

**"I think it adds another element of trickiness": An Interpretative
Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Autistic Gender
Diverse Adolescents**

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Summary

This thesis is comprised of three chapters: a review of the literature, an empirical chapter, and a critically reflective account. The first chapter provides a narrative review of the literature relating to the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, as well as situating the research within the wider sociopolitical context. The empirical chapter presents a qualitative study carried out with a sample of five autistic and gender diverse young people who attend education settings in England. The study used online semi-structured interviews and some creative activities to elicit the lived experiences of the young people, including their educational experiences. Following analysis of the data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this chapter presents and discusses the findings of the research as well as considering implications for practice and directions for future research. The reflective chapter includes the researcher's reflections on the research journey, offering insights from the planning stages of the study through to analysis and write-up. This chapter considers the researchers positionality and reflections on research decisions made throughout. It also presents plans for dissemination.

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Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

Research has repeatedly demonstrated a relationship between autistic experiences and gender diverse identities. Many existing studies note that autistic people are disproportionately represented among individuals with gender dysphoria or presenting to gender clinics (van der Miesen et al., 2018; Shumer et al., 2016; Manjra & Masic, 2022). However, thus far, the research has focused on using quantitative methods to establish the existence of an overlap, rather than exploring the experiences of individuals at the intersection of autism and gender diversity (Mittertreiner et al., 2024). Adolescence is a time where many individuals will engage in the complex social and discursive process of constructing their identity and developing a sense of self (Kroger et al., 2010; Taylor, 2015). Gender identity can be understood as evolving and changing across the lifespan, and as societal views about gender change (Bussey, 2011). Autistic individuals integrate the idea of being autistic into their self-identity to differing degrees (Mesa & Hamilton, 2022).

There is an emerging body of qualitative research which explores the experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, though gaps and opportunities to build on this literature remain. Within this literature, it is indicated that participants report interwoven experiences of neurodivergence and gender identity (Reutter, 2024), and experience unique challenges and stressors as a result of holding two marginalised identities (Cooper et al., 2023a). For example, Cooper et al (2023a) found that some adolescents experienced distress due to the interaction of sensory sensitivities and gender dysphoria (e.g., during menstruation). Given the legal requirement for young people to remain in education or training until the age of 18, it will be particularly important that educational professionals, including school/college staff and Educational Psychologists (EPs), have an awareness and understanding of the unique experiences of individuals who hold both autistic and gender diverse identities, to ensure that these individuals are appropriately supported within education and the wider community. Mezzatesta-Gava et al (2025) highlight a gap in the existing literature relating to working with autistic and gender diverse individuals from intersectional, neurodiverse and gender diverse affirmative approaches in clinical, educational and research settings. There is a significant lack of research

exploring the educational experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents within a UK context, and the majority of qualitative research is focused on clinical contexts.

Approach to Literature Review

Literature reviews aim to provide a synthesis of published literature on a topic. They do not present new data but intend to examine what is already published (Ferrari, 2015). They can be broadly classified as ‘systematic’ or ‘narrative’ (Byrne, 2016). Systematic reviews aim to answer specific research questions using “a systematic and explicit methodology to identify, select, and critically evaluate results of the studies included” (Rother, 2007, p. 1). Systematic reviews adhere to guidelines such as PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; Ferrari, 2015). Whilst systematic reviews have many strengths including their ability to focus on a unique query and to provide an objective and quantitative summary (Ferrari, 2015), they have also been criticised for having a narrow scope (Byrne, 2016) and for being prone to bias (Ferrari, 2015). On the other hand, a narrative review is described as providing readers with up-to-date knowledge about a specific topic or theme (Rother, 2007). Narrative reviews are often broader in scope compared with systematic reviews, and they offer “breadth of literature coverage and flexibility to deal with evolving knowledge and concepts” (Byrne, 2016, p. 2). They focus on breadth of literature coverage as opposed to depth (Byrne, 2016). Narrative literature reviews often do not describe the methodological approach that would permit reproduction of data, or answer specific research questions (Rother, 2007). They often do not list the types of databases searched or specify the selection criteria for inclusion of research articles (Ferrari, 2015). Narrative reviews have been criticised for lacking synthesis and rigour (Byrne, 2016), and they do not follow acknowledged guidelines (similar to PRISMA for systematic reviews). Whilst both systematic and narrative reviews provide useful insights into the literature, the researcher decided to adopt a narrative review within this research. It was felt that a narrative review would be most appropriate because it offers the flexibility to explore the breadth of the literature relevant to key topics within the present research, and it supports an understanding of how the literature and key concepts have evolved over time. It does not require an exhaustive review of the literature, but rather a rich understanding of the research landscape.

Being narrative in nature, this literature review seeks to present a broad overview of topics relevant to the experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, whilst also highlighting gaps in the existing literature and therefore directions for future research. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory will broadly guide the structure of this literature review, in that factors relevant to the 'chronosystem' and 'macrosystem' will be considered, before factors relevant to the 'microsystem', 'mesosystem' and 'exosystem'. The review will begin with an explanation of key terminology and an outline of the historical and socio-political context, including different conceptualisations of autism, the legislative and socio-political context relevant to gender diversity, and context relating to research with autistic and gender diverse communities. An overview will be provided of relevant theoretical literature relating to identity development, intersectionality and minority stress. A review is then provided of existing theoretical and empirical research relating to the overlap between autism and gender diversity, as well as the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents. The review concludes with a summary of the literature including gaps identified throughout the narrative review.

