excluded from evaluating the

intervention when arguably their views about the experience are the most important (Stack et al., 2021). Furthermore, although the intervention aligns somewhat with the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006) due to the aim to support school staff to adapt their practice according to the strengths and needs of the child, it primarily targets the child's challenges rather than adapting the school environment to be more inclusive. This means the intervention seems more focused on addressing difficulties thought to be within the individual rather than promoting wider environmental or systemic change in line with the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006).

Alternatively, Nuske et al. (2025) developed Building Better Bridges (BBB), which focuses on caregiver engagement in the transition process with autistic children. This programme provides caregivers with individualised coaching and a resource binder for six modules: school communication, advocacy, educational rights and child preparation strategies, to complete over the summer before secondary school. Through a randomised control trial, Nuske et al. (2024) found teachers and caregivers involved in the intervention rated the transition more successful than the control group. However, while the intervention aimed to support caregivers, once again the children were not asked for their views on the effectiveness of the intervention. Secondly, similarly to Mandy et al.'s (2016b) study, the methodology was quantitative, therefore, a discussion of specific elements of the coaching did not occur, leaving us to question which elements of this intervention made the transition successful for participants. Nevertheless, this intervention does align with the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006) as there is a clear focus on empowering caregivers to support their children with information about advocacy and how to communicate with schools, rather than trying to change the individual characteristics of the child.

While studies described in this section have positive self-reports from parents and school staff suggesting the interventions were successful, there is not a large body of evidence to support using more formal intervention programmes. This is in stark contrast to the number of studies discussing pupil-centred, school-based inclusive practice to support autistic pupils. The body of research suggests individualised support contributes to a successful transition for autistic pupils alongside universal support. However, there is a need for further research into positive experiences and facilitators of the transition needs from the perspective of the children themselves to build this element of the literature.

Transition Planning

This section considers how transitions were planned for autistic pupils and who took part in the process. This is considered a 'strategy' within this review as it is part of the preparation process where interventions/school-based strategies are prepared. Planning was discussed in many of the papers reviewed (e.g. Makin et al., 2017; Stack et al., 2021; Richter, 2020), considering pupil and parent involvement and the communication between primary and secondary schools.

Pupil involvement:

Stack et al. (2021) found autistic children wanted to be seen as individuals and make choices within the transition process. Despite much of the research suggesting pupils' individual differences should be recognised and considered (e.g. Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016; Fortuna, 2014; Deacy et al., 2015), hardly any of the research described pupils making decisions regarding their transition. Similarly, hardly any of the research sought to investigate how autistic pupils would improve the transition process based on their experiences, meaning there are gaps in gathering pupil views around planning and reviewing their transition process. Webster et al. (2022) viewed school transition through a self-determination theory lens, and commented that in their study, including 422 participants, only two parents and one specialist professional described involving students in transition planning and decision-making. Instead, participants expressed autistic children were "passive recipients" of the support deemed appropriate by the school. This resulted in stakeholders believing the children were underprepared and overwhelmed by the experience. Furthermore, Webster et al. (2022) were concerned that pupils having no agency or autonomy in transition processes reinforces the idea they cannot advocate for themselves. While this paper was not limited to the primary-to-secondary transition and commented on both transitions between schools and between other year groups, it is important for consideration within this literature review due to its application of self-determination theory and findings of the importance of pupil voice in the transition process. This is also supported by teachers in Makin et al.'s (2017) study believing children should be involved in decision-making as early as possible and that children experienced more anxiety when they were not involved. Furthermore, one parent in Tso & Strnadová's (2017) study suggested children should be included in planning their transition to support the development of self-determination skills. This presents a desire from this parent for autonomy and relatedness for children in their new context, which Stack et al. (2021) argue

pupils are craving. These studies suggest the self-determination of autistic pupils applies directly to the primary-to-secondary school transition.

Parent Involvement:

Parental involvement in the transition was a common theme across the literature. Parents reported planning was important to promote a smooth transition into the new school environment (Fortuna, 2014; Tso & Strnadová, 2017; Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016). Across the research, parents felt their input should guide transition processes (Yates et al., 2023) due to their knowledge about their children's needs being an asset (Richter, 2019; Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016). Peters & Brooks (2016) reported a range of experiences by parents, with many involved in structured planning such as meetings or organised visits. However, 29% felt they had to initiate planning and request additional support. While this was only a small study of 17 parents, the findings are corroborated by Hamilton and Wilkinson (2016), who found many parents felt they had to be the prime "motivators" for organising and implementing a smooth transition. Many parents placed value on the school catering to their child's individual needs and recognising that although multiple children might be autistic, each child is unique and requires bespoke planning (Peters & Brooks, 2016; Yates et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, some parents from Yates et al.'s (2023) study stated schools did not deliver individualised support as stated in EHCPs, which resulted in difficulties for their children to attend school. In some cases, more generic support was provided despite the existence of a clear transition plan based on individual differences (Webster et al., 2022). This represents a concern from some researchers over the implementation of generic transition programmes. Many of the universal transition strategies and programmes can be helpful to non-autistic pupils and autistic pupils (Stack et al., 2021); however, further individualised approaches might also be necessary to support autistic pupils to meet their individual needs (Stack et al., 2021; Deacy et al., 2015; Tobin et al., 2012; Neal & Frederickson, 2016).

Communication between primary and secondary schools:

The communication between primary and secondary schools was commented on across many studies. Makin et al. (2017) suggested a successful transition is largely related to school and system factors rather than within-child elements, and multiple studies highlighted good communication between the primary school and secondary school

contributed to a successful transition (Richter et al., 2019; Deacy et al., 2015). The exchange of information at planning stages was deemed important to support both academic and organisational continuity for the pupils and to prepare them for changes in routine (Richter et al., 2019; Nuske et al., 2019; Deacy et al., 2015). Both oral and written communication were deemed helpful, including sharing documents such as Individualised Education Plans, where targets set in the primary setting could be carried into the secondary setting (Deacy et al., 2015; Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016). This continuity between the primary and secondary activities was thought by parents in Hamilton & Wilkinson's (2016) study to comfort pupils. However, in their literature review, where all stakeholders were included, Richter et al. (2019) found cooperation between the primary and secondary schools did not always occur. In Tobin's (2012) study, parents felt this breakdown in communication led to an unsuccessful transition as agreed strategies were not put in place.

Conclusions and Gaps in the Literature

So far, this review has presented a breadth of literature exploring the transition for autistic pupils. This includes large international, multi-perspective studies (e.g. Nuske et al., 2019; Richter et al., 2019) and smaller studies (e.g. Hoy et al., 2018; Hebron, 2017) including the perspectives of autistic children (e.g. Stack et al., 2019), their parents (e.g. Yates et al., 2023) and educational professionals (Deacy et al., 2015). This has led to a better understanding of the experiences of autistic pupils during the transition and the support that is deemed helpful. However, the number of adults involved in many studies outweighed the voices of the children, watering down their first-hand experiences. Therefore, further studies seeking to promote children's voices are needed. Furthermore, although the literature has identified a range of factors associated with successful and challenging transitions, less attention has been given to highlighting autistic children's perspectives regarding which aspects of support they found helpful, unhelpful or how support could be improved. Autistic children's voices need to be collected authentically (East, 2024), and their views should have implications for how transition processes are developed and improved that can be applied to practice. This too is an area requiring further exploration. Finally, there was a clear gender bias commented on throughout the review and recognised by some researchers (e.g. Peters & Brooks, 2016; Stack et al., 2021), meaning the experiences of autistic girls are a gap in this body of literature. Therefore, the remaining sections of this literature review are dedicated to unpicking what we know about the experiences of autistic girls and why further research seeking the views of autistic girls is necessary.

The Transition for Autistic Girls

The Gap in the Research:

In almost every paper, there was a much larger proportion of autistic boys being discussed or participating compared to autistic girls. For example, 89.3% of participants in Mandy et al.'s (2016a) longitudinal observational study were male, and in Mandy et al.'s (2016b) study measuring the efficacy and feasibility of the STEP intervention, 81.1% of child participants were male. Similarly, in smaller studies such as Hebron's (2018) study, 25 participants were male and only 5 were female. Furthermore, Yates et al.'s (2023) study included only one female pupil, and all participants in Richter et al.'s (2022) study were male. Stack et al. (2021) noticed all studies included in their systematic review of transition literature regarding pupil voice had a much higher male-to-female ratio. In many of the papers, the disproportionate participation of autistic girls compared to autistic boys was considered appropriate due to the higher prevalence of autistic males (e.g. Richter et al., 2019). However, published diagnosis statistics are not believed to fully represent the autistic population, as girls are thought to be underdiagnosed due to masking (Alley, 2019). These findings led some authors to suggest it would be beneficial to focus on autistic girls' experiences of the transition, as their experiences have been largely overlooked in the literature (Stack et al., 2021; Richter, 2022; Peters & Brooks, 2016).

The findings of the few studies which acknowledged the experience of autistic girls suggested their transition experiences could be different to autistic boys. For example, in Peters and Brooks' (2016) study, only the two parents with daughters described their children experiencing internalised behaviours of depressive symptoms, self-harm and physical manifestations of anxiety (i.e., incontinence and constipation), while many of the boys' parents reported their sons had "meltdowns" which were visible and sometimes "aggressive". Therefore, Peters & Brooks (2016) considered how manifestations of stress and anxiety could present differently in autistic boys and girls. Furthermore, Whelan et al. (2024) found female students across all levels of autistic traits experienced a greater decline in quality of life compared to males during the transition. While these studies alone cannot definitively state a difference between the way autistic boys and girls experience poor wellbeing during transition, they highlight the lack of information known about the experiences of autistic girls.

What we know about the transition for autistic girls:

Only three papers from the initial literature review search specifically explored the experiences of autistic girls. While these papers were included due to specifically mentioning the transition between primary and secondary school, the transition was only a small aspect in each.

Malone et al. (2025) explored mental health difficulties in six adolescent autistic girls in Ireland using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach. The transition from primary to secondary school was deemed particularly challenging due to the changes in structure of the school day, feeling isolated and misunderstood by teachers and peers, and sensory overwhelm. This, alongside their existing mental health difficulties, led to many of the participants being unable to attend school (Malone et al., 2025). Nevertheless, coping strategies and support systems were identified by participants as supportive. This included encouragement from teachers and accommodations put in place following a diagnosis (Malone et al., 2025). Similarly, Cridland et al.'s (2014) paper explored the experiences of autistic girls during adolescence. However, this study utilised semi-structured interviews with autistic girls and their mothers. Once again, many topics were discussed; however, the transition to high school was highlighted by all mothers and generally thought to be a difficult period. The main issue described was finding it difficult to adjust to new routines, including moving between classes, organisation of belongings and having multiple teachers. The participants described mixed experiences of high school. Some stated they enjoyed being exposed to more subjects, having a larger pool of peers (so it was easier to "fit in"), and preferred the more structured environment. However, others found the academic work difficult, struggled to manage the larger school environment and had challenges making friends, having lost previous friendships from primary school. While Malone et al. (2025) and Cridland et al. (2014) sought to understand the experiences of autistic girls during adolescence more generally, Ayirebi and Thomas' (2024) systematic literature review aimed to establish what could be considered effective support for autistic girls in high school. Similar findings were uncovered, including the transition being challenging for autistic girls due to the loss of friendships from primary school, which could be interpreted as part of the 'Endings' stage within Bridges' Transition Model (2009). Furthermore, the change in environment, and increased lessons and teachers at secondary school were challenging (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024). In addition, the travel to secondary school was deemed stressful. While many of the themes in Ayirebi and Thomas' (2024), Cridland et al.'s (2014), and Malone et al.'s (2025) papers have been discussed in this literature review, this was mostly through the lens of autistic boys, and even these papers did not study the transition to high

school in depth. Therefore, there is a need for further, more in-depth investigation, specifically exploring the transition experiences of autistic girls. Furthermore, while all of these papers sought the views of the girls, Ayirebi and Thomas' (2024) and Cridland et al.'s (2014), also included other supportive adults (e.g. parents and professionals), therefore, similar to the criticism of Nuske et al.'s (2019) study, it could be argued the girls' views may have been watered down by dominant adult voices.

To further unpick what has been uncovered by the small body of research about the experiences of autistic girls, papers used to contribute to Ayirebi and Thomas' (2024) systematic literature review were also reviewed. Ayirebi and Thomas (2024) identified four papers suggesting the transition from primary to secondary school was a particularly challenging period for both autistic females and their mothers (Cridland et al., 2014; O'Hagan et al., 2022; Pickup, 2021; Ryan et al., 2021). Again, while the transition period was discussed in all these studies, suggesting its importance, it was not the focus of any study.

Ryan et al. (2021) studied the perceptions of friendships among adolescent autistic girls using focus groups, where a strength was highlighting the importance of pupil voice. Transition was identified as a particularly difficult and intimidating period for the girls due to loss of primary school friendships, which is corroborated by Cridland et al. (2014). While the loss of friendship during the transition was mentioned as a difficulty by other male-dominant participant studies in this review (Makin et al., 2017), Ryan et al. (2021) found girls were more likely to experience 'relational aggression' through being exposed to behaviours such as gossiping, social exclusion and withdrawing friendship, where it was felt the aim was to assert dominance and harm the victim. This could contribute to explaining Whelan et al.'s (2024) findings of female pupils experiencing a greater decline in quality of life than male pupils during the transition; however, they were clear further research with autistic girls is required before any clear conclusions can be drawn.

O'Hagan et al.'s (2022) study focused on Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) in autistic girls. Two out of the three girls described EBSA occurring within the first few weeks of starting secondary school, describing difficulties communicating with teachers and meeting required expectations, which was thought to increase anxiety, a finding similar to Malone et al. (2025). Furthermore, two out of three parents felt the lack of a diagnosis at the time of transition contributed to a poor transition. Delayed or late diagnosis in autistic girls was a theme identified in all the papers, thought to have negative implications such as being unable to access early intervention and support services (Cridland et al., 2014; O'Hagan et al., 2022; Pickup, 2021; Ryan et al., 2021). Research suggests this could be

exacerbated by autistic girls being more likely to mask socially, which can decrease the chance of adults identifying differences and providing the appropriate support (Dean et al., 2017), increasing emotional difficulties (Hull et al., 2020). This suggests that if an autistic girl has no diagnosis at the time of transition, then the necessary support may not be given, exposing a probable lack of knowledge in school staff about how best to support autistic girls (Cridland et al., 2014). Therefore, further research needs to occur to support practitioners to increase their knowledge of how autism can present in female pupils and how to best support them (O'Hagan et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2021).

Pickup's (2021) doctoral thesis studied the views of adolescent autistic girls about what helps them to successfully navigate mainstream schooling. While this study did not focus on transition, the participants were all in Year 7 or 8, so their early secondary school experiences are useful to examine. Like the studies with larger male populations already described in this review (Nuske et al., 2019; Hebron, 2017; Richter et al., 2020), Pickup (2021) found autistic girls were motivated to engage in social interaction and friendships. Also, like the male-dominated studies (Richter et al., 2019; Nuske et al., 2019), the girls found the noisy and busy secondary school environment challenging and had difficulty navigating between lessons when they first started. Nevertheless, unlike the body of research mainly presenting the male experience, Pickup (2021) stated that while the girls largely felt the teachers were supportive and attentive to their needs (e.g. making adjustments), perhaps school staff were not aware of all of the difficulties they experienced at school due to them being unable to be honest when teachers asked if they were okay, perhaps associated with masking. This meant some emotional needs were left unmet. Considering the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), this highlights nuances in the experiences of autistic individuals, meaning a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to understanding and supporting autistic individuals is ineffective, suggesting that being guided to take action based solely on the medicalised model of an autistic presentation is inadequate. While Pickup's (2021) findings help highlight some of the similarities and differences between the experiences of autistic girls and boys around the time of transition, there are limitations in the research being conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. This was an unprecedented time for education and wider society, which likely impacted the experiences of participants in a way that cannot be applied to other contexts. Therefore, further research seeking the views of autistic girls in a post-COVID context is necessary for extending our understanding of their current experiences.

While findings from the studies examined in this section highlight the potential difficulties autistic girls might face during the transition period, none of them specifically

focus on transition or record an in-depth account of this important experience. Therefore, more specific examples were sought. The following studies were identified following a Google Scholar search, specifically seeking literature on the transition for autistic girls. Two studies were identified, from Hebron (2019) and East (2024).

Hebron's mixed-methods (2017) study, containing 10 case studies, including 11 autistic children, their parents and a key teacher, has been discussed in previous sections of this review. However, the Google Scholar search led to the discovery of a further chapter written by Hebron (2019) in a different book where she specifically discussed the findings from the two case studies of female autistic pupils from the previous research. Many of the strategies and challenges experienced by the girls were similar to those of autistic boys; however, the experiences thought to be more specific to girls were highlighted. Common themes Hebron (2019) identified between the case studies included high levels of anxiety experienced by the girls, but both were able to camouflage their needs whilst at school and then required time for release and recovery at home, which is an emerging theme from the research literature for autistic girls (Dean et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2020). Furthermore, awareness of autism in girls was found to be supportive, whilst a lack of awareness was detrimental to the transition, making this lack of understanding of how autism presents in girls an emerging theme within this very small body of literature (O'Hagan et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2021).

While Hebron's (2019) chapter helps begin to understand the experiences of autistic girls, this was not the initial intention of the research. Hebron (2019) stated this information has come from a larger project exploring the transition for autistic children generally (Hebron, 2017). Therefore, this chapter seems a slight afterthought to consider how the experience of autistic girls could be different from that of autistic boys, which was not considered in Hebron's (2017) original research. Furthermore, while Hebron (2019) is clear generalisation cannot occur from two case studies, she attempts to draw themes between the experiences, where one participant attended a mainstream school and the other a specialist provision. Therefore, she has generated an in-depth understanding of the experiences of two girls within very different settings, meaning further research is warranted to investigate the experiences of autistic girls in each of these settings on a wider scale.

Unlike any other study examined in this review, East's (2024) thesis purposefully sought the views of autistic girls about their transition. Participatory research was used to explore what autistic girls consider the barriers to a successful transition from primary to secondary school, but also how creative data collection and analysis methods promote the

voices of autistic girls. The girls discussed transition experiences and created transition resources for schools, showing how the study authentically shared the views of the autistic girls to have real-world implications for teachers' practice. Body Mapping (Solomon, 2007) supported the girls to express their views about different parts of the transition, and then the girls wrote narratives about a certain aspect of their experience. These narratives were discussed and collaboratively edited so they represented the views and experiences of the whole group. A key commonality in the findings was the lack of understanding from teachers, meaning they were unable to receive the desired support, which often led to the girls masking to avoid miscommunication and conflict. Similarly to the findings of papers already discussed, the group argued raising understanding of autism in school staff and peers would be beneficial for the transition period. Furthermore, they identified strategies to ease the transition, including using ear defenders to support sensory needs in loud spaces, using disabled toilets to avoid crowds, and accessing a quiet space using a time-out card. However, there were concerns over wider systemic factors in schools, such as the heavy focus on academic achievement being prioritised over mental health and wellbeing.

East's (2024) thesis is pioneering in this field as the only study specifically investigating the transition experiences of autistic girls, showing autistic girls can and should participate in this area of research. A particular strength is the participatory approach, as the project constructs knowledge about the transition with autistic girls, addressing power imbalances between the researcher and participants. However, the use of group discussions could have limited what participants were willing to share amongst new acquaintances, especially in earlier meetings when the views about transition were collected and analysed. Furthermore, the research could have been vulnerable to 'groupthink' (Horgan, 2017), particularly when the group came together to edit their narratives to ensure they represented the experiences of the whole group. Furthermore, East (2024) chose to focus on barriers to a successful transition, meaning there is space for recognising positive experiences and supportive aspects of transition support to gain a more balanced understanding of the experience. Therefore, further research in this area should aim to highlight the individual voices of participants, including the nuance (e.g. positive and negative aspects) in their experiences, as each autistic pupil's transition experience differs due to their individual strengths, needs, personal circumstances, and the support that is offered.

Final Conclusions

The literature outlined in this review has highlighted that whilst the transition for autistic children is a highly researched area, there continues to be a large gap in exploring

the experiences of autistic girls and limited research focusing on seeking the child's voice. This review explored the limited legislation and policy pertaining to the transition, theories utilised by researchers to understand the transition and the empirical findings of research about the transition for autistic pupils. Empirical evidence, mainly involving autistic boys and their parents, found the transition is a time of intensive change. Key themes included concerns from all stakeholders about the children feeling anxious about the change in environment and participating in new routines (Nuske et al., 2019; Stack et al., 2021; Neal & Frederickson, 2016). Furthermore, there were reports of bullying and perhaps mutual difficulties with interaction leading to loneliness and social isolation (Makin et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2020; Hebron, 2017). There was also evidence of pupils masking their difficulties to 'fit in' socially, potentially further intensifying internalised stress and anxiety (Richter et al., 2022). This is particularly important when considering the experience of autistic girls (Alley, 2019); however, due to the lack of autistic girls involved in the current body of research, further exploration in this area is required. Some pupils had positive experiences, where changes were considered a 'fresh start' where they could enjoy the variety of new lessons, teachers, and access a larger peer group to make friends (Neal & Frederickson, 2016). While there was an abundance of studies investigating difficulties associated with the transition, those focusing on positive experiences were rare. This suggests there is a gap in the research for a more balanced approach to understanding the experiences of children, allowing discussion of difficulties but also highlighting strengths and positive experiences. The focus then turned to strategies and interventions discussed in the research to remove barriers to inclusion (Shakespeare, 2006) whilst considering each autistic child as an individual with person-specific strengths, needs and experiences (Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016; Fortuna, 2014; Deacy et al., 2015). Then, planning the transition was discussed, highlighting a lack of pupil involvement across the literature. This section particularly highlighted the need for studies seeking pupils' views about the utility of support offered during the transition. The final section of the review delved deeper into the little information available about the experiences of autistic girls, uncovering only two papers specifically exploring the transition for autistic girls (Hebron, 2019; East, 2024). While the views of autistic girls had been sought in both studies, there is a need to further explore the nuanced experiences of autistic girls as individuals, seeking to better understand the transition in a more balanced way, considering both barriers and facilitators of the transition.

Overall, this review has highlighted important gaps within the literature which require further research. Firstly, autistic girls are substantially underrepresented within transition research. Secondly, much of the existing research privileges the perspectives of parents and professionals over the voices of autistic children (especially girls). This means we know very

little about how autistic girls make sense of their transition experiences, including both the challenges and opportunities the transition brings. Furthermore, similarly to the literature regarding autistic boys, there remains a limited understanding of how autistic girls themselves feel about the support they received and how they believe the transition process could be improved. Consequently, there is a need for research that centres on the voices of autistic girls and explores their experiences in greater depth individually and collectively. Addressing these gaps may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the transition and lead to insights that inform educational practice.

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

Abstract

The transition from primary to secondary school is a key event in a child's education, where they experience academic, emotional, social, and structural changes (Coffey, 2013; Waters et al., 2014). This transition has been explored at length for autistic boys; however, autistic girls are enormously underrepresented in the research literature (e.g. Stack et al., 2021; Peters & Brooks, 2016). The current study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology (Smith et al., 2022) to explore the experiences of autistic girls in mainstream schools when they transitioned from primary school to high school. Individual semi-structured interviews using child-friendly resources were used to gain an in-depth account of the experiences of five autistic girls with lived experience of the transition. Transcripts were analysed using Smith et al.'s (2022) interpretative phenomenological analysis, and most of the participants took part in member checking of the researcher's initial interpretation of their transcripts. Individual summaries for each participant were created and presented, followed by cross-case analysis. Six Group Experiential Themes emerged from the data: attempting to feel prepared with mixed success; adapting to the new high school context; navigating peer interaction and relationships; the need for support and understanding from adults; the transition of self, and how to better support autistic girls. These findings are considered alongside the existing literature and theory. Furthermore, the study's strengths, contribution to the literature, limitations, and implications for EP practice are examined.

Introduction and Rationale

This chapter presents the empirical study undertaken by the researcher exploring the experiences of autistic girls during the transition from primary school to secondary school (referred to in this chapter as 'the transition'). First, an introduction presents the topic of interest situated in the literature, followed by the rationale for the current study. In line with the Literature Review chapter, autism is conceptualised using the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) and considers challenges faced during the transition in line with the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006). Then, the current study undertaken by the researcher is presented, and the findings are discussed with reference to relevant literature and theory.

The transition to high school for autistic pupils:

The transition from primary to secondary school is a significant educational milestone (Coffey, 2013; Waters et al., 2014). While transitions can be challenging for many pupils (Hebron, 2018), they can be heightened for autistic pupils (Tobin et al., 2012), who may experience additional or different difficulties associated with these changes (e.g. Hebron, 2018; Tobin et al., 2012). Research has explored these experiences from the perspectives of autistic children, their parents and professionals. A summary of key findings will now be outlined, leading towards a rationale for the current study.

The transition brings a change of context, altering previously embedded routines (e.g. travel, lesson structure, school rules), impacting the emotional wellbeing of autistic children (e.g. Tso & Strnadova, 2017; Neal & Frederickson, 2016). The transition also creates challenges with social interaction. Bullying is a common experience in the literature, leading to loneliness and social isolation (e.g. Makin et al., 2017; Hebron, 2017). Therefore, it is unsurprising that some autistic pupils might feel the need to mask their typically autistic presentations to 'fit in' (Richter et al., 2022). This shows how the transition can bring difficulties for autistic pupils across emotional, academic and social domains.

Despite many studies focusing on transition difficulties, more positive experiences have been documented. Autistic pupils have reportedly enjoyed increased academic resources, a wider variety of lessons and teachers, and greater structure in learning and discipline upon entering secondary school (e.g. Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Richter et al., 2020). Furthermore, some autistic pupils described having positive social experiences where they made new friends (Neal & Frederickson, 2016). For some, the transition was considered an opportunity for a 'new start' away from the prejudice of previous pupils (Richter et al., 2019), where they could meet a larger pool of pupils and find like-minded peers (Cridland et al., 2014). Therefore, while some researchers expected autistic pupils in their study to experience greater difficulties during the transition (e.g. Whelan, 2024), the research shows autistic pupils can have positive experiences.

Strategies utilised throughout the transition are also well documented. Common approaches include transition day visits, which allowed pupils to become more familiar with the school building, routines, and staff (e.g., Stack et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2019). Building trusting relationships with school staff is also deemed crucial for supporting emotional regulation and wellbeing (e.g. Richter et al., 2022; Deacy, 2015). Furthermore, school staff's understanding of autism (Makin et al., 2017) and attending to pupils' individual difficulties is important to parents and children (Hebron, 2017; Hoy et al., 2018). However, many studies

reported autistic children often have strained relationships with staff due to a lack of understanding of autism and individual difficulties (Richter et al., 2019; Hebron, 2017). Therefore, the differences in experiences and the type of support desired/received highlight the nuance in the experiences of autistic children (e.g. Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016).

Gaps in the literature:

While some studies included pupil views, many relied on the views of other stakeholders. The views of children can be different to their parents and teachers (Dann, 2011); therefore, while gaining the views of different stakeholders (i.e. parents, teachers) can contribute to a more holistic picture (e.g. Nuske et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2022), it can also result in overshadowing the views of the children. Therefore, there is a further need for studies highlighting and promoting autistic children's views of the transition experience and consideration of what they feel needs to change to improve current processes. Furthermore, most of the studies largely focused on the negative aspects of the transition and the lack of appropriate support given to children, with only Neal and Frederickson (2016) specifically seeking the views of pupils with a strengths-based focus on their transition experiences. Therefore, further studies should identify and promote practices deemed helpful by autistic children. Nevertheless, the most prominent gap in the research was the missing views and experiences of autistic girls, which will now be further explored.

The experiences of autistic girls are largely underrepresented in the transition literature. Almost all studies have a much larger population of autistic males as participants (or their parents/teachers) compared to females (e.g. Hebron, 2018; Yates et al., 2023; Richter et al., 2022), creating a gap in the research. While some have argued the disparity in the research is due to the reported higher prevalence of diagnosed autistic males (Loomes et al., 2017), others claim published diagnosis statistics do not fully represent the autistic population, as girls are likely underdiagnosed due to masking (Alley, 2019).

Why investigate the transition experiences of Autistic Girls?

A few studies identified potential differences between the transition experiences of autistic boys and girls, including girls being more likely to internalise anxiety, depressive symptoms and experience self-harm (Peters & Brooks, 2016), and experience a greater decline in quality of life during the transition (Whelan et al., 2024). Such preliminary findings led some authors to suggest it would be beneficial to focus on autistic girls' experiences of the transition, as their experiences have been largely overlooked in the literature (e.g. Stack et al., 2021; Peters & Brooks, 2016).

Although a small number of studies from the literature review in Chapter 1 have explored autistic girls' experiences (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Malone et al., 2025; Cridland et al., 2014), none of these studies specifically examined the transition, so discussion of transition experiences formed only a minor element of each. Findings from these studies suggest autistic girls may experience challenges relating to changes, including leaving friends from primary school, new routines, and multiple teachers misunderstanding their needs. However, more in-depth accounts of transition experiences are required to gain a better understanding of autistic girls' experiences.

Only two studies specifically seeking to understand the transition experiences of autistic girls were identified: a chapter within a book stating two case studies (Hebron, 2019) and a thesis detailing participatory research (East, 2024). Key findings from these papers include the negative impact of masking whilst at school to avoid conflict, and the detrimental impact of a lack of teacher understanding about how autism presents in girls (Hebron, 2019; East, 2014). Furthermore, East (2024) found participants were concerned about the heavy focus on academic achievement, but access to quiet spaces and using ear defenders was supportive. While these studies provide valuable insights, opportunities for further research remain. Hebron's (2019) case study approach generated rich accounts for two autistic girls; however, the girls were from different types of educational settings (i.e. mainstream and specialist) and took a multi-perspective approach, including the girls, their parents and teachers. This means further research is warranted to investigate autistic girls' experiences within each type of provision, and to highlight the voices of autistic girls. East's (2024) participatory approach promoted the views of autistic girls; however, the analysis focused mainly on negative collective experiences through co-edited narratives of events within the transition (e.g. a day/lesson), rather than an in-depth analysis of individual participants' entire transition experiences. Considering many authors recognise the person-specific strengths, needs and experiences of autistic children (e.g. Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016; Fortuna, 2014), there is a need for further research to develop a richer understanding of how autistic girls individually experience and make sense of the transition before considering themes across individuals, as well as how the girls themselves feel the transition process could be improved based on their experiences to promote a person-centred approach to making changes.

In summary, the literature highlights a clear need for further research focused on autistic girls' experiences of the transition. Autistic girls remain underrepresented within the research, and their perspectives have rarely been the primary focus of investigation. As a result, there is limited understanding of how autistic girls experience and make sense of the

transition process as individuals and as a collective group, including factors they perceive as supportive or challenging. Furthermore, further research must focus on how the girls themselves perceive the support they receive and what they believe could improve the transition process to ensure their voice has been heard authentically and contributes to meaningful change. Addressing these gaps is important for developing a more nuanced understanding of the transition and informing educational practice.

Aims of the Current Research

The present study sought to explore, highlight and better understand the experiences of the primary-to-secondary school transition for autistic girls within mainstream education. The aim is to fill a gap in the current body of research by seeking to understand their lived experiences as individuals, as well as similarities and differences within the group. Furthermore, this research aims to gain a well-rounded account of the transition experience, including both positive and negative aspects of the experience (i.e., facilitators and barriers to their transition) and how autistic girls believe the process could be improved.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the experiences of autistic girls who transitioned from mainstream primary to secondary schools?

RQ2: How do autistic girls believe the transition from mainstream primary to secondary school could be improved based on their transition experiences?

Research Design/Methods

Ontology and Epistemology:

Epistemology and ontology are “philosophical meta-theories” (pg. 274) underpinning research decisions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, whereas epistemology considers what can be known or how knowledge can be generated (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The current study adopted an ontologically relativist and epistemologically interpretive phenomenological stance. Ontological relativism suggests there are multiple versions of reality, all of equal value (Williams et al., 2016). Since there is no fundamental truth, meaning is context-dependent (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This aligns with a phenomenological approach, concerned with the experiential world rather than a single

'reality' (Willig, 2013). For example, even if all participants appear to have encountered the same event (e.g. transition), this can be experienced in different ways. Furthermore, the researcher is interested in the participant's interpretation of the experience. Interpretivism suggests knowledge is socially constructed and understood (Burr, 2015), and an interpretative phenomenological approach attempts to understand the experiences described by participants within the wider social, cultural and theoretical context (Larkin et al., 2008). This interpretation cannot be a pure description of the experience as the researcher contributes critical commentary on the participant's meaning-making of their experience, therefore co-producing knowledge within a social context (Willig, 2013). This aligns with the research aims to investigate the lived experiences of individuals.

Methodology

Aligning with the ontological and epistemological stance and the research aims of the study, the research will follow an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is a qualitative approach attempting to examine people's experiences and how they make sense of them (Smith et al., 2022). IPA's key theoretical underpinnings, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Oxley, 2016), mean researchers examine how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. People are considered self-interpreting, so are actively engaged in interpreting events within their lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Phenomenology:

Phenomenology is concerned with understanding the lived experience of human beings and how these experiences are perceived and interpreted (Smith et al., 2022). Husserl (1929) posited researchers should carefully examine the human experience so they can identify the essential qualities/components of the phenomena or experience. Therefore, IPA researchers focus on how participants perceive and talk about their experiences rather than exploring phenomena through existing criteria (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), contrasting with a postpositive epistemology attempting to uncover an objective reality (Panhwar et al., 2017). To support this process, Husserl developed the method of 'bracketing' where the researcher goes through a series of 'reductions' to put aside their preconceptions of a phenomenon or events, so the essence of the phenomenon from participants' lived experience is uncovered (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, IPA researchers attempt to understand participants' relationship with the world through interpretation, while also acknowledging the impact of their role, experiences and conceptions when engaging in interpretation (Heidegger, 1927/2008). In the current research, the event the researcher

would like to better understand through the interpretation of participants' lived experiences is the transition from primary to secondary school.

Hermeneutics:

Hermeneutics refers to interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). This theoretical underpinning means researchers go through an intensive and detailed examination of participants' accounts to interpret their meaning. They attempt to make sense of another person's internal world, which cannot be directly accessed. For Schleiermacher (1998), the researcher offers a separate perspective on the experience being described than the participant themselves. So, the researcher interprets the participant's interpretation of their experience, therefore adding something new. This is described by Smith and Osborn (2003) as the 'double hermeneutic ', as the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's experience, and the participant also tries to make sense of their experience. A further idea is the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2022). This refers to the levels of interpretation, including how, while the researcher may attempt to uncover meaning from individual words or sentences within an interview, they also need to be considered within the context of a particular extract or even the entire interview. This becomes part of the IPA process, showing how analysis is iterative and there are many ways to think about the data at the different levels of interpretation.

Idiography:

Idiography is the interest in the particular (Smith et al., 2022). This is explored through analysis at the individual participant level and the way IPA studies usually try to make sense of a particular phenomenon/event (e.g. the transition to high school), by particular participants (e.g. autistic girls) in a particular context. This contrasts with studies attempting to make generalisable claims based on their findings, and allows IPA researchers to analyse small samples in great depth. Participants are recognised as experts in their experiences, balancing the power between the researcher and the participant. This position has resulted in IPA being increasingly used in research with autistic people due to consideration of a double hermeneutic (Howard et al., 2019); the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's account of their experience as the participant is making sense of their experience (Smith et al., 2022). This contributes to alleviating the Double Empathy Gap (Milton, 2012) as reflexive engagement is required from the researcher at all phases of the study (Howard et al., 2019). Furthermore, with idiography being concerned with personal experiences, there is an acknowledgement of each participant as an individual within the study as well as the extraction of group themes (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, the

IPA approach was chosen as it aligned with the particular interest in the nuanced transition experiences of autistic girls within mainstream settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the University of East Anglia's (UEA) School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee (Appendix A and B). The research also met all relevant regulations, including those from the British Educational Research Association (2024) and the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2021). Furthermore, the researcher was required to submit their research proposal to the Research Governance Committee within their placement Local Authority (LA), and approval was received (See Appendix C). Achieving this included offering an initial meeting with the participant and their parent to explain the process to support the participant in giving their assent and their parent in giving informed consent. Furthermore, the participant could elect to have their parent present for the interview (but none did). While discussing highly sensitive topics was not planned, on two occasions participants spoke about concerning topics (e.g. self-harm). The appropriate safeguarding procedures were followed, including informing a Designated Safeguarding Lead at the participants' schools, the researcher's Research Supervisor and the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee, who agreed the researcher had acted appropriately. Furthermore, the researcher provided participants and their parents with a debrief sheet including links to local services and charities if they wished to seek further support (Appendix D).

The research was conducted within the LA where the researcher works as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). Therefore, the researcher was clear that in this context their role was a researcher, and the research was being conducted independently from the LA (i.e. participation was voluntary and no raw data were shared with the LA). Furthermore, the researcher did not use information accessible to them in their TEP role without the appropriate ethical approval.

Once collected, data were stored in accordance with UEA regulations, as approved by the UEA School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee. This included storing all data collected (e.g., audio recordings) on a OneDrive folder, only accessible to the researcher and their research supervisor (as explained in the participant and parent consent forms). Furthermore, confidentiality was maintained by transcripts being fully anonymised.

Participants

Recruitment Approaches:

Participants were recruited from one LA in the East of England through three avenues. Recruitment emails, including a recruitment flyer (Appendix E), were sent to secondary school Head Teachers (Appendix F), local youth/SEND/autism group leaders (Appendix G), and Educational Psychologists (Appendix H) and Specialist Teachers (Appendix I) from the LA where the research took place. These professionals were asked to share the recruitment flyer with parents and children they worked with. In all instances, the parent of the prospective participant contacted the researcher via email to organise an initial meeting to further discuss the research alongside their child. At this point, the researcher sent the parent and participant information sheets (Appendix J and K) via email to the parent. Participants were accepted to take part in the study on a first-come, first-served basis as long as they met the participant criteria.

Participant Sample:

The researcher's goal was to recruit a "fairly homogeneous sample, for whom the research question will be meaningful" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 44). Therefore, purposive homogeneous sampling (Smith et al., 2022) was utilised. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

The participants recruited were autistic girls in Years 8-10 (typically aged 12-15). This age range was chosen so participants had completed their first year of secondary school and could reflect on their entire transition experience (considered in this study as between the start of Year 6 and the end of Year 7) but were not so far removed from the transition that they would be unable to recall important details. They had to have been given an autism diagnosis by a professional qualified to diagnose autism and identify as female. The decision to require participants to have a formally recognised autism diagnosis was to support the homogeneity of the participant group. Research suggests that those who have a diagnosis often have differing experiences from those without a diagnosis or self-identify as autistic. For example, an autism diagnosis can result in greater self-understanding and acceptance, a sense of belonging within the autistic community, and access to services and support due to greater understanding by others; or alternatively, there is the possibility of greater stigmatisation (by themselves and others) and pathology (Fletcher-Watson, 2024).

Therefore, the inclusion criteria, including a formal autism diagnosis was required to recognise and mitigate these potential differences.

Furthermore, participants had to have attended a mainstream primary school and currently be attending a mainstream secondary school. Furthermore, the participants needed to express themselves to a level where they could describe their experiences in detail (either verbally or through writing/typing). See Table 1 for the participant sample:

Table 1

Participant Sample

Name (pseudonym)	Year group at the time of interview	School phase when autism diagnosis was received
Alice	Year 8	Primary school – Key Stage 2
Beth	Year 9	Primary school – Key Stage 2
Caitlyn	Year 9	Secondary school – Key Stage 3
Daisy	Year 9	Secondary school – Key Stage 3
Ellie	Year 8	Primary school – Key Stage 2

Interviews took place between June 2025 and January 2026 (over two academic school years).

While a total of five participants may appear to be a small sample, “the primary concern of IPA is with a detailed account of individual experience” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 46). Therefore, the smaller the participant sample, the greater depth of analysis the researcher can afford to explore for each individual case before cross-case analysis, which allows greater exploration appropriate to meaning-making within the complexity of the human experience.

Procedure

Initial Meeting:

Before data collection, an initial meeting took place with each participant and a parent. The purpose was for the researcher to introduce themselves to the participant to

start to build rapport. The researcher explained what would happen during the interview, showed the participant the interview questions and resources, and answered questions. Any necessary adjustments to remove barriers to inclusion (Shakespeare, 2006) were also discussed at this stage (e.g., interview questions and resources printed on coloured paper). Participants were asked where they would like the interview to take place (i.e. at school in person or at home online, with or without their parent present). After the initial meeting, the researcher sent the parent the parent consent form (Appendix L) and the participant consent form (Appendix M). Consent forms were signed and returned to the researcher via email.

Data Collection:

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect rich data (Smith et al., 2022). All participants chose to hold their interview in person at their school. Semi-structured interviews have been used throughout research with autistic participants as their flexibility allows participants to focus on topics meaningful to them (Cridland et al., 2014). Participants were asked about their experiences of the transition, then how they were currently experiencing school to support reflection on the transition (Appendix N). Considering the potential for communication differences between the participants and the researcher, child-friendly visual resources were used to support the participants in sharing their experiences (Appendix O). This included offering the use of the Grid Elaboration Method (Joffe & Elsey, 2014) so participants had the opportunity to write or draw images that came to mind when they were asked about leaving primary school, starting high school, and what school is like now. Participants were then asked to explain what they had written/drawn and were asked follow-up questions. This tool was selected to facilitate dialogue from a concrete and structured task (Joffee & Elsey, 2014), but what was written/drawn was not collected as data, only the conversations that followed. Furthermore, participants could choose to verbalise or write/type their responses.

To strengthen the data-gathering resources, the researcher sought advice from Specialist Teachers within the LA with experience working with autistic children and young people to “sense check” the interview schedule, discuss the wording of questions and appropriateness of the visual resources. Furthermore, the final questions were sent to participants in advance of the interview so they could prepare.

Data Analysis:

The researcher used IPA to analyse the data as stated in Smith et al.’s (2022) book (see Table 2). IPA was chosen due to its theoretical underpinnings stated in the design

section. This approach was appropriate for the research questions, as the focus of rich analysis is on the participants' interpretation of their experience. Furthermore, IPA supports the project's aims due to its commitment to idiography, shown by detailed case-by-case analysis occurring before cross-case analysis for shared and unique elements of experiences (Smith et al., 2022; Smith, 2017). Therefore, before data analysis, interviews were transcribed verbatim, including where there were pauses and non-verbal communication (e.g., laughter), supporting interpretation.

Considering the Double Empathy Gap (Milton, 2012), so differences in communication style potentially leading to bidirectional misunderstandings by the researcher and participants, and the impact of double hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2022), the researcher wrote a summary of each participant's interview, based on analysis of their transcript, and offered to share this with the participant through the process of member checking so they could provide feedback about whether the analysis reflected their experience (Tong et al., 2007). This aimed to promote a shared understanding between the researcher and participant, making the analysis more authentic to the participant's voice (Yardley, 2015). This method has been used successfully in research with similar participant groups (e.g. Da Mata Da Silva Costa, 2023). Four out of the five participants took part in member checking. Then cross-case analysis occurred.

Table 2

Adapted IPA Process (Smith et al., 2022)

IPA Steps	Description
Step 1*:* Starting with the first case: reading and re-reading	The researcher immerses themselves in the original data and examines it closely, attempting to enter the participant's world.
Step 2: Exploratory noting	The researcher examines content and language through an exploratory lens. The researcher becomes more familiar with the data and begins to identify ways the participant understands the phenomenon (i.e., transition experience) (Appendix P).
Step 3: Constructing experiential statements	The researcher uses data from the transcript and the exploratory notes to make sense of the participant's experiences. They represent the participant's original

	transcript and the researcher's interpretation (double hermeneutic) (Appendix Q).
Step 4: Searching for connections across experiential statements	Charting/mapping how the statements fit together in clusters (Appendix R).
Step 5: Naming the personal experiential themes (PETs) and consolidating and organising them in a table	Each cluster is given a title to describe its characteristics. These become PETs. PETs are divided into sub-themes and extracts from the transcript are used to show what prompted the theme (Appendix R)
*Member Checking: The researcher shared a summary of the interview based on the analysis leading to their PETs. Participants were asked to comment on whether the summary reflected their experience and amendments they wished to make (Appendix S).	
Step 6: Continuing the individual analysis of other cases	Steps 1-5 were repeated for each participant's transcript. Considering the principle of idiography, it was important to treat each transcript individually to do justice to its individuality. New analytic entities emerged in each case.
Step 7: Working with PETs to develop group experiential themes (GETs) across cases	The researcher looked for similarities and differences across the PETs from each case, creating a set of GETs. The aim was not to present a 'group norm', but to highlight shared and differing experiences between participants. (Appendix T).

Validity:

Validity is the degree to which a study can be considered meaningful and credible, and it considers whether the methodological approach is appropriate (Smith et al., 2022). Yardley (2015) suggested four principles for assessing the validity of qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

To be sensitive to context, a thorough literature review was conducted (see Literature Review Chapter) to better understand the existing body of research on the transition for autistic pupils. Furthermore, when designing the study, care was taken to meet the preferences and requirements of the participants (e.g. an initial meeting to establish adjustments, offering the interview to take place at home or school). Appropriate ethical

approval was also sought. Commitment and rigour were shown in the use of purposive sampling to ensure a homogeneous sample was collected that would add knowledge to the existing body of research, specifically to highlight the voice of autistic girls. The researcher also took part in monthly research supervision, discussing the approach to the research and findings, therefore enabling a reflective approach. Commitment was also shown through making the process person-centred, such as the initial meeting aimed at putting the participants at ease, and the researcher sharing their initial analysis of each transcript with the participant so they could take part in member checking (Tong et al., 2007) and stay true to the participants' voices. Coherence and transparency were adhered to as research questions were identified based on the findings of the literature review. Since the experience of autistic girls is lacking in the current body of research, an in-depth IPA study is appropriate to add to the literature. Transparency is shown through the clear paper trail of the IPA process (Appendix P, Q, R and S) and the researcher's reflective accounts (Appendix U). Furthermore, direct quotations were used in the analysis. Impact and importance are highlighted and adhered to due to the area of research being significant in adding to the body of transition research regarding autistic girls. Furthermore, supporting the transition to high school is an important area of practice in which Educational Psychologists can support children, families and school staff, which will be discussed in the Implications section.

Analysis

Individual Participant Summaries

First, a summary of each participant's transcript will be presented to highlight each individual's experience. They are based on the PETs identified for each participant and any amendments made following member checking. Note that the participants often used the term "high school" rather than "secondary school", so this has often been stated in the analysis; however, it refers to the same setting.

Alice

PET 1: Feeling Prepared – A Multipronged Approach

It was important for Alice to feel prepared for the transition. She engaged in many approaches, including multiple transition lessons and school visits, which contributed to a

sense of familiarity and comfort with high school buildings and her teachers, as she was able to “get used to being there”. However, some of the transition lessons were unrealistic of “how it actually is” in high school, leaving Alice feeling frustrated and unprepared. On transition days, they taught “complicated” methods/techniques irrelevant to the Year 6 and 7 curricula in “random” parts of the school, leaving Alice questioning her ability to navigate the school and achieve well academically, which increased her apprehension about starting high school. Alice also made practical preparations with her family, including buying and practising wearing the school uniform during the summer holidays to get “used to the feeling of it”, buying school supplies, and packing her bag. It was important for Alice to feel prepared, as she feels anxious when unprepared, implying that perhaps her preparations brought a sense of agency. Alice also talked to her sister about what would happen in high school, including how to wear her uniform. Knowing her sister would be there for her at high school made Alice feel more comfortable and able to enjoy her summer holiday without worrying.

PET 2: Concerned Preconceptions vs Manageable Reality

Alice had preconceived worries about what high school would be like, but found the reality manageable. Alice was concerned about being academically successful, as this impacted her sense of self. For example, she worried about being put in a low set and feeling “stupid”. But once she reached high school, she did well academically, which she described as “cool”, continuing to place a high value on her academic success. Alice thought she would get lots of homework but found Year 7 homework “not hard at all”, and suggested the assessments were manageable because she was “used to everything” the teacher taught.

PET 3: Getting “used to” the High School Context

Alice found the high school context challenging at first. She had to adapt to new routines (e.g. morning routine) and get used to organising her homework and schoolbooks independently, showing a change in expectations of independence when she entered high school. She experienced difficulty with this, leading to feeling disorganised, seemingly indicating a sense of overwhelm. Alice also experienced sensory overwhelm when enduring the noise and busyness of high school, and she worried about being “trampled” on by crowds. This made her feel like she wanted to escape, suggesting the school environment made her feel under threat. Therefore, she ate her lunch in a quieter place with her friends, away from the busy canteen.

PET 4: Personal Evolution

For Alice, the transition was a milestone in “growing up.” Alice acknowledged she was ready to be more like the older children but had contrasting feelings about missing primary school and being excited to attend high school. She acknowledged her teachers knew her well at primary school, perhaps making this a familiar and safe space. While Alice got lost initially, she quickly “memorised” her lessons and described how once she got into the routine of going to the same lessons every week, she “just g[o]t used to it”. This shows that some difficulties were temporary once familiarity was achieved. Alice overcame challenges with the school atmosphere and is “all fine with it”, having developed strategies to regulate without direct support. This includes asking to go to the toilet to leave the classroom discreetly, using fidget toys, and stepping out into quiet parts of the school when necessary. Alice feels she has “evolved” since starting high school, suggesting she recognised her personal growth in the skills necessary for high school. She has learnt how to complete her homework and “not procrastinate it so much” by attending homework club. While self-organisation can still be difficult, Alice feels like she is “better”, presenting an acknowledgement that her improvement in personal organisation skills has made managing high school easier than when she first transitioned.

PET 5: Forming Friendships through Familiarity

All of Alice’s primary classmates transitioned to the same high school, so she was already familiar with several peers. Alice’s friendships from primary school continued into high school and formed the foundation for new friendships as they introduced her to many of the “really good friends” she has now. Being introduced to people by a familiar peer made the uncomfortable experience of meeting new people a lot easier, as Alice did not like talking to new people on her own. This is perhaps why, at first, she disliked the lack of control over where she sat in class due to seating plans. It was easier for Alice to make friends with peers she spent time with consistently (e.g. people in her classes), as this supported feeling more comfortable and building meaningful relationships, even if they can be quite overwhelming and intense for Alice and the other child. Alice was clear, “you’re not going to be on your own”, as “there will be at least one person who likes you”, presenting her positive experience of forming friendships during the transition and the importance she placed on peer connection. Now that she has met “pretty much all of [her peers]” and she has made good friends, Alice noticed her increase in confidence, saying “I’m better”, in reference to peer interaction, again acknowledging how she has changed following the initial transition.

PET 6: Teachers were Supportive and Understanding

While being autistic means some of Alice's differences may need to be "considered" and understood by her teachers, she felt she could be treated the same as everyone else in many situations. Alice does not tell many people about her autism diagnosis, as this can lead to frustration of being treated "soft", as if peers associate autism with being more fragile. Alice noticed support staff came to lessons where there were multiple neurodivergent children, which was comforting as it was "nice to know they were there" so she could ask questions or talk to them if she was feeling anxious or stressed. This was discreet and preferable, rather than gaining the attention of the teacher and the whole class. Alice found teachers were supportive and "understanding", meaning they were kind when Year 7s needed help and allowed her to be herself. However, Alice's mother also needed to advocate for Alice by asking for help on her behalf, but the school listened. Alice found 1:1 weekly wellbeing sessions provided a private and appropriate space to "unload" her true positive and negative feelings, which supported her regulation. However, she found sporadic group support unhelpful and uncomfortable, suggesting tailored support was preferable and useful. She was instructed to attend a neurodivergent 'Girls' Group'. Alice felt obligated to attend and was called rude when she did not want to participate.

Alice felt teachers needed to "notice" girls becoming overstimulated or nervous and make adjustments rather than waiting to be asked for support, suggesting a lack of acknowledgement by school staff was a barrier to support. Alice also felt autistic girls should receive information about puberty, and discreet ways to inform the teacher they may need to use the bathroom should be established, so they don't have to draw attention to themselves. Finally, Alice acknowledged autistic girls can "get attached really easily" to friends and need support with understanding how friendships evolve and change from primary to high school.

Beth

PET 1: Preparation – helpful support vs exacerbated concerns

Beth partook in a range of transition activities to gain a realistic understanding of what high school would be like. Multiple transition days immersed Beth in the high school context, supporting her to become more familiar with the environment, teachers, and routines. But Beth felt that only one extra day was not enough to get to know the school context. Beth wanted a realistic high school experience, but transition days involved "fun" activities rather than realistic learning. Teachers also behaved differently (were "less fun")

once she started high school, meaning Beth was not fully prepared for the realistic day-to-day experience. Beth also sought advice from trusted people (e.g. parents, brother and teachers) who had experience of high school, to gain a realistic account of "how it was going to work". She also checked the school website to ensure she had the right resources and uniform, and wrote a list. Buying and "tick[ing]… off" items on the list made Beth feel more comfortable, perhaps giving a greater sense of agency during the changes of the transition. Also, practising wearing the uniform made Beth feel prepared, so she could "get used to it." But it was overwhelming when primary school staff and Beth's parents "kept pressing" about how everything was going to be different in high school (students, rules, uniform, lessons) to the point that Beth felt it contributed to meltdowns as she "didn't know how to deal with it", suggesting these actions added unhelpful pressure. Her brother warned her about being "picked on", reinforcing the negative aspects of the transition when she wanted reassurance that she would be liked and accepted. Beth felt the need to "bottle it up" and hid her worries as her primary school peers only spoke about their excitement. This made her "get in [her] head" and feel overwhelmed, suggesting she felt isolated in her feelings of apprehension.

PET 2: Temporary and Permanent Challenges

Beth's primary school routine was familiar and predictable, which was comforting. When Beth started high school, her daily routines became much more complex, and it was too much to comprehend too quickly, as expressed by her listing new challenges including: a new school layout, different teachers and doing different lessons on a two-week rotation. It was "weird" getting used to having to remember the different resources/equipment she needed on different days, implying Beth found the new expectations unusual and difficult at first. Beth found going from a small class of peers she knew well to an environment with "tonnes of people" stressful, making it difficult to get to lessons. While Beth was excited for greater freedom at high school, she found the complex, busy environment overwhelming and older peers sometimes sent her in the wrong direction, so she got lost. It took Beth 2-3 weeks to learn how to navigate the school and memorise her routine, suggesting navigation difficulties were temporary. She found it motivating when she got used to something, as she could "check off [her] list in [her] mind". This shows Beth broke down the steps to becoming more familiar with her environment, making this more manageable, and self-monitored her progress.

PET 3: Teacher understanding was the make-or-break of support

Beth found consistent adults who knew and understood her preferences helpful. Beth preferred teachers' behaviour to be predictable, acting "the same" during transition days and when she started high school. She noticed some teachers would listen, understand what she needed and help. This was partly achieved by having a document all about her shared with every member of staff (i.e. "Student Passport"), which meant there were "rules" teachers would follow so support was consistent across lessons (e.g. sitting next to someone familiar). The use of the word "rules" suggests this support was non-negotiable and so expected. After many months of Year 7, Beth was eventually given school-based strategies which helped her to feel more comfortable and made the school environment manageable. This included leave early, time out, and uniform passes, and interventions that increased her confidence with peers. The range of interventions suggests many environmental adaptations were necessary to make high school accessible for Beth so she could feel comfortable and ready to learn. Finally, she had 1:1 check-ins where she could "debrief" about anything she found difficult. This helped Beth process and unravel anything that had happened at school with a teacher who listened. This was essential as Beth worried about asking for adjustments due to fears that teachers would say no. She could not "figure out" how to put what she needed into words at the time, which meant Beth felt "trapped" in certain classroom situations, suggesting it was challenging to verbalise her needs in such situations, so she did not receive the support required. Beth said school staff did not think she was "SEN enough" or autistic enough" to get support, when really, she was masking at school, so some of the teachers did not understand that she was struggling. She had meltdowns at home throughout the transition, and it took "a lot of fighting" from her parents for the support to be put in place, implying Beth noticed tension between what she and her parents expected and the support the school were able or willing to give. Therefore, Beth reflected that it is important for teachers to quickly understand pupil needs and provide support. She realised that being on the SEN register meant she got support, so she would have liked this to happen earlier.

PET 4: Fitting in to Survive - increasingly complex peer interactions

Beth had difficulty managing friendships during primary school, and hoped friendships would be easier in high school. However, she found they were more complicated, indicating peer relationships were an area of ongoing concern. Some of her new peers were "obnoxious" and "self-obsessed", and Beth was very worried about getting "picked on", perhaps expressing Beth's perceived differences between herself and her peers and her fear

this would lead to bullying. She felt she might do/say something wrong and hid some parts of her personality to avoid being “picked on”. Beth wanted to be part of a big friend group and achieved this, making new friends by “follow[ing]” an established group, including a friend she had from primary school. At first, Beth enjoyed being part of a big group because it meant she always had someone she knew to “hang out with”/sit with in lessons, alleviating fears around being isolated. However, this came with peer pressure to do and say things she did not really feel, to be part of the group. At the time, it was essential to follow the group consensus for acceptance and belonging. Beth “masked” so peers would not think she was “weird” and shared her autism diagnosis with only a few trusted friends to avoid being “picked on”. Beth was ashamed of her diagnosis and realised the person she showed the rest of the world was not the real Beth. She felt this “different” person she presented was “chosen”, “fit in”, and “wanted” by the big group, so belonged. Later in the year, Beth was pleased when she “clicked” with a friend. She trusted this friend with her true personality and told them about her autism. Towards the end of Year Seven, Beth realised she preferred a smaller friend group, feeling safer and less overwhelmed.

PET 5: A Shift in Identity

When Beth transitioned to high school, she felt like her life was “shifting”, as if the transition was a milestone she had reached that would bring changes within herself and to her life. This caused some discomfort as she went from being the “oldest… and then all of a sudden… the youngest” in her setting, showing the stark contrast of her identity as a pupil within the two settings. Moving to high school was associated with more freedom and control over her belongings at school and self-organisation. Also, having the new uniform made Beth feel more mature and grown up. She was excited to have this freedom and learn more about topics she was interested in. Since Year 7, Beth’s self-acceptance and sense of self as autistic have developed as she now tries to “be [herself], [her] way, the way [she] wants to be.” She also recognises some parts of school are still tricky post-transition (e.g. friendship arguments), but she now knows how to get the help she needs, such as speaking to a trusted adult. Beth also feels Drama lessons have helped her self-confidence, as you can “take the mask off and just do what you want.” This presents Beth’s recognition of her self-development in skills that support her to be successful at high school, but also in her confidence to present as her true self.

Caitlyn

PET 1: Fears vs Opportunities

Caitlyn's pretransition fears were connected to her primary school experiences. She was worried about bullying and teachers "[getting her] in trouble", as this happened in primary school. This led to constant, ruminating thoughts about starting high school over the summer holidays. Caitlyn was also "sad" to leave behind friendships from primary school and worried about making new friends, showing concern about being isolated. Caitlyn's brother told her about how he used to get into trouble, making Caitlyn particularly concerned about being told off in front of everyone and feeling embarrassed. However, Caitlyn was excited for a "new start" away from primary school teachers she disliked and pupils who had seen her previous behaviour. She wanted to present a different version of herself where others had no preconceptions of how she might act. This suggests she felt she needed to change her behaviour to be socially accepted. She was also looking forward to exciting elements of high school (e.g. better lessons, school trips, food, and tangible rewards). This shows how starting high school came with contrasting feelings of worry and excitement.

PET 2: Limited Preparations Without a Diagnosis

Since Caitlyn did not have an autism diagnosis at the time of the transition, she was not offered the additional support she saw others receive, which was frustrating, as it was important for Caitlyn to prepare. Caitlyn had multiple transition days, which she thought were fun and good "practises" for lessons. She got to "know the school more", so she was not so scared. But Caitlyn would have liked more transition days, and she would have liked to have toured the entire school, expressing the importance of practical experience in preparations. Caitlyn also felt more realistic lessons would have helped her to see what classes were really like. It would also have been helpful for Caitlyn to have met her teachers before starting high school. This was all support that peers with diagnoses received, highlighting Caitlyn's acknowledgement that her lack of diagnosis reduced the transition support she was offered. Caitlyn also tried on her uniform lots of times to try to get used to it, attempting to make the uncomfortable more comfortable, but it still "didn't feel right", showing how even with preparation, perhaps the sensory experience of the uniform continued to cause discomfort. To try to gain further emotional comfort (supporting anxiety), Caitlyn sought reassurance, finding it helpful to receive advice that "everything's going to be okay" from her parents.

PET 3: High school expectations were difficult to manage

High school had a very complex layout compared to primary school, with many more pupils, making it overwhelmingly busy. Caitlyn was concerned for her safety amongst the older pupils who “shoved against each other”. She found it scary and irritating to navigate her way around the school alone, eventually finding it difficult to attend school due to being so scared. At school, she got through the day, but Caitlyn described experiencing “crash out[s]” at home, showing how she was truly feeling (“really grumpy”). This is perhaps because she felt safer at home to release her true feelings. Even though Caitlyn was really scared, she pushed herself to go back into school and “live with it” to maintain her attendance records, presenting her response to the external pressures of school attendance, despite the toll this took on her personally. Furthermore, the uniform was really uncomfortable, triggering sensory discomfort. Caitlyn felt the uniform could and should be changed to be more comfortable, but the requirements were so strict that she could not make many adjustments, again showing how she felt she needed to conform to school expectations even when they brought discomfort. Other school rules, like being unable to go to the toilet during lessons, also made Caitlyn feel anxious and uncomfortable. Eventually, Caitlyn worked out how to navigate around the school using the colour-coded system. She also learned the real limits/boundaries of some teachers with the school rules. This meant she did not have to follow the school rules exactly (e.g. talking in class, uniform rules) and explored how she could make her own adaptations within school expectations to make herself feel more comfortable, which made things less stressful.

PET 4: Complexities of Peer Interaction and Forming Friendships

Caitlyn found interacting with new peers challenging. She was separated from her friends during transition days, resulting in feeling “sad”, which seemed to be due to her being isolated. New peers in her classes were rude, and she felt like she did not “fit in”. Therefore, Caitlyn requested to change classes. Caitlyn wanted to make friends in Year 7 but found it difficult to do so independently. She still finds it tricky to ask for things she needs. Talking to people in lessons where there was structure to the conversation was easier, but Caitlyn found talking to peers without structure difficult, as talking to unfamiliar people is complex, delicate to manage, and it takes a lot of effort to do/say the right thing. Caitlyn’s form tutor introduced her to a new peer group. While she found this peer group “annoying”, having friends and avoiding isolation was important, so she felt she had to endure being “stuck” in the group as she did not have any other friends. Caitlyn also found that friendships can be

volatile, with lots of arguments, rudeness, and changes to the group over time, expressing the ongoing challenges of peer relationships. Caitlyn now has a good group of friends and finds it comforting to have someone she can always talk to. She also has increased confidence to speak to people and make friends independently.

PET 5: Support Given vs Support Lacking Based on Teacher Understanding

Caitlyn felt school staff did not understand her or what she needed during the transition, perhaps linked to her lack of a diagnosis at the time. Caitlyn's mother had to advocate for her to receive the support/adjustments she needed so she could be comfortable attending school. Caitlyn eventually got some support (e.g. leave early pass), but sometimes even her mother could not get her the support she felt she needed (e.g. to move to another class). Furthermore, when Caitlyn finally received some adjustments, they were removed too soon. Her leave early pass was taken away after a fixed period. The congestion in the corridors was still a big strain on Caitlyn, so it felt unfair that they took the pass away when it was helping her. This was confusing and frustrating for Caitlyn. However, teachers who understood what Caitlyn needed to learn were "nice" and "helpful". For example, a primary school teacher bridged the gap between primary and secondary by telling Caitlyn about high school clubs she could attend that were similar to clubs in primary school. Nevertheless, some teachers were "rude" and embarrassed Caitlyn in front of everyone when she made a mistake or found something difficult. Some were also very strict and lacked understanding of what she needed to feel comfortable and learn (e.g. fidget). Therefore, Caitlyn was pleased to eventually receive a Student Passport, because she did not have to justify fidgeting anymore. "Now [she] get[s] to fidget whenever [she] wants", as this is now stated within school paperwork, suggesting they better meet her needs.

Daisy

PET 1: Practise and Preparation with Mixed Success

Daisy took it upon herself to make detailed preparations for high school. For example, she practised the different routes to and from school and searched for the equipment she needed on the school website. Also, since her high school uniform felt different from her primary uniform ("starchy" and "weird"), it required washing and trying on multiple times to get used to it. This shows how well-rounded preparations included consideration of travel and equipment. Transition days allowed Daisy to become more familiar with the school context, but an online transition meeting increased Daisy's fears that

high school would be restrictive, and she would not have her individual needs met. Furthermore, transition events presented an exaggerated version of the high school's expectations for how to sit and stand with no "leeway", which caused Daisy concern about being uncomfortable. This also confused Daisy when she started high school, because she expected a strict routine, which did not occur. Furthermore, Year 7 classes were created based on SATs results, and transition days were specific to each class (e.g. meeting your tutor and class-specific activities). However, Daisy changed classes just before the start of school, which meant her peers and tutor were different. Therefore, while initially feeling prepared, moving classes at the last minute meant Daisy was unprepared, which caused her to worry. Furthermore, the lack of advanced notice for the activities on the first day of term was "annoying" due to a lack of time to plan and prepare. So, Daisy "dread[ed]" going to high school due to feeling unprepared. She wanted more realistic, hands-on experiences and truthful pupil testimonies about high school, as this would have provided better preparation. Daisy noticed her school has improved their transition days (for current Year 6s), which are now like "mock days", which are better as they are more realistic.

PET 2: A "Fresh Start" vs Temporary Contextual Challenges

Leaving primary school came with mixed feelings; excitement for a "fresh start" away from peers Daisy disliked, and nervousness about meeting new people. The perceived lack of support from teachers in Year 6 led Daisy to think they "did not care" about her anymore. Also, the end of primary school was academically "boring", while high school brought further academic challenge, an increased pace of learning, and allowed her to do subjects she enjoyed. It was also a "fresh start" socially, as there were lots of people getting to know new people just like her. Therefore, Daisy gave the sense that she felt ready to move on to high school. However, the difference in school processes (e.g. changing classrooms) was "nerve-wracking" at first, as there was "a lot of change" and not knowing what to expect was unsettling. Also, high school was busier than primary school, but Daisy settled quickly and enjoyed greater "freedom". But some aspects were difficult to get used to, like lots of people in the canteen being too loud, so a place to avoid when busy. Also, having to adapt to the different teaching styles in each subject was challenging for the whole of Year 7, but it got better in Year 8, and even easier in Year 9 when Daisy had the same teachers and was more familiar with them. Therefore, familiarity with the context was key to settling into high school.

PET 3: Peer interaction: Comfort in the Familiar

Daisy preferred to be around peers she felt comfortable with. Therefore, when teachers used seating plans in register order, she was seated away from familiar peers and forced to speak to new people (which was intimidating). It was so important for Daisy to be with people she knew that she asked to move down a set so she could be with her well-established primary school friends. Daisy was excited to make new friends, but recognised this was something she found difficult, and she really wanted to "fit in." Daisy found that having a "starting point" of knowing some familiar peers in lessons helped her to make new friends. Therefore, many initial friendships were formed through joining a group where there were familiar peers from her primary school. Once Daisy knew she liked a peer, she became quite attached to them, showing how special it was for her to become comfortable with a new peer, perhaps due to this being difficult for her. Daisy's friendships changed a lot in primary school, so she was "quite used to it" in high school. In Year 7, Daisy's friendships were inconsistent and changed a lot, but now (after the transition) her "solid group" is "tight" and more consistent, which means there is always someone familiar to be with. But there are still "ebbs and flows" of changes, showing how making and maintaining friendships is an ever-changing process with both positive and difficult moments.