Search Strategy

Narrative reviews are not required to be overly specific about the types of databases and methodological approaches used to conduct the review (Ferrari, 2015). However, to adhere to Yardley's (2000) principles relating to transparency and rigour, details relating to the search strategy are presented below. A number of key databases relevant to the research area were searched between March 2025 and February 2026. The researcher conducted an initial search through the EBSCO (Elton B. Stephens Company) database accessed through the university library search. In addition, articles were obtained through a number of journals and databases, including PsycArticles, SageJournals, Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, Scopus, ERIC, PsychInfo, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar and Educational & Child Psychology. A 'snowballing' method was also used to obtain additional articles through reviewing the reference lists of articles obtained through the initial search strategy (Wohlin et al., 2022). A variety of search terms were used in order to obtain relevant articles, including 'autism', 'ASD', 'autism spectrum disorder', 'asperger's',

‘asperger’s syndrome’, ‘transgender’, ‘gender diverse’, ‘non-binary’, ‘gender variant’, ‘gender non-conforming’, ‘genderqueer’, ‘gender questioning’, ‘education’, ‘school’, ‘learning’, ‘teaching’, ‘classroom’, ‘education system’, ‘adolescent’, ‘young people’, ‘youth’, ‘teenager’, ‘children’, ‘experience’, ‘perspective’. This literature review also incorporates ‘grey literature’, including government documents and unpublished doctoral theses, due to the research area being under researched, and considering the relevance of the wider sociopolitical context. Furthermore, due to the lack of literature relating to the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, studies conducted outside of the UK were also included. Studies which focused solely on the experiences of parents or professionals were excluded. Date limits were not set due to the lack of research in this area.

Key Terminology

Verbal and written communication are powerful in producing specific versions of the world, oneself, and others, and “language conveys, shapes, and perpetuates ideologies” (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021, p. 20). Whilst further terminology will be outlined in subsequent sections, the terms most pertinent to this research are defined and explored below.

Autism

The language used to relate to the construct of autism is continuously changing, and is influenced by the preferences of the autistic community. Within a clinical context, the terms ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ (ASD) or ‘Autism Spectrum Condition’ (ASC) are typically adopted. Bottini et al. (2024) carried out a systematic review of autism research published from 2021. They found that most research articles adopted ‘traditional medical language’ as opposed to ‘alternative neuro-affirming language’, particularly articles published in medical journals and related to biology/the aetiology of autism. However, Bottema-Beutel et al. (2021) describe that the use of medicalised or pathologising language in autism research can “reflect and perpetuate ableist ideologies (i.e., beliefs and practices that discriminate against people with disabilities)” (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021, p. 18) and increase marginalization. This includes the use of functioning labels (i.e. ‘high functioning’ and ‘low functioning’) to describe an autistic person’s needs, which can be reductionist

and fail to reflect the complexity of support needs and the variation in the levels of support an individual may require across different contexts (Kapp, 2023). Bottema-Beutel et al. (2021) provide a table of alternatives to potentially ableist terms and discourse which commonly appear in autism research, which focus on the emphasis on difference rather than deficit and adopt person-centred approaches such as describing an individual's specific strengths and needs rather than deficit-focused language.

Furthermore, the Autism Education Trust (n.d.) published a 'terminology guide' which was developed alongside members of the autistic community and outlines language preferences, including avoiding the use of functioning labels, embracing neurodiversity, and viewing autism as a difference rather than a deficit. The use of 'identity-first' language (e.g., 'autistic person') and 'person-first' language (e.g., 'person with autism') has been a point of discussion within autism literature and within the wider autism community. Taboas et al. (2023) highlighted that whilst person-first language is regularly used by professionals, self-advocates have voiced that identity-defining features (such as autism) cannot be separated from the individual. Disability advocates have also expressed a preference for identity-first language to be used by all (Taboas et al., 2023). Many autistic individuals have been found to prefer identity-first language (Keates et al., 2024), however, it should be recognised that some individuals prefer person-first language to be used (Buijsman et al., 2023). Whilst professionals working with individuals should ask about and respect their language preferences (Dwyer, 2022), the present literature review will generally adopt identity-first and non-pathologising language in line with the Autism Education Trust (2021) terminology guide.

Sex and Gender

Definitions of 'sex' and 'gender' vary, and have evolved over time (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2011). Within the literature, some authors use the terms interchangeably (Etaugh & Bridges, 2023), however this is argued to be problematic as it does not provide clarity on the terms, and their relationship is not clearly defined (Glasser & Smith, 2008). In the context of this review, the term 'sex' refers to an individuals' physical characteristics (e.g., chromosomal sex, gonadal sex, hormonal sex) (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). It can be defined as the classification of individuals

as 'female' or 'male', based on their biological and genetic qualities (Helgeson, 2020). Lips (2020) reported that 'sex' is "reserved for discussions of anatomy and the classification of individuals based on their anatomical category" (Lips, 2020, p. 8). Definitions of 'sex' are extended in the literature to consider the social processes involved in categorising individuals as male or female (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2011). Rosenblum and Travis (2003) explain that similar to race or sexual orientation, sex can be understood as a socially created dichotomy. Donelson (1999) argued that biological 'facts' are embedded within a social context, so even experiences that are rooted in biology (e.g., menstruation, childbirth) carry social meanings that extend beyond the implications necessitated by biology.

Gender can be understood as a social construct which identifies social and cultural expectations (e.g., gender norms) for individuals based on perceived or assigned sex (Feeney et al., 2019). It is comprised of traits, interests and behaviours which society ascribe to sex categories (Denmark et al., 2016). Many authors refer to the socially produced nature of gender differences (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2011). Within these definitions of gender, the stereotypes and expectations about 'males' and 'females' are referred to, rather than actual differences between men and women (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2011). Gender identity can refer to a person's internal sense of self, including how they perceive themselves and/or what they call themselves (Russell et al., 2023). Gender expression often refers to the ways an individual communicates or presents their gender through the use of markers and symbols (e.g., clothing, hairstyles, jewellery; Lorber & Moore, 2007) and through broader aspects of appearance, affect, behaviour and activities (Feeney et al., 2019).