PET 4: Support was Multifaceted but Inconsistent

Daisy experienced a range of transition support activities. Daisy's high school organised older pupils to support Year 7s to navigate the school, which meant Daisy did not get lost, and she felt supported. She was also invited into a 'Girls' Group', which introduced her to similar peers, enabling Daisy to become familiar with pupils across year groups (she would have otherwise found "scary"). Daisy also made friends in this group who helped her to join her current friend group, so peer support was essential to Daisy building a sense of familiarity and belonging. An intervention for communication was also offered, but Daisy felt she was patronised and treated "a lot younger" during this intervention, when other teachers treated her as "a lot older" in line with the more mature high school context. This presented a juxtaposition between how Daisy was treated as an autistic person where teachers felt intervention was needed, and how she felt she should be treated as a high school pupil. Daisy decided not to attend this intervention and enjoyed the autonomy over which interventions she accepted based on whether she found them helpful. Daisy's mother advocated for the support she needed in class by discussing Daisy's Student Passport with Daisy and sending necessary amendments to the school, including things Daisy felt the primary school should have shared, perhaps exposing gaps in communication between her

education settings. Daisy believed student passports should be followed as they give individualised support. Nevertheless, the support Daisy was offered was teacher-dependent, so inconsistent. Some teachers “wanted to help” so implemented the agreed support/strategies, but others just told Daisy to “grow up and do it yourself.” This meant Daisy did not know what support she would receive in lessons, which was unsettling. Following the initial transition, teachers now deliver more consistent support, and Daisy found that as she spends more time in high school, she gets to know her teachers better, which helps.

Ellie

PET 1: Seeking and Preparing for a Fresh Start

Ellie felt her primary school poorly prepared her for high school, especially the academic expectations. However, high school solved many of the issues Ellie associated with primary school, as she could move around, learn new things, and have different teachers. This presents Ellie as feeling ready to move into high school, both to escape aspects she disliked about primary school and to gain new experiences. She attended multiple transition days, helping her to become familiar with spaces like her tutor room. However, she had forgotten this by the time she started, describing the days as “useless”, showing that despite information being repeated, this strategy was unhelpful when so much time had passed. Also, on transition days, a high school teacher discussed all the “bad” aspects repeatedly, like the size of the school and the consequences for not following school rules, which heightened Ellie’s concerns. They also attempted to give Ellie a consequence for not following a uniform rule before she started, leaving Ellie feeling frustrated and anticipating further difficulties in future encounters. Ellie also independently sought out opportunities to see what high school was like by speaking to family members. They shared difficult high school experiences, stating it was “the worst experience they’ve ever had”, which made Ellie pre-emptively think she too would have a bad experience. Ellie also watched a television programme about high school so she could “see what things [she]’d be up to”, seemingly seeking a realistic understanding of what high school was like.

PET 2: Challenges of the High School Context

High school was more academically challenging than primary school, which exposed an additional need impacting Ellie’s learning that had previously gone undetected. Lessons were also more taxing, requiring multitasking to “listen, highlight, write, and read at the same

time", which was overwhelming and felt impossible. When Ellie found work difficult, she lost motivation and required the support of a Teaching Assistant. Ellie also noticed the difference in the size of her "really small" primary school compared to the "huge" high school. Ellie said this felt "weird", which seemed to express her mixed feelings towards the larger space. For example, being in crowded spaces caused discomfort and negatively impacted Ellie's mood frequently. However, the large size of the high school was better because Ellie could "escape" from teachers and not be noticed. Ellie also found navigating the school complicated and confusing, leading to her getting lost and being left alone, meaning she was late to lessons.

PET 3: The Joys and Complexities of Peer Connection

Ellie anticipated peer interaction would be more difficult in high school; however, a "social" friend eased the process by bringing peers to Ellie to support her in making friends. Ellie placed value on having a longstanding friendship from primary school to support her as "someone to be with". In Year 7, Ellie became familiar with peers who were consistently part of her lessons, making lessons more comfortable over time. Connection with peers was strengthened by using social media outside of school. Ellie seemed to feel a sense of affiliation with an autistic person who was the "exact same" as her and sought out further friendships with peers she deemed to be like herself, as she felt she better understood how they think, feel and behave, and they "understand" her. Ellie reflected how friendships can change as people do over time. Ellie experienced an extremely volatile peer relationship that was damaging to her wellbeing, and support from school staff and outside agencies was required. Furthermore, the change in classes following Year 7 caused Ellie discomfort and frustration as it was difficult for Ellie to be away from peers she had become familiar with.

PET 4: "You Get What You Give" – Teacher Understanding Makes or Breaks Engagement

Ellie perceived that her Year 6 teacher had a stereotypical understanding of autism, so despite her diagnosis, they did not consider Ellie to be autistic due to her presentation. This meant Ellie did not receive the support required, leaving her feeling uncared for and disliked. In Year 7, a high school teacher told Ellie not to "act autistic", seemingly assuming her responses were lazy choices rather than a need for support. Additionally, Ellie noticed all peers who required additional support were singled out by a teacher. She felt all neurodivergent children need is understanding and adaptations to support their learning, rather than teachers viewing them as an inconvenience or disruptive. Lessons with poor relational aspects (e.g. "bad teacher" and "bad class") made Ellie feel "stuck". A perceived

unjust consequence for being late to a lesson was a catalyst for Ellie choosing to push back against school rules to behave in the way teachers had described her. She enacted a "disruptive" persona as "truant", "defiant" and "the worst one" as if to meet the expectations of these teachers. Planned relational interventions (supporting Ellie's relationships with teachers) were not followed through, further reducing Ellie's trust in school staff. Ellie had the perception that teachers felt her behaviour was a problem that needed to be "fix[ed]". But removing Ellie from the classroom with a "time out" card did not resolve the problems inside the classroom. Ellie reflected that receiving sanctions did not change her behaviour. However, Ellie engaged well and "love[d]" lessons taught by "good" teachers, who supported her to feel comfortable. They did not get angry or give out unfair consequences; they earned Ellie's "respect", which meant she engaged better. Ellie found teachers she could trust were understanding, present when needed, and created an environment where she felt comfortable.

PET 5: The Impact of the Transition on the Self

Ellie met the transition with indifference as she felt it did not matter which school she was attending, as "school is hell" because people told her what to do. Ellie did not want to be at any school because she felt teachers told her what to do, suggesting she found school life challenged her autonomy. Ellie described herself as being "good" at primary school, which she conceptualised as "quiet", conforming to the rules, and "smart". Ellie experienced a shift from being "well behaved" and "top of the class" in primary school to "bottom" in everything in high school. She noticed that in primary school, she had less confidence to respond to teachers whom she felt mistreated her, as she described herself as a "goodie two-shoes" who conformed. But she now "stand[s] up for [her]self", showing an increase in confidence in adhering to her sense of justice and fairness. Ellie's greatest frustration in high school was the school's uniform rules, which seemed to remove her full autonomy and caused distress. Pressure was applied from those around Ellie to conform to the way the school wanted her to behave, which she found frustrating. Ellie also presented with feelings of inadequacy in the classroom (due to the increased difficulty) and attempted to hide this from others. Ellie considered herself to be unsuccessful at school due to her behaviour and choices but also acknowledged the impact of environmental factors like classes and teachers. The transition is a time when Ellie experienced difficulties with her wellbeing, and the way others treated her made her behaviour and feelings about herself "worse".

Cross-case analysis: Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Having detailed the individual transition experiences of the participants, this section presents the cross-case analysis. Six GETs and 19 subthemes emerged from the data (see Figure 1). Each GET and its subthemes will now be outlined, presenting themes identified between participant experiences. However, there is still consideration of the nuance of each participant's experience shown through exact quotations from participant transcripts.

Figure 1

Table of GETs

GET 1: Attempting to Feel Prepared with Mixed Success

- Transition Days
- Proactive self-preparations
- Seeking support from those with experience

GET 2: Adapting to the New High School Context

- New Routines/Procedures
- Sensory overstimulation
- Navigating the larger environment
- Things get easier once they are more familiar

GET 3: Navigating Peer Interaction and Relationships

- Social interaction with new peers
- Consistency creates familiarity and comfort
- Building a sense of belonging
- Instability of high school interaction and friendships

GET 4: The Need for Support and Understanding from Adults

- School staff understanding was the make-or-break of appropriate support
- The need for tailored additional support at school
- Parental advocacy to access support

GET 5: The Transition of Self

- Preconceived ideas of the transition and personal ability to cope
- A fresh start and shifting identity
- The post-transition self

GET 6: How to Better Support Autistic Girls During the Transition

- Comprehensive and realistic transition activities
- Individualised support based on authentic understanding

GET 1: Attempting to Feel Prepared with Mixed Success

GET 1 describes how participants made attempts to prepare for the transition. Preparation was approached in a variety of ways, including support offered by schools, and participants independently seeking further information and practise, all as an attempt to feel prepared. Participants also described the varying success of the approaches they chose or were offered in supporting their feelings of preparedness. Table 3 presents the subthemes of GET 1 and the prevalence of the subthemes amongst the participants.

Table 3

Prevalence of subthemes related to GET 1

Participant	Transition Days	Proactive self-preparations	Seeking support from those with experience
Alice	✓	✓	✓
Beth	✓	✓	✓
Caitlyn	✓	✓	✓
Daisy	✓	✓	
Ellie	✓	✓	✓

Subtheme: Transition Days

All participants experienced multiple transition days. There was consensus that transition days supported familiarisation and therefore comfort with the school context, including the layout, routines, and meeting members of staff. For example, Alice and Caitlyn said,

> *"I think they are like good, like you, it gives you like what the school looks like and you know what like the rooms are like. And like, you get to meet the teachers."* (Alice, p. 2)

> *"It was like really helpful because it made me like, know the school more and not be as scared."* (Caitlyn, p. 2)

Having the opportunity to really get to “know the school more” displays how it was important for Caitlyn to physically experience the school environment in advance to support her preparation for interacting with the physical space. Furthermore, the statement that this made Caitlyn feel less “scared” suggests this type of preparation contributes to feelings of comfort and safety. Almost all participants spoke about the positive aspects of transition days and the fact they had additional days due to their autism diagnosis. For example, Daisy said,

> *“I got to go to an extra tour of the school when it was like in, during school time so that I could see what it would be like when we got to like look in the back of some different classrooms, so we could see how the teachers taught and like how they interact with people.”* (Daisy, p. 1)

This quotation shows how transition days supported Daisy to better understand many aspects of the high school context, and the fact this occurred “during school time” means she observed a realistic example of social interactions between staff and pupils. There is an emphasis on seeing the setting and interactions for herself being helpful for Daisy to gain a concrete understanding of the context. However, many of the participants also found aspects of the transition days unrealistic of the true high school experience. For example, Beth and Daisy found teachers behaved differently on transition days:

> *“They were different. They were more like, less fun [once she started high school]. I think the only teacher who was most the same was my German teacher.”* (Beth, p. 9)

> *“Like in the transition lessons they were doing games they were being like really nice to us. We didn't actually do like any proper learning.”* (Beth, p. 9)

> *“And that was almost a bit annoying because I kind of expected everything, because they made it sound so strict, like it kind of made it feel like everything was going to almost instantly fall into like a set routine. But it didn't because it turns out it wasn't so strict. So then everything didn't quite have such a routine.”* (Daisy, p. 11)

Beth’s comments present an inconsistency between the more relaxed behaviour and teaching styles of school staff on the transition day compared to the start of high school.

Daisy found the opposite, that teachers were much more lenient in high school than they were made out to be on transition days. However, both girls found the inconsistency in the teachers' behaviour from the transition days to the start of high school confusing, and in Daisy's case, meant the preparations she had made were different to the actual "routine". Therefore, this shows how transition days can be both helpful and unhelpful to preparation for high school. The opportunity to enter the high school environment supports familiarity, while the aspects inconsistent with the true high school experience result in confusion and feeling less prepared.

Subtheme: Proactive Self-preparations

All participants made attempts to proactively prepare for the transition (with the support of family). This occurred in several ways, intending to create further comfort with the impending transition, especially for aspects the participants were particularly concerned about. For example, Alice and Beth described buying the necessary resources/stationery:

> *"I tried to force my mum to buy everything, like at the very start, so I'd have like everything ready. I wrote a list of stuff I'd need. I could have like the notebook or the pens, purple pens, like every little thing like I just wrote down the list and then whenever we go to a shop, I'd always try and get something from that list and just tick it off…Being prepared. So like on the last week, we haven't got to rush around and do it."* (Beth, p. 9)

> *"[Buying stationery] made me feel good because I like being prepared. Because it makes me like, anxious when I get there, and like, you know, I don't know what I'm doing or like, I'm not prepared or like, I get, I get nervous to ask stuff as well. So I get nervous like asking for a pen or something.* (Alice, p. 4)

Both quotations present the participants as being self-aware of the anxiety they might feel if they were not prepared for the transition, hence these preparations were interpreted to be proactive to reduce anxiety. There was a need to have the necessary equipment in advance, as if being prepared brings a sense of calm to an otherwise chaotic event. Furthermore, Beth's attempt to "tick… off" tasks from her list demonstrates how she broke down the numerous preparation tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks, allowing her to observe her progress. Similarly, participants prepared for other aspects of school life through practising wearing the uniform and travelling to school:

“We were also practising how different ways I was going to get to school, because there are lots of different ways we could get to school... Like we're going to drive and then if I was going to get back with them all, if my mum was going to walk to come and pick us up or stuff like that.” (Daisy, p. 1)

“I tried it on. I was really, really sad. And like, it just didn't feel right. And like, I don't know, I had a little bit of meltdown, to be honest, because it was like that bad. And then I was like, I kept trying it on for some reason, like, over and over again to see if it would help. But like, it didn't really…Because it was like either way too tight or way too loose. And it just didn't feel right.” (Caitlyn, p. 1)

“*Like being able to try on the uniform was still pretty helpful…Because it helped me like get used to it a little bit more and like try to figure out ways that can make it feel less weird to be honest.”* (Caitlyn, p. 3)

While Daisy and Caitlyn discussed different elements of the transition they were preparing for, there is a commonality in the repetition of “practising” something they feel uncomfortable with, seemingly attempting to gain as much comfort as possible. For Daisy, this was the change in how she would travel to high school, as this was due to occur in different ways, and she would need to be flexible but prepared for them all. For Caitlyn (and all the other participants), trying on the uniform in advance was essential. The uniform brought her discomfort, causing dysregulation and distress. Therefore, she required ample time to “get used to it” and to feel more comfortable. Furthermore, she felt the need to “figure out ways to make it feel less weird”, which shows a proactive attempt to prepare and discreetly change the uniform to meet her sensory preferences.

Finally, participants used available resources to seek further information about high school:

“I watched stuff like Educating Yorkshire to see what high school was like.” (Ellie, p. 1)

> *"I was looking up the school as well. I kept checking like the SEN thing, looking up all like the uniforms. And like, I was figuring out, like, they kind of explained that we need to have a correct, they said like we need our own pencil case and stuff. And I was like, really excited to, like, have my own stuff instead of getting given stuff, and being able to buy all these cute pens and these cute little pencil cases and bags."* (Beth, p. 5)

These quotations show a proactive attempt to gain further knowledge about high school in different ways. For Ellie, watching other children attending high school via a television programme gave her a real-life example of "what high school was like" perhaps so she could process potential upcoming changes in advance. Whereas Beth gathered further information about her school via their website, attempting to learn about the parameters for the equipment she could bring to school, finding a balance between meeting the expectations of the school and her own preferences. She even reflected on how appropriate preparation led to excitement about the transition, suggesting preparation was not just practical but also impacted her emotions and state of mind. Therefore, while the participants prepared for the transition in different ways, there was a common desire to perform tasks to feel more prepared.

Subtheme: Seeking Support from those with Experience

Many of the participants sought experiential knowledge from people who had attended, or were currently attending, high school. For some, this included conversations with family members. Alice said,

> *"I was like curious about like detentions and stuff because you don't get them in primary school. She was like, "oh no, it's like the same as staying in at break. But sometimes you get, like, an after school so you would have to stay after school." Yeah…Yeah. It was really helpful I had my sister to talk to."* (Alice, p. 4)

Alice sought knowledge about high school procedures from her sister, who was currently attending high school. This seemed to bridge gaps in Alice's knowledge but also provide reassurance that the changes would be manageable from a person she trusted. Caitlyn also sought reassurance from her family that she would be able to cope with the transition, which reduced feelings of general concern:

"My mum and my brother and my dad helped… just like helping reassure me and stuff…Like [mum] was telling me that everything was going to be OK and like, it's not the end of the world and it'll be fine….It made me feel less anxious." (Caitlyn, p. 4)

While Alice and Caitlyn found their conversations with family members helpful and reassuring, Ellie's family shared more difficult experiences:

"[Older cousins], would like, come up when I was younger and stuff and be like, oh (pause), like my brother got his arms and legs tied by wires and fell over in the computer science room (short laugh). And my sister ran off because she had the wrong socks on and stuff. I actually just they'd just tell me stuff like that, and I thought, yeah (hmm – laugh, pulled a face)…That would be me…Because we're like copies of each other. (Ellie, p. 1)

Ellie's use of the phrase "copies of each other" shows how she sees herself as a reflection of her family members and therefore assumes that she will have a similar experience. This is also true of the other quotations discussed, as the participants seem to have internalised and believed the view presented by their family member, whether this be positive or negative. This presents the importance and value placed upon the views held by family members. The participants also asked school staff and pupils about high school.

"Miss X definitely helped. Like I'd go to her and go and ask her questions about how it was going to work and like, stuff like that." (Beth, p. 5)

"It was just like these year nines at the time…It was like pretty good. And they were like really helpful to be honest… Because they helped ask questions and like, answer them and stuff and, like, just reassure us…Like, say that everything's going to be OK and it's really not that bad." (Caitlyn, p. 3)

Caitlyn sought reassurance from experienced peers, while Beth sought more practical knowledge, which helped her to feel more prepared for what would happen within lessons. The shared experience across almost all the participants was gaining a realistic insight into high school life from someone who had directly experienced it seemingly in an

attempt to demystify the transition and gain reassurance, and valuing this point of view, whether this be from a family member, teacher, or peer.

GET 2: Adapting to the New High School Context

GET 2 explores how the participants experienced the changes to their school context. This includes changes in the physical environment as well as differences in procedures/routines. Finally, the extent of the challenges experienced by participants is described as finding routine and familiarity is explored. Table 4 presents the subthemes of GET 2 and the prevalence of the subthemes amongst the participants.

Table 4

Prevalence of subthemes related to GET 2

Participant	New Routines/ Procedures	Sensory Overstimulation	Navigating the larger environment	Things get easier once they are more familiar
Alice	✓	✓	✓	✓
Beth	✓	✓	✓	✓
Caitlyn	✓	✓	✓	✓
Daisy	✓	✓		✓
Ellie	✓	✓	✓	

Subtheme: New Routines/Procedures

There were many changes participants encountered, often involving new routines and procedures at high school. This was often difficult to manage at first. Beth described how her routine changed between Year 6 and 7:

> *"It was different because I was used to have, like instead of in Year 6 having like a set routine, my teachers would be like okay we're doing this today and then we do that and we do something different that day next week, like the week after. But in Year Seven because we swap from Week A to B, it'd be like, OK, we have this lesson today and then we're not going to have it for another two weeks because it*

like it rotated. Like it was difficult because like it would be like you'd have like PE like three times one week and then have it for one time the next week. That was weird because you have to remember they can't, like if you have like a certain lesson and you'd bring something in for that certain lesson you'd have to try and remember it on that day. It was weird getting used to the routine." (Beth, p. 19)

"I think it was more just like remembering everything. And because at primary school we had a place where we put all our stuff and then we'd just stay and, like, leave all our stuff there all day and like having to think about where my stuff was, a lot." (Daisy, p. 10)

Beth described how there is a weekly "set routine" in primary school, whereas the routine in high school is much more complex, spanning multiple weeks. She comments on the strain of needing to "remember" not only when her lessons occurred, but also the equipment required. This suggests attending high school required more advanced organisational skills due to the increase in cognitive load, expectations and independence. The organisational strain caused by a change to a more complex procedure was also commented on by Daisy, but in her case, it was difficult to keep track of her personal belongings. Most of the participants also described the difference in academic expectations. For example, Daisy and Ellie said,

"*I think different teachers, different lessons because… we do different subjects here than we did in primary school. And like the different range of subjects that we do and how they approach being taught. And like our primary school is very much, "Here's some information. Here's a worksheet", and we've done the lesson. But now it's like more, "Here's some information, you need to do different stuff with it." And I think it like challenges you more and it's a little bit weird like it was a quite weird to start with."* (Daisy, p. 11)

"I thought I could read really well but I'd been reading words wrong. And then I started realising in high school when I had to read bigger texts and stuff. And then I started spelling things wrong and they were like, oh, go check, get you checked for [learning difficulty]... And I had [learning difficulty]." (Ellie, p. 2)

Here, both Daisy and Ellie describe the increase in academic expectations of high school. For Daisy, this was being required to apply new learning to independent activities,

which she felt “challenges you more” than more passive learning activities conducted at primary school. Therefore, Daisy’s use of the word “challenges” appears to have dual meaning within this context, implying she experienced a sense of increased difficulty but also welcomed academic advancement in high school. Whereas for Ellie, the increase in academic expectations highlighted a further difficulty that had gone undetected in primary school. Many of the participants described how the number and intensity of the changes to routine impacted them:

> *“And it was like, so quick of a change. And there were, like, so many things, like happening at once I couldn’t comprehend it all.”* (Beth, p. 2)

> *“I was quite nervous about it because there was like a lot of change and, you, I thought I knew what I was expecting, but then when I first got here, then I, turns out I didn't know what I was expecting and I didn't really like that.”* (Daisy, p. 14)

Beth’s use of the statement “I couldn’t comprehend it all” expresses the mental load brought about by the changes to routine. There is a sense that the changes are overwhelming and difficult to manage. Similarly, Daisy reflects on how the changes made her nervous, which seemed to be exacerbated by the fact that her expectations of what high school would be like were not met. Therefore, despite preparation activities undertaken, she still felt unprepared. Therefore, this subtheme presents the intensity and range of changes participants faced and a shared experience of finding this challenging.

Subtheme: Sensory Overstimulation

All the participants spoke about the sensory challenges of the high school environment due to its large size and the increase in the number of pupils, making it difficult to move around the school. For example, Beth said,

> *“The getting to and from lessons is quite stressful because there was like tonnes of people in the corridors and stuff.”* (Beth, p. 2)

Beth found it “stressful” to be around such a large number of people when walking through the school, especially in tight spaces such as the corridors. It seems this made the times between lessons particularly difficult experiences. Similarly, Alice and Caitlyn said,

"I don't like how, like busy it is because like, you know, you have, you might like all be getting trampled by people. But there's just a lot of people and it's like a lot of crowds and, you know… it could happen" (Alice, p. 19)

"Because I was like, obviously really scared in the corridors, and like I was at the point that, like, I could not go to school. It was like that bad." (Caitlyn, p. 11)

Alice's use of the word "trampled" suggests the way peers moved through the space made her feel unsafe and physically at risk of being hurt. Similarly, Caitlyn described feeling so "scared" she could not attend school. This highlights the extent of the discomfort felt by the participants when simply moving around the school environment. Unsurprisingly, where there was an increase in people in high school, there was also an increase in noise. Daisy and Alice said,

"In Year Seven I didn't like the canteen, but I think that's because the then year 10s and elevens were really, really loud. So I didn't like sitting in the canteen and I would sit outside." (Daisy, p. 17)

"I would always have lunch with [friend from primary school] in my form room so that I knew where it was and everything… The canteen's tiny here so. And it's also like really busy and loud because everyone just wants to get food." (Alice, p. 13)

Here, Daisy and Alice comment on how the canteen is "loud", so it is a space in school that is avoided. In fact, Daisy and Alice both made alternative plans to eat their lunch in alternative spaces, seemingly in an attempt to meet their sensory preferences for a calmer, quieter environment. Therefore, this subtheme presents the sensory overstimulation experienced by all the participants, particularly in loud and busy areas in the school.

Subtheme: Navigating the Larger Environment

Attempting to navigate a new and much more complex environment was difficult for many of the participants, causing stress and concern. For example, Beth said,

"Trying to find the lessons and not be late. It quickly got stressful because you have to find, work your way around. And like obviously, all the people and stuff and trying

to figure out what like the X meant and what the X meant because it's all like colour labelled." (Beth, p. 3)

Beth is describing how she attempted to use the school's colour-coded system to support her navigation, implying this was a difficult process that had to be followed. She found it "stressful" to find her classrooms before the start of lessons and communicated fears of being late despite her efforts to be on time. This presents at least two layers of stress (i.e. being lost and being late) before she has even entered the classroom. Similarly, Ellie and Caitlyn described the complexity of the school environment, and some classrooms being outside the established "block" structure as an added difficulty:

"If you go up some stairs then there's like a, the corridor, and there's some stairs on the other way, which leads to my old English classroom, but I couldn't see that. So once again my English room was not in the English block. It was next to the Science block and the DT blocks. How am I supposed to know that? I didn't know, I just kind of stood there." (Ellie, p. 11)

"I kept getting told off because I kept being late because I didn't understand like, "G" and then floor one and floor two. And like no one helped me and it was really annoying. And like, it was like, really scary and like, just really irritating that I was just like all alone and I didn't know what to do. And like it was also really annoying because, like, I got lost and like, no one helped me." (Caitlyn, p. 8)

Caitlyn's statement not only presents her stress when becoming lost in a new environment, but also the fear and irritation of being lost because she was alone. She repeated the phrase "no one helped me", which suggests she did not receive help when it was most needed and perhaps expected. Therefore, perhaps her irritation comes from being in a position of helplessness with no direct access to support and having difficulty asking for assistance. Finally, further concern occurred for both Beth and Ellie over being late and being reprimanded, which was out of their control, so felt unfair. Therefore, this subtheme presents the shared experience of most of the participants finding it difficult to navigate their high school setting, leading to stress and frustration.

Subtheme: Things Get Easier Once They are More Familiar

Despite explicitly expressing the challenges of entering the high school context, most of the participants found the discomfort to be temporary, and their experience improved over time as they became more familiar. For example, Alice said,

> *"It was a bit scary because there are a lot of new people and new faces and at the start everything is going to confuse you. But you also get used to it really quickly. And in your planner it tells you your lessons and usually you memorise that really quickly too."* (Alice, p. 5)

Alice describes getting used to her school environment "very quickly". She utilised her "planner" to support her in memorising her lessons, which suggests this organisational tool was helpful for understanding and learning her school routine. Like Alice, Beth used the resources given to her to support familiarity with the new context. She said,

> *"It took me like 2-3 weeks to figure it out… like you wouldn't remember the numbers, you'd remember where the class is. Like with your timetable, you remember what lesson you have... You do, it just gets memorised. Yeah, like it's just like a set routine in your brain. Which is why I like, timetables."* (Beth, p. 12)

This suggests the structured routines and procedures become embedded relatively quickly once understood (e.g. your timetable). In fact, Daisy even found she preferred the high school environment once she "got into a rhythm":

> *"In year seven to start with, it was a bit weird because I couldn't remember it [her timetable] very well, but then I think I did get into a rhythm of it quite quickly."* (Daisy, p. 18)

> ***"****I think to start with it was quite busy compared to primary school, but then I think I settled in quite quickly and like enjoyed it quite a lot because we had a lot more freedom and we could kind of do what we wanted. And like, at primary school, you had to go and sit in the hall to have your lunch and stuff, and you can sit outside and sit kind of wherever now. And there's, like, a lot more freedom."* (Daisy, p. 17)

In this passage, Daisy presents the idea that the more complex high school context allows greater “freedom” than the primary school context. High school pupils are permitted choice over where they eat their lunch and can move around the school much more freely, meaning they have more autonomy and can act according to their preferences. Therefore, while all of the participants expressed challenges upon initially transitioning to the high school context, many of these difficulties were short-lived once they became more familiar with the setting.

GET 3: Navigating Peer Interaction and Relationships

GET 3 explores the participants’ experiences of social interaction during the transition. As participants entered a new school, they interacted with new peers, formed friendships and experienced the highs and lows of being a part of social groups. Table 5 presents the subthemes of GET 3 and the prevalence of the subthemes amongst the participants.

Table 5

Prevalence of subthemes related to GET 3

Participant	Social interaction with new peers	Consistency creates familiarity and comfort	Building a sense of belonging	Instability of high school interaction and friendships
Alice	✓	✓	✓	
Beth	✓	✓	✓	✓
Caitlyn	✓		✓	✓
Daisy	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ellie	✓	✓	✓	✓

Subtheme: Social Interaction with New Peers

Starting high school comes with social interaction with new peers and the opportunity to form new friendships. The participants largely found this quite difficult, especially when

they had to sit and work with pupils they were unfamiliar with during lessons. This often occurred when teachers used seating plans:

> *"I'd be sat in the middle next to people who, they were OK, But I wasn't, like really comfortable with them. So I just, we sat like this (gestured sitting turned away from the person next to her), really, like just closed. It wasn't very nice, because I felt like trapped. When I got this person I don't know next to me, a person I don't know how like on the other side. So I didn't feel like I could move or breathe or anything."* (Beth, p. 13)

> *"To start with, because I fell right at the top of the register and then I think anyone else I knew falls like towards the middle or the end. That was quite like intimidating because I was then sat, they sat us in register order quite a lot to start. I was then sat around people who I didn't know and, and to be honest, I didn't really like because it was all boys who were all really loud and annoying and knew each other already. And that was kind of annoying because I didn't know them and didn't really want to talk to them either."* (Daisy, p. 14)

Both Daisy and Beth identified discomfort caused by teacher seating plans where their needs/preferences were not considered. For Beth, this was largely due to her physical placement in the classroom, leaving her feeling "trapped", with the intensity of her discomfort expressed through her use of the phrase "I didn't feel like I could move or breathe", suggesting physical discomfort from being put in this uncomfortable social situation with unknown peers. Whereas Daisy felt intimidated and annoyed within the classroom due to the "loud and annoying" peers surrounding her. The fact that her peers knew each other further isolated her, leaving her feeling unable to contribute or speak to them. Nevertheless, Alice found sitting with new peers supported her in forming friendships:

> *"And I wanted to get used to talking to other people. Um because I remember at the start of the Year 7 I sat next to this girl, who she's like, she's one of my friends now and I really like her… And I was like, "I can't, I can't talk to her." You know, "I'm too nervous to." And then like, you know, we just started talking to each other, and we really, like you know, we can joke around with each other now. And like I have Spanish with her this year and whenever we have to like partner up, I sit next to I talk to her and stuff and so yeah we just got used to each other."* (Alice, p. 23)

Here we can see the seating plan originally made Alice feel some discomfort. However, following some time for familiarisation, she was grateful for the opportunity to speak to a new person. Alice wanted to speak to new people, but without the seating plan she may not have attempted to converse with someone new and have formed this lasting friendship. Therefore, the seating plan appears to have acted as a vehicle for communication with new peers on a small scale (e.g. with a table partner). Similarly, Caitlyn found having the structure of lessons to start discussions helpful, but commented on how unstructured social communication is complex and difficult to navigate:

> *"You know like in class it's just like you just talk about the work and it's like you just have the work to talk about because then like when you try to make friends like you gotta figure out what they like to talk about that, because like you don't want to just talk about yourself the entire time. And like, I don't know, it feels like you're interrogating them if you just ask them about themselves the entire time. Yeah. It's just like, hard."* (Caitlyn, p. 14)

Caitlyn described her own thought processes when attempting to converse socially with new people, highlighting the thought and effort that goes into this type of interaction and the potential for misunderstanding/misinterpretation of meaning or intention in the conversation. This perhaps indicates why she may have avoided unstructured interaction outside of the classroom and required support with forming friendships. Almost all the participants formed new friendships through the support and encouragement from already well-established friendships from primary school:

> *"I remember when I first met some of the people in my friend group. Now when I first met them, became friends with them it was because [friend from primary school] said about all those people, "Oh, that's that's him. He's in my form. Can we go, can we go talk to them?", you know? And then we sat with them and we became really good friends and now, I'm like still friends with them."* (Alice, p. 13)

> *"X, she's really social… My best mate that I've had since I was little… She's like the opposite of me. So she made loads of friends and just kind of brung them to me…We just kind of became friends."* (Ellie, p. 14)

For both Alice and Ellie, a familiar friend brought new peers into their social circle, easing the process of forming friendships. Ellie described her "best mate" as "really social"

and “the opposite of her”, highlighting how Ellie perhaps finds interacting with new peers difficult, so welcomed the support. Therefore, while all of the participants experienced some discomfort with socialising with new peers, they all formed friendships during the transition, some with the support of classroom structures and others through well-known peers.

Subtheme: Consistency Creates Familiarity and Comfort

The participants largely found it easier to form and maintain peer relationships when they were placed with a consistent group of peers for lessons. For example, Ellie said,

> *“Because it was people I knew well because they were in my tutor group. So they like they do like tutor group lessons, like History, Geography, Art, Dance, Drama, all that. But like you're, you're in your tutor groups. Even if you have Maths in between, you've just come from History with your tutor group, Maths mixed, and you'd go to Geography after with your tutor group again, so you know who you're going to be with and like, stuff like that.”* (Ellie, p. 17)

It seems Ellie found it helpful to have many of her lessons with the same group of peers. This suggests Ellie preferred predictable and expected peer interactions, where there was the opportunity to become familiar with the group. This was similar for Alice,

> *“And like in Year Seven it does help because you mostly have the same people in all your classes. So like last year, in my Science class, it was the same class in English and Music. And like History, everything like it was all the same people. So you get used to those people.”* (Alice, p. 13)

Alice also touches on needing to “get used” to the people around her, which is similar to the way many of the participants described needing to become more familiar with the high school environment before feeling comfortable with time in GET 2. While Alice and Ellie discussed becoming more familiar with peers at a class level, there were also examples of participants relying on longstanding friendships for comfort in a new context:

> *“Knowing I had one friend that, like, I could, like if something didn't work out with someone else I could go back to her.”* (Beth, p. 16)

> *"Yeah, my best mate I've had since I was little, she goes here. She's in my classes this year, she was in them last year as well… Good, having someone to be with."* (Ellie, p. 6)

In these quotations, Beth and Ellie present the idea that feelings of safety come from knowing there is at least one good friend providing support. Ellie's use of the phrase "having someone to be with" suggests she was not concerned about social isolation because she had this long-standing friendship to lean on. Notably, Caitlyn was the only participant not to feature within this subtheme. This is because she never became familiar and comfortable with her Year 7 class, to the extent that she requested to move classes. However, when this was not permitted, Caitlyn said the following occurred at home:

> *"Like I remember I like had a really big crash out and like was like really upset and had a meltdown because of it. Like she's just really annoying…It was like, better at home. But then, because obviously I was like, really upset all day, then I would take it out at home, and like, be really grumpy at home and like, not the best."* (Caitlyn, p. 13)

Through her use of the phrases "crash out" and "meltdown", Caitlyn presented her feelings of complete overwhelm occurring from consistently feeling discomfort in her lessons alongside "annoying" peers. The "meltdown" occurred at home, suggesting Caitlyn internalised her frustration whilst at school, which built over time, and then at home, where perhaps she felt safer to do so, she released her strong feelings. Therefore, this subtheme presents the importance of becoming familiar and comfortable with peers; there was a positive impact on emotional wellbeing when this occurs and a negative impact when it does not.