Sexual and gender minority identities are often described together under the acronym 'LGBTQ+', which encompasses lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer identities (Russell et al., 2023). The plus sign is used to represent other minoritised identities, sexual orientations and behaviours that are not reflected in the acronyms named identities (Matsick et al., 2024). Gender identity does not imply a specific sexual orientation (Russell et al., 2023). The terms 'trans' or 'transgender' describe identities which may be held by individuals "whose assigned sex at birth does not align with the corresponding social expected gender identity" (Tebbe &

Budge, 2016, p. 997). The terms ‘cis’ or ‘cisgender’ are used to describe individuals “whose assigned biological sex aligns with their expected binary gender identities” (Tebbe & Budge, 2016, p. 997). Whilst some individuals consider transgender to reflect the opposite of cisgender, Enke (2012) argues that the concept of ‘opposite’ reinforces a limited, binary gender system. Akin to ‘transgender’, the term ‘gender diverse’ is often used to describe individuals whose gender identities or expressions differ from the gender socially attributed to the sex assigned to them at birth (Coleman et al., 2022). Monro (2019) describes ‘non-binary’ as an umbrella term that includes individuals whose gender identity falls outside or between male and female identities, those who experience both male and female identities at different times, or those who do not experience or identify with a gender identity at all. The term ‘genderqueer’ refers to trans identities that do not always align with rigid gender binaries, i.e., trans identities that are not always ‘male’ or ‘female’. Gender dysphoria is defined in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and generally understood as a “marked incongruence between an individual’s gender identity and assigned gender with associated distress or impairment” (Cooper et al., 2020, p. 1). ‘Cisnormativity’ can be defined as the assumption within society that the vast majority of people are cisgender, and the implication that additional genders are “other, abnormal or deviant” (Russell et al., 2023). As a result of cisnormativity, cisgender identities are privileged and gender diverse identities are marginalised within social, political and economic structures (Russell et al., 2023). Within the current research, the term ‘gender diverse’ will generally be adopted throughout. Further reflections on terminology are provided within the Reflective Chapter.

Different Conceptualisations of Autism

Autism Within a Medical Context

When considered in the context of a medical model of disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder is described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V) as a neurodevelopmental disorder, encompassing ‘deficits’ in communication and social interaction, ‘restricted and repetitive’ behaviours, and hyper- or hypo- sensitivity to sensory input (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is understood as a ‘spectrum condition’, which can include a range of different

presentations (Hughes, 2021). Anderson-Chavarria (2022) argues that many social factors have shaped the medicalisation of autism, and the DSM V carries significant prestige within the biomedical field, resulting in a medicalised perception of autism being the most popular view held by society and within autism literature. Dwyer (2022) highlights that research within the field of developmental science typically studies “atypical development” within the framework of a medical model, within which being ‘able-bodied’ and ‘typically developing’ are seen as the ideal. These ideas are often poorly received by disabled communities (Constantino, 2018). Some criticisms of conceptualising autism in this way refer to the inherent focus on deficit; “what autistic individuals are missing rather than what they have great aptitude for” (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022, p. 1329). Bagatell (2007) argues that deficit-focused discourse relating to the autistic experience can significantly and negatively impact identity development for autistic individuals. This has also been found to promote ‘camouflaging’ or ‘masking’, through which autistic people behave in ways to appear more neurotypical, which is associated with several negative outcomes including depression (Evans et al., 2024), burnout (Arnold et al., 2023) and suicidality (Miller et al., 2021).

Neurodiversity

In addition to diagnostic-led conceptualisations, autism can also be understood in the context of neurodiversity. Singer (1998), an autistic scholar, is believed to be the first to coin the term ‘neurodiversity’ as aligning with the social model of disability and representing the “neurologically different”. Walker (2014) defines the concept of neurodiversity as the existence of diverse minds and brains, similar to ‘biodiversity’ referring to the variation of biological diversity on Earth, which is understood as a fact. The literature distinguishes between the concept of neurodiversity, the neurodiversity movement, and the neurodiversity paradigm (Dwyer, 2022; Walker, 2014). The neurodiversity movement is described as a social justice movement that seeks equal rights and societal inclusion for all neurodivergent people (Dwyer, 2022). The neurodiversity paradigm is said to provide philosophical foundations for the neurodiversity movement, as it stipulates that neurodevelopmental differences should not be pathologized as they are important, natural, and valuable parts of human neurocognitive variation (Hughes, 2021), and it

holds the perspective that there is no singular ‘normal’ type of brain or a ‘correct’ neurotype (Walker, 2014). The concept of neurodiversity, as well as the neurodiversity paradigm/movement, are widely accepted by many autistic individuals and are increasingly informing the work of autism charities, support groups, practitioners working with autistic people, and autism researchers (Hughes, 2021). Kapp et al. (2013) describe that those who accept a conceptualisation of autism which aligns with a neurodiversity paradigm, typically favour interventions which focus on removing social and environmental barriers, as opposed to interventions which aim to ‘cure’ autistic behaviour. However, it is recognised that the neurodiversity movement has been criticised for not being representative of all people who are ‘neurodivergent’, and specifically unrepresentative of “more impaired” autistic people (Russell, 2020). Parsloe (2015) distinguishes between oppressive discourses of disability and empowering discourses of disability, which many would argue reflects the differing conceptualisations of autism (e.g., a medicalised perspective and a neurodiversity affirming perspective).

Gender Diversity: Legislative and Socio-Political Context

To situate this research within the broader context, it is particularly important to consider historical and contemporary legislation, as well as the socio-political context, which has shaped the experiences of individuals who belong to the LGBTQ+ community. Although some historical legislation does not have a direct impact on children and young people (CYP) from the LGBTQ+ community in the present day, it likely will have impacted historical and current societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. Homosexuality has historically been criminalised, with the Buggery Act (1533) being one of the first laws in England to criminalise homosexual sexual acts, making them punishable by death. The Offences Against the Person Act (1861) replaced the death penalty with a maximum prison sentence of life imprisonment. Homosexual intercourse remained illegal until the enactment of the Sexual Offences Act (1967), which permitted homosexual acts in private between two consenting adults. Hepple (2012) recognises the impact of British colonisation, where anti-sodomy legislation was enacted across the British Empire, and homosexuality remains illegal in a number of countries across the world. Iyer (2020) describes that in the present day, gay people still face “violations such as murder,