Subtheme: Building a Sense of Belonging

All the participants presented ideas about wanting to belong amongst their peers. For some, there was a focus on identifying similar peers, for others, seeking to belong led to masking and attempting to assimilate to be accepted. For example, Beth said,

> *"I masked like I still mask a lot, but I masked a lot more in year seven because there was new people. I didn't want them to think I was weird. I obviously wanted people to like me. I wanted to get along with people and wanted to have, like kind of like a big*

friend group, so if something happened, they'd like defend me…It was tiring because you put on an act, somebody you're not, and then at home it just goes like boom....Like in, in like the middle, like towards the end of year seven there was, there was a lot of meltdowns after school." (Beth, p. 14)

"I was ashamed of it [autism diagnosis]. I didn't want people to know. I was embarrassed that my brain worked differently. I just thought because everyone knew me as like being normal and the (participant's name) they wanted to know. And like the (participant's name) that fit in, they picked, you know, the person who they wanted." (Beth, p. 17)

In these passages, Beth discussed how she felt the need to "mask" her natural thoughts/behaviours she associates with being autistic so she would be accepted by peers. Beth felt such a sense of shame and embarrassment about being autistic that she felt a need to hide that her "brain worked differently" and wanted to present as "normal". This seems to have, in part, been a safety precaution to avoid bullying, implied by her desire for her friends to "defend" her if necessary. A secondary function of masking was acceptance. Beth's use of the words "picked" and "wanted" suggests she felt her masked presentation had been accepted by her peers and so had earned her belonging within the peer group. However, masking came at a cost to Beth's physical and mental wellbeing. Holding onto the discomfort of "put[ting on an act" during the school day was exhausting, resulting in releasing the intense emotional overwhelm once feeling safer at home. Caitlyn also felt a need to act a different way to how she felt. She said,

"It's like this really annoying group of boys, and like, these two girls I don't really like. And I was just like, really annoying, and like they're really annoying, and like I didn't like it, but I didn't have any other friends." (Caitlyn, p. 16)

Caitlyn expressed the idea that being in a peer group is so important that she was willing to spend time with people she found "really annoying" just to ensure she was accepted and part of a friend group. This presents a strong desire to belong during the transition.

While the statements in this subtheme thus far show how participants felt they needed to change or act differently to be accepted, Ellie spoke about finding similar peers to her:

> *"So we started talking like late October. He's not diagnosed with autism, but he's like me, but boy version. So he is, it's really obvious he's got autism. He's in, like a referral for ADHD. I'm in a referral for ADHD, 'cause. I've already got my autism diagnosis. But he's just me, but in another person, and he struggles with the same things. So we just kind of got on like that and we were just like best mates."* (Ellie, p. 13)

> *"We just find it really funny. And [child in class] has got ADHD. So I make friends with people who are neurodivergent, mainly... I just understand them more."* (Ellie, p. 17)

For Ellie, a sense of belonging was achieved through seeking and giving understanding. She found comfort and support in identifying a peer who was "just like [her]" because they "struggle[d] with the same things." Therefore, a sense of affiliation was built with peers who appeared to have similar school and life experiences, and this is what enabled understanding between them. Therefore, while approached in different ways, all the participants sought a sense of belonging and expressed a desire for acceptance during the transition.

Subtheme: Instability of High School Interaction and Friendships

Many of the participants experienced turbulent changes within friendships/groups during and beyond the transition. For example, Daisy said,

> *"Then I stayed friends with them until I moved up sets again at Christmas. And then I became friends with one of the people who I wasn't going to be friends with because those two stopped being friends, the two girls in that group. And then I became friends with one of the other people, and then they sort of introduced me to their whole friend group, which also coincidentally happened to have one of the people who I was friends with at primary school. And so we sort of became friends a little bit and it was sort of like 2 friend groups that were sort of a bit mashed together."* (Daisy, p. 15)

This passage shows the complexities of how Daisy's friendship group changed and evolved over the transition year. Daisy reflected on how the fluid and evolving relationships between different individuals within the friendship group, and how those she spent time with during lessons impacted and changed the makeup of the whole group and who she considered her friends. Daisy seemed accepting of these changes, and the context of the

situation dictating who was part of the group, but she was particularly pleased when the group included primary school friends she already knew well. Caitlyn also described how disagreements occurred within her friendship group:

> *"Like everyone, just like always had beef and like, same with year eight, to be honest. And like, everyone was just like being really rude to each other for, like, no reason, and like making false accusations and stuff."* (Caitlyn, p. 17)

Caitlyn highlights that disagreements within friendship groups can occur during and continue after the transition (into Year 8), which can be confusing and difficult to manage. Therefore, the majority of participants expressed experiences of the instability of friendship groups during the transition due to group dynamics and contextual circumstances.

GET 4: The Need for Support and Understanding from Adults

Adult support was a prominent theme in all the participant interviews, particularly support from school staff and parents. The way adults interacted with the participants either helped or hindered the transition process; supporting participants to feel reassured, comfortable, and understood, or frustrated, confused and misunderstood. Table 6 presents the subthemes of GET 4 and the prevalence of the subthemes amongst the participants.

Table 6

Prevalence of subthemes related to GET 4

Participant	School staff understanding was the make-or-break of appropriate support	The need for tailored additional support at school	Parental advocacy to access support
Alice	✓	✓	✓
Beth	✓	✓	✓
Caitlyn	✓	✓	✓
Daisy	✓	✓	✓
Ellie	✓	✓	✓

Subtheme: School Staff Understanding was the Make-or-break of Appropriate Support

Participants largely agreed that many members of high school staff understood their needs/preferences, were consistent and cared about them. For example, Alice said,

> *"But you know if anything's like bothering them, they're going to understand like, then you're not going to get told off for anything. And like, there's some really nice teachers here that, you know, they don't mind because they understand you know, they go through the same thing every year of year sevens coming up and then being like a little nervous."* (Alice, p. 9)

Alice's repeated use of the word "understand" shows this was a key attribute she highly valued in teachers during the transition. For Alice, being understanding meant having leniency with Year 7s when they make mistakes. Caitlyn also described some teachers as "understanding" when they were tolerant about lateness, but also allowed her to fidget so she could regulate within the classroom:

> *"Like most of them [teachers] were really, really nice and like, understanding when I was like, late or like fidgeting a lot and it was like really helpful.* (Caitlyn, p. 9)

This is an example of teachers showing understanding by making adaptations so pupils feel more comfortable in the school environment based on individual needs/preferences. Similarly, Ellie gave an example of a teacher who supported her:

> *"Mr X is so chill… Near the end I saw him more because I was in [internal isolation]. And then this year, I see him every day. I'll go see him every day... Because when I don't go into my Computer Science class, he'll let me come and sit in his room, which is normally empty. And he's the one I had last year. And he'll just let me come sit in his room and do my work there."* (Ellie, p. 11)

It was important to Ellie to have a "chill" teacher to support her when she had become dysregulated in the classroom. The teacher she described understood what she needed in these moments and provided a safe space for her to regulate and engage in her learning. While all the participants gave examples of teachers being understanding and

creating a sense of safety at school, the majority also spoke about the difficulties they faced when teachers lacked understanding and were inconsistent. For example, Caitlyn said,

> *"Coz obviously not all of them, but some of them are like really, really rude. And like, I just didn't like them, like at all…Like, they're just really mean to me. Like, I had this one teacher in year 7, and like I forgot my homework and then he said that I was really unorganised and like messy in front of everyone, and it was really sad."* (Caitlyn, p. 14)

While in her initial statement used in this section Caitlyn described most teachers as understanding, here Caitlyn described some of her teachers as "mean" and "rude", showing staff understanding and behaviour were inconsistent during the transition. When Caitlyn made an organisational error, she was subject to embarrassment when reprimanded in front of the class. The lack of understanding and perhaps lack of empathy Caitlyn experienced was perhaps further exacerbated by the fact that she was one of the few participants to not have an autism diagnosis during the transition. Caitlyn implies that if she had a diagnosis, perhaps teachers would have better understood her and what she needed:

> *"Just because like, I wasn't, like known to be special at the time, you know? I don't know. They just like, weren't very helpful at the time, you know, and like, didn't understand, you know."* (Caitlyn, p. 6)

Nevertheless, teachers showing a lack of understanding and/or knowledge of how to help was not unique to Caitlyn. Ellie spoke about how some teachers in both Year 6 and Year 7 had misconceptions about autism and based their understanding on stereotypes:

> ***"****Because there was a kid called [child in primary class] in my class. He was like one of my best mates. He has autism and you can kind of tell because he couldn't regulate his emotions well. So she thought of his image and she had had a year group before that, with someone called (child from class above), and who was like higher on the spectrum. And he, like, wouldn't speak to people. He's like, nonverbal sometimes and stuff like that. So she saw that was autistic, not me."* (Ellie, p. 2)

> *“Coz she didn’t know how to support us. She didn't know how to, like we're not asking for a lot. But like I couldn’t read the board and she’d send me out like, and give me detention. If [another child] rocked on his chair, which is his way, he's “disruptive.”* (Ellie, p. 16)

Here, Ellie explains how a primary school teacher did not consider her to be autistic (despite her diagnosis) because she did not meet the expected autistic stereotypes the teacher held. This implies Ellie did not receive individualised support or understanding from this teacher with a fixed idea of what it is to be autistic. Furthermore, through this passage, Ellie shares her understanding that autism can present differently within individuals. She strongly identifies as being autistic even when a teacher questioned this identity based on a limited understanding of how autistic people may present. Once she reached high school, another teacher was deemed to lack the knowledge of how to support neurodivergent pupils. Ellie expressed frustration when her difficulties and the difficulties of others were interpreted as choices to disengage, impacting her trust and relationship with staff. Ellie speaks not only of herself but other neurodivergent peers, expressing a strong sense of community and identity, and frustration with how her community can be unfairly dismissed and reprimanded by school staff. Therefore, all the participants had experiences of teachers who were understanding, which had a supportive impact during the transition, and experiences when they were not, which harmed their transition experience.

Subtheme: The Need for Tailored Additional Support at School

Many of the participants received additional support organised by school staff. A range of approaches were described by the participants, but those that were considered most helpful were individualised and/or tailored to their presenting difficulties at the time of the transition. There were multiple examples of individualised support plans utilised by school staff. For example, Beth explained:

> *“I have a student passport. Umm it has like my leave early pass on there, things I don't like, things like goals. Like they've got rules like for me not to be picked on in class. I get to have, I have to sit next to somebody I’m comfortable with because otherwise I'll panic. To try and keep me near an end and not to be in the middle.”* (Beth, p. 11)

Beth's "student passport" is an example of tailored support within the classroom. Beth shared "rules" that school staff were required to implement/follow to support her comfort across all classrooms, especially concerning peer interaction. Other participants shared out of class intervention support, including Alice's 1:1 wellbeing sessions:

> *"I like doing it because, you know, if I have anything that I want to unload, but even if it's good news, like, if I'm like, oh, I'm really excited to go here then, like, because you can't talk about like, I mean, you can, but like, that would be like during break. Because like in class, you can't just say I've got this, this what I'm doing at the weekend. I'm really excited. And but with, you know, you can with her and. So yeah, it's just the unload."* (Alice, p. 18)

Here Alice describes her need to "unload" her thoughts with a trusted adult whilst at school to remain regulated within her lessons and maintain her wellbeing. The differences between the type of support necessary for Beth and Alice show how they considered good transitional support to be sensitive to their individual needs. This is further highlighted as a similar intervention of a "girls' group" was helpful for Daisy but unhelpful for Alice. Daisy said,

> *"There was a girls' group in year seven, which I quite liked because it was sort of just doing stuff with other people who were quite similar to you. And that was quite fun. I feel like there was someone who was in Year 11 that year, who was then friends with the other people who would then like if we saw them around school, we'd say hi. I quite like that."* (Daisy, p. 13)

Daisy found a "girls' group" helpful. She enjoyed being introduced to pupils who were "similar" to her and building cross-year group connections that made her feel more comfortable around the school. Whereas when asked about the "girls' group" at her school, Alice said,

> *"I have to go every Friday morning form time. But it's just like a group of, like, girls who have, like, ADHD or autism. And I'm not really like friends with any of them …. I prefer form time. Like it's not bad, …We don't really talk about anything in particular. I just sit there to be honest because everyone else is talking and I'm like "I don't know any of these people" and I don't see them often enough. I see them for 15 minutes every week. I don't know, like I don't know them well enough to just, you know talk to anyone. And so I just sit there and then wait for the bell to go."* (Alice, p. 25)

Alice's use of the phrase "I have to go" implies she attended the group out of requirement rather than choice. It appears Alice finds the group uncomfortable due to the lack of time to build familiarity with the members of the group. This highlights how, despite both being autistic, Alice and Daisy required different support at school during the transition.

Finally, the participants spoke about a lack of support given when it was needed. This was for a variety of reasons, but for Caitlyn, the lack of transition support was directly linked to her not yet having an autism diagnosis. She said,

> *"Only specific people got to, like, look around the school beforehand, and like, it was really annoying because, like, you had to be, like, diagnosed with something at the time it was like just really annoying… With, like, no one else there. And they got to, like, get used to the surroundings and stuff… I know that they got to, like, have these people, like, personally, like, like students there, like play games with them and help them and like, get have questions and biscuits and stuff."* (Caitlyn, p. 4)

Here we see Caitlyn's frustration over not being included in the additional transition preparations other pupils received because she did not yet have an autism diagnosis. This passage gives the sense of Caitlyn feeling left behind and excluded from these activities. Additionally, there were other examples of support being mismanaged or inconsistent. For example, Daisy said,

> *"I remember that parts of my one-page profile weren't followed, but I don't really remember what that was because it never got followed. So then I don't remember what it was, and I just remember taking random stuff off that didn't get followed."* (Daisy, p. 18)

As already stated, many of the participants were provided with individualised plans of support (i.e. one-page profile/student passport), and Daisy expressed how the agreed support was inconsistently delivered. This led to the decision to remove items that could have been supportive, as if giving up on receiving the support she felt was necessary. Finally, Ellie explained how she was provided additional support that was inappropriate for the presenting difficulty. She said,

> ***"****Like halfway through I got umm a 5-minute outside pass because they thought that would fix my bad behaviour. For some reason 5 minutes outside of classrooms can*

> *massively change everything [sarcastic tone]… I think it's bloody useless. They don't know how to handle anyone with needs, so they just give you a 5-minute pass, and if it's that bad, they give you a 15-minute front office pass that you can use once a day. But how is 15 minutes of sitting there going to do anything to my behaviour?"* (Ellie, p. 6)

This passage emphasises how additional support organised by school staff did not support Ellie as it did nothing to change the root cause of the problem she was facing. Ellie felt the teachers deemed her behaviour something that needed to be "fix[ed]" as if the problem was held solely within her, but clearly stated the suggested support would not change her behaviour. Ellie's experience that they did not know how to "handle anyone with needs" implies she felt there was a lack of knowledge and understanding from school staff, and so the support offered was inappropriate. Therefore, this subtheme emphasises how additional support was often desired and helpful when individualised. However, generic support or an absence of support meant some difficulties remained, leading to frustration.

Subtheme: Parental Advocacy to Access Support

Parental advocacy was often considered a key element to gaining access to the support needed during the transition. Many of the participants described their parents requesting support on their behalf when it was not automatically given. For example, Beth said,

> *"I kind of just let my parents handle it to be honest, because like while I wasn't too worried like I knew it would be helpful, but I just didn't really want to bring myself, to tell myself that it would be helpful. Yeah. So I just, like, kind of let my parents deal with it."* (Beth, p. 21)

This passage suggests Beth had difficulty expressing what she needed to improve her school experience; therefore, she relied on her parents' advocacy. This suggests there is a dual purpose for parent involvement, firstly, to express to school staff that their child is experiencing a difficulty when they feel unable to, and secondly, to request support/intervention. This was also expressed by Caitlyn,

> *"I could not go to school. It was like that bad. So she [her mother] had to, like, ask the people for it. And then they gave me one [a leave early pass]."* (Caitlyn, p. 11)

There is a sense that Caitlyn's difficulty with attending school became "bad" without being addressed, which meant her mother needed to request support. While Caitlyn and Beth's parents requested specific support once their daughters were attending high school, Daisy reflected on how her mother supported joined up thinking between her primary and high school:

> ***"****She did a lot of talking, switching with different information that the schools had, because at primary school I had a one page profile, and they had that and then she helped like they sent it to her just before I joined, like here [secondary school] sent it to her so that she could then look over and change it and check with me because when we created it, they probably, it kind of felt like they didn't include everything. They kind of filled half of it out for me. And then like told me more then what I could add. But then they never gave it to me to add stuff, so I think she helped add the stuff that needed to be added and help like get the teachers to actually apply that stuff."* (Daisy, p. 17)

Daisy expressed how her mother facilitated the sharing of information between her schools during the transition and included Daisy in the process. This meant Daisy and her mother worked together to request the support deemed necessary. Daisy also noted elements of helpful support were missing and that through her One Page Profile she could "add" what was needed. Daisy's use of the phrase "get the teachers to actually apply that stuff" gives the impression that, without her mother's influence, the agreed support may not have taken place. This suggests Daisy noticed the power her mother holds in changing the support she received at school, which is also reflected in Beth and Caitlyn's statements.

However, for some of the participants, the need for parental involvement resulted in a strained relationship between home and school. For example, Beth said,

> *"Like late year 7. So we had a meeting with Mr X, Miss x and Miss X. And when like when my parents, my dad said to him that I wasn't on the SEN register he had another meeting or a phone call with Miss X a few weeks later. And my dad was just saying that like it was really annoying because he felt like they weren't trying to help me."* (Beth, p. 21)

Beth's passage presents a complicated route her parents encountered in attempting to gain support for her, with multiple meetings with different members of school staff causing

frustration. This communicates Beth's recognition that the transition also impacted her parents, due to their time and persistence being required to gain access to appropriate support and the mental load this took, which was expressed by her father's annoyance. The difficulty in attaining the support gave the family the impression that school staff were not "trying" to support Beth purposefully, rather than the problem being a lack of knowledge or resources. Therefore, there is a commonality in the way participants recognised the important role their parents played in advocating for them to be better understood and supported at school. There appears to be a shared belief in a sense of power that participants felt their parents held to ensure appropriate support was put in place.

GET 5: The Transition of Self

GET 5 explores the participants' transition within themselves. The participants largely had daunting preconceived ideas about high school, which often did not materialise once they started. Instead, they spoke about high school being a "fresh start" away from their well-established primary school reputations and routines. Finally, most of the participants reflected on how they had changed during and following the transition, hence how the school transition started the process of a transition of self. Table 7 presents the subthemes of GET 5 and the prevalence of the subthemes amongst the participants.

Table 7

Prevalence of subthemes related to GET 5

Participant	Preconceived ideas of the transition and personal ability to cope	A fresh start and shifting identity	The post-transition self
Alice	✓	✓	✓
Beth	✓	✓	✓
Caitlyn	✓	✓	✓
Daisy	✓	✓	
Ellie		✓	✓

Subtheme: Preconceived Ideas of the Transition and Personal Ability to Cope

Many of the participants had preconceived ideas about what high school might be like and their ability to cope. For example, Caitlyn said,

> *"And that like I was going to get bullied. I was really scared about that…Because, like, primary school, I always used to get bullied and it was really sad. And then, like, I don't know. Yeah. I was, like, really scared that it was going to happen in high school as well."* (Caitlyn, p. 7)

Caitlyn's primary school experience of being bullied impacted her perception of what high school would be like. This increased her fear about being bullied at high school. Similarly, Daisy said,

> *"I wasn't looking forward to it because I just didn't want to go back to school. And I don't really enjoy school that much. So like the prospect of trying to come back to school and then feeling like it was going to be so much stricter, I just didn't really want to."* (Daisy, p. 8)

While Daisy also based her ideas of high school around her primary school experience, she had the added concern of high school being even worse due to the preconception it would be "much stricter". Alice also anticipated aspects of high school would be more difficult, but found her preconceptions to be unfounded:

> *"I was worried because I thought that there'll be like loads of because, you know, like in high school they've got, like, massive stacks of paper. But it's not, it's not hard at all. You just go like a sheet and most time you're not even set homework."* (Alice, p. 3)

When considering how participants came to hold their preconceptions, Beth commented on adults constantly discussing all the negative changes associated with the transition:

> *"So I was having, like, meltdowns quite a bit, but (short pause). I struggled with Year 6 anyway. It took me, it took me like, I'd like go in late, like every single day like*

leading up towards summer holidays. (whispering) I wasn't very good at going to school… Because I was getting stressed because like left and rightly they mentioned high school and all these changes and it was just kind of being thrown at me. And I didn't really know how to deal with it, if that makes sense… Like, the Head Teacher, Year 6 teachers, just like teachers all like kind of scattered around the school… They were just saying that we like, it was like, we were going into a different environment and that it was like that." (Beth, p. 2)

Beth's use of the phrase "being thrown at me" expresses the overwhelm she felt when being given constant reminders by primary school staff about the changes that came with the incoming transition. This had a large impact on her daily school life, causing "meltdowns" and difficulty attending school as the transition became more imminent. Beth whispered, "I wasn't very good at going to school," implying she felt a sense of shame and embarrassment about her stress impacting her ability to attend school, despite this occurring due to the actions of others. Therefore, there was a shared preconceived consensus among most of the participants that they would experience overwhelming difficulties in high school, leading them to question their ability to cope.

Subtheme: A Fresh Start and Shifting Identity

Starting high school signified a "fresh start" for the participants, both for themselves and the environment around them. Participants reflected on their mixed feelings about leaving primary school and starting high school. For example, Beth spoke about how difficult it was to leave primary school. She said,

"I cried in year 6. I cried a lot on leavers day…because it was just like a whole part of like my life was just going, just shifting." (Beth, p. 4)

Beth reflected on the enormity associated with leaving primary school. She recognised the familiar school routine she had become accustomed to was about to shift and so change. The word "shifting" suggests she recognised her life would be different in a way that could not be reversed. Daisy also reflected on how she felt about leaving primary school, considering it a "fresh start" and saying,

"I think the fresh start, because, like stuff being more challenging. Because in primary school, especially after SATs, they kind of just almost ignored us and we didn't really do much. So it's kind of like SATs, and then there was a residential, but I didn't go.

So it was like SATs, residential, end of the year. And there was like a lot of gaps where we weren't really doing much. And like, I was kind of just ready to start actually learning stuff again. Because that was getting quite boring." (Daisy, p. 9)

Daisy presented she was ready for the "fresh start" she described. She felt she had gained all the knowledge and experience primary school could offer and was ready for the "more challenging" high school curriculum. This passage presents Daisy as being sure of herself and "ready" for the transition due to outgrowing the practices within primary school. This was similar to Ellie, who when asked what she was looking forward to about high school said,

"Not being like with the same teacher all the time and moving around and stuff. Not being stuck in same seat all day. And actually like learning something." (Ellie, p. 7)

This implies Ellie felt moving onto high school would resolve many of the issues she associated with primary school (e.g. having the same teacher, being stuck in the same seat). Like Daisy, Ellie was also ready for an increase in academic challenge and sought the opportunity to learn differently. Similar views about the new and "exciting" opportunities high school held were also shared by Beth,

"I was excited to have, like, a bunch of different teachers, like, not being stuck in just one classroom all the time and having a little bit more freedom I guess." (Beth, p. 3)

Beth's use of the word "freedom" suggests being in high school was associated with more autonomy compared to primary school. Similarly, Alice commented on how the transition resulted in her maturing as a person and developing her identity. She said,

"I love some of the teachers here like they're really cool. But I also miss my primary school teachers. But you know that's just how it is." (Alice, p. 9)

"*It was like growing up, you know, like, I'm like, I'm old now. I'm not in primary school anymore. I'm not surrounded by little kids. I'm trying to be like, big kids, like people I'm going into."* (Alice, p. 9)

The phrase “that’s just how it is” shows Alice’s acceptance of the changes associated with the transition. Furthermore, the second quotation suggests Alice felt there was a shift in identity as she entered high school as the youngest of the pupils. She recognised a need to mature and develop so she could become one of the “big kids” in this new setting. For Caitlyn, the transition also came with the opportunity to forge a new identity:

> *“I was excited. I know like for just like new teachers and like more of a new start with like people that I like didn't know… like because they just like, wouldn't know who I was in primary because I was really embarrassing in primary. I could just like not be that weird, you know? And like be better… Because, like, in primary just like was like really obnoxious and like loud and like, not the best person to be friends with. And like and secondary people wouldn't know that that was me, you know?”* (Caitlyn, p. 7)

Caitlyn held a very low view of her behaviour in primary school, describing herself as “embarrassing”, “obnoxious” and “weird”. Therefore, the transition was an opportunity to present herself differently so she could form better relationships with peers and teachers. She felt it would be helpful that teachers/peers in high school had no preconceived ideas about her, so she could start anew. Therefore, the participants largely viewed the transition as a natural point of change in their lives where they had an exciting opportunity to evolve educationally, personally, and socially.

Subtheme: The Post-transition Self

The participants were asked to reflect on the present. They spoke about how things had changed since the transition, some of which started during the transition and have continued to develop since. For example, Beth reflected on how she no longer feels the need to “fit in” like she did during year 7. She said,

> *“I was really ashamed of being autistic. I didn't like telling people, I didn't want people to know. I like I don't hide it now so much, but I don't, I still don't tell people because it's not, it's not their business. Like I don't, I don't like I I think I just said this, but I don't hide it like it's, it's part of me, it's not going to go. Like I think instead of just trying to be normal and trying to fit in, just being, have it, just be myself my own way, the way I want to be.”* (Beth, p. 14)

> *"I'm making myself a challenge coz tomorrow I'm going to school trip so I'm going to tag [a charm] on my jeans. I'm scared, but it's OK."* (Beth, p. 16)

Beth expressed how her self-acceptance of being autistic has developed post-transition. While being autistic was something she felt she needed to hide from peers when she joined high school, she now accepts her autism as "part" of her identity that holds value. There is a real sense of freedom in the phrase "just be myself my own way, the way I want to be" as she has now broken away from the need to appear "normal" and wants to present her true self to others. She has continued to develop her sense of self and is even making a "challenge" for herself to wear a charm on her jeans she likes even though her peers might not, suggesting she is seeking further development of her own sense of style and how she wants to present her identity to others. Beth's use of the word "challenge" suggests this form of non-conformity continues to be difficult and scares her. However, her perseverance to wear something she likes shows exploration of her personal style and identity that she hid away during the transition.

Caitlyn and Alice spoke about how their confidence in social interaction has grown post-transition:

> *"But now I'm, you know, I'm better because I feel like nobody's going to come up to you or like, say anything to you."* (Alice, p. 21)

Alice's use of the phrase "I'm better" suggests she felt her ability to interact with others was something within her that needed to improve, and has, following the transition. Similarly, Caitlyn said,

> *"Now, I've got my group of friends that I hang out with all the time, and we have our spot in the atrium that we always sit at. But then also in lessons now I know how you like speak people and make friends with them instead of just talking about like the work and stuff. And like now I've, like, actually got more friends...Like the start of year nine to be honest, like recently…I just like got more confidence with it, to be honest."* (Caitlyn, p. 15)

Caitlyn has reflected that not only does she now have a group of friends, but her ability to speak to new people has also improved. She identifies "more confidence" within herself that has developed over time, which highlights how, for Caitlyn, the transition was the

start of a journey of self-development socially. When discussing this topic, Caitlyn seemed pleased with her progress and presented this reflection with a sense of pride, showing how she has overcome a difficulty she faced during the transition.

While the rest of the participants presented reflections about self-development and acceptance, unfortunately, Ellie experienced further difficulties following the transition. She said,

> *"I didn't get in trouble at all in primary. I was, I was at top of my class in everything. And now I'm at the bottom of my class in everything."* (Ellie, p. 2)

> ***"**I've been suspended this year already…I don't go to half my lessons."* (Ellie, p. 18)

Ellie expressed how she considers herself to be unsuccessful at school post-transition. There is a stark contrast between her behaviour and academic success between primary school and high school, which presents how the transition has been difficult, and the situation has worsened since. Throughout her interview, Ellie spoke about the negative impact of her relationships with school staff and the challenge to her autonomy:

> ***"**I don't like when people like boss me around over stupid things, like earrings. I just knew that I was gunna get on stuff like that, and I do now."* (Ellie, p. 7)

While Ellie places blame on school staff for causing her difficulty and her resulting behaviour, inevitably, her experiences have also impacted her sense of self:

> "I've just got worse and worse. Everybody's just mean." (Ellie, p. 19)

Ellie's reference to both her and everyone else (school staff) highlights the link between the strain of the school environment (e.g. context, staff) and her behaviour and feelings about herself, which she continues to carry post-transition. Therefore, this subtheme presents how the participants' identities continued to evolve after the transition.

GET 6: How to Better Support Autistic Girls During the Transition

GET 6 presents the suggestions made by the participants to improve the transition process to better support autistic girls based on their experiences. While other GETs detail the barriers and facilitators of the transition for the participants, GET 6 explores the explicit proposals participants felt would better prepare and support autistic girls through the transition. Table 8 presents the subthemes of GET 6 and the prevalence of the subthemes amongst the participants.

Table 8

Prevalence of subthemes related to GET 6

Participant	Comprehensive and realistic transition activities	Individualised support based on authentic understanding
Alice	✓	✓
Beth	✓	✓
Caitlyn	✓	✓
Daisy	✓	✓
Ellie	✓	✓

Subtheme: Comprehensive and Realistic Transition Activities

In GET 1 all the participants discussed the quality and usefulness of transition days organised by their schools. However, the participants explicitly stated adjustments for transition days to be improved, which largely focused on making them more comprehensive and realistic to the high school experience. For example, Alice said,

> *"I think it'd be helpful for them [pupils with SEND] to speak like to the team a bit to get used to like to have more like in depth transition, extra transition days, I guess."*
> (Alice, p. 23)

Alice feels pupils with SEND (including autistic girls) need more opportunities to discuss the transition with the high school "team" in detail, which would be achieved by more

transition days. The need for “depth” suggests her experience was surface level with a lack of attention to detail, which left her feeling unprepared. Similarly, Beth and Caitlyn felt meeting teachers was important, but extended this to experiencing a realistic lesson:

> *“It's like what sort of, like situation each classes are and like, just like, get, let them meet some of their teachers and stuff beforehand and it might help you know.”* (Caitlyn, p. 18)

> *“More transition days. Like having transition days like going and sitting in a class like with other students and seeing how the teacher teachers, like teachers who I was going to have on my timetable. How they would like how they do the lessons, if the class is actually silent, how you do the register, how you come in, how you sit down. Yeah, it's kind of how you do everything.”* (Beth, p. 8)

Caitlyn and Beth described the need for more transition days that are realistic of the true high school experience by gaining direct, practical experiences of taking part in lessons. There is a sense that experiencing the high school context in greater depth (i.e. sitting in class, realistic teacher input) would support greater preparation and reduce confusion. In Beth’s passage, there is also the personalised element of meeting the teachers she “was going to have on [her] timetable”, suggesting knowing exactly who would be teaching you and having the opportunity to have a practise lesson with them to get to know their teaching style would demystify the start of high school and reduce worry.

Ellie also felt it would have been helpful to connect with similar peers during the transition days:

> *“Like actually maybe get to know people before I started. Like on the extra transitions the kids obviously have, like ADHD or autism or something, and if I'd have got to know them then like my mate (child on extra transition day), I only started getting to know him like maybe halfway through Year Seven. And there's some people that I get on really well with <u>now</u> that I think could have gone to transitions days that have autism.”* (Ellie, p. 6)

This shows how Ellie feels transition days could have a function to support peer connection. However, since this did not occur organically, perhaps due to the types of activities completed on the days (e.g. tours), peer connection activities should be explicitly planned during transition days, especially for neurodivergent pupils so they can begin to

build their sense of community with others who may understand elements of their lived experience. Therefore, there was a consensus from all the participants that transition days need to become more realistic and provide an in-depth experience of high school to support better preparation.