imprisonment, torture, and abuse” in many countries (Iyer, 2020, p. 946). In the United Kingdom (UK), historically homosexuality was treated as an “illness” by professionals, which they sought to ‘heal’ (Iyer, 2020). Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) was the first piece of UK legislation which related to how LGBTQ+ issues could be addressed within education. It prohibited schools and Local Authorities (LAs) from ‘promoting and publishing material with the intention of promoting homosexuality’ and ‘promoting the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’ (Iyer, 2020, p. 948). The sociocultural context at the time, including the construction of AIDS in the media as a “gay cancer” (Rocha & Dil, 2022), likely shaped the legislative context. Section 28 was repealed in Scotland in 2000, and across the rest of the UK in 2003. Epstein (2000) reported that Section 28 was poorly defined, with it being unclear what the ‘promotion of homosexuality’ might incorporate. The legislation had a direct impact on LGBTQ+ CYP in schools, as teachers often felt unable to “deal adequately with homophobia or to present homosexuality as acceptable” (Epstein, 2000). Furthermore, it enforced heteronormative attitudes by suggesting that homosexuality could be ‘promoted’ whilst presenting heterosexuality as ‘natural’ (Marston, 2015).

The Gender Recognition Act was introduced in 2004 and was a significant development within the legislative context (Sharpe, 2007). It provides a mechanism by which transgender people can obtain legal recognition of the gender they are living in (referred to as “acquired gender”), through applying for a ‘Gender Recognition Certificate’ (GRC). An individual’s ‘legal sex’ would be changed to reflect their “acquired gender”, including a new birth certificate being issued. This Act was described as “radical” as transgender individuals are not required to undergo hormonal or surgical intervention in order to obtain recognition of their gender identity (Jeffreys, 2008). There were governmental plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act, however these were dismissed in 2020 (Nirta, 2021). Nirta (2021) argues that the act does not do justice to individuals who reject binary gender categories. Furthermore, as individuals must be over 18 in order to apply for a GRC, the age restriction may have negative implications for gender diverse young people in that their gender identity is not legally recognised. The Equality Act (2010) protects individuals from direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation based on protected characteristics, including gender reassignment and sexual

orientation. Transgender people who have not applied for a GRC are still legally protected from discrimination under the Equality Act, through the protected characteristic of gender reassignment.

In May 2014, the Department for Education (DfE) published advice for schools titled 'The Equality Act 2010 and schools' (DfE, 2014). This guidance states that it is unlawful for schools to discriminate against a pupil or prospective pupil by treating them less favourably because of their: sex, race, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender reassignment and pregnancy or maternity. It is also unlawful for schools to discriminate against a student based on association with somebody with a protected characteristic or based on perception. In 2025, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the definition of 'sex' in the Equality Act (2010) should be interpreted as biological sex only. This means that for the purposes of the act, a person's legal sex is the one that was recorded at their birth, and individuals are not able to change their legal sex through obtaining a GRC (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2025). The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is updating its statutory codes of practice to reflect this change. This has implications for the access to single-sex spaces for trans people, including bathrooms, changing rooms and hospital wards. The ruling posits that sex is unchangeable even if gender is variable (Gavin et al., 2025). Media narratives and responses to the ruling appeared to claim it as a victory for 'common sense', though it is argued that "what passes for 'common sense' is in fact a set of values that have come to seem normal and eternal, but are actually rooted in the biases of their particular historical moment" (Gavin et al., 2025, p. 907). Many individuals and researchers argue that the ruling represents a significant setback for the rights of trans individuals (Chalson et al., 2026). It is argued that the ruling reflects a trend of transphobia within public discourse and institutions, and it encourages reductionist and absolutist arguments about gender and sexuality which are divisive (Phipps & Alsop, 2025). The categorisation of people on the bases of sex recorded at birth may restrict opportunities for all people, including trans people, to lead full embodied lives (Phipps & Alsop, 2025).

The Department for Education (DfE) published the 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education' statutory guidance outlining the requirements for schools in England (DfE, 2019). This guidance outlined

that teaching about LGBTQ+ issues should be integrated into the curriculum rather than delivered as a standalone lesson, and that students should be taught LGBT content at a timely point (DfE, 2019). This places responsibility on schools and would perhaps result in inconsistent delivery of this curriculum area nationally, and the delivery may be influenced by the ethos of the setting. The DfE has since published revised guidance on 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education' in July 2025, which will be introduced in schools from 1st September 2026. This includes more detailed information relating to the teaching of gender diversity related topics, including that pupils should be taught the facts and the law about biological sex and gender reassignment, it should be recognised that "people have legal rights by virtue of their biological sex which are different from the rights of those of the opposite sex with the protected characteristic of gender reassignment" (DfE, 2025, p. 36), and that schools "should not teach as a fact that all people have a gender identity" (DfE, 2025, p. 36). Setty and Hunt (2025) argue that such statements are likely shaped by political compromise rather than educational clarity, and that they may create confusion and reduce opportunities for open discussion. There is a risk that school staff may avoid teaching about gender all together, "despite its centrality to students' experiences of intimacy, power and belonging" (Setty & Hunt, 2025, p. 4). In December 2023, the DfE published draft guidance for consultation relating to "Gender Questioning Children" (DfE, 2023). This guidance included advice for schools relating to many aspects including changing names, pronouns, single-sex spaces, uniform and Physical Education and sport (DfE, 2023). Following the consultation period, the DfE shared that the consultation demonstrated that this is a contested policy area, and there is no consensus on the appropriate approach, so decided to no longer publish standalone guidance for schools and colleges relating to supporting 'gender questioning children'. This guidance received a significant amount of criticism, including charities such as The Children's Society, Barnardo's and the NSPCC issuing formal responses (Stonewall, n.d.). The guidance refers to 'gender questioning' children throughout, failing to recognise transgender, non-binary and otherwise gender non-conforming identities. The guidance was further criticised for not adhering to the principle that the welfare of the child or young person is paramount in all considerations (Brighton & Hove City Council, 2024). If published, this guidance would have had implications for

individuals who wish to take steps to socially transition at school. Now, in the absence of standalone guidance, the government are proposing a new section in the Keeping Children Safe in Education statutory guidance relating to children who are ‘questioning their gender’, which is open to consultation as of March 2026.

The Cass Review refers to an independent review of NHS (National Health Service) gender identity services for CYP, commissioned by NHS England in 2020 and published in April 2024. It was overseen by Dr Hillary Cass, a paediatrician. One of the key implications of this review was the ban on prescribing puberty-pausing medications (often referred to as puberty blockers) to young people under the age of 18. The review resulted in increased media attention and discussions, as well as it receiving significant criticism. The British Medical Association (BMA) raised concerns about weaknesses in the methodologies used in the review (BMA, 2024). Noone et al (2024) further raised concerns about methodological and conceptual flaws, including a high risk of bias, ambiguous eligibility criteria and inadequate study identification. The review is said to repeatedly misuse data, and rest many conclusions on speculation (McNamara et al., 2024). This has implications for the future of gender affirming care and the wider political context (Noone et al., 2024). Over 200 Educational Psychologists signed an open letter to Bridget Phillipson (Education Secretary) expressing concerns about the findings of the Cass Review (Perry, 2024). Following an interim report by Dr Hillary Cass who called the service “unsustainable”, the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) delivered by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, announced it’s closure in 2022, and then subsequently closed in March 2024. This was part of a plan to expand provision and develop a new regional model to support gender diverse CYP. Some regional clinics have now been opened in England, including in the North West, South West, and London. Further clinics are expected to open in the future.

Research with Autistic and Gender Diverse Communities

When engaging in research with marginalised communities, it is important that researchers reflect on their practice and consider the steps they can take to avoid causing harm or perpetuating inequality (Quinn et al., 2023). The below subsections provide some key considerations for researchers when working with members of the autistic and gender diverse communities.

Amplifying Autistic Voice

Articles 9 and 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child stipulate that all children have a right to be heard and to engage in decisions which affect them (UNICEF, 1989). This idea is also important within educational psychology practice, as within the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) it is stated that local authorities must ensure that children, young people and parents “are provided with the information, advice and support necessary to enable them to participate in discussions and decisions about their support” (DfE & DoH, 2015, p. 21). Many autistic individuals have raised concerns that their experiences are minimised or misinterpreted by non-autistic researchers, educators, and allies (Lebenhagen, 2020), and “much of previous research on neurodivergent groups of people stems from a neurotypical-gaze position” (Rosqvist et al., 2020, p. 228). The Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Health (2002) attempted to address this through the publication of the ‘Autistic Spectrum Disorders: Good Practice Guidance’, which set out an objective to involve autistic students in decisions affecting their education. However, it has been argued that autistic voices are still not meaningfully captured within autism research (Waldock & Keates, 2022). Some members of the autistic community have adopted the slogan ‘nothing about us, without us’, referring to the wishes of many autistic individuals to be collaborators, consenting participants, and colleagues within autism research, rather than passive subjects who have research ‘done to’ them (Milton, 2013). Milton (2013) highlights that research of a qualitative and/or participatory nature can provide valuable insights into the autistic experience and can challenge existing stereotypes and assumptions. Waldock and Keates (2022) advocate for the use of the Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969) as a model for inclusive autism research, and they discuss the potential benefits this model would have on autistic people. Fletcher-Watson et al. (2019) argue that enabling greater participation can potentially transform the lives of autistic (and non-autistic) individuals. Autistic adults’ narratives are beginning to be captured within autism-related literature (Rowe, 2013), however, there are groups within the autistic community whose voices are less frequently represented. This includes the views of autistic children and adolescents (DePape & Lindsay, 2016; Sciutto et al., 2012). DePape and Lindsay (2016) argue that most lived experience research focuses on the perspectives of autistic adults, with only a

small number of studies amplifying the voice of autistic children or adolescents. Similarly, Tesfaye et al. (2023) highlight that weight has been given to the views of teachers, parents, clinicians and siblings within autism research, however little emphasis has been placed on the accounts of autistic adolescents, who can bring alternative and important viewpoints (Clark et al., 2015). The views of individuals who might be described as ‘non- or minimally speaking’ are also less frequently represented within the literature (Lebenhagen, 2020). Courchesne et al (2022) state that challenges in capturing the voices of these individuals are due to a lack of appropriate inclusive methodologies. They carried out research which drew on the first-person perspective of autistic individuals with diverse language and cognitive abilities and included non-verbal and alternative communication responses within their data (Courchesne et al., 2022). Representation from a diverse group of autistic individuals is required in order to promote inclusive research protocols and ensure that policy and practice is informed by a range of lived experience (Perry-Hazan, 2016).

Participatory Approaches in Autism Research

Participatory research in the context of autism research refers to incorporating the views and sharing power with the autism community to decide what research gets done, how it is done and how it is implemented (Hobson et al., 2023). There are many different research methods and methodologies which would fall under the umbrella of participatory-informed research (Den Houting et al., 2021). The autistic and broader autism communities can be involved in research in a number of ways, including in identifying research priorities, in deciding the design and conduct of research, in analysing and interpreting research findings, and in the dissemination of research (Hobson et al., 2023). Participatory methods can be implemented where community members have varying degrees of involvement in the research (Le Cunff et al., 2023). At ‘lower levels’ of participation, members of the autistic community may provide feedback or consultation that influences decision making, whereas at ‘higher levels’ of participation, autistic individuals may work in collaboration with researchers, with the power shared equally and decisions made jointly (Den Houting et al., 2021). One particular participatory approach which is increasingly used within autism research is consultation with the autism community (Keating, 2021). This may also

be referred to as forming a 'Community Advisory Board' to provide feedback on various stages throughout the research process (e.g., Le Cunff et al., 2023), or as working with a 'Research Advisory Group' (e.g., Taylor-Bower et al., 2025). Consultation can occur at a number of stages within the research project, including when generating a research question, when designing the study, when collecting data, and when disseminating findings (Keating, 2021).