Subtheme: Individualised Support Based on Authentic Understanding

The participants described a need for school staff to have a better understanding of autistic girls, but also an increased ability to recognise and meet their individual differences and difficulties. Beth and Alice suggested this started with identifying difficulties:

> *"Figuring out what their needs are and if if they can't put it into words, help them put it into words. And instead of just ignoring when they say like oh, I need this, get it done, instead of it just being like months of waiting."* (Beth, p. 23)

> *"Understand or like notice like if they're getting like over stimulated or like nervous or anything and just give them help. Like maybe like let them go to class like a few minutes early if like you know the if like the crowds, when everyone gets to leave and go to their class, if it gets to like too much then let them go like a minute before so they can get to their class like just a minute before everyone else."* (Alice, p. 24)

Beth's explanation highlights the differences in how autistic girls may present compared to other pupils. Firstly, she says autistic girls may not be able to express their needs verbally, but this does not mean the need is not present. Beth expresses a responsibility of the teacher to support autistic girls to uncover and "figur[e] out" what is going wrong. Similarly, Alice states teachers' need to "notice" when autistic girls are becoming overstimulated, again implying they may be unable to verbalise this themselves. The implication is that only if teachers "notice" or "figur[e] out" difficulties will they be able to make timely adjustments before autistic girls become overwhelmed. Secondly, Beth highlights how when autistic girls do/can verbalise what they need during the transition this should be followed through by school staff with urgency, they need to "get it done", implying being ignored and having to wait can escalate concerns/problems. Ellie gave a similar view in her interview:

> *"When we say something because normally, and this isn't the case for everyone but my mate [friend] was also autistic, she, me and her have always told them what's wrong and how they can change it, but they've always said no, we won't change like*

that. So just unless you really can't, I think it's better to listen to what we're saying because nobody actually takes us seriously because we're 13-year-old girls. Like when I say moving classes or something else or whatever, like go and have walk and talk and they don't listen, it just gets worse and worse and worse. And they wonder why. But I'm telling them how they can fix that." (Ellie, p. 20)

Like Beth, Ellie stated a need to "listen" to autistic girls when they ask for what they need, as they often know what needs to change so they can be better supported. Ellie takes the view that when she and other autistic girls are ignored and not taken seriously by the adults supporting them, difficulties worsen over time. There is a real sense of unbalanced power between the girls, who know and understand their lived experience best, requesting the support they know they need and those who are gatekeeping the support, which Ellie believes can be mitigated by school staff listening and truly hearing and understanding what autistic girls want and need. Daisy suggests this could be achieved through a consistent adult checking in:

"I think maybe having a specific teacher who would like, come and check in on what I was doing. Because I know we had a Pastoral Officer, but that changed again in the middle of the year for some reason. And that was a bit annoying because like, I felt like I I didn't really like the first one, so then it kind of felt like I could more talk to the second one. But by that point, I sort of didn't need someone to talk to almost because I'd settled in." (Daisy, p. 18)

Daisy's comment presents the importance of a meaningful relationship with a trusted adult to support her during the transition period. She also highlights how support during the transition may only need to occur for a limited amount of time, but is required until the individual autistic girl feels "settled in". Therefore, all the participants shared the view that transition support needs to be prompt and individualised for each child based on an authentic understanding of their difficulties.

Discussion

This section considers how the findings answer the research questions and can be understood within the existing research literature and theory. This includes using theories utilised within the existing body of literature, such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Furthermore, based on the findings, the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012) and Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development (Erikson, 1950), and Bridges Transition Model (2009) introduced within the literature review were deemed appropriate to provide a further lens through which to understand some findings of the current study. Then, limitations of the study will be considered as well as opportunities for further research in this area. Finally, potential implications for Educational Psychology practice and other professionals will be contemplated.

RQ1: What are the experiences of autistic girls who transitioned from mainstream primary to secondary schools?

This study aimed to highlight and better understand the voices of autistic girls and understand their experiences of the transition to high school, as they have previously been underrepresented in transition research. The use of semi-structured interviews with five autistic girls and analysis through the IPA process (Smith et al., 2022) ensured the participants' experiences were understood individually first, highlighting the heterogeneity and nuance of experience within this participant group. Then cross-case analysis allowed both similarities and differences to be considered within the group. GETs 1 to 5 were relevant to RQ1 as they detail the different elements that made up the transition experience for the participants.

GET 1: Attempting to Feel Prepared with Mixed Success

GET 1 presents participants' experiences of the start of the transition process, where they made preparations to go to high school. Participants took a diverse range of approaches, but all experienced transition days. Similar to the current study, transition days are commonly discussed throughout the research. Visiting the new school was a popular strategy for adapting to a new school building, routines and meeting staff to reduce anxiety and stress (e.g. Stack et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2022). Nevertheless, an interesting finding from the present study was the idea that if transition days were inconsistent with the day-to-day running of high school, including teachers behaving differently or lessons being

unrealistic, they were deemed counterproductive to preparation. From a Self-Determination Theory lens (Ryan & Deci, 2000), perhaps this links to participants feeling there was a missed opportunity to gain a sense of 'competence' in what high school is really like, so they would feel prepared. Gaining a sense of competence seemed important to all the participants, but they gained this in different ways through their proactive preparations (e.g. speaking to people with experience, gathering equipment, practising travel routines). Many of the participants also felt the need to try on the uniform multiple times, perhaps highlighting the sensory hyperarousal and distress autistic individuals can experience caused by the material. This was not highlighted in the transition literature but has been identified in studies for autistic girls outside of transition literature (e.g. Sproston et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the diverse approaches taken by the participants of the current study show how different preparation activities were supportive for different individuals, presenting the heterogeneity of methods within the group to achieve the similar aim of preparedness, which was uncovered by the idiographic nature and depth of the IPA analysis (Smith et al., 2022).

GET 2: Adapting to the New High School Context

GET 2 presents the participants' experiences when they first arrived at high school. In line with the literature, all the participants described finding the changes challenging (e.g. Nuske et al., 2019; Stack et al., 2021). This included much more complex routines and lessons with multiple classrooms and teachers, which was overwhelming to manage, as well as an increase in academic expectations. This aligns with the literature, as higher academic expectations causing stress and anxiety were found for both boys (e.g. Hamilton and Wilkinson, 2016) and girls (e.g. Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Cridland et al., 2014). Other changes discussed by the participants of the current study included navigating the much larger environment, leading to almost all the participants becoming lost, which caused distress and annoyance. This too was a common theme in the literature, with Nuske et al.'s (2019) review finding pupils had concerns about entering new and often much larger buildings that were loud and disorienting. Not only did they have to learn to navigate a much larger physical environment, but they also found the increase in the number of pupils challenging, which, for some, led to the point of having difficulty attending school and experiencing "meltdowns" at home. This links to an emerging theme from the research literature of autistic girls camouflaging their distress whilst at school and then requiring time for release and recovery at home (Hebron, 2019; Dean et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, despite initial challenges associated with entering high school, many of the participants found the discomfort (especially around navigating the school) to be

temporary. This suggests that once the girls became more familiar with their environment and routine, some of the initial challenges subsided. This also aligns with Bridges' (2009) Transition Model, as discussed in the literature review. Whilst participants had physically moved to high school, their accounts suggest that adaptation was ongoing as they became more familiar with their new routines, environments and expectations. This placed them within the 'Neutral Zone' (Bridges, 2009) for a time as they had left their old setting and were becoming used to their new context. While this was straining at the time, it was temporary before moving into the 'New Beginning Phase' where they felt more competent. While many of the studies in the literature focused on the difficulties faced by autistic children during the transition, Richter et al. (2022) also found difficulties such as getting lost and adjusting to new routines were often short-lived and autistic pupils quickly adapted. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that, similarly to autistic boys discussed in the literature, the autistic girls within this study also experienced difficulties when first encountering the high school environment, but quickly adapted. Nevertheless, a potential difference for girls, in line with other studies (East, 2024; Hebron, 2019), was their distress may have been masked/camouflaged at school and released once feeling safe at home, so not observed by school staff.

GET 3: Navigating Peer Interaction and Relationships

GET 3 explored participants' experiences of the complexities of peer interaction and forming friendships during the transition. Many of the participants described difficulties interacting with new peers during the transition, especially in forced circumstances such as seating plans. Nevertheless, despite feeling discomfort, a novel finding was that some of the participants found seating plans enabled interaction with new peers, which they wanted, but may have otherwise avoided. This aligns with the idea that autistic pupils want to develop personal relationships due to a strong desire for friends (Nuske et al., 2019; Hebron, 2017; Richter et al., 2020), but their differences in social communication approaches can mean they face difficulties when forming new peer relationships (Nuske et al., 2019). While other studies have previously commented on difficulties in interactions endured during unstructured times, findings in the present study presented how structured conversation through class-based activities was supportive for interaction compared to the complexities and potential for misunderstanding intentions and meaning that had to be considered during unstructured social conversation. This could be understood through the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012), which suggests that, due to the different experiences, dispositional viewpoints and interactions between autistic and non-autistic individuals, there can be differences in understanding by both parties during interactions (Milton et al., 2023). This

theory does not project a deficit on the part of the autistic individual, but a “break in mutual understanding” (p. 83) by both the autistic and non-autistic parties (Milton et al., 2023), leading to misunderstandings and different interpretations of the interaction. Therefore, it could be conceived that structured, class-based discussions with new peers removed some of the ambiguity in interactions and were a more supportive introduction to interaction with new peers. This could also explain why many of the participants found it easier to form new friendships through association with already well-established friends from primary school who knew and understood them, as perhaps it was felt there was less opportunity for miscommunication. In line with the literature (e.g. Hebron, 2017), many of the participants had successful friendships from primary school that persisted into high school and formed new friendships in Year 7. A further theme for forming friendships was consistent contact to promote familiarity and comfort, which is also supported by the literature, suggesting autistic pupils can take more time to form and solidify friendships (Richter et al., 2022). However, the participants also largely experienced instability in their friendships. Friendship groups evolved, with some of the participants gaining more friends and others experiencing friendship breakdown during the transition and beyond. This could be explained by Ryan et al.’s (2021) research into friendships among adolescent autistic girls, who found autistic girls were more likely to experience ‘relational aggression’ through behaviours such as gossiping, social exclusion and withdrawing friendship.

A further finding was that while many participants sought belonging amongst their peers, this was approached in different ways. Some of the participants discussed attempting to assimilate to gain acceptance from peers and avoid bullying by masking what they felt were their autistic traits. However, none of the girls in the present study described experiences of bullying upon entering high school, despite this being a prominent theme within the research literature (Makin et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2020; Hebron, 2017). While the present study cannot be generalised to express the experiences of all autistic girls, research suggests that autistic girls may be more likely to mask/camouflage compared to autistic boys (Alley, 2019). Looking outside the transition literature, there is evidence that autistic girls may mask to feel a greater sense of belonging and to prevent them from being singled out by peers (e.g. Cook et al., 2018). Therefore, the present study has highlighted how masking may have been a key mechanism during peer interaction for the autistic girls during the transition, which perhaps meant they were not bullied, but likely took a toll on their emotional wellbeing (e.g. O’Connor et al., 2024). Alternatively, some participants sought a sense of belonging amongst peers they felt were similar to them (e.g. other neurodivergent peers), which was similar to Cridland et al.’s (2014) finding where new friendships were

formed by autistic girls with like-minded pupils with similar interests. Therefore, while all participants sought a sense of belonging, they took differing approaches to achieve this.

GET 4: The Need for Support and Understanding from Adults

GET 4 explores the experiences of the participants with the adults who were supporting them. In line with the literature, it was deemed important by participants to build trusting relationships with school staff to support emotional regulation and wellbeing (e.g. Richter et al., 2022; Deacy, 2015; Webster et al., 2022). Nevertheless, in contrast to East's (2024) study exploring the transition for autistic girls, participants largely agreed that many members of high school staff understood how to support them as Year 7s (e.g. being late to lessons), which helped them during the transition. When considering the transition through an ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this shows how the support from teachers (i.e. within the microsystem) directly impacts the transition experience for pupils. While all the participants discussed positive experiences with members of school staff, many also described negative experiences where a few members of staff's lack of understanding and knowledge of supporting autistic learners was unhelpful and, in some cases, detrimental to wellbeing. Strained relationships with school staff were common throughout the literature (Richter et al., 2019; Tobin, 2012; Hebron, 2017), and Ayirebi and Thomas (2024) highlighted how this is particularly dangerous for autistic girls, as difficulties are perhaps more likely to go unnoticed by staff, resulting in decreased opportunities for appropriate support, making them susceptible to mental health difficulties. Caitlyn was one of the few participants who did not have an autism diagnosis during the transition period and described the contrast in support she received compared to the additional support those around her with diagnoses received during the transition. Delayed or late diagnosis in autistic girls was a theme identified in the literature exploring the experiences of autistic girls, thought to have negative implications such as being unable to access early intervention and support services (Cridland et al., 2014; O'Hagan et al., 2022; Ryan et al., 2021). This perhaps highlights the importance of a diagnosis in the current school context to promote understanding and acceptance of difficulties faced by autistic pupils, possibly exposing an overreliance on the medical model (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000) as a framework for receiving support. Nevertheless, even with a diagnosis, the participants of the current study discussed how some primary and high school teachers had limited understanding of autism, and in some cases clearly worked according to outdated beliefs and stereotypes about autistic presentations. These experiences draw parallels with the findings of East (2024) and Ayirebi and Thomas' (2024) studies, highlighting how a lack of teacher understanding of how autistic girls may present negatively impacted the support they were offered. Nevertheless, many of

the participants received additional support organised by the school in a range of areas, including social support and self-regulation, as described in Nuske et al.'s (2019) systematic review, including a 'student passport', 'time out' cards and many of the participants attended 'Girls' Groups' with similar peers. Aligning with the literature, individualised support to the specific challenges faced by the individual was preferred and more effective (Stack et al., 2021; Neal & Frederickson, 2016). For example, Daisy found attending a 'Girls' Group' with similar peers enjoyable and it helped her confidence in interacting with peers across the school. However, Alice described her 'Girls' Group' as unhelpful as she was unfamiliar with the group members, so did not feel comfortable contributing. Instead, her 1:1 wellbeing session with a trusted member of staff supported her regulation during the transition as she could offload her worries. This highlights the heterogeneity within the group captured by the IPA analysis (Smith et al., 2022) and how the same intervention is not appropriate for every autistic girl. Furthermore, many participants spoke about planned support either not being delivered in practice or inappropriate support being offered, with there seeming to be a link between the level of teacher understanding and the support delivered within that lesson. For example, similar to Tomlinson et al.'s (2020) study of school experiences for adolescent autistic girls, multiple participants in the current study described 'student passports' being inconsistently delivered if teachers did not notice a problem. This added to the worry of the participants in the current study, as they did not know the level of support to expect, as teachers interacted with them so differently. Furthermore, some interventions (e.g. the '5 minutes outside pass') did not resolve the root cause of the problems, appearing to be used as a short-term resolution to more substantial concerns, such as feeling safe in the school environment and having trusting relationships with school staff. This again highlights the consequences of a lack of authentic understanding and individualised support. Examples like this often resulted in parents needing to become involved.

All the participants spoke about their parents advocating for them to gain access to appropriate support during the transition. This aligns with parental involvement being a common theme throughout the transition literature (e.g. Yates et al., 2023; Richter, 2019). For example, within the literature, some parents expressed how they were key motivators for organising and implementing transition support (Hamilton and Wilkinson, 2016). Similarly, participants in the current research explained how parents expressed the difficulties the participants faced to school staff (when the participants themselves found this challenging) and requested support/intervention that otherwise may not have been given. This highlights the advocacy role of parents in ensuring individual needs within the school environment are understood and catered to. To support this process, the current study found the parental role further extended to facilitating the sharing of information between the primary school and

high school in some cases, which the literature suggests is key to academic and organisational continuity, and preparation for change (e.g. Richter et al., 2019; Nuske et al., 2019; Deacy et al., 2015). However, there were also parallels between participants in the current study and the body of transition literature portraying parental frustration with the complicated routes to gaining support, which, once agreed, was often not fully implemented (Yates et al., 2023). In both the current study and within the transition literature, this led to a strained home-school relationship, with parents losing trust and questioning the school's ability and determination to deliver appropriate support (Yates et al., 2023). Therefore, GET 4 highlights a need to consider the ecological factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) contributing to transition experiences. These findings suggest school staff and/or parents' understanding contributed to participants feeling supported or ignored.

GET 5: The Transition of Self

While GET 5 has been identified as its own theme, the contents interact with other GETs. GET 5 highlights how the participants experienced and noticed a change within themselves during and after the transition. This started with preconceived ideas about the transition and participants' perceived ability to cope. In line with the literature, many of the participants expressed pretransition concerns (e.g. Richter et al., 2019; Tso & Strnadova, 2017; Neal & Frederickson, 2016). For example, bullying experiences in primary school led to this being the expectation in high school, which aligns with the expectations of participants in Stack et al.'s (2021) study. Furthermore, there were concerns about increased expectations of high school teachers and anticipated greater academic difficulty, aligning with Hamilton and Wilkinson's (2016) study. Therefore, GET 5 interacts with GET 1 as participants felt a need to be prepared due to the worrying preconceptions they had formed. Perhaps through a self-determination lens (Ryan & Deci, 2000), being prepared was an attempt to regain a sense of autonomy over a transition they have little control over. However, preconceptions about high school were more nuanced than being purely positive or negative. Many participants spoke about high school signifying a much needed and exciting fresh start, which could mean the transition to high school can be understood through the lens of Life Course Theory (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2007), which, as discussed in the literature review, could be considered a punctuated point of transition. The participants of the current study discussed the transition itself as a shift where they would have greater autonomy and become more grown up, seeming to interpret the transition as not just a change of educational setting but a change to identity. Caitlyn took this a step further, describing how she saw the transition as an opportunity to present herself differently from how she presented in primary school, hoping to form better friendships with peers, therefore

aligning with Richter et al.'s (2019) study suggesting that for autistic pupils who had negative experiences with peers in primary school, the move to secondary school was considered an opportunity for a 'new start' without prejudice. This could be because their reputation, previous behaviour, and autistic label would not be known to new peers (Hebron, 2017). Furthermore, participants in the current study shared an excitement to have many different teachers and expand their knowledge, having outgrown the practices of primary school. This links with the small body of existing literature, contrasting with the dominant narrative that high school is a negative experience for autistic pupils, especially Neal and Frederickson's (2016) strengths-based study finding pupils enjoyed having multiple teachers and a greater variety of lessons.

Finally, participants in the current study reflected on their post-transition selves and how their personal skills and identity have since evolved. Participants spoke about how their confidence in social interaction had grown since the initial transition, and they now have greater stability in their friendships. Through the lens of Life Course Theory (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2007), this finding emphasises the idea that the transition to high school could be considered a point of punctuation, where individuals enter a new physical and social environment, where individual characteristics, resources and personal experiences, family, school and sociocultural context, all contribute towards their development (Brenner, 2011). Beth took this one step further, as originally, she discussed feeling shame about being autistic and did not tell many peers during the transition, similarly to girls from Connolly and Bunn's (2025) recent study investigating autistic girls' wellbeing in school. Nevertheless, Beth continued that now (in Year 9) she does not hide her autism, expressing a greater sense of self, identity, and acceptance as an autistic young person. The timing of this evolving sense of identity during and post-transition appears to align with Erikson's stages of Psychosocial Development (Erikson, 1950) as described in the literature review. Erikson (1950) claims social relationships shape our sense of self as we encounter a central psychological conflict at different stages of life. The school transition occurs towards the end of Erikson's Industry vs Inferiority stage, where children are learning social/emotional skills within their school contexts, comparing themselves to peers, and can feel inadequate if they do not feel competent amongst peers. This could reflect participants' desire to 'fit in' amongst peers during the transition period and hide aspects of themselves they felt were different. However, following the initial transition, some participants appear to have moved into the Identity vs Confusion stage (Erikson, 1950), developing a much stronger sense of self as well as stronger relationships with others. Alternatively, while Ellie presented with a strong sense of identity as an autistic person, her experience of the transition, including difficult relationships with members of school staff, seems to have resulted in her viewing herself as

"worse" at school post-transition. This again highlights how the transition could be considered a transitional point of punctuation within an individual's life (Brenner, 2011), where further development of a sense of self is impacted by interacting features within the physical and social environment (i.e. school staff, setting, parental involvement, etc.).

RQ2: How do autistic girls believe the transition from mainstream primary to secondary school could be improved based on their transition experiences?

This research question arose because of how the participants chose to discuss their experience of the transition during the interview, illustrating how the IPA methodology is participant-led (Smith et al., 2022). Participants were clear about aspects of the transition support that required improvement; therefore, the researcher asked questions about how the process could be improved. This formed GET 6, 'How to better support autistic girls during the transition'. Explicit proposals to improve the transition experience fell into two categories: 'comprehensive and realistic transition activities' and 'individualised support based on authentic understanding'.

As discussed in GET 1, all the participants experienced multiple transition days, elements of which were found helpful. However, many of the participants felt transition days need to delve into the realistic high school experience in further depth to support preparations. This included opportunities to meet more of their teachers and experience their teaching styles and processes (e.g. how the register is taken) in advance to further demystify the experience. This could be understood through self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as an attempt to build a greater sense of competence about 'how to be' within the high school context through preparation based on realistic experience. Furthermore, meeting and beginning to build relationships with teachers highlights the need for relational facilitation. This could be further explored in Ellie's comments regarding earlier and further opportunities to connect with peers, perhaps again to fulfil the relational element of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) by beginning to build a sense of belonging with like-minded peers before starting high school.

As highlighted by GET 4, some members of school staff did not have a good understanding of autism or how to support autistic girls during the transition, a finding East (2024) also documented. A clear theme in the literature was the need for staff to know students as individuals and respond to their individual challenges (Hebron, 2017; Hoy et al., 2018; Stack et al., 2021), and in GET 6 the participants explored how staff understanding needs could occur to create a better transition experience. For example, participants

highlighted a need to notice when autistic girls may require support, based on their experiences and belief that some autistic girls find it difficult to verbally express when they feel “overstimulated” or “nervous”. Here, the participants perhaps referred to a version of masking (O’Connor et al., 2024) where autistic girls may attempt to cover their discomfort, leading to further overwhelm. Additionally, Ellie expressed frustration that when she and other autistic girls explicitly state what they need, they can be ignored or not taken seriously. From a self-determination theory lens (Ryan & Deci, 2000), Ellie appears to be expressing the lack of autonomy attributed to autistic girls during the transition, a comment also made by pupils in Stack et al.’s (2021) study, although in their study, the majority of the participants were autistic boys. Therefore, having more members of school staff who seek to understand the views of autistic girls and act upon them was believed to be important to improving the transition process.

Contribution to the Literature

This study contributes to the body of literature examining the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic pupils. A strength of this study was highlighting and promoting the voice of autistic girls, who are underrepresented in the current literature. Furthermore, distinct and important contributions were made through utilising an IPA (Smith et al., 2022) approach to understanding the lived experiences of autistic girls, where individual experiences, including barriers and facilitators throughout the transition, were captured in greater breadth and depth than previous studies. Key findings will now be summarised.

Participants discussed their experiences of transition days in detail. This included the positive aspects already documented in the literature, but also the novel finding that transition days were unhelpful, and for some, counterproductive to preparation if they were inconsistent with typical teacher behaviour and the day-to-day running of high school. Furthermore, additional preparation approaches were attempted by all the participants, but in different ways, further emphasising the need for individualised approaches to concrete experiences to support transition preparation. This study also documented the impact of having a diagnosis on the support received during the transition. Due to the higher chances for delayed or late diagnosis in autistic girls (e.g. Cridland et al., 2014; O’Hagan et al., 2022), it is a concerning but important finding that, in some cases, transition support was gatekept if the participant did not have an autism diagnosis at the time of transition. Furthermore, the participants in this study described transition support being inconsistently delivered even when they had a diagnosis. Despite the existence of a “student passport”, some teachers

would not deliver agreed strategies if they did not consider them necessary. This is an important finding which adds to concerns about teachers' understanding of autistic girls and not providing needed support due to the way they present (Ayirebi and Thomas, 2024), which the current study has highlighted can also occur during the transition. Finally, a strength of this study was discussing the transition with participants who could reflect on the entire experience (post-transition). This resulted in participants recognising a 'transition of self' where the transition had been a starting point for an evolving sense of identity as an autistic girl. Often their diagnosis was associated with shame during the transition, but followed by greater self-acceptance post-transition once they became more socially established and familiar with the context.

Limitations

The current study has made a strong contribution to the body of literature about the transition. However, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations.

Firstly, this study had a very small sample size of only 5 participants from one UK county. This means the findings cannot be generalised to represent the experiences of all autistic girls. The purpose of IPA methodology, especially through the influence of idiography, is to generate rich and detailed data and analysis of the particular. Therefore, it was never an aim of the study to produce generalisable results. It was important to uncover detailed experiences due to the acknowledgement in the literature that each child is an individual with their own strengths, needs and experiences (e.g. Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016) and that detailed experiences from autistic girls have largely not been captured in the literature (Stack et al., 2021; Richter, 2022; Peters & Brooks, 2016).

While the researcher's goal was to find a "fairly homogeneous sample" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 44), a second limitation was the way the participants were recruited, leading to a potentially biased sample. While the researcher attempted to recruit participants through multiple avenues (i.e. through schools, local groups, EPs and Specialist Teachers), the majority of the participants were recruited through schools that had passed on the recruitment flyer to participants/parents. This leads the researcher to wonder whether school staff perhaps shared the recruitment information with pupils who had largely more positive experiences, potentially positively skewing the data. Furthermore, since most of the participants received a diagnosis earlier in their development, there is the possibility they presented with more readily identifiable or 'overt' behaviours associated with autism. With findings of the current research indicating a lack of diagnosis meant opportunities for further

support were not always given, this may mean this cohort of participants received greater support earlier in their education journeys and a better understanding of themselves, which could have resulted in more positive experiences than those diagnosed later in life, if at all (e.g., self-identified autistic girls). Furthermore, to take part in the study, participants had to be attending a mainstream high school. Therefore, participants who had been permanently excluded during or following the transition and were attending alternative provision were unable to take part, again meaning there could be a more positive skew within the data.

A further limitation is the potential that the participants may have enacted masking throughout their interviews (Dean et al., 2017), especially if they were concerned about how they might be perceived by the researcher. While the researcher took measures to meet the participants in an initial meeting to introduce themselves, explain the purpose of the research, and assure the participants of anonymity (e.g. pseudonyms), it is possible participants still considered their answers in an attempt to be socially desirable. Nevertheless, participants discussed a range of events they associated with the transition, including key reflections on their difficulties with their environment as well as personal challenges.

A key limitation to this and any IPA study is the level of subjectivity involved in interpretation to produce the analysis. No matter how reflexive and true to the data the researcher attempts to be, ultimately their interpretations will be influenced (even to the smallest extent) by their own biases and preconceptions. This is why the researcher enacted ‘member checking ’, which was previously utilised in Da Mata Da Silva Costa’s (2023) thesis, so participants could check the initial analysis of PETs was accurate. The researcher also took part in monthly supervision during all phases of the research. It is worth noting 4 out of the 5 participants took part in member checking.

Implications

There are implications for EPs and school staff for supporting transitions to high school for autistic girls. To stay true to the voice of the participants, this section will consider all the identified GETs, but will especially focus on the factors suggested by the participants in GET 6, ‘How to better support autistic girls during the transition’. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) will be used as a structure to consider how the findings of this study, highlighting the voices of autistic girls, can influence how EPs could intervene across the systems that have an impact on their transition experience. Intervening at a systemic level is a key part of EP practice, as the aim is to create lasting and

effective change that supports inclusion for as many learners as possible (Young et al., 2019). Ecological Systems Theory (1979) was chosen because its structure encourages consideration of where EPs can intervene at this systemic level and the roles of supporting adults in creating change. This also aligns with the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006) and the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), as rather than assuming the individual young person requires intervention, the focus is on intervening in environmental factors that cause barriers to inclusion at a wider level. Therefore, this approach aligns with the positionality of the researcher.

Microsystem and Mesosystem:

The microsystem considers those who have direct contact with autistic girls, and the mesosystem considers how those with direct contact (in the microsystem) interact with one another. Considering the impact parents, school staff, and potentially other professionals can have on the transition experiences of autistic girls (for better or worse), EPs could have a role in intervening with these parties. The findings from GET 6 suggest that adults supporting autistic girls through the transition should support them to share their views, actively listen to their wants and needs, and act upon what they suggest. This involves supporting the young person to have an active role in planning for their transition. Connolly and Bunn (2025) suggest EPs are skilled in collaborative work with young people to understand what is important to them and apply this to effective, person-centred support. Thinking systemically, EPs can then utilise this information to facilitate meetings with individual parties (e.g. parents, school staff), or multi-system meetings with adults supporting autistic girls so they can plan and implement transition support (Wood et al., 2019). An essential factor in facilitating these meetings includes highlighting and centring support around the young person's views and, where possible, including the young person in the meeting by utilising person-centred planning tools (e.g. Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) (Wood et al., 2019). For example, if the young person shares that they are concerned about how to initiate interactions with new peers but making new friends at high school is important to them, then tailored support could be provided to support them in achieving this goal (e.g. forming a shared interest group facilitated by a trusted adult).

Aligning with the findings of the strong advocacy role of parents during the transition, EPs could also work directly with parents/carers of autistic girls. McCormick and Thomas (2025) investigated what parents of autistic girls found helpful when working with EPs. While this study did not specifically investigate EP support during times of transition, the findings of the current study could be applied to this process. McCormick and Thomas (2025) found

parents valued support with understanding their child's needs, and signposting to supportive strategies, further information, and pathways for further support. This links to the participants from the current study acknowledging the large role their parents played in gaining appropriate support for them, sharing information with school staff, and parental frustration when the pathway to support was unclear or difficult to navigate. Therefore, it could be helpful for EPs to facilitate consultations with parents or perhaps more informal school events (e.g. coffee mornings) to share information about transition processes and so empower parents to access early intervention and planning for autistic girls. The further benefit of a more informal event where many parents are invited is the opportunity to facilitate parent-to-parent support and connection (Lee et al., 2024). This type of support emphasises how it is important for EPs to intervene with people in systems interacting with and advocating for autistic girls to make the transition more accessible, rather than assuming all support needs to be directly given to the girls themselves.

Exosystem:

EPs could work within the exosystem through their interaction with educational settings as a whole, including developing teacher and staff training and neuro-affirming approaches to transitions. Referring to GET 6, the participants felt school staff needed greater understanding of how autistic girls may present so they can identify when support might be needed. This leads to a training need for school staff on how autism can present in girls that EPs could facilitate (O'Hagan & Bond, 2019; Connolly & Bunn, 2025), framed by the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) and social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006). Importantly, considering the descriptions in this study of support being denied to girls who did not have a diagnosis, training could promote supporting presenting/self-identified needs rather than waiting for a diagnosis before acting. Furthermore, considering the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) and social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006), EP training in educational settings could promote a culture of neuro-affirming practice (Connolly & Bunn, 2025), including how the implementation of neuro-affirming approaches could remove barriers to inclusion whilst benefiting all pupils. This means those with and without diagnoses could benefit from neuro-affirming practice. Again, in the interest of highlighting and promoting the pupil voice, any training should be informed by the experiences of autistic girls. For example, East (2024) coproduced training for schools in collaboration with autistic girls, making the content meaningful and relevant to their experiences. Furthermore, in line with GET 6, training sessions and/or consultations EPs facilitate within schools should include important features of transition preparation activities based on the experiences of autistic girls. For example,

EPs and autistic girls could collaboratively develop and present a criterion for transition days (e.g. including realistic experiences of lessons, interacting with their future teachers and peers, perhaps alongside some already familiar peers to support preparation and social connection).

Macrosystem:

EPs can also intervene within the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to reshape how we support autistic pupils and think about educational transition. It has been recognised within the transition literature that there has been a lack of concern, and therefore participation of autistic girls. O'Hagan and Bond (2019) suggest EPs can support further understanding of the experiences of autistic girls at school through research. By conducting further studies that place value on the voices and experiences of autistic girls, EPs can highlight their lived experience to support a shift towards neuro-affirming practice for all autistic pupils, rather than support based on stereotypes or a narrow understanding of autism. Suggestions for further areas of research will be explored in the next section.

EPs can also translate their research and work with young people into policy and processes. Through their work within Local Authorities (LA), EPs could continue to support the development of transition strategies and/or guidance based on up-to-date research concerning the lived experiences of autistic students, as a centralised guide for primary and secondary schools in neuro-affirming practices. Crucially, EPs can and should facilitate the involvement of autistic girls within these developments. This may include conversations about what is important and helpful to them (Connolly & Bunn, 2025), ensuring their voices are embedded within the policies and processes designed to support them and are co-produced.

Future Research

The current research sought to gain a better understanding of the high school transition experiences of autistic girls, adding knowledge to an extremely sparse body of existing research. The use of IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2022) provided much-needed depth and detail so the experiences of the participants could be meaningfully understood. This study provides further evidence that autistic girls can and should be included in research. Therefore, further IPA studies with autistic girls across the UK would continue to add to our understanding of this event for autistic girls from an individual and group perspective. For example, repeating the study with girls who are diagnosed during

secondary school, self-identify as autistic (Friedman et al., 2024) or are on the waiting list for diagnosis could be areas for further research, which may give a greater understanding of the wide range of experiences autistic girls may encounter during transition. Furthermore, as stated in Donnelly's (2026) thesis, further exploration of how the intersectionality of identities impacts the transition experiences of autistic girls is needed, where utilising the model of the social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2012) could be helpful. However, this study has also highlighted the ecological nature of the transition (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mortimer & Shanahan, 2007). Therefore, while the focus of the current study was to promote the voices of autistic girls, there is a need to also gather the voices of other key stakeholders regarding the transition for autistic girls, including parents and teachers. Studies involving the voices of parents of autistic girls will be a particularly important area of future research, as the current study's findings emphasise their strong advocacy role during the transition and how this impacted the support the girls received at school. Nevertheless, the voices of parents should not overshadow the voices of autistic girls. Therefore, a multi-perspective IPA study could be useful for examining the transition from multiple viewpoints, so similarities and differences in perspectives can be explored whilst still gaining rich individual accounts from all parties.

Chapter 3: Reflective Paper

This chapter presents my reflection on my research journey. This includes exploring the decisions I made at various points of the research, what worked well and what I would change if conducting the research again. Furthermore, I reflect on ethical dilemmas, detail how I plan to disseminate the findings of my study and suggest further developments for future research. At points, I will refer to Howell and Fleishman's learning model (1982) to present my perceived competence and how I adapted my approach accordingly.

Positionality

As explained in the previous chapters, this research was framed by understanding autism through the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) and the difficulties autistic individuals face through the social model of disability (Den Houting, 2019; Shakespeare, 2006). This influenced my approach to all aspects of this project, from the way existing research was critiqued during the literature review, to my approach to data collection, to attempting to understand and find meaning in the findings. The implications of this will be explored throughout this reflective chapter.

Selecting a Research Area

My interest in the transition from primary to secondary school originated from being a Year 5 Classroom Teacher. Often, I was surprised by parents, who had been satisfied with the support their child received throughout primary school, expressing concern about their child's ability to cope with secondary school. This was especially prominent when children experienced SEND. Similar concerns were raised during parent and teacher consultations throughout my role as a TEP whilst on placement, especially with pupils described as having communication and interaction needs and/or who were autistic. For some, the fear of their child being unable to cope within the secondary school environment was so strong they informed me this was the reason they had requested an Education, Health, Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA), in the hope that an EHCP would provide a kind of 'protection' for their child as they entered a new phase of learning. With this narrative being so strong, and my personal interest in accessing and promoting pupil voice, I was first intrigued by how autistic pupils thought about and experienced the transition. Furthermore, considering my role as a TEP and future EP, I was also interested in how autistic pupils prepared and/or

were supported to prepare for high school, as well as how pupils experience the transition period.

Reviewing Literature

While I was mainly interested in pupil views, a thematic review of the literature on the transition to high school for autistic pupils was identified as appropriate for reviewing the literature due to the complex and multifaceted nature of the transition, incorporating social, emotional, structural, academic, and systemic aspects (Coffey, 2013; Waters et al., 2014). Therefore, studies were reviewed where a range of approaches were taken involving different stakeholders in the transition. I was first struck by the fact that, despite the number of studies reviewed, only Neal and Frederickson's (2016) study took a strengths-based approach, meaning many of the studies mainly focused on the difficulties autistic pupils faced. My positionality in understanding autism through the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) means autism is considered a difference rather than a deficit. Therefore, identifying autistic pupils who have had positive experiences and the support that enabled this promotes the idea that autistic children can have successful transitions. Nevertheless, considering the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006), there was still a need to recognise difficulties experienced by many autistic children when the appropriate support is not given. Therefore, I felt there was space for a study seeking to better understand the holistic experiences of autistic children, including the facilitators and barriers to the transition. Furthermore, I was astounded by the lack of research including autistic girls, with some studies claiming this was due to the lower prevalence of autism in girls (e.g. Richter et al., 2019), while it is perhaps more likely that autistic girls may be underdiagnosed due to masking (Alley, 2019). This opened a large research gap and a need to better understand the experiences of autistic girls and their views about the type of support that may be needed during the transition.

With the experiences of autistic girls identified as a large gap in the research, there were multiple areas I could have delved into as my area of research. This included gathering the views/experiences of teachers, parents and children. Therefore, in the early stages of my research development, I considered conducting a multiperspective approach, including families and children. However, during research supervision, I reflected on my values as a researcher and chose to focus on seeking the perspectives of autistic girls to amplify the voices of this underrepresented group in the research. Many studies in the literature stated each stakeholder's views represent their perception of the event and should not be considered a direct understanding of the experience of the child (e.g. Peters & Brooks, 2016;

Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016). Therefore, if I truly wanted to understand the experience of the transition for the group who directly experience it, I decided I needed to gain the views of the autistic girls.

Identifying Research Questions

Due to the lack of research about the transition for autistic girls, it seemed appropriate to keep the research questions broad. Therefore, RQ1 became "What are the experiences of autistic girls who transitioned from mainstream primary to secondary schools?" While I wanted to stay true to better understanding the participants' experiences holistically, I was influenced by the lack of research capturing positive transition experiences (Neal & Frederickson, 2016) and wanted to gain an understanding of the positive and negative aspects of the transition, as well as what was helpful and unhelpful. Therefore, originally, RQ2 was, "What do autistic girls perceive as the barriers and facilitators of the transition?" Nevertheless, upon data collection and the early stages of analysis, it became clear the complexity and nuance of the experiences described by the participants meant both barriers and facilitators were captured within the data associated with RQ1. RQ2 was later changed to respond to the topics discussed by participants, which will be explained in the analysis section.

Ontology and Epistemology

Before adopting an ontological and epistemological approach, I considered what would be most appropriate to my underlying values and research questions. A Realist ontology, for example, describes a knowable reality where truths exist outside of human thought (Tebes, 2005). An accompanying epistemology is Postpositivism, where attempts are made to uncover the objective reality and generate knowledge through scientific methods, whilst accepting this understanding is imperfect due to human and contextual subjectivity (Panhwar et al., 2017). While this approach is dominant within scientific research, critics believe Realism leads to overly simplified causal models, such as biological explanations for behaviour (Yarkoni, 2020). For example, a realist may understand autism as "Autism Spectrum Disorder" through a deficit model, according to the DSM-5 (APA, 2013), where there are fixed difficulties that come from within the person. Nevertheless, this does not acknowledge the complexity of the human experience and their interaction with their environment. This approach also does not adhere to the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022); therefore, it was not an appropriate approach for my research questions. Therefore, I adopted an ontologically relativist (Williams et al., 2016) and epistemologically interpretive phenomenological (Willig, 2008) stance. This approach, as

stated in the Empirical Paper, deems there to be multiple versions of reality, all of equal value (Williams et al., 2016), where researchers are concerned with the participants' experiential world (Willig, 2008). This approach was much better suited to the research questions, as I was interested in the experience of the participant as an individual rather than trying to uncover a supposed objective reality.

Methodology and Design Decisions

When considering the appropriate methodology to answer the research question, I explored different qualitative approaches. IPA appealed to me due to its key theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Oxley, 2016), meaning researchers examine how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, whilst recognising the researcher also influences the meaning-making through their interpretation of participants' accounts (Smith et al., 2022). While IPA has been criticised as a subjective methodology influenced by the biases of the researcher, this is mainly a problem if researchers "do not always explicitly recognise either the theoretical preconceptions they bring to the data or their own role in interpretation" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.101). Therefore, many IPA researchers do not consider the subjectiveness of interpretation to be a limitation when the researcher can recognise and attend to their own biases. Therefore, concerned with the lived experience of participants about the phenomenon of the transition to high school, IPA seemed an appropriate approach to answering my research question in line with my ontological and epistemological stance. Nevertheless, I contemplated other approaches before making my final decision. I decided Grounded Theory (Stough & Lee, 2021) would be inappropriate due to the number of studies already exploring the transition to high school for autistic children (even though this was largely for boys), and that my aim was not to develop a new theory. I considered using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), appropriate for studies where researchers are aiming to interpret meaning from participant accounts; therefore, taking the view that experiences are subjective, rather than attempting to uncover an objective pre-existing entity (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This aspect of RTA was appropriate for my research question. Nevertheless, RTA does not incorporate the idiographic underpinning essential to IPA, meaning the individual experiences of participants can be lost. The importance of recognising autistic children as individuals with differing strengths, difficulties and experiences came through as a strong theme in the literature review (e.g. Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016; Fortuna, 2014). Therefore, an IPA methodology was ultimately chosen to frame my research as it aligned with my ontological and epistemological stance, and was appropriate to answer my research questions.

Participant Group and Recruitment:

Aligning with the IPA methodology, it was important to attain a "fairly homogeneous sample, for whom the research question will be meaningful" (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 44). Therefore, purposive homogeneous sampling (Smith et al., 2022) was utilised. I was initially concerned about recruiting enough participants due to my requirement that they have an autism diagnosis and attend mainstream school to support homogeneity in line with IPA principles (Smith et al., 2022). This was concerning because women/girls have been found to often be diagnosed later in life than boys/men; therefore, many autistic girls go through school without a diagnosis, impacting the support they receive (Driver & Chester, 2021). Therefore, I was surprised to find most of the participants who took part in my study received their autism diagnosis during primary school. The fact that girls are underdiagnosed led me to reflect that there is likely a large group of school-age participants who are either awaiting diagnosis or who have not yet been referred, who are excluded from much of the research literature due to having no diagnosis (Chester, 2019). Therefore, repeating the study with girls who are diagnosed during secondary school, self-identify as autistic (Friedman et al., 2024) or are on the waiting list for diagnosis could be an area for further research, which may give a greater understanding of the wide range of experiences autistic girls may encounter during transition.

Overall, recruitment was successful within the timeframe of this research. I believe this was mainly because participants were recruited through schools, which potentially worked well due to participants and their parents having trust in the school, so trusting the research would be appropriate and take place in a familiar setting (Bartlett et al., 2017). However, when the responses to the recruitment information lessened, I had not yet reached my target number of 4-6 participants (that would support a balance of detailed individual analysis and cross-case perspectives). Therefore, I went back to the ethics committee to request to share my recruitment resources with EPs and Specialist Teachers who could share them with pupils/parents they worked with. Once approval was given, it was especially important to clearly state my role in this context as a researcher rather than a TEP, and that participation was voluntary. Opening the recruitment channels had a positive impact, and in hindsight, I should have done this from the start to reach a greater range of participants.

Data Collection

Initial Meeting:

Before collecting qualitative data, I met with the participants and a parent/carer in online 'initial meetings'. These meetings were successful in introducing myself to the participants to build rapport before the interview. I told the participants about my hobbies and connected with them by asking about their interests. This process also contributed to informed consent and assent, as I explained the process of the interview and showed them the interview schedule/resources. This enabled participants and their parents to ask questions and discuss reasonable adjustments. For example, one participant asked for the interview questions and resources to be printed on blue paper. I also gained the participants' preferences about where they wanted to conduct the interview and if they wanted a parent in the room, showing a person-centred approach to make the process as comfortable as possible (Harrington et al., 2014). Furthermore, I asked the participants when they received their autism diagnosis. Upon reflection, considering the lack of research on the transition for autistic girls and the Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2012), it could have also been helpful to gather further demographic data to allow for more cultural reflexivity when considering transition experiences. Nevertheless, further demographic information should be collected with caution to ensure the anonymity of participants.

Interview Structure/Schedule:

I chose to conduct individual semi-structured interviews to collect rich data, aligning with the IPA process (Smith et al., 2022). I considered other approaches, such as focus groups, but wanted to stay true to the ideography of IPA (Smith et al., 2022) and capture each participant's experience as an individual before cross-case analysis. Individual interviews enabled this without the influence of others, which could have left participants vulnerable to groupthink (Horgan, 2017). Each interview took place in a private space within the participants' school to support confidentiality and anonymity.

When designing the semi-structured interview schedule, I reflected on my 'competence' in discussing personal experiences with autistic children. Considering Howell and Fleishman's learning model (1982), I felt I had 'conscious competence' of working with autistic children from my work as a primary school teacher and TEP. However, I reflected on my 'conscious incompetence' of working with autistic children in a research capacity and the Double Empathy Gap (Milton, 2012), so the potential for misunderstanding between myself and autistic individuals. Therefore, I sought support through 'sense checking' my interview

schedule with a Coproduction Advisor from the Engagement Hub of my LA, whose specialist role was to seek the views of autistic girls to improve LA services, and a Communication and Interaction Specialist Teacher whose key area of interest was working with autistic girls. The advice from these professionals helped simplify and break down my research questions for greater clarity. Furthermore, the use of the initial meeting before the interview meant questions could be 'sense checked' with each participant.

I was also flexible during the interview as the schedule was used as 'a guide' in line with Smith et al.'s (2022) guidance. Therefore, I enacted active listening to ensure I was responsive to what the participant was saying, providing prompts for further detail where necessary. This approach also led to my first participant sharing her views on what she felt was important support for autistic girls generally within the transition period, and how existing processes could be improved. This was not part of the original interview schedule but became a key topic of discussion for the first participant. After transcribing this initial interview, I considered the reflectiveness this participant had exhibited and decided to invite other participants to comment on what they thought would be helpful to support the future transitions of autistic girls more generally by amending the interview schedule (See Appendix M).

Interview Supports:

The professionals who 'sense checked' my interview schedule also provided positive feedback on my planned interview process (see Appendix V), including the child-friendly visual supports. For example, the Grid Elaboration Method was chosen to provide structure and facilitate dialogue (Joffe & Elsey, 2014). While some participants found the use of the grids helpful, with Daisy saying, "There's random things I keep remembering, like looking back at, that I didn't remember yesterday." Caitlyn and Ellie both requested not to use the grids, preferring to tell me their thoughts straight away. Furthermore, none of the participants opted to use the other resources, and all were very thoughtful, reflective, and spoke about their experiences in depth. This made me reflect on how I had potentially underestimated the participants' ability to clearly communicate their thoughts and ideas. Considering the Social Model (Den Houting, 2019; Shakespeare, 2006), perhaps the initial meeting supported the participants in becoming comfortable with me and the process, and provided the opportunity to prepare as they were given the questions in advance, thus breaking down some communication barriers. For example, multiple participants told me they had looked at the questions before the interview, and one participant even printed them out and had written notes. Therefore, while I had intended for all the participants to use the Grid Elaboration

Method, this was not a requirement when the participant requested not to use it, as it was always meant to be a helpful tool. Daisy also said, “I've looked through my camera roll as well, so I'd like work out different stuff that I've done.” This made me consider how an approach like participant-driven photo-elicitation (e.g. Danker et al., 2017) could have been another method of supporting the participants to engage and participate in semi-structured interviews. While this approach has been successful for supporting autistic CYP to share their voice within research, it was not appropriate for the current study, as usually this method involves the participants taking photographs and bringing them to the interview. This would have been inappropriate, as in my interview, participants were asked to reflect on an event that happened in the past. Therefore, overall, the interview process as it occurred seemed to be supportive to participants, enabling them to engage and share their views.

Analysis

Since each interview was around an hour, there was a vast amount of data to transcribe, read/re-read, and analyse, which was quite intimidating and overwhelming at first. Again, reflecting on Howell and Fleishman’s learning model (1982), while I had conducted qualitative studies in the past, this was the first time I had conducted an IPA study. Therefore, I was relieved to feel supported by the stepped process described by Smith et al. (2022). I went through steps 1-5 for one transcript before moving on to the next, to give each transcript my full focus and “do justice to its own individuality” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 99). I felt the depth of analysis I achieved on the individual transcripts was possible due to the small sample. This enabled me to move between the part (individual words/sentences) and whole (sentences and extracts) during data analysis and check that I was staying true to the participants’ experience throughout the different levels of analysis through the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2022). I attributed this to how I had immersed myself in the data. Full immersion in the data was also essential for bracketing preconceptions to get to the essence of the participant’s subjective experience. I believe my development in reflexive practice throughout my training to be an EP (HCPC, 2023; BPS, 2023) supported me in the process, as well as discussing parts of my analysis during research supervision.

As mentioned in the interview schedule section, the first participant began to speak about how she felt the transition process could be improved, which resulted in amending the interview schedule. While some of the participant’s suggestions seemed to be linked to her experiences, she explicitly made the point of stating a suggestion that she did not need, but felt other autistic girls might benefit from. The other participants also had lots of ideas about

how to improve the transition, linked to their personal experiences, and what they had noticed occurred for others. This resulted in the formation of GET 6, 'How to better support autistic girls during the transition'. I realised GET 6 did not fully align with RQ1, which only referred to what the participants had directly experienced, so I "retrospectively reworked" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 43) my research questions to introduce RQ2, 'How do autistic girls believe the transition from mainstream primary to secondary school could be improved?'. Therefore, RQ2 evolved from the data, once again showing how I was responsive to what the participants chose to share regarding the transition during their interviews, further exemplifying how the views of autistic girls were central to this research.

Impact of Positionality:

I purposely recognised my theoretical preconceptions of conceptualising autism as a difference rather than a deficit in line with the neurodiversity paradigm (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) and the difficulties autistic individuals face through the social model of disability (Den Houting, 2019; Shakespeare, 2006). This was particularly important when the participants relayed their experiences at school or even the way they described how they experienced their own autism. I had to be careful to acknowledge my own positionality and interpret what the participants had said within the context of their interpretation. This at times made it difficult to maintain an interpretative rather than descriptive stance through fear of moving away from the essence of what the participant had said and allowing my own positionality to overly influence the interpretation. After recognising how my interpretations could differ from the intended meaning of the participants due to my theoretical preconceptions and the Double Empathy Gap (Milton, 2012), I enacted 'member checking' (Tong et al., 2007). 'Member checking' had been utilised in Da Mata Da Silva Costa's thesis (2023) (also analysing the experiences of autistic girls), so I also used this to ensure my analysis and interpretation reflected the experiences of my participants. A further and perhaps more important purpose of member checking was to give power back to the participants and ensure their voice was central to the analysis. While this does not often occur in research, this way of working aligned with my values of being child-centred in my approach throughout the research, from designing the interview schedule with child-friendly resources to the analysis of themes. Therefore, throughout my analysis, I aimed to identify themes that were important to my participants.

Impact of Member Checking:

Four out of five participants chose to take part in 'member checking' where I shared a summary of my initial findings based on the PETs I developed from their individual transcripts. During my meeting with Beth, she said, "Don't change anything, this is perfect. You really understood me and what I said." This gave me confidence that I had managed to 'bracket' many of my own preconceptions when analysing Beth's transcript. Nevertheless, during my meeting with Daisy, there were a few aspects she felt I had slightly misrepresented as too vague, which I then edited to present her thoughts. On reflection, despite my best intentions, I may have been influenced by another participant's interview, who had a similar experience, so this part of my analysis for Daisy lacked nuance. This emphasised the impact the researcher can have on the data through the double hermeneutic and highlighted the importance of member checking before moving on to cross-case analysis. While I felt cross-case analysis was successful, I have since reflected it could have been beneficial to have also received feedback or even introduced a participatory approach (MacLeod, 2019) to data analysis with the participants at this stage. Nevertheless, this would have added a significant time commitment for the participants (Bourke, 2009), which may have reduced participation, and a significant organisational commitment for me as the researcher, alongside my placement and university activities when time was scarce. Therefore, in future research with fewer time limitations, this should be considered to further strengthen the analysis process.

Ethics

I considered ethical practice throughout the research process according to guidance set out by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee at UEA, as well as the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) and HCPC Standards of Proficiency (2023). Furthermore, to meet the requirements necessary to recruit participants within the LA I was working in, I also gained ethical approval from the LA's Research Governance Committee (See Appendix C).

A particularly important area for consideration when planning the study was ensuring appropriate support was provided to the participants so they could take part. This materialised in the processes outlined in the previous sections, including conducting the interviews in private spaces within their familiar educational environment, anonymisation through pseudonyms, the initial meeting, supportive tools during the interview, child-friendly

information sheets, consent forms and debriefing sheets. Nevertheless, while appropriate planning approved by the ethics committees took place, two ‘adverse events’ occurred during interviews. Two participants disclosed historic self-harm that occurred during the transition period. Having followed the appropriate safeguarding procedures, including informing Designated Safeguarding Leaders at their schools, my Research Supervisor, and the School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee at UEA, it was established the event was historic, the participants had received appropriate support, and I had acted appropriately. The participants choosing to talk about this experience showed they felt comfortable discussing highly personal and difficult topics during the interview, even though no question required this of them. I was concerned about how to write up this finding, so I discussed it with my Research Supervisor. We unpicked the meaning behind what had been said and established that in both cases the participants were sharing the extent to which they had experienced difficulties with peer interaction and the desire to ‘fit in’. I checked my interpretation with one of the participants during ‘member checking’, who said this was the meaning she intended, as she experienced self-harm as an attempt to assimilate with her peers. This felt like the most appropriate way to write up what the participant had shared. Therefore, while overall this study was ethically strong, future research with autistic girls should consider the potential for sensitive topics to be discussed during semi-structured interviews (Malone et al., 2025), even if the planned interview questions do not directly ask for this.

Personal Knowledge and Skill Development

My research journey has provided many opportunities to develop new skills required for research and as a TEP (HCPC, 2023; BPS 2023; BPS, 2021). While examples of my growing knowledge and skills have been expressed throughout this chapter, I will now highlight further areas of development.

Firstly, I have developed skills in negotiating empirical research with my placement LA, as I had to state how the research would support steps towards achieving local initiatives to receive approval from the Research Governance Committee. This was possible as I had critically evaluated existing research and policy through my literature review to identify a gap in the research and formulated a clear rationale for the research I wanted to conduct. Planning a research project of this size was at first extremely daunting. Once I had attended university lectures introducing me to different methodologies and conducted further reading,

there seemed to be a clear pathway for my research. Therefore, I feel I have achieved significant development in my qualitative research skills, including decision-making in adopting a methodology appropriate for my research aims and questions, as well as a further depth of skills in IPA.

I have also developed skills in conducting research with autistic children, something I noted early in my research journey was an area of conscious incompetence according to Howell and Fleishman's learning model (1982). I now feel I have gained competence in this area. I was particularly concerned about asking participants to recall a past event, but they all spoke about the transition in great depth, down to very fine details. A large area of learning which I will take into future research was the importance of the initial meeting before the interview to aid rapport building and support preparation. On reflection, there were similarities between what the participants needed to engage in the research process and what they stated would be supportive when starting high school. The participants described wanting consistency between their transition days and the start of the school term, and the initial meeting allowed them to meet me, observe my tone, mannerisms, personality, and see the exact questions I would ask (with the caveat that I might ask them to explain more about some topics if needed), so they were fully prepared for what the interview would entail. This seemed to put them at ease and allowed them to recall and discuss their experiences with great reflection and detail. Therefore, this learning can be applied to my future research with this population, but also my 1:1 work with children as a TEP and future EP.

Research Contributions and Implications

I am pleased to have conducted research that contributed to the body of literature examining the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic pupils and provided a distinct contribution to a gap in the literature. To my knowledge, this is the only study that has used an IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2022) to examine the primary to secondary school transition experiences of autistic girls within mainstream education. This complements an existing thesis utilising alternative qualitative approaches by East (2024); however, the depth of information gathered from each participant spanning across primary and secondary school experiences holistically enabled themes to be uncovered that expanded the knowledge produced by existing research. This included further unpicking about the barriers and facilitators of relationships with peers and staff, access to support (considering the impact of a diagnosis), recognising the 'transition of self' the participants

experienced, and preparations for the transition. For example, all of my participants not only mentioned that transition days occurred and their benefits, similar to other studies (e.g., Stack et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2022), but also gave a more nuanced evaluation of how and why aspects were and were not helpful. This is one example of how my findings added an important layer of depth, contributing to the understanding of the experiences of autistic girls. Furthermore, this thesis is novel as the findings are used to consider direct implications for EP practice described in the empirical chapter, conceptualised through an Ecological Systems Theory framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This means the impact of the findings of this study have been considered at multi-systemic levels.

Dissemination

I hope to share this research in multiple ways. Firstly, in line with my ethics application, I plan to create shorter summaries of the findings, appropriate for schools that supported recruitment for the project, the parents of the participants and the participants themselves. I also plan to present my research during a professional development day within my LA for my service. My hope is the EPs will take my findings and implement them within their practice across the county. I would also like to share my research through participation in events like webinars and conferences, to reach wider EP audiences as well as other professionals like school staff, specialist teachers and others who work with autistic girls before, during and after the transition. Finally, I feel that publishing this research will reach an even wider audience to highlight the voices of autistic girls in the research.

Conclusion

My research journey has been challenging but rewarding. This chapter has presented my growth as a researcher and development of research skills, which will be applied throughout my work as an EP. The opportunity to reflect within this chapter has enabled me to recognise the strengths in my study through conscious and evidence-based choices, as well as opportunities for further development in future research. My hope is this research invites practitioners to consider the strong and reflective voice of autistic girls and apply this to supporting them within their transition experiences and beyond.

Appendices

Appendix A - School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee Ethics Application

Ethics ETH2425-1467 : Miss Kirsty Thomas

Date Created.	04 Feb 2025
Date Submitted	25 Feb 2025
Date of last resubmission	31 Mar 2025
Date forwarded to committee	04 Apr 2025
Researcher	Miss Kirsty Thomas
Category	PGR
Supervisor	Dr Andrea Honess
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Current status	Approved after amendments made

Ethics application

Applicant and research team

Principal Applicant

Name of Principal Applicant: Miss Kirsty Thomas

UEA account: pub17zru@uea.ac.uk

School/Department: School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Category: PGR

Primary Supervisor

Name of Primary Supervisor

Dr Andrea Honess

Primary Supervisor's school/department

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Project details

Project title

Exploring autistic girls' experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school - An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Study

Project start date

21 Apr 2025

Project end date

31 Aug 2026

Describe the scope and aims of the project in language understandable by a non-technical audience. Include any other relevant background which will allow the reviewers to contextualise the research.
The transition from primary to secondary school is a key event in a child's education, where they experience academic, emotional, social, and structural changes (Coffey, 2013; Waters et al., 2014). While transitions can be challenging for many pupils (Hebron, 2018), challenges can be heightened for autistic pupils due to the disruption to routines and relationships, differences in social communication and interaction, experiences of anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and bullying in mainstream settings (Tobin et al., 2012; Boulter et al., 2014).

There is extensive literature attempting to explore this transition for autistic pupils, finding both positive and negative experiences and suggestions for support. However, this research is overwhelmingly based on the views of autistic boys, their parents and teachers, perhaps due to the reported higher prevalence of diagnosed autistic males (Loomes et al., 2017). Nevertheless, NICE guidelines (2017) suggest autism is under-recognised in girls due to gender differences in their social presentation. Consequently, there is very little research seeking the views of autistic girls. Considering autism can be experienced and present differently in boys and girls, it is important to gain a better understanding of girls' experiences at this crucial time of transition so we can consider the appropriate support required.

This study aims to highlight and better understand the experiences of the primary to secondary school transition for autistic girls within mainstream education. The aim is to understand their lived experiences as individuals, as well as similarities and differences within the group. Furthermore, this research aims to gain a holistic account of the transition experience, including what the girls felt were facilitators and barriers throughout their transition.

My research questions:

1) What are the experiences of autistic girls who transitioned from mainstream primary to secondary schools?

2) What do autistic girls perceive as barriers and facilitators of the transition?

Provide a brief explanation of the research design (e.g. interview, experimental, observational, survey), questions, methodology, and data gathered/analysis. If relevant, include what the participants will be expected to do/experience.
I will collect the views of autistic girls in Year 7-10 (typically age 11-15) in mainstream secondary school via semi-structured interviews. I will aim to recruit girls based within the county (where I am on placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist), however if I am unable to recruit enough participants, this will be extended to other counties in the East of England. I will ask participants' parents for their child's current year group, the date they received their autism diagnosis, and whether they have an Education Health Care Plan and the date they received this at the end of the first (introduction) meeting after consent has been obtained. I will seek advice from professionals within the local area with expertise

working with autistic young people (e.g. teachers from autism hubs in mainstream schools) to "sense check" the interview schedule and discuss minor adjustments to the wording of questions and appropriateness of supportive resources. The final questions will be sent to participants prior to the interview. The interviews will take place at the participants' school or online via Microsoft Teams (up to 1 hour). Participants can choose to have a parent present. Participants will be asked about their experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school. Considering potential communication differences between participants and the researcher, child-friendly visual resources will be used to support participants in sharing their experiences. Participants can choose to verbalise, write or type their responses. The researcher plans to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2022) to analyse the data. Following initial analysis of transcripts the researcher plans enact 'member checking' and write a summary of each participant's experience and share this with the participant so they can provide feedback about whether the analysis reflects their experience. Following this, cross- case analysis will occur.

Detail how any adverse events arising in the course of the project will be reported in a timely manner.
Adverse events will be reported to my Research Supervisor as soon as I am aware they have occurred to seek advice of next steps. Furthermore, if a participant discloses a safeguarding concern to me I will terminate the interview and immediately report this to the Designated Safeguarding Lead if the interview has taken place at school. I will also report any adverse events in Ethics Monitor following these initial procedures.

Will you also be applying for Health Research Authority approval (HRA)?

No

Indicate if you are applying for approval for an experiment to be conducted in the School of Economics' Laboratory for Economic and Decision Research (LEDR).
No

Is the project?:

none of the options listed

Does the project have external funding administered through the University's Research and Innovation Services (RIN)?
No

Will the research take place outside of the UK?

No

Will any part of the project be carried out under the auspices of an external organisation, or involve collaboration between institutions?
No

Do you require or have you already gained approval from an ethics review body external to UEA?

Yes, approval to be obtained from inside the UK

Does this new project relate to a project which already has ethics approval from UEA?

No

Research categories
Will the project include primary data collection involving human participants?

Yes

Will the project use secondary data involving human participants?

No

Will the project involve the use of live animals?

No

Will the project have the potential to affect the environment?

No

Will the project have the potential to affect culturally valuable, significant or sensitive objects or practices?
No

Will the project involve security sensitive research?

No

Will the project involve a generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool?

No

Human participants - selection and recruitment
How many Participant Groups are there who will receive tailored participant information?:

One

Name of Participant Group 1.

Autistic girls who have transitioned from primary to secondary school

How will the participants be selected/recruited?

I will aim to recruit up to 8 participants. This is achievable within one Local Authority.

Participants will be recruited through secondary schools, where the Head Teacher will act as gatekeeper, passing on recruitment flyers to children and parents within their school community. The parent will contact the researcher to express interest on their child's behalf. Secondly, the researcher will provide the recruitment flyer to local youth/SEN/autism parent and child groups and charities (e.g. The Mix), where group leaders will act as gatekeepers, passing the recruitment flyer to children and parents. They will also be asked to place the flyer on their social media pages used by the group's parents. The recruitment letter will state that parents must initially contact the researcher to express interest for their child, both

the parent and child will be required to give informed consent before the child can participate in the study, ensuring ethical participation. Participants will be accepted to take part in the study on a first come first served basis as long as they meet the participant criteria. They will be informed of this on the recruitment flyer in case of oversubscription. Furthermore, the researcher will offer to conduct an information session at the schools or SEN/autism/youth parent or child groups to provide potential participants and their parents with the recruitment flyer and more information about the study and answer any questions. This will be stated in the initial email to gatekeepers. There is a pre-September poster (for Year 7-9) and post-September poster (for year 8-10) to ensure the participants have been in secondary school long enough to be able to discuss their transition experience if recruitment occurs in the new academic school year.

If appropriate, upload a copy of the proposed advertisement, including proposed recruitment emails, flyers, posters or invitation letter.
How and when will participants receive this recruitment material?
The researcher will send the advertisement to gatekeepers once ethical approval has been obtained. Participants and/or parents of the participants will be given the recruitment flyer. The parents will then show the flyer to the participants, or the participants will be given the flyer and show their parent the flyer. Alternatively, the parent may view the flyer on their local SEN/autism/youth groups social media page. Following this, the parent will contact the researcher (it will be stated on the recruitment flyer that the parent must contact the researcher to express their and their child's interest). Furthermore, the researcher will offer to conduct an information session at the schools or SEN/autism/youth parent or child groups to provide potential participants and their parents with the recruitment flyer and more information about the study and answer any questions. This will be stated in the initial email to gatekeepers.

In terms of UEA participants only, will you be advertising the opportunity to take part in this project to?:
None of the above (i.e. UEA's Student Insight Review Group (SIRG) does not need to be informed)

What are the characteristics of the participants?

The participants will be pupils in Years 7-10 (typically age 11-15). They will have been given an autism diagnosis by a professional qualified to diagnose autism, and identify as female. They will have attended a mainstream primary school and now be at a mainstream secondary school. Furthermore, the participants will be able to express themselves to a level where they can describe their experiences in detail (either verbally or through typing).

Will the project require the cooperation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the individuals/groups to be recruited?
Yes

Who will be your gatekeeper for accessing participants?

The Head Teacher from the participants' secondary school or a group leader from a local Youth/SEN/autism parent or child group.

Parental consent will also be given for participants to take part.

How and when will a gatekeeper permission be obtained?

Gatekeeper permission will be obtained from the Head Teachers and Youth/SEN/Autism parent or child group leaders once ethical approval has been gained. This will occur via email. The email sent to gatekeepers also informs them that I would be willing to put on an information session for parents/children to support recruitment and go to their setting to present the findings of the study with themselves and other members of staff if they wish. Parental consent will also be given for participants to take part. This will be shown through a signed consent form.

Provide any relevant gatekeeper documentation (letters of invite, emails etc). How will you record a gatekeeper's permission?
I will store the email response on OneDrive during the project.

Is there any sense in which participants might be 'obliged' to participate?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

The researcher intends to conduct the research within the Local Authority where they work as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP).

What will you do to ensure participation is voluntary?

The researcher will be clear to gatekeepers, parents and the participants that in this context their role is a researcher, and the research is being conducted independently from the Local Authority (LA) (i.e. no raw data will be shared with the LA, school or SEN/autism/youth group) during the introduction meeting before data collection. Therefore they may choose not to participate. Furthermore, the researcher will not use information accessible to them in their TEP role without the appropriate ethical approval. Furthermore, I will be using my university email address, not my placement one.

Will the project involve vulnerable groups?

Yes

If yes, explain the necessity of involving these individuals as research participants and what will be done to facilitate their participation, or the participation of people with physical disabilities.
The voice of autistic girls is missing from the body of primary to secondary school transition research. It is crucial to gain their views about their experiences of the facilitators and barriers to their school transition. By understanding what is perceived as helpful and unhelpful by autistic girls, it is hoped this research will add to the evidence base and be of use to practitioners including Educational Psychologists, and school staff in implementing child-centred practice, therefore improving the experience for autistic girls. To facilitate their participation, there will be an initial online meeting with the participant and their parent/carer to explain the process and provide the participant information sheet and consent form (there will be a child's version of each form) to ensure informed consent can be given. There will also be a "time out card" the participant can point to if they would like a break during the interview and they can leave the interview at any time. Furthermore, the child can elect to have their parent/carer present for the interview if they wish. Additionally, within the interview there will be visual supports (e.g. transition map, opportunities to draw/write ideas down first, prompt cards) available to support the participants to answer the questions. Participants can choose to verbally respond or write or type responses to questions. Considering the 'Double Empathy Gap", that posits there can be differences in understanding between non autistic

and autistic individuals, following initial phases of analysis after the interview, participants will be invited to view a summary of their transcript so they can check the researcher has understood their views and provide feedback (the process of member checking). There will also be a debrief at the end to signpost them to further wellbeing support should they require it.

Will payment or any other incentive be made to any participant?

No

Include any other ethical considerations regarding participation.

The purpose of this study is to gather the views and experiences of the participants. Therefore, there is no adverse impact on peers not taking part. The interviews will be held in a 1:1 space (unless the child requests their parent is also present) so it will not be possible for data to be collected from people who are not participating. The researcher has experience of working 1:1 with children and young people with a range of needs and differences (including those who are autistic) in their daily practice as a Trainee Educational Psychologist and previously as a teacher. If the participant is choosing to participate in the interview via Microsoft Teams, the researcher will ask that they are the only person on the camera (if they chose to have their camera on) through their parents can still be in the room, and to be in a private space where no other conversations can be heard.

Human participants - consent options
By which method(s) will consent to participate in the research be obtained?:

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Human participants - information and consent

Participant Information and Consent
Will opt out consent for participation in the research be used?

No

You can generate a Participant Information Text and Consent Form for this application by completing information in the Participant Information Text and Consent Form Generator tab. Alternatively you can upload your Participant Information Text and Participant Consent Form which you have already prepared. Confirm below:

Upload prepared Participant Information Text and Consent Form.

Upload the Participant Information Text and Consent Form. Enter participant group number and name.