A number of benefits are associated with adopting participatory-informed approaches within autism research, including placing the findings within a real-world context, ensuring that research yields meaningful benefits for the autism community, and enhancing collaboration and trust between researchers and autistic people (Keating, 2021). Participatory approaches are thought to lead better quality research which is more easily translated into practice (Hobson et al., 2023). However, Genovesi et al (2025) explain that community involvement is not without challenge. Common barriers to using participatory approaches reported in the literature include difficulties with recruiting representatives and with building meaningful connections with community members (Genovesi et al., 2025). Further, Keating (2021) identifies barriers associated with using participatory approaches including time and funding constraints, as well as an absence of support for participatory working from more senior academics. Taylor-Bower et al (2025) report challenges associated with employing participatory methods in doctoral research, including "questions around collaborative design and co-creation must be addressed when balancing participatory engagement with the assessment-based requirements of doctoral study" (Taylor-Bower et al., 2025, p. 183). Whilst challenges are identified relating to using participatory approaches, Den Houting et al (2021) argue that the benefits outweigh the challenges as research outcomes are "more rigorous, more feasible and more relevant and acceptable" to the autistic community (Den Houting et al., 2021, p. 150).

Hobson et al (2023) argue that there is no one 'right' way to engage in participatory research, as participatory practices must be tailored to each individual study. Fletcher-Watson et al (2019) call for greater use of participatory approaches among the autism research community, and the facilitation of greater autistic leadership of and partnership in research. Pickard et al (2022) found that there is

currently a disconnect between the current landscape and output of autism research, and the wants of the autistic community within research. Keating (2021) reports that at present, a large proportion of autism research involves no community participation, or tokenistic participation. Tan et al (2025) found that there was a significant increase in the number of studies reporting community involvement in 2022 compared to in 2019, and whilst this is encouraging, more efforts should be directed towards improving transparency in the reporting of community involvement, and increasing frequency with which autistic individuals share decision-making power with researchers, or assume greater control of the research process. Whilst participatory research within autism research offers important contributions, the present study does not constitute participatory research in a methodological sense. Instead, it is participatory-informed, drawing on participatory principles (e.g., consultation with an advisory group) to ensure the research is accessible and relevant.

Critical Autism Studies

Critical Autism Studies is discussed within the literature as a significant theoretical movement that challenges traditional, deficit-focused conceptualisations of autism, and reframes autism as a socially produced construct rather than a fixed condition. Davidson and Orsini (2013) describe Critical Autism Studies as being concerned with interrogating the power relations that shape autism knowledge, questioning how particular narratives become dominant, and the importance of foregrounding autistic people's own accounts of their lives. Subsequent literature emphasises how autism is constructed through cultural norms, institutional practices, and diagnostic frameworks (O'Dell et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2018). Critical Autism Studies aligns closely with Critical Disability Studies and the social model of disability, shifting attention away from individual impairment and towards the societal structures and discourses which produce disadvantage (O'Dell et al., 2016). Ryan and Milton (2022) argue that Critical Autism Studies offers a critical lens through which to examine how autism is represented, who is authorised to speak about it, and how autistic people can reclaim authority over autism knowledge. A key element of Critical Autism Studies relates to its commitment to centring the voices of autistic individuals and valuing autistic-led knowledge production. This includes challenging

deficit-oriented framings, recognising the cultural dimensions of autism, and attending to the intersectional experiences of autistic people (e.g., Botha, 2021; Ryan & Milton, 2022). Critical Autism Studies provides an important theoretical foundation for research exploring the lived experiences of gender-diverse autistic adolescents, whose experiences are not only shaped by autism-related discourses but also by normative expectations relating to gender. By emphasising issues of power and cultural context, Critical Autism Studies supports an emancipatory approach to understanding autistic adolescents' experiences. Further discussion relating to Critical Autism Studies and the theoretical framing of the present research is provided within the Empirical Chapter.

Historical Marginalisation within Gender Diversity Research

Gender diverse individuals have been “subject to a troubled history of ethically and methodologically flawed research practices” (Vincent, 2018, p.1). It is reported within the literature that historical research in this area has been highly pathologizing (Vincent, 2018), with gender diverse people being seen as “objects to be dissected” (Chaplin et al., 2018, p.3). Chaplin et al (2018) describe that this reflects the privileging of psychiatric knowledge within research, over the lived experiences and voices of transgender people. They further identify labels used to describe gender diverse individuals in historic research, including “psychopathic, narcissistic, mentally unhealthy, and pathological” (Chaplin et al., 2018, p.3). Vincent (2018) highlights the importance of gender diversity researchers understanding how trans people have been subject to ethically problematic and harmful research practices, and if this understanding is not gained there is a risk of repeating the harmful practices and having a negative impact on the wellbeing of individuals from gender diverse communities. It is noted that historically, many researchers prioritised validating their own theories of the origins of gender diversity than considering the wellbeing and ambitions of trans individuals (Vincent, 2018). Ramaswamy (2024) similarly identifies that some existing research about trans and gender diverse people “has only problematised and pathologized their lives” (Ramaswamy, 2024, p.129). In relation to gender diversity, pathologisation is described as practices which label and treat gender diverse individuals’ “self-identified gender, body, gender expression or presentation, and the agency or practice of gender identity, as abnormal or deviant”

(Ramaswamy, 2024, p.129). Ramaswamy (2024) describes that this has a number of negative and harmful impacts, including the silencing, social isolation and marginalisation of gender diverse people. Furthermore, Ramaswamy (2024) identifies that much of the research on gender diverse people reflects the perspectives of cisgender researchers, and more representation of gender diverse people in research communities is critical.

Participatory Approaches in Gender Diversity Research

Similar to calls for greater participation within autism research, there is a need to engage in participatory-informed research with gender diverse communities, enabling individuals' voices to be heard and informing more effective interventions (Katz-Wise et al., 2019). Servais et al (2024) argue that research directly with gender diverse young people is critical to better understand their lived experiences and to be able to adapt services to meet the needs of gender diverse young people. They further argue that research exploring the current experiences and needs of gender diverse young people under the age of 18 is limited. One explanation for the lack of research in this area may relate to the requirement for parental consent which may present ethical difficulties (Servais et al., 2024). Singh et al (2013) report that whilst research on topics related to gender diversity has increased over the last 20 years, there has been a lack of research which adopts participatory action research (PAR) frameworks with gender diverse individuals and communities. Vincent (2018) argues that community involvement or participation within the formulation of a research project will provide valuable insights. McNeil et al (2012) carried out research which used an advisory group made up of gender diverse non-academic community members and concluded that it was essential to the success of the research project that gender diverse people were able to act as advisors throughout the entirety of the project. Vincent (2018) argues that adopting participatory approaches within the data analysis phase of qualitative research, for example by sharing emerging themes or contents of the analysis with the participant, can partially safeguard the participant by preventing the misrepresentation of their experiences. In line with the literature relating to participatory-informed approaches within autism research, there are many researchers within the existing gender diversity research which call for greater use of participatory-informed approaches within research. The present research adopts

participatory-informed principles in an advisory capacity, rather than as participatory methodology.

Identity Development

Adolescent Identity Construction

It is widely accepted in the literature that adolescence is an important time for individuals in developing a sense of self, or identity (Kroger et al., 2010). Identity construction is described as a complex social and discursive process (Taylor, 2015). Erikson (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development is an influential theory in this area, which outlines eight stages of psychosocial development which he proposes individuals generally follow from birth to late adulthood. Within the adolescence developmental stage (from 12-18 years), it is argued that adolescents explore their values, beliefs and goals in order to develop a sense of self, personal identity, control and independence (Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1968) theorises that if adolescents don't have opportunities to explore their unique interests, values and goals, they may experience 'role confusion' where they are unsure about their purpose and direction, and confused about their personal identity. Erikson (1968) emphasises the importance of social relationships at this developmental stage. He argues that how an adolescent's peer group perceives them can impact their identity formation, and that adolescents are more likely to develop a positive sense of self if they feel a sense of social acceptance and belonging.

Building on Erikson's (1968) theory, Marcia (1966) proposed that an adolescent's identity can be classified into one of four statuses. He argues that 'identity diffusion' occurs when an individual neither explores nor commits to any identities, 'foreclosure' occurs when an individual commits to an identity without exploring other options, 'moratorium' is a state in which adolescents are exploring options but haven't yet committed to an identity, and 'identity achievement' occurs when individuals have successfully explored options and have committed to an identity (Marcia, 1966). Through carrying out a meta-analysis of 124 studies, Kroger et al (2010) found that states of 'moratorium' rose steadily to age 19 and declined thereafter, the proportion of individuals being 'identity achieved' rose over late adolescence and early adulthood, 'foreclosure' and 'diffusion' statuses declined over

high school years but fluctuated throughout late adolescence, and large numbers of participants were not 'identity achieved' by young adulthood.

Whilst the work of Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966) has been used traditionally to explain identity formation in adolescence, more recently, process-oriented models of identity are used to provide new insights, in particular dual-cycle models (Crocetti, 2017). Branje (2022) described that within a dual-cycle identity model, two interrelated cycles (the 'identity formation' cycle and the 'identity maintenance' cycle) are said to occur when adolescents are developing their identity. Within the identity formation cycle, adolescents are described as questioning their identity, exploring alternative options, and forming commitments. Within the identity maintenance cycle, adolescents are described as strengthening their chosen identity commitments (Branje, 2022). Through these processes, adolescents develop 'identity synthesis', i.e., the extent to which they have a consistent self-concept and feel "sure of themselves" (Branje, 2022). Branje (2022) recognised the importance of social and contextual factors in adolescent identity construction, as the process of forming an identity does not occur in a vacuum.

Within the literature, a distinction is made between 'personal identity' development and 'social identity' development, with both forming and changing over time in a dynamic process (Crocetti et al., 2024). Personal identity refers to the inner meaning making at an individual level (Crocetti et al., 2024) and relates to theories described above. On the other hand, social identity refers to the ways in which individuals define themselves as members of groups of people (Crocetti et al., 2024). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) relates to social identity development and describes the ways in which individuals define themselves based on their group memberships (e.g., nationality, religion, social class), and how belonging and self-esteem is enhanced through identifying with 'in-groups' and differentiating from 'out-groups'. Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner, 1999) builds on these ideas and explains the cognitive processes underlying an individuals' self-categorisation and intergroup differentiation processes. It is evident that there is a wide body of literature and a range of theories to describe the ways in which humans construct their identity, both individually and in relation to others. When working with

adolescents, it is particularly important to consider these psychosocial developmental processes.

Gender Identity Development

Psychological theories relating to gender identity development focus on how individuals come to see themselves “in gender-differentiated ways and adopt gender-differentiated behaviours” (Bussey, 2011, p. 25). One particularly influential theory in this area is Kohlberg's (1966) developmental theory, in which the gender development process is described. This theory focuses on children learning to gender-label themselves and others, and understanding that this aspect of self persists over time and across different situations (Bussey, 2011). Kohlberg (1966) explains that ‘gender constancy’ (i.e., the understanding that gender identity is stable and does not change over time or in different contexts) is generally acquired in children between the ages of 5 and 7 years. However, this ‘fixed’ view of gender identity has been criticised, as it is unable to account for the variation in gendered behaviour observed in older children and adults (Bussey, 2011). The Gender Schema Theory (Martin & Halverson, 1981) also focuses on gender identity development in childhood but proposes that children learn gender norms and stereotypes, and to attain cognitive consistency they are motivated to behave in ways which align with the stereotypes. They argue that gender schemas are formed which guide the behaviour of children. Bem (1981) argues that there is variation in the extent to which individuals rely on gender schemas. The Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory have been applied to gender identity development. It is proposed that when individuals are assigned to a group (e.g., binary gender category), they demonstrate allegiance to the group and ‘in-group’ identification (Bussey, 2011). However, individuals typically do not adopt all of the characteristics of the group with which they identify, and from a Social Identity approach it is unclear how individuals decide which elements of the group they will adopt and which they will reject (Bussey, 2011). Bussey (2011) describes that other theories of gender identity development emphasise the “multidimensionality of identification with a group”, such as with ethnicity, race, or gender. This approach also would argue that individuals identify with particular groups and perceive that cognitive beliefs are also jointly held by group members (Bussey, 2011).