Autistic girls who have transitioned from primary to secondary school

When will participants receive the participant information and consent request?

The parents of participants will receive an email containing the participant information sheet (parent and child versions), following ethical approval, gatekeeper approval, and the parent contacting the researcher to express interest on their child's behalf. This email will ask the parents and participants to read the appropriate information sheet and will also invite the

participant and their parents to an online meeting with the researcher to make introductions, discuss the information sheet, where the meeting will take place (the participant's school or Via Microsoft Teams), and so the participant and/or parent can ask any further questions or request reasonable adjustments. Within this meeting, if the participant wants to take part the researcher will send the participant's parent the appropriate consent forms (online or in person version) via email and ask them to send these back signed.

How will you record a participant's decision to take part in the research?

At the end of the initial online meeting, the researcher will ask the parent and participant to review their respective consent forms and sign/complete them. The researcher will request the parent to email this back to them.

Parental/Guardian Information and Consent
Are you asking for parental/guardian (or other responsible person) consent?

Yes

You can generate a Parental/Guardian Information Text and Consent Form for this application by completing information in the Parental/Guardian Information Text and Consent Form Generator tab. Alternatively you can upload your Parental/Guardian (or Other Responsible Person) Information Text and Consent Form which you have already prepared. Confirm below:

Generate automated Parental/Guardian Information Text and Consent Form.

When will parents/guardians (or other responsible person) receive the parental/guardian (or other responsible person) information and consent request?
The parents of participants will receive an email containing the participant information sheet (parent and child versions), following ethical approval, gatekeeper approval, and the parent contacting the researcher to express interest on their child's behalf. This email will ask the parents and participants to read the appropriate information sheet. Furthermore, the email will also invite the participant and their parents to an online meeting with the researcher to make introductions, discuss where the interview will take place (the participant's school or Via Microsoft Teams), and so the participant and/or parent can ask any further questions or request reasonable adjustments. Within this meeting, if the participant want's to take part the researcher will send the participant's parent the appropriate consent forms (online or in person version for both child and parent) via email and ask them to send these back signed.

How will you record a parent's/guardian's (or other responsible person's) decision regarding consent for their child (or other vulnerable person) to participate in the research?

At the end of the initial online meeting, the researcher will ask the parent and participant to review their respective consent forms and sign/complete them. The researcher will request the parent to email this back to them.

Human participants - method
Which data collection methods will be used in the research?:

Interview

If your research involves any of the methods (including Other) listed above, upload supporting materials.

How have your characteristics, or those of the participants influenced the design of the study or how the research is experienced by participants?

My participants are autistic. Therefore I have considered how best to facilitate their participation thinking about their potential communication and interaction differences. To ease anxiety I will offer an initial meeting with the participant and their parent/carer to explain the process including the participant information sheet and consent form (the child's version will include visual aids). This will also ensure informed consent can be given. To strengthen the data-gathering resources, I will seek advice from professionals within the local area with experience working with autistic children (e.g. teachers from autism hubs in mainstream schools) to "sense check" the interview schedule and discuss the wording of questions and appropriateness of the visual resources. Furthermore, the final questions will be sent to participants in advance of the interview so they can prepare and discuss any questions they are unsure of. During the interview a "time out card" will be available to the participant to point to if they would like a break or to end the interview. Furthermore, the child can elect to have their parent/carer present for the interview. Also, there will be visual supports (e.g. calendar, transition map, opportunities to draw/write ideas down first) to support the participants to answer the questions either verbally or by typing/writing their answer. Following initial phases of analysis after the interview, participants will be offered a meeting to view a summary of their transcript so they can check the researcher has understood their views. There will also be a debrief at the end to signpost them to further wellbeing support should they require it. Responses could be impacted by the fact I work for the Local Authority so participants could be worried they are being assessed. Therefore, my role as researcher will be explained in the initial meeting with their parent/carer present.

Will the project involve transcripts?

Yes

Select ONE option below:

Transcription software

If yes provide details.

I will use the Microsoft Teams transcription tool to transcribe interviews. I will record and transcribe the interview using Microsoft Teams for online interviews. For in-person interviews, I will record the interviews using an audio recording device. Then I will play the recording to Microsoft Teams to transcribe. I will listen to all of the recordings and edit the transcriptions by hand to ensure they are accurate (all recordings will be deleted after accurate transcription has been occurred).

Provide an explanation if you are not offering the participant the opportunity to review their transcripts.

It is not necessary for the participant to read their entire transcript, this could also be overwhelming considering the profile and needs of the participants. Instead, I plan to write a summary of each participant's experience (based on the personal experiential themes identified as part of the IPA process (Smith et al., 2022) and offer the participant a meeting to share this with the participant so they can provide feedback about whether the analysis reflects their experience. This method, described as member checking, promotes a shared understanding between the researcher and participant, making the analysis more authentic to the participant's voice (Yardley, 2015) and has been used successfully in other studies (e.g. De Mata Da Silva Costa, 2023).

Will you be capturing photographs or video footage (digital assets) of individuals taken for University business?
No

Is this research using visual/vocal methods where respondents may be identified?

Yes

If yes, confirm what safeguards are in place for participants who are vulnerable or underage.

If participants choose to conduct the interview online via Microsoft Teams and have their camera on I will need to record both video and audio so that I can listen back to check and edit the transcript. This is because you are not able to record just audio using Microsoft Teams. Therefore, this will need to be clearly stated in the information sheet and consent forms so participants and their parents consent to the recording. If participants choose to have their camera off then I will only record the audio. All recordings will be stored securely on a OneDrive and deleted once they have been transcribed.

Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time?
No

Will deception or incomplete disclosure be used?

No

Will the participants be debriefed after data collection?

Yes

If yes, how will they be debriefed and what information will be provided?

There will be a debriefing sheet signposting participants to charities and organisations that can support their well-being (E.g Mind - Young People page). This will be provided to all participants, even if they choose to leave the interview part way through. A copy will also be emailed to their parents. there is also a parental debrief sheet which will also be emailed to parents.

If yes, upload a copy of the debrief information.
Will substances be administered to the participants? No

Will involvement in the project result in, or the risk of, discomfort, physical harm, psychological harm or intrusive procedures?
No

Will the project involve prolonged or repetitive testing?

No

Will the project involve potentially sensitive topics?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

During the interview participants will be asked questions about both the positive and negative aspects of their transition to secondary school. While some participants may have had positive transition experiences, there is a small possibility of psychological discomfort or distress when describing more negative aspects of their experiences of transitioning to secondary school. Difficult topics might include recalling times where they felt anxious or perhaps were bullied. If this occurs, they will be directed to appropriate support such as parents or local support services detailed in the debriefing sheet. Furthermore, the information sheet explains that should participants feel psychological discomfort or distress during the interview, or if they no longer wish to participate, they are free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to explain. This will be reiterated during the initial meeting of introductions and clarifications. I have experience of working with autistic children and young people as part of my work as a Trainee Educational Psychologist and as a Teacher. Therefore, I have had regular discussions with pupils around potentially sensitive topics. Therefore, to further support them I have planned for participants to be able to use the 'time out card' to pause or end the interview at any time. Furthermore, if participants become visibly distressed, or are no longer able to or want to respond, I will end the interview.

In addition, if a child makes a disclosure to me causing a safeguarding concern I will follow the school safeguarding procedures and report this to the Designated Safeguarding Lead at school and my Research Supervisor as already stated earlier in this application.

Will the project involve elite interviews?

No

Will the project involve any incitement to, encouragement of, or participation, in an illegal act (by participant or researcher)?
No

Will the research involve an investigation of people engaged in or supporting activities that compromise computer security or other activities that may normally be considered harmful or unlawful?

No

Does the research involve members of the public in participatory research where they are actively involved in undertaking research tasks?
No

Does the research offer advice or guidance to people?

No

Is the research intended to benefit the participants, third parties or the local community?

Yes

Provide an explanation.

In the Local Authority (LA) where the researcher works, an objective of the SEND Strategy (2024- 2029) is to better support children and young people (CYP) to navigate times of change between phases of education, as children and young people and their families reported current planning to be inconsistent. A key outcome of this objective is planning and preparation to include children and young people's views. Furthermore, the LA's SEND Partnership Self-Evaluation Summary identified the need for more school support for the transition between school phases. Therefore, research in this area will contribute to achieving LA priorities by understanding what is perceived as helpful and unhelpful by autistic girls. It is hoped this research will add to the evidence base and be of use to practitioners, including EPs, and school staff. This in turn will support autistic girls to have more successful, supportive and person-centred school transitions and school experiences. This is also an opportunity for the participants to be listened to, have their voice heard and tell their story, promoting the importance of their experiences and views which have so often been missed in the current body of research. therefore the study aims to raise the profile of the views of autistic girls and promote the importance of gaining their views.

What procedures are in place for monitoring the research with respect to ethical compliance?

I am responsible for reporting any ethical breaches to my university research supervisor, the EDU Head of School and recording them on Ethics Monitor. To support monitoring of ethical compliance I will have regular supervision meetings with my research supervisor and will refer to BERA and BPS guidance. I will also maintain a reflective diary of my actions.

Does the study involve the use of a clinical or non-clinical scale, questionnaire or inventory which has specific copyright permissions, reproduction or distribution restrictions or training requirements?
No

Include any other ethical considerations regarding data collection methods.

Participant transcripts will be provided with a pseudonym so they cannot be identified. Furthermore, if participants discuss any other data that makes them identifiable (e.g. name of school or county) this will be anonymised within the transcript (e.g. "participant's school" rather than the school name). All recordings will be deleted once the data has been transcribed.

Health and safety - participants

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the participants in this project including a support person (e.g. a care giver, school teaching assistant) may be in question? Yes

If yes, describe the nature of any health and safety concerns to the participants and the steps you will take to minimise these.
There is the possibility participants could become tired by the length of the interview. They may also feel anxious by not knowing what the interview will entail. There is also a small possibility of psychological discomfort or distress when describing more negative aspects of their experiences of transitioning to secondary school. Difficult topics might include recalling times where they felt anxious or perhaps were bullied. Furthermore, if the participant's parent is present, the parent may also feel distressed at their child recalling past difficulties.

To minimise these concerns, the information sheet explains that should participants feel psychological discomfort or distress during the interview, or if they no longer wish to

participate, they are free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to explain. This will be reiterated during the initial meeting of introductions and discussion of the interview procedure. I will remind the participant that they only need to share what they feel comfortable sharing. The time out card will be explained and available to use at any time the participant wants a break or to terminate the interview. Furthermore, interview questions will be given to participants in advance so they can prepare. During the initial meeting, we can also discuss reasonable adjustments including planned breaks after an agreed amount of time. Furthermore, considering my experience of working with autistic children and young people, if I can see a participant is becoming distressed by the way they are presenting, I will ask them if they would like to take a break and/or terminate the interview. There will also be a participant and parent debriefing sheet detailing avenues of support (e.g. charities and local organisations) that can support them with their emotional wellbeing.

What procedures have been established for the care and protection of participants?

I am going to seek advice from professionals within the local area with experience working with autistic CYP (e.g. teachers from autism hubs in mainstream schools) to "sense check" the interview schedule and discuss the wording of questions and appropriateness of the visual resources. Furthermore, the final questions will be sent to participants in advance of the interview so they can prepare and discuss any questions they are unsure of.

I am providing the participant the choice of completing the interview at school in person, or via Microsoft Teams online, where they can choose the physical location they participate from. Participants can also choose whether they wish to have their parent/carer present for support. If participants choose not to have their parents present during online interviews, then we will discuss in the introductory meeting having a parent in the next room for the duration of the interview to ensure support is there should they need it. If the interview takes place at school I will ask that a trusted adult be close by and accessible if necessary. There will also be a participant and parent debriefing sheet detailing avenues of support (e.g. charities and local organisations) that can support them with their emotional wellbeing.

Describe your safeguarding protocol. What procedures are in place for the appropriate referral of a participant who discloses an emotional, psychological, health, education or other issue during the course of the research or is identified by the researcher to have such a need?
While highly sensitive topics should not be discussed, if anything concerning is said by the child the appropriate safeguarding procedures will be followed. This includes reporting any disclosures to my Research Supervisor and the school Designated Safeguarding Lead.

Furthermore, a debrief will be provided to the child and their parent with links to local services and charities if they require further support.

What is the possible harm to the wider community from their participation or from the project as a whole?
Participants might mention identifiable information such as area of the country, schools or people in their lives by name. However, information about the area of the country, schools (including the school staff) participants both previously attended and currently attend will not be identifiable as this information will be anonymised when data is transcribed. The recordings will be deleted after it has been transcribed and stored on a password-protected laptop.

Furthermore, there is a small possibility for parents to become distressed from hearing their child recall a difficult transition experience (if their child chooses to have them present or if the participant shows them the summary of their analysed transcript).

What precautions will you take to minimise any possible harm to the wider community?

Information about the local area, schools (including the school staff) participants both previously attended and currently attend will not be identifiable as this information will be anonymised when audio data is transcribed. The audio will be deleted after it has been transcribed and stored on a password-protected laptop.

There will be a parent debrief sheet which will be sent to the parents following the interview. This will provide local charities/organisations the parents can access for support with their emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, the wider community will be protected by ensuring the data is anonymised so the school cannot be identified from the transcript data. I will anonymise any mention of specific details about school staff or the school (and its location).

Health and safety - researcher(s)

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the researcher(s) and that of any other people (as distinct from any participants) impacted by this project including research assistants/translators may be in question?
Yes

If yes, how have you addressed the health and safety concerns? Describe any safeguards included and relevant protocols.
In person interviews: I have an up to date DBS certificate so I should be able to enter schools to conduct interviews. While I will be conducting the interview 1:1 with the participant (unless they have chosen to have their parent present) there will be school staff nearby should I require assistance. The school will also have risk assessments in place for ensuring the health and safety of all who enter the

school (including me as a visitor) and I will follow all school processes of working 1:1 with a child (e.g. perhaps their policy is meeting in a room with a window in the door). Furthermore, my supervisor will be aware of the time, location, and expected duration of any interviews I am conducting any in person at schools. This will be shared in the shared folder on OneDrive.

I will engage in online safe working practices for any online meetings or interviews. This includes not disclosing the location I am conducting the meeting from with participants and blurring the background so the location is not identifiable. I will use a locked Microsoft Teams session so nobody else can enter the meeting. Furthermore, the session will be recorded and then transcribed so exactly what is said will be recorded.

Risk assessment

Are there hazards associated with undertaking this project where a formal risk assessment will be required?
No

Notes

For the in person interviews: The school will also have risk assessments in place for ensuring the health and safety of all who enter the school (including me as a visitor).

A risk assessment is not necessary for online interviews.

Ethics approval external to UEA

Provide details of the external body who is considering or who has provided ethics approval, including their name, address and details of the responsible person there.
As I am conducting the research with participants attending schools in the Local Authority where I am on placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, I must also seek ethical approval from this LA. However, the project is my own work, not a collaborative project with the Local authority.

The LA's EPS Research Policy states I must submit a research proposal to the Senior Educational Psychologists and then complete a Research Governance Application form and submit this to the Research Governance Panel. I cannot start my research until the panel have given their approval. I am planning to gain ethical approval from UEA first, then apply to the Governance Panel.

The email address for the Chair of the Research Panel

If I do not gain enough participants within the LA and have to seek participants further out (in the East of England) the appropriate procedures for other Local Authorities will be adhered to.

Provide details of UEA's contribution to the study if this is not explicitly clear in the ethics application submitted to the other UK HEI.
N/A

If approval has already been obtained, state the date approval was obtained.

Upload documents related to this ethics approval.

Data management

Will the project involve any personal data (including pseudonymised data) not in the public domain?
Yes

If yes, will any of the personal data be?:

Anonymised and pseudonymised

If using anonymised and/or pseudonymised data, describe the measures that will be implemented to prevent de-anonymisation.
Each participant will be given a pseudonym when referred to throughout the research. This will be used in reference to their school Year Group, whether or not they have an EHCP, the date of their autism diagnosis and transcript.

Any mention of identifiable information such as the school or area the participant lives/attends school (including names of staff and peers) will be anonymised (e.g. changing Mrs Birch to [Year 6 Class Teacher]) to ensure neither participants nor their school can be identified from the transcript. Once the audio interview data has been transcribed it will be deleted.

If not using anonymised or pseudonymised data, how will you maintain participant confidentiality and comply with data protection requirements?
N/A

Will any personal data be processed by another organisation(s)?

No

Will the project involve access to records of sensitive/confidential information?

No

Will the project involve access to confidential business data?

No

Will the project involve secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?
No

Will you be using publicly available data from the internet for your study?

No

Will the research data in this study be deposited in a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes?
No

Provide details.

A suitable repository for my data is not available.

Who will have access to the data during and after the project?

The data will be stored on OneDrive in a folder only accessible to me and my research supervisor. Once the video/audio data has been transcribed it will be deleted and the data will be stored as an anonymised transcript. Once the project is complete, data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Where/how do you intend to store the data during and after the project?

Audio and video data will be downloaded onto my UEA one drive. Then once the audio data has been transcribed (including processes of anonymising the data) the video and audio data will be deleted. The transcripts will be stored on the UEA OneDrive until it is deleted 10 years after the date of last use.

Furthermore, Information about when/if the participant has an Education Health care Plan and the date of their autism diagnosis will also be stored on the UEA OneDrive. This will kept anonymous by the use of a pseudonym. The data will be deleted 10 years after the date of last use.

Once the project is complete, data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

How will you ensure the secure storage of the data during and after the project?

Audio and video data will be downloaded onto my UEA one drive. Then once the audio data has been transcribed the video and audio data will be deleted. The transcripts and information about when/if the participant has an Education Health care Plan and the date of their autism diagnosis (which is kept anonymous by the use of a pseudonym) will be stored on the UEA OneDrive until it is deleted 10 years after the date of last use.

Once the project is complete, data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

How long will research data be stored after the study has ended?

The research data will be stored for 10 years after last use.

How long will research data be accessible after the study has ended?

The research data will be accessible for 10 years after last use

How are you intending to destroy the project data when it is no longer required?

Audio and video data will be downloaded onto my UEA one drive. Then once the audio data has been transcribed (including processes of anonymising the data) the video and audio data will be deleted. The transcripts will be stored on the UEA OneDrive until they are deleted 10 years after the date of last use.

Furthermore, Information about when/if the participant has an Education Health care Plan and the date of their autism diagnosis will also be stored on the UEA OneDrive. This will kept anonymous by the use of a pseudonym. The data will be deleted 10 years after the date of last use. All data will be digitally deleted from the UEA OneDrive 10 years after last use. Once the project is complete, data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Generate and upload files

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION TEXT AND CONSENT FORM

Upload the Parental/Guardian Information Sheet and Consent Form. Enter Participant Group number and name.
Autistic girls who have transitioned from primary to secondary school

Appendix B – Ethical Approval from UEA

Dear Kirsty,

Your application was considered on 7th April 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)

Appendix C – LA Research Governance Application Outcome

Hello Kirsty

I am just letting you know the outcome of your application.

The Panel thought it was a thorough application and addresses an important area of research. We have approved your application, with the following conditions.

Condition: We could not see a clear rationale for asking whether participants have an EHCP. This is sensitive data which the research does not explicitly call for. There are ethical implications to the collection of sensitive data without justification. We would also be concerned, from a methodological perspective, that this might detract focus from the experience of transition being researched.

I hope this helps. Please let us know if you need any further clarification.

Best wishes

On behalf of the Research Governance Panel.

Appendix D – Participant and Parent Debriefing Sheets

Kirsty Thomas
Post Graduate Researcher

1st May 2025

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Exploring autistic girls' experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school
PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF SHEET

Thank you for participating in this study. I hope that you enjoyed sharing your thoughts and experiences with me. Your time and effort is really appreciated.

You spoke to me about your experiences of leaving primary school and starting secondary school. We also discussed what you thought was helpful and unhelpful when you started secondary school.

Next…

1) **I will type up the interview recording.**

   When I type up what we both said I will give you a pseudonym (which is a different name) and anonymise any parts of the interview where anything was said that could mean other people could work out who you are. This includes details like names of teachers, family members, your school. Then I will delete the recordings I took during the interview.

2) **I will write a summary of our discussion and invite you to give feedback**

   I will email your parent/carer and ask if you want to give feedback to the summary. I can meet you at school or online to show you the summary. You can read the summary to see if I understood everything you said correctly. **Then you can provide feedback.** You can tell me if I misunderstood anything, and I can change it. Either, when you have given me feedback or two weeks after your parent/carer has received the email is the last time you can request to withdraw from the study, even if your parent/carer does not reply to the email.

3) Then I will compare our interview with interviews I have with other girls to look at the similarities and differences in your views and experiences.

If you have any questions regarding this study or if you have any worries or concerns about the research, please ask you parent/carer to contact the researcher: Kirsty Thomas (Kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk) or my supervisor: Andrea Honess (a.honess@uea.ac.uk). They can also contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Yann Lebeau (y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk) about this research.

I understand that some of the topics covered in this research might have been challenging and potentially distressing. If you have been upset by any aspect of the study, then you may wish to consider contacting any of the services below for support:

- Talking to your parents
- Talking to a member of staff at school that you trust
- Autism Anglia: https://www.autism-anglia.org.uk
- Autism and ADHD support: https://www.autismandadhd.org/support
- Mind: https://www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/

Thank you again for your participation.

Kirsty Thomas

Kirsty Thomas
Post Graduate Researcher

1st May 2025

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Exploring autistic girls' experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school
Parent/carer DEBRIEF SHEET

Thank you for supporting the participation of your child in my research. I hope that they enjoyed sharing their thoughts and experiences with me. Both your child's and your time and effort are appreciated.

Your child spoke to me about their experiences of leaving primary school and starting secondary school. We also discussed what they thought was helpful and unhelpful when they started secondary school.

Next…

1) **I will type up the interview recording.**

   When I type up what we both said I will give your child a pseudonym (a different name) and anonymise any parts of the interview where anything was said that could mean others could identify them. This includes details like names of teachers, family members, the name of their school. Then I will delete the recordings I took during the interview.

2) **I will write a summary of the discussion and invite your child to give feedback**

   I will email you to ask if your child wants to give feedback to the summary. I can meet your child at school or online to show them the summary. **Then they can provide feedback (**i.e. tell me if I misunderstood anything and what they would like to change, or if the summary is accurate). Either, when they have given me feedback or two weeks after you have received the email inviting them to give feedback is the last time you or your child can request to withdraw their data from the study, even if you do not reply to the email.

3) Then I will compare your child's interview transcript with interviews I have with other participants to identify and explore the similarities and differences in their views and experiences.

If you have any questions regarding this study or if you have any worries or concerns about the research, please contact the researcher: Kirsty Thomas (Kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk) or supervisor: Andrea Honess (a.honess@uea.ac.uk). You can also contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Yann Lebeau (y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk about this research.

We understand that some of the topics covered in this research might have been challenging and potentially distressing for your child. They have been given a debrief sheet highlighting the following services that they may wish to contact for support:

- Talking to your parents
- Talking to a member of staff at school that you trust
- Autism Anglia: https://www.autism-anglia.org.uk
- Autism and ADHD support: https://www.autismandadhd.org/support
- Mind: https://www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/

If you have found it challenging or distressing to listen to your child recount their experiences or you would like further support following the interview you may wish to contact the following services:

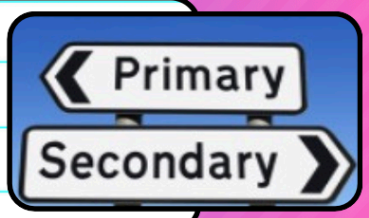
- National autistic Society: (Link provided for support in local area within LA)
- Autism Anglia: https://www.autism-anglia.org.uk
- Mind: https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/
- Local Children and Young People's Emotional Wellbeing Hub: (Link provided for support in local area within LA)
- Support groups for families: https://www.autismcentral.org.uk/guidance/support-groups-families

Thank you again for supporting you child's participation.

Kirsty Thomas

Appendix E – Recruitment Flyer

Research exploring the transition from primary to secondary school for *autistic girls*



Who am I?

Hi there! My name is Kirsty. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia.

What is the research about?

I am doing a study to find out about how **autistic girls** experience the **transition from primary school to secondary school**. This includes what happened, what was helpful and what was unhelpful.



Kirsty Thomas
kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk

Who can get involved?



If you:

- Are in **Year 8, 9 or 10**
- Have an **autism diagnosis**
- Identify as a **girl**
- Feel able to talk or write about your experience of going from a **mainstream primary school** to **mainstream secondary school**

What will you do?

1) An **introduction meeting** with me and your parent/carer to talk about how you would feel most comfortable taking part in the study and what I can do to help you to take part.

2) **Tell me about your experiences** of the transition from primary to secondary school (interview online or at your school).

3) **Feedback**: Read a summary of our discussion and tell me if I understood you correctly.

What should I do if I want to take part or find out more?

Ask your **parent or carer** to email me at:
kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk

University of East Anglia

ETH2425-1467
School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee

Participants will be recruited on a first come first served basis

Appendix F – Recruitment Email for Head Teachers

Dear Head Teacher

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist from the University of East Anglia. I am conducting a research project for my doctoral thesis research exploring the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic girls in mainstream education.

I am looking for autistic girls in Year 8, 9 and 10 who would be able to express their experience of transitioning from a mainstream primary school to a mainstream secondary school (verbally or through typing/writing). They must have an autism diagnosis and identify as female to take part.

Following an initial online meeting with the young person and their parent/carer to discuss the adjustments that can be made to support them to take part in the study, they will be invited to take part in an interview to discuss their experiences. I am hoping with your permission to offer to conduct the interview either in person at school, or the interview can occur online outside of school (it is the participant's choice). This should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

I would be deeply grateful if you could pass on the recruitment poster attached to this email to young people and parents/carers in your school community. The young person's parent will then express the young person's interest in the study to me using the email on the poster.

Furthermore, I would like to offer to come to your school to hold an information session for young people and parents about the research and answer any questions. Also, if you would like me to come into school and present the findings of my project with you and/or your staff then I would be happy to organise this.

Please respond to this email to give your consent for this process to occur.

OR

If you would like to discuss the study or have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me: kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk.

Best wishes,
Kirsty Thomas

Appendix G – Recruitment Email for Youth/SEND/Autism Group Leader

Dear Youth/SEND/Autism Group leader

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist from the University of East Anglia. I am conducting a research project for my doctoral thesis research exploring the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic girls in mainstream education.

I am looking for autistic girls in Year 8, 9 and 10 who would be able to express their experience of transitioning from a mainstream primary school to a mainstream secondary school (verbally or through typing/writing). They must have an autism diagnosis and identify as female to take part.

Following an initial online meeting with the young person and their parent/carer to discuss the adjustments that can be made to support them to take part in the study, they will be invited to take part in an interview to discuss their experiences. I am hoping to conduct the interview either in person at school, or the interview can occur online outside of school (it is the participant's choice). This should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

I would be deeply grateful if you could you pass on the recruitment poster attached to this email to either the young people or parents/carers of your group. The young person's parent will then express the young person's interest in the study to me using the email on the poster.

Furthermore, I would like to offer to come to your one of your sessions to deliver an information session for young people and parents about the research and answer any questions.

Also, if you would like me to come into a future session and present the findings of my project with you and/or your staff then I would be happy to organise this.

Please respond to this email to give your consent for this process to occur.

OR

If you would like to discuss the study or have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me: kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk.

Best wishes,
Kirsty Thomas

Appendix H – Recruitment email for Educational Psychologists

Dear Principal Educational Psychologist

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist from the University of East Anglia. I am conducting a research project for my doctoral thesis research exploring the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic girls in mainstream education.

I am looking for autistic girls in Year 8, 9 and 10 who would be able to express their experience of transitioning from a mainstream primary school to a mainstream secondary school (verbally or through typing/writing). They must have an autism diagnosis and identify as female to take part.

Following an initial online meeting with the young person and their parent/carer to discuss the adjustments that can be made to support them to take part in the study, they will be invited to take part in an interview to discuss their experiences. I am hoping to offer to conduct the interview either in person at school, or the interview can occur online outside of school (it is the participant's choice). This should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

I would be deeply grateful if you and your colleagues (members of your team) could pass on the recruitment poster attached to this email to young people and parents/carers you work with. The young person's parent will then express the young person's interest in the study to me using the email on the poster.

Please respond to this email to give your consent for this process to occur.

OR

If you would like to discuss the study or have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me: kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk.

Best wishes,
Kirsty Thomas

Appendix I – Recruitment Email for Specialist Teachers

Dear SES Head Teacher

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist from the University of East Anglia. I am conducting a research project for my doctoral thesis research exploring the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic girls in mainstream education.

I am looking for autistic girls in Year 8, 9 and 10 who would be able to express their experience of transitioning from a mainstream primary school to a mainstream secondary school (verbally or through typing/writing). They must have an autism diagnosis and identify as female to take part.

Following an initial online meeting with the young person and their parent/carer to discuss the adjustments that can be made to support them to take part in the study, they will be invited to take part in an interview to discuss their experiences. I am hoping to offer to conduct the interview either in person at school, or the interview can occur online outside of school (it is the participant's choice). This should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

I would be deeply grateful if you and your colleagues (members of your team) could pass on the recruitment poster attached to this email to young people and parents/carers you work with. The young person's parent will then express the young person's interest in the study to me using the email on the poster.

Please respond to this email to give your consent for this process to occur.

OR

If you would like to discuss the study or have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me: kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk.

Best wishes,
Kirsty Thomas

Appendix J – Parent/Carer Information Sheet

Kirsty Thomas

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and
Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email:

31st March 2025

Exploring autistic girls' experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?

Your child is invited to take part in a research study seeking to better understand the experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic girls. I am interested in their views of the experience, what they thought was helpful and what they found unhelpful.

Your child has been invited to participate in this study because:

- They will be in Year 8, 9 or 10
- They have an autism diagnosis by a professional qualified to diagnose autism
- Identify as female
- They attended a mainstream primary school and now attend a mainstream secondary school.
- They are able to express themselves verbally to a level where they can describe their experiences in detail (or can write their answers)

This Parent/Guardian Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to let your child take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree for your child to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your child's personal information as described.
- ✓ Have received a copy of this Parent/Guardian Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Miss Kirsty Thomas. Kirsty is a Trainee Educational Psychologist and postgraduate researcher. She is completing this research as part of her Educational Psychology Doctorate.

This will take place under the supervision of Dr Andrea Honess (,).

(3) What will the study involve for my child if they want to take part?

a) Introduction Meeting:

You and your child will be invited to a meeting with me online so I can tell you a bit about myself and they can tell me a bit about themselves. I will also re-explain what is written on this sheet and you or your child can ask me questions. We will also talk about how to make the interview as comfortable for your child as possible and when/where the interview could take place. This might include:

- Your child choosing to have you present for the interview
- Your child taking part in the interview at their school or they can choose to take part online
- Having planned breaks and access to a 'time out card' so they can stop the interview at any time.
- Your child choosing to type/write their answers or answer through speaking.
- Discussions around the visual aids that will help your child with their answers.

If your child wants to take part in the study and you both give your consent for your child to take part, I will ask you these questions at the end of the Introduction Meeting:

1) When did your child receive their autism diagnosis?
2) What is your child's current year group?

If your child decides that they want to be in my study, I will ask them to do these things:

b) Interview:

- I will ask your child questions about what it was like in Year 6 when they were preparing to transition to secondary school, the summer holidays before Year 7, and when they first started secondary school in Year 7. I am interested in what happened, what was helpful and what was unhelpful for them getting ready and settling into their new school.
- I will ask your child to write down and/or draw their thoughts first to help them to think before answering the questions.
- If the interview takes place online I will record the interview using Microsoft Teams. This means video and audio recordings will be made of the interview. If the interview takes place face-to-face at school I will only record the audio. However, any recordings will be deleted once the interview has been transcribed and stored securely on the UEA OneDrive.

c) Feedback:

- Once I have typed up your child's answers, I will write a summary of the content of the interview.
- I will send you an email to invite your child to a meeting to discuss the summary and provide feedback. This will occur on Microsoft Teams or at their school.
- Your child can read the summary to see if I understood them correctly. If there is anything I have got wrong then I can change it.

(4) How much of my child's time will the study take?

- The introduction meeting will take about 20-30 minutes.
- The interview will take between 45 minutes and 1 hour (we can have breaks).
- The feedback will take about 10-15 minutes.

(5) Does my child have to be in the study? Can my child withdraw from the study once they have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and your child does not have to take part.
Their decision (with your consent) whether to participate will not affect your or their current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or your child's school now or in the future.

If your child decides to take part in the study (with your consent) and then either of you change your minds later, they are free to withdraw from the study at any time and you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your child has given feedback for the interview summary, or 2 weeks after you have received the email from the researcher inviting your child to a meeting to provide feedback, even if you do not respond. You can do this by emailing the researcher, Kirsty Thomas (kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk).

(6) What are the consequences if my child withdraws from the study?

Your child is free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information your child has provided will not be included in the study results up to the point that your child has provided feedback for the interview summary, or 2 weeks after you have received the email from the researcher inviting your child to a meeting to provide feedback on the summary, even if you do not respond. Your child may also refuse to answer any questions that they do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw your child from the study their information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point that your child has provided feedback for the interview summary, or 2 weeks after you have received the email from the researcher inviting your child to a meeting to provide feedback on the summary, even if you do not respond.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with my child being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study for your child. Some children may not want to say anything in front of others or may find it difficult to talk about schooling if they have had a negative experience. I will be mindful of anything that might cause concern and they will not be required to speak if they don't feel like it. If they do get upset, they can stop the interview at any time by telling the researcher verbally or by using the 'time out' card they will be provided with. Furthermore, they will be provided with a debrief sheet suggesting avenues of support if they would like to pursue them. You will also receive a debriefing sheet suggesting avenues of support.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with my child being in the study?

There are no direct benefits to your child for participating in the project. However, by taking part in this research they will be able to share their school transition experiences. This will enable the researcher to use the study to inform others, e.g. parents, teachers and other

professionals, what is helpful and unhelpful support for autistic girls starting secondary school. This will help them to better support girls in the future.

(9) What will happen to information provided by my child and data collected during the study?

Your child's data will be transcribed by hand or via the Microsoft Teams transcription software. It will then be anonymised so they are not identifiable and any recordings (which are stored in the UEA one drive) will be deleted. The transcribed data will be securely stored on the UEA One Drive. The information your child provides during the interview will be used to write my thesis and may be used for articles in peer-reviewed journals or presented at conferences.

Your child's personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information your child provides will be stored securely and their identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching, but your child will not be identified if they decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for 10 years from the last date of use.

(10) What if we would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Miss Kirsty Thomas (,) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

(11) Will my child be told the results of the study?

You and your child have the right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. This feedback will be in the form of a one-page summary of the findings and will be emailed to you after the 30th August 2026.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?
If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Miss Kirsty Thomas
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor: Dr Andrea Honess (a.honess@uea.ac.uk)

If you (or your child) are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: (,).

(13) How do we know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information my child needs to be informed about?
According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your child's personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your child's data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- If you are unhappy with how your child's personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I am happy for my child to take part – what do I do next?
You need to discuss with your child whether they would like to take part in the study. Then you will need to both complete your respective consent forms (provided by the researcher) and send them back to the researcher via email.

(16) Further information
This information was last updated on 31.03.25.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by the researcher (Kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk).

This information sheet is for you to keep.

Appendix K – Participant Information Sheet

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

Email: kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

1st May 2025

Exploring autistic girls' experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school

Study Information Sheet



Hello. My name is Kirsty Thomas and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia.



I am doing a study to find out more about the experience of the transition from primary to secondary school for autistic girls.

I am asking you to be in my study because you are in Year 8, 9 or 10. This means you will have experienced the transition from primary to secondary school. You also have an autism diagnosis and identify as a girl.
You can decide if you want to take part in the study or not, it's up to you.
This sheet tells you what I will ask you to do if you decide to take part in this study. Please read it carefully.
If you have any questions, you can speak to me during the study or you can ask your parent/carer to speak to me. If you want to, you or your parent/carer can contact me on kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk.

What will happen if I say that I want to be in the study?

1) *Introduction:*
   You and your parent/carer will be invited to a meeting with me online so we can get to know eachother a bit more. I will also re-explain what is written on this sheet and you or your parent/carer can ask me questions. We will also talk about how to make the interview as comfortable for you as possible. For example, you can choose:

- To have your parent/carer there for the interview
- Take part online, or I can come to your school
- To have planned breaks
- To type/write your answers or answer through speaking.
- Something else that will make the interview more comfortable

If you decide that you want to be in my study, I will ask your parent/carer at the end of this meeting when you received your autism diagnosis and your current year group.
Then…

2) *Interview:*

- We will have a conversation where I will ask you questions about what it was like in Year 6 when you were getting ready to go to secondary school, the summer holidays before Year 7, and when you first started secondary school in Year 7. I am interested in what happened, what was helpful and what was unhelpful for getting ready and settling into your new school.
- I will ask you to write down and/or draw your thoughts first to help you think before you answer questions.
- When I ask you questions, you can choose which ones you want to answer. If you don't want to talk about something, that's ok. You can stop talking to me at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore.
- If you say it's ok, I will audio record our meeting. I will also video the meeting if it takes place online. These recordings will be deleted once I have typed up your answers.

3) *Feedback:*

- Once I have typed up your answers, I will write a summary of our conversation.
- I will invite you to see this summary either by meeting you online or by meeting you at your school.
- You can read the summary and tell me if I understood what you told me correctly.
- If there is anything I have got wrong, I will change it.

Will anyone else know what I say in the study?



I won't tell anyone else what you say to me, except if you talk about someone hurting you or about you hurting yourself or someone else. Then I might need to tell someone outside of the study to keep you and other people safe.

All the information that I have about you from the study will be stored in a safe place and I will look after it very carefully. I will write a report about the study and show it to other people, but I won't put your name in the report, and no one will know that you're in the study. I may also share your information with other researchers, but I will take out your name.

How long will the study take?



- The introduction meeting will take about 20 to 30 minutes.
- The interview will take between 45 minutes and 1 hour (we can have breaks).
- The feedback will take about 10-15 minutes.

Are there any good things about being in the study?



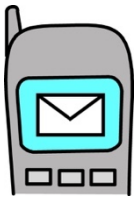
- You won't get anything for being in the study, but you will be helping me do my research.
- This will help me to tell other people (e.g. parents, teachers and other people who help pupils) what is helpful and unhelpful support for autistic girls starting secondary school.
- This will help them to better understand and support girls in the future.



Are there any bad things about being in the study?

- This study will take up some of your time, but I am not expecting it to be bad for you or cost you anything.
- If anything we talk about does upset you, then we will stop the interview. Remember, if you don't want to talk about something, that's ok. You can stop talking to me at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore.

What if I am not happy with the study or the people doing the study?



If you are not happy with how I am doing the study or how I treat you, then you or your parent/carer can:

- Tell me during or after the study.
- Email me: kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk.
- Contact my supervisor, Andrea Honess (a.honess@uea.ac.uk)
- Email my Head of School, Yann Lebeau (y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk)

How do I know that this study is ok to take part in?



All research I undertake is checked and approved by an Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia before I can start it.

What if I change my mind and no longer want to take part?

If you decide you want to be in the study and then you change your mind later, that's ok. All you need to do is tell me that you don't want to be in the study anymore. You can do this before or even during the interview. Your parent/carer can email me (kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk).

Once I send your parents/carers an invitation asking if you would like to meet me online or at school to discuss the summary I have written about our conversation they will have 2 weeks to reply saying whether or not you would like to provide feedback. I will not be able to remove any information you may have already provided after you have given feedback to the summary or from 2 weeks after I invite you to read your summary if your parents do not reply.

What if I want to know more about the information collected on me in the study?



When we talk in the study, I will collect some information which is unique to you. I can only collect this information if I have a reason to do so. My reason to do so for this study is because the study is in the public interest.

This information is stored by me within the University of East Anglia. They help me protect your information and look after it.

If you want to know more about the information collected about you, you can email me (kirsty.l.thomas@uea.ac.uk) or you can email the University's Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk) who helps to protect your information. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) helps to protect everyone's information. If you are unhappy with mine or the University Data Protection Officer's responses about your information, you can speak to the ICO.

I will keep the information for 10 years after I finish using it. Remember the data will not include your name or any information that can be used to identify you.

What if I want to know the findings of the study?

You can tell me if you want to receive feedback about the results of the study by circling yes on the consent form.

What if I want further information or to take part?



This sheet was last updated on 31.03.2025. I will update you if I make any changes to this sheet. If you decide you want to take part you can complete the consent form.

This information sheet is for you to keep.

Appendix L – Parent/Carer Consent Form

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (If child is taking part face to face at school)
I, ...[PRINT PARENT'S/GUARDIAN'S NAME], consent to my child …… [PRINT CHILD'S NAME] participating in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what my child will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Parental/Guardian Information Sheet and have been able to discuss my child's involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and my child does not have to take part. My decision whether to let them take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that my child can withdraw from the study at any time up to the point that my child has provided feedback for the interview summary, or 2 weeks after I have received the email from the researcher inviting my child to a meeting to provide feedback on the summary (even if I do not respond).
- I understand that my child may stop the interview at any time if they do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results up to the point that my child has provided feedback for the interview summary, or 2 weeks after I have received the email from the researcher inviting my child to provide feedback on the summary (even if I do not respond). I also understand that my child may refuse to answer any questions they don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about my child that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about my child will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

Please circle the appropriate answer:
I consent to:

My child taking part in an interview with the researcher	**Yes**	**No**
The interview being audio recorded (and deleted this after the interview has been transcribed)	**Yes**	**No**
My child providing feedback about the accuracy of the summary interview the researcher provides.	**Yes**	**No**
I would like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study	**Yes**	**No**

……..... …….
Signature **Date**

.....**PRINT name**

Appendix M – Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form (Participants taking part in person – at school)

If you are happy to be in the study, please:
- write your name in the space below.
- sign your name at the bottom of the next page.
- put the date at the bottom of the next page.

You should only say 'yes' to being in the study if you know what it is about and you want to be in it. If you don't want to be in the study, don't sign the form.
I, ... [PRINT NAME], am happy to be in this research study.
In saying yes to being in the study, I am saying that:
- I know what the study is about.
- I know what I will be asked to do.
- Someone has talked to me about the study.
- My questions have been answered.
- I know that I don't have to be in the study if I don't want to.
- I know that I can pull out of the study at any time if I don't want to do it anymore. I know it will not be possible to remove any information I have already provided after I have given feedback to the summary of the conversation the researcher shows me, or from 2 weeks after the researcher sends an email to my parents/carers inviting me to a meeting to give feedback, even if my parents don't reply.
- I know that I don't have to answer any questions that I don't want to answer.
- I know that the researchers won't tell anyone what I say when I talk to them unless I talk about being hurt by someone or hurting myself or someone else.

Now I am going to ask you circle 'Yes' or 'No' to tell me what you are happy to do or not do in the study.

Are you happy to speak to me? (With your parent/carer there if you want them to be)	Yes	No
Are you happy for me to audio record our conversation? (and delete this after I have typed up your answers)	Yes	No
Are you happy to tell me if the summary I provide of our conversation is correct?	Yes	No
I want to be told about the findings of the study	Yes	No

……..... …….
Signature Date

Appendix N – Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Interview questions:

Here are the questions I will ask – remember there are no wrong answers. I want to hear about your experience.

- Tell me about Year 6:

  -When you were getting ready to leave primary school

  - When you were getting ready for year 7 in high school

  (Draw/write in grid 1)

  Some prompt questions:

  - Can you remember your feelings about leaving primary school?
  - How did your primary school help you to get ready for secondary school?
  - What was helpful? Why?
  - What was unhelpful? Why?
  - Who helped you to get ready for secondary school?
  - Did you have any help/support that was different or additional to anyone else?
  - Was there anything else you think could have been helpful?
  - During the summer holidays after Year 6 was there anything that helped you to get ready for secondary school?
  - Was there anything that didn't help?
  - Was there anything you were looking forward to when you started secondary school?
  - Was there anything you were worried about?

- Tell me about what it was like when you first started secondary school (year 7)?

(Draw/write in grid 2)

Some prompt questions:

- Can you remember your feelings about starting secondary school?
- What did you like about secondary school when you first started?
- What was helpful when you first started?
- Did you have any help/support that was different or additional to anyone else?
- Who helped you when you started secondary school?
- What didn't you like about secondary school when you first started?
- What was unhelpful? Why?
- Is there anything you would have changed?
- Was there anything else that you think would have been helpful?

- What is school like now?

(Draw/write in grid 3)

Some prompt questions:

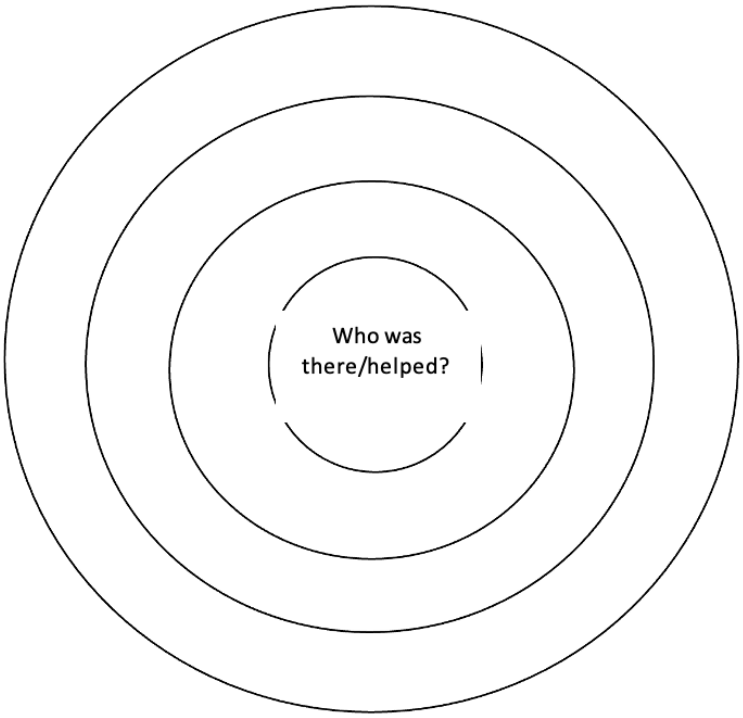
- What is going well?
- What is not going so well?
- Is there anything you would like to change?
- Do you have any thoughts about what might be helpful for supporting autistic girls with the transition in the future? (Amended following interview with first participant)

Is there anything I missed out about your experience of moving from primary to secondary school which you think is important?

Appendix O – Child-Friendly Interview Supports

Grid Elaboration Method:

Visual Support:



Appendix P – Extract of Transcript with Exploratory Notes

Daisy: I didn't enjoy the end of primary school that much, so I was quite looking forward to moving, and like getting a fresh start almost, but then also I didn't know who's in my class, so I was kind of nervous about who was going to be in my class. But then I didn't like my class from primary school, so I was kind of excited to be leaving them. But also I didn't want to leave them and not know anyone in my new class. So it's like, I kind of just preferred not being in either.

R: OK, so, yeah, so you were you were looking forward to the first start, but you were also nervous a bit too. (Daisy: yeah) OK, thank you. So how did your primary school help you to get ready for secondary school?

Daisy: I went on extra tours with them because it was like a group of us who went on a different extra tour as well as we did after, like, the open evening we did another tour then, when I was the right at the start of Year 6.

R: Oh, OK, so were there days you did with everybody and then days with this smaller group?

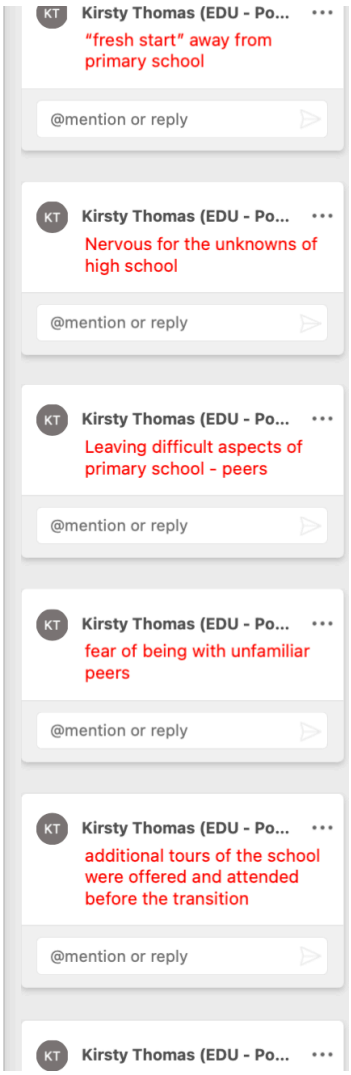
Daisy: There were days right at the start with just like me, my parents and like one other family that were going around. And then I know now they do it where I think because I was involved quite a lot in my sister's year coming up, they did three different days where they came up. Because they came up for the science thing and then a big class transition day and then their transition days as well. So I think that's a lot better because then they're in a lot more.

R: So that. So what was the difference? What happened with yours?

Daisy: With mine, we did that one tour and then we had people come and talk to us from there at our primary school. But that was about it until the transition days and that was, I feel like they could have done more than what they did because I felt like now they come to or we come to here a lot more than we did.

R: But not when you did it? (P4: nod) OK, so it was more them coming to you? (P4: yeah) OK. And you were saying that the meeting with that with the teacher, it wasn't that helpful when the teacher came to see you. Why? So why was that unhelpful?

Daisy: It was like an online meeting, but I feel like the fact that we didn't really get told anything about it before and then they did, because it was like set to being 10 minutes, and then we didn't know how you logged on. So then we wasted like half that time waiting for them to log it on. And then they sort of mostly just talked about like the school and how it was exciting that we were joining the school for most of the time, and then didn't actually answer questions till we had like a minute or two left, and then didn't really answer them properly.



Appendix Q – Extract of Transcript with Experiential Statements

Exploratory notes are shown in red.
Experiential statements are shown in blue.

Caitlyn: Not really, to be honest. Yeah, if I got a show around that would have been really helpful. But like, apart from that, not really.

R: Oh, so the show around, would that be like before you came or when you got here?

Caitlyn: Yeah. Before I came.

R: OK. So that is kind of the end of that section as well. We've got one section left, and it's a bit shorter than the others. So what is school like now?

Caitlyn: Now it's like, obviously school is like, still really boring. But it's like way better now 'cause like I know how you speak to people and like how to make friends and like not have drama with everyone.

R: So why is it way better?

Caitlyn: Because, like, no in year seven, I was like, didn't really understand what was going on and like, how like, I don't know, like, how to get around the rules sometimes. Like with the uniform, like the teachers only care about your uniform, like your shirt being tucked in at the door and in the corridors. And when you're in lesson, you can actually like untuck your shirt and, like, take your blazer off and it really helps.

R: So when did you realise that?

Caitlyn: Like the end of year seven.

R: Yeah, OK, cool. Was there anything else that you kind of realised towards the end of year seven or in year eight maybe?

Caitlyn: I realised, like how to just like, I don't know, like still like speak, but like when the teacher is OK with you speaking properly because I always used to interrupt them in year seven, you know, I'd get told off and then wonder why. I'm like, I don't know. Yeah.

R: Oh, so in year seven, you got told of for interrupting. Yeah. Oh, can you tell me more about that?

Caitlyn: Like, I don't know. I was just always chatting when I shouldn't have been, to be honest. And like when people were trying to talk and like, yeah, I wasn't really the best at that, to be honest.

R: You said about like, how to make friends as well. So because you're in, are you in year nine now? Yes. You're in year nine now. So what's? What are friendships like now?

Caitlyn: Now, I've got my group of friends that I hang out with all the time, and we have our spot in the atrium that we always sit at. But then also in lessons now I know how you like speak people and make friends with them instead of just talking about like the work and stuff. And like now I've, like, actually got more friends.

R: And so so when when did that happen?

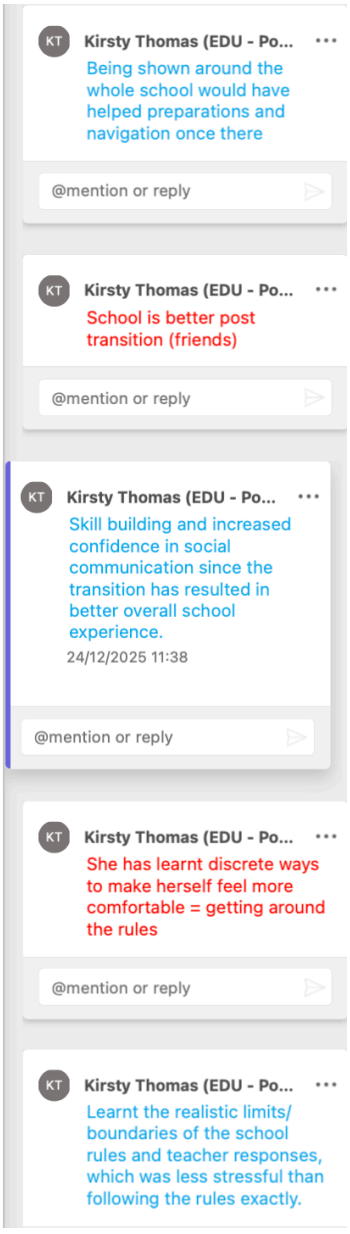
Caitlyn: Like the start of year nine to be honest, like recently

R: recently. So so how how did that happen?

Caitlyn: I don't really know to be honest. I just like got more confidence with it, to be honest.

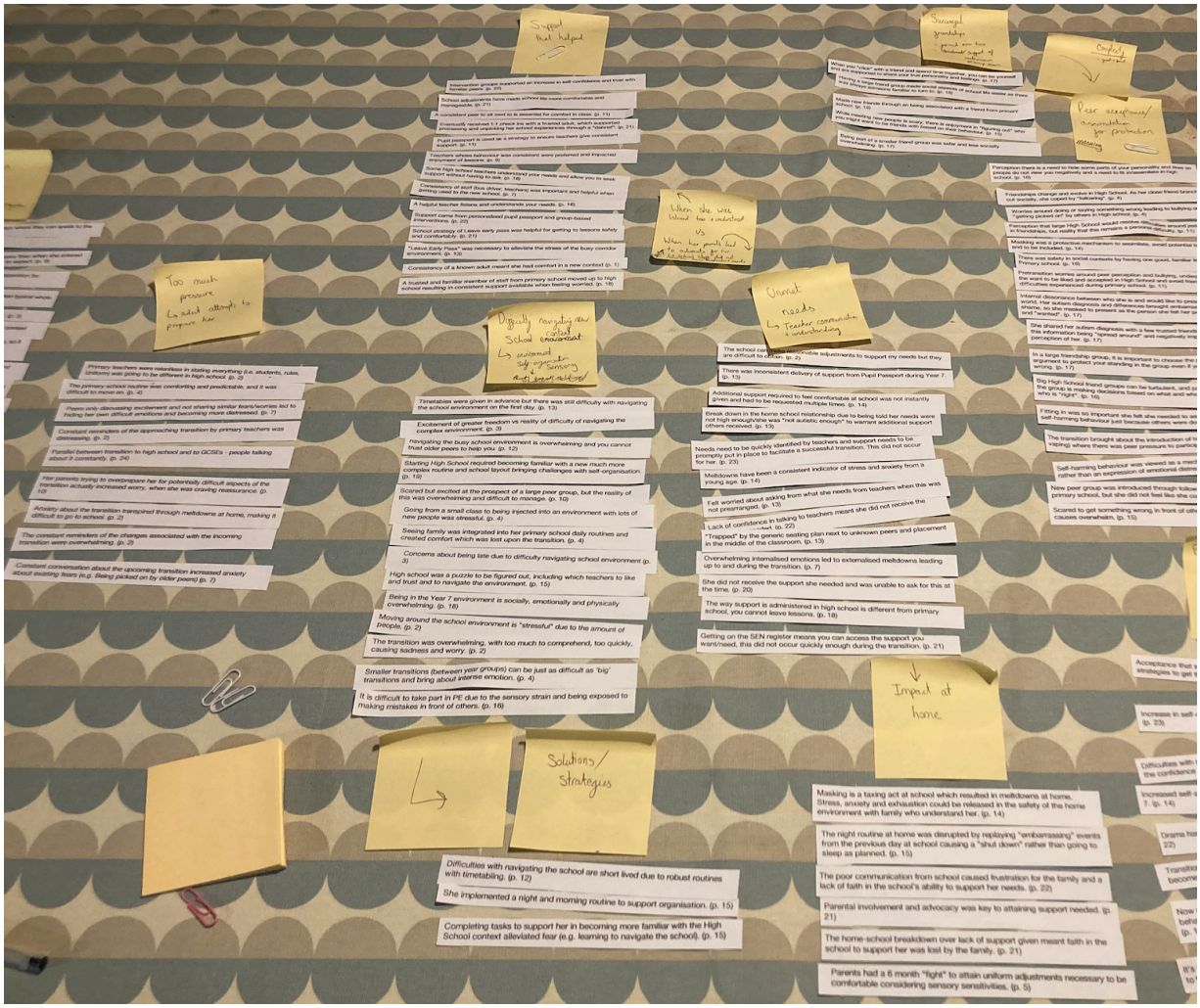
R: OK. And so did you introduce yourself or did people introduce themselves?

Caitlyn: I like introduced myself.



Appendix R – Development of PETs

Example of Mapping Experiential Statements



Extract from Table of PETs:

PET 4: 'FITTING IN' TO SURVIVE - INCREASINGLY COMPLEX PEER INTERACTIONS

Masking and assimilation within the peer group for acceptance

Worries around doing or saying something wrong leading to bullying or "getting picked on" by others in High school. (p. 4)

"I was still worried about whether I was going to get something wrong. Like, I'd always hate even in primary school I'd hate getting picked on because I was worried I'm going to say something wrong. I was more, I think I was more worried about getting something wrong and

everyone laughing at me because I was I was really worried about what other people think, like really bad."

Perception there is a need to hide some parts of your personality and likes so people do not view you negatively and a need to fit in/assimilate in high school. (p. 16)
"And because I like, I still worry that people are gunna like look at me, which is why I don't like do certain things. Like I wanna have like certain key rings on my bag, but because it's K pop, people don't exactly like K pop so."

Masking was a protective mechanism to assimilate, avoid potential bullying, and to be included. (p. 14)
"I masked like I still mask a lot, but I masked a lot more in year seven because there was new people. I didn't want them to think I was weird. I obviously wanted people to like me. I wanted to get along with people and wanted to have, like kind of like a big friend group, so if something happened, they'd like defend me."

In a large friendship group, it is important to choose the popular side of an argument to protect your standing in the group even if you think they are wrong. (p. 17)
"It was stressful because I didn't want to go on the wrong side. I kind of I kind of just followed what like as I said, like what X (primary school friend) would go with, even if I was like, if even if I knew the other person was in the right. I'd still speak like I even like, I think I'd still speak to a person sometimes, but I'd more so go with the other person because that's the side you wanted to be on. That's the side that, like, you knew, like, you wouldn't have to worry about being on that side."

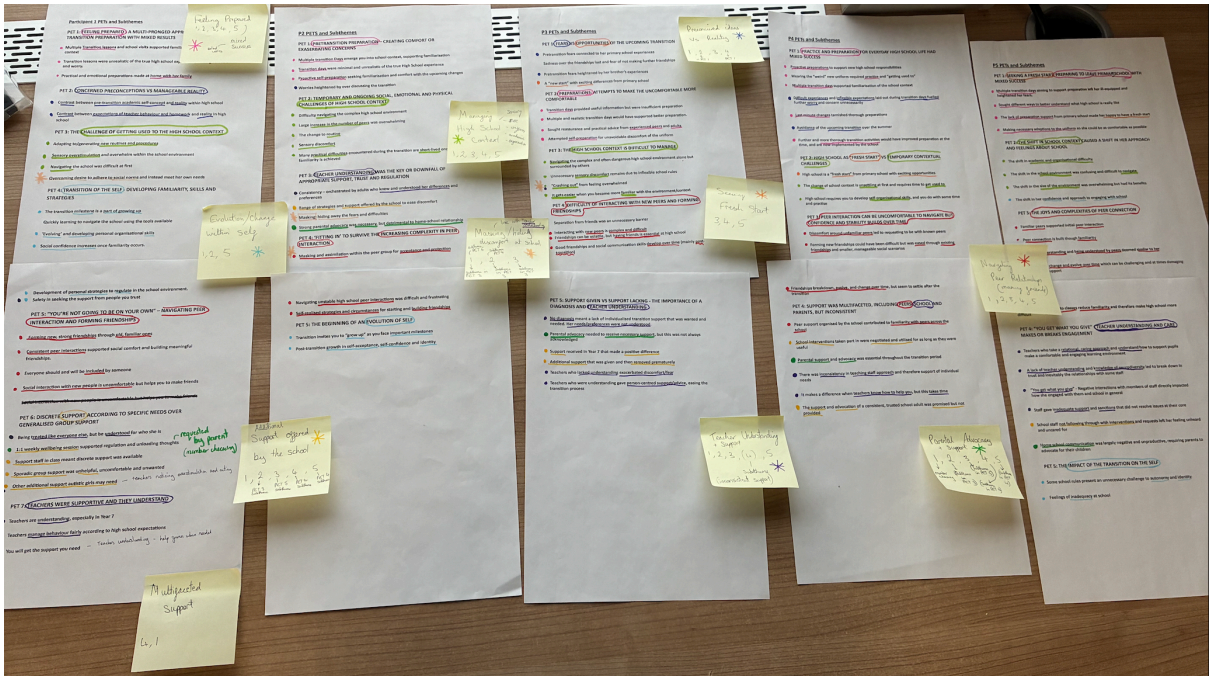
Appendix S – Extract of Summary Shared with Participant with Member Checking

Changes from member checking are shown in purple.

The changes in how the high school is run (e.g. changing classrooms) was “nerve-wracking” as at first, everything was strange, different and new. There was “a lot of change” and not knowing what to expect was unsettling. There are a lot more people in high school; and when you transition it changes from you being the oldest to the youngest which is a strange and new dynamic to get used to. Also, high school is busy compared to primary school, but you settled quickly and enjoyed the new found freedom. There were some aspects that were difficult to get used to, like when there are lots of people in the canteen it is too loud and a place to be avoided when busy. Also having new teachers is good and bad; they are strangers, and you don’t know how they will teach which is unsettling. Also having to adapt to the different teaching styles in each subject was challenging for the whole of Year 7, but got better in Year 8 and even easier in year 9 when you have the same teachers. High school lessons and teaching style are more academically challenging, as they quickly pick up the pace of learning compared to primary school. However this is preferable even though it took getting used to.

Appendix T – Development of GETs

Cross-case analysis process:



Extract from Table of GETs:

GET 2: Adapting to the New High School Context

New routines/procedures

Actually starting high school (Day 1) was scary and made her nervous.
"But then, like, school came up. And I remember, I think I was, I was like nervous, you know... Umm and so I did that and then I got there and I was like, oh, this is a bit scary." (Alice, p. 9)

Getting up for school early was difficult and caused strain within her morning routine
"in year seven I would I would like every opportunity that I had to like in the morning to sleep I would. So like if I was like if I woke up at like like 7, I'd be like, OK, I'm going to sleep until 7:30 I can do 20 more minutes and then I'll be like 750 I'm like, oh, my God, I have to leave in like 10 minutes and then start to get dressed really quickly." (Alice, p. 20)

Organising her homework and schoolbooks independently was difficult without a clear system to follow.

“my bag last year got, like so, like, messed up and filthy. And like, everything was just like everywhere. I couldn't sort anything out. And my my homework would be all scrunched up. But, you know, that's. And and to keep like your books tidy. Like if you're writing in them because like, I used to just be like, oh, yeah, just squeeze that in, just keep using them. And my books get really thick and heavy and it'd be like, unorganised. (Alice, p. 21)

High school was a puzzle to be figured out, including which teachers to like and trust and to navigate the environment.
“Umm I guess kind of getting to know the lessons, meeting the teachers, figuring out what teachers I like and what teachers I don’t like, and yeah just kind of getting used to the whole environment.” (Beth, p. 15)

The transition was overwhelming, with too much to comprehend, too quickly, causing sadness and worry.
“And it was like, so quick of a change. And there were, like, so many things, like happening at once I couldn’t like comprehend it all.” (Beth, p. 2)

The change in context and how the school is run was “nerve-wracking.”
“I think just like the uniform and the change in how everything was going to run because obviously primary school you stay in the same class, all like all day and here you don't and I think that was quite nerve wracking.” (Daisy, p. 10)

At first, everything was strange, different and new in high school.
“So I think the first couple of weeks it was just really strange because everything was different and new.” (Daisy, p. 11)

There was “a lot of change” and not knowing was to expect was unsettling.
“I was quite nervous about it because there was like a lot of change and and, you, I thought I knew what I was expecting, but then when I first got here, then I, turns out I didn't know what I was expecting and I didn't really like that.” (Daisy, p. 14)

Being in high school required greater organisational skills and thought for your belongings.
“I think it was more just like remembering everything. And because at primary school we had a place where we put all our stuff and then we'd just stay and, like, leave all our stuff there all day and like having to think about where my stuff was, a lot. Yeah.” (Daisy, p. 10)

Appendix U – Extract from Researcher's Reflective Log

Event: Reflection after Interview with Participant

I completed my interview with my final participant today. Like some of the other participants, she asked me whether she had to use the Grid Elaboration Method or if she could just start answering the questions straight away. I informed her that she could use the resources in whatever way was most useful to her. Some of the other participants had also barely used or chose not to use the Grid Elaboration Method, but all described their transition to high school in detail. I had been initially worried about the participants being able to engage in the interview verbally due to the fact that I was not a well-known person to them. Other professionals had also warned me that the participants may have difficulty interacting with me in such an intensive way, so the option to draw and write down ideas first would be helpful. On reflection, all of the participants engaged well in the interview process and gave a reflective account of their transition. This made me consider how this occurred. Firstly, perhaps in my attempts to remove barriers to open communication (due to my strong alignment with the social model of disability), I had underestimated my participants' ability to communicate verbally. The participants were all in mainstream secondary schools and had chosen to take part in in-person interviews. Therefore, the participants and their parents must have deemed the participants capable of discussing their transition experiences with me. Secondly, the participants had the opportunity to prepare before the interview, as I had gone through the interview schedule with them during the initial meeting, and I sent their parents the interview schedule so the participants could review it again before meeting me in person for the interview. This was positively commented on during sense checking with other professionals, as it meant the participants had the time to process and consider each question before the interview and so were prepared to answer the questions. Adapting the interview so they did not have to use the Grid Elaboration Method may have built further rapport with the participant, as they saw I was sensitive to what they wanted during the interview. I was pleased to have enabled this engagement and respond to their wants during the interview so their views could be heard and documented.

Appendix V – Sense Checking Feedback from Professionals

15.04.25 - Meeting with Coproduction advisor from the Engagement Hub. Role is to talk with young people to improve the service – specialism is SEND – neurodiversity – runs groups for autistic girls

- Likes initial meeting to find out what participants want and need (e.g. breaks) – this will help them to feel comfortable to take part
- Good idea to send questions in advance – help with processing – also print out questions for the interview
- The young people she works with always say they love visual tools – anything they can see – helpful
- Interview schedule is good – breaking the interview down into sections is helpful for processing and natural times for breaks without breaking flow of conversation.
- Liked how the spoken part of the interview is broken up using a drawing/writing task.
- She found that often the children she works with like talking and sharing their experiences
- Suggested sending my One Page Profile to build rapport as limited time for getting to know one another.

29.04.25 – Meeting with Specialist Education Service Communication and Interaction Teacher. She has an interest in supporting autistic girls.

- Said age I am seeing to talk to is appropriate for the cohort as they need time to reflect
- Pleased the girls' views would be represented in a doctoral study
- Initial meeting to discuss study and reasonable adjustments is "relational" and the gradual introduction to the research before jumping in means relationships can be built.
- Discussing reasonable adjustments in the initial meeting shows the participants that I "value what they need" which are likely to appreciate as they may not have had that experience before. – fidget toys, breaks, parent present
- Use of grid elaboration method will allow girls processing time to reflect on their answers to more open questions
- Some discussion around breaking up the multifaceted first question into two pieces
- After stating the open question say "no answer/ way of recording (on grid) is wrong"
- Where they are being asked to reflect on feelings, ask if they remember how they felt first. Then dig in deeper (breaking up the remembering and feelings)

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