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory posits that people develop perceptions of themselves based on their experiences, including interactions with others, and self-reflection (Bussey, 2011). From birth, interactions with others are influenced by gender, therefore Bussey (2011) argues that it is no surprise that gender identity has an important influence on self-concept and life courses. Social factors shape the way people are treated and how they respond. Gender is an important determinant of social interaction in many societies (Bussey, 2011). Other developmental theories relating to gender identity development (e.g., Gender Schema Theory) have been criticised for adopting a deterministic view where gender identity is primarily associated with a child's knowledge of their biological sex (Powlishta et al., 2001). However, Social Cognitive Theory would argue that gender identity is multifaceted, and it varies across individuals and across the lifespan, and it develops not only from self-knowledge of biological sex, but also from a combination of personal and social factors (Bussey, 2011). From this view, gender identity is understood as evolving and changing across the lifespan and as societal views about gender change (Bussey, 2011).

Fisher et al (2025) carried out a systematic review of the longitudinal evidence relating to gender identity development. They reported that across the literature, the age of 3 appears to be a salient time where children are becoming increasingly aware of gendered norms and cues, they appear to increase their rigidity in their gender-stereotyped clothing preferences, and they begin to show evidence of sex segregation. Fisher et al (2025) report that as children enter middle childhood, their self-identified gender tends to remain consistent over time, and rigidity in gendered expression or preferences may lessen.

Autistic Identity Development

Whilst the construction of a personal identity is a key component during adolescence, autistic adolescents will integrate the idea of 'being autistic' into their self-identity to differing degrees (Lamash et al., 2024; Mesa & Hamilton, 2022). Whilst historically it may have been assumed that identity is not a central concern to autistic young people, more recent qualitative research suggests that autistic people are concerned with identity construction and will position themselves in relation to sociocultural norms and expectations (Mesa & Hamilton, 2022). Discourses relating

to autism that autistic adolescents are exposed to whilst growing up are likely to influence their relationship with the 'autism' label and therefore the ways in which they construct an autistic identity (Brownlow, 2010). Bagatell (2007) describes the process of constructing an autistic identity as involving the negotiation of competing narratives: of 'disability' and 'deficit' in pathologizing discourses; of the voices of the 'neurotypical and ableist' world; and of the neurodiversity movement, where 'autistic norms' are celebrated.

Cooper et al (2017) propose that the Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory provide a useful theoretical framework with which to consider autistic identity. They suggest that an autistic identity is one of many social identities which can be integrated into an individual's personal identity. Cooper et al (2017) defines social identification with other autistic people (autism identification) as a feeling of connection to the group, such that it is internalised within the individuals' self-concept, and the individual behaves in a way that aligns with other members of the group. Autistic social identity would involve perceived shared characteristics with other autistic people, and differentiation from 'out-groups' (e.g., non-autistic people) (Corden et al., 2021). A number of factors may contribute to the process of identity construction for autistic people, including social stigma, family response to diagnosis, knowledge of autism and cognitive processes (Cooper et al., 2017). Within their research, Cooper et al (2017) found that autism social identification was positively related to personal self-esteem, and it provided a sense of collective self-esteem. Furthermore, having a positive autism social identity appeared to be a protective factor against mental health difficulties.

Mesa and Hamilton (2022) found that within their sample of 14 autistic young people, participants' understandings of what it means to be autistic evolved as they grew up, and the extent to which they integrated 'autism' into their personal identities was mediated by the responses of others in their social circles. Mesa and Hamilton (2022) concluded that participants sometimes understood autism as a 'totalising identity', where the multiple layers of difference and similarity between individuals were not acknowledged. Parents within Mesa and Hamilton's (2022) study reported benefits of autistic young people interacting with each other in school, to develop a group identity and discuss shared experiences, which aligns with benefits of autism

social identification discussed by Cooper et al (2017). Botha et al (2022) reported that participants within their research generally felt that autism affects their entire perception of the world, and therefore an autistic identity is significant. Identity construction in autistic adolescents has also been found to be impacted by parental disclosure of their child's autism diagnosis, as Riccio et al (2021) concluded that "adolescents whose parents voluntarily disclosed their autism diagnosis to them described autism and themselves more positively than adolescents who did not experience voluntary disclosure" (Riccio et al., 2021, p.374).

Minority Stress

Research indicates that gender diverse individuals experience high rates of minority stressors, including discrimination, stigma, and physical and sexual violence (Testa et al., 2015). The Minority Stress Model was first introduced by Ilan Meyer in 2003 as a conceptual framework for understanding the increased incidence of mental health challenges amongst LGB (lesbian, gay and bisexual) individuals (Meyer, 2003). Since then, it has been influential in guiding research relating to the health and wellbeing of sexual and gender minority individuals (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Within the first iteration of the framework, Meyer (2003) focused on understanding factors contributing to mental health inequalities facing sexual minority populations, however the framework has since been expanded to include 'gender minorities', in particular "describing the role of gender non-affirmation as a stressor for transgender and non-binary people" (Frost & Meyer, 2023, p. 1).

Within the model, a distinction is made between 'minority stress', i.e., stress which originates from prejudice and stigma, and 'general stress', i.e., stress that all people may experience (Frost & Meyer, 2023). The model demonstrates the idea that both 'distal' and 'proximal' stress processes contribute to an "excess stress burden" which results in sexual and gender minority individuals being at greater risk of negative outcomes, when compared with cisgender straight people (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Distal stressors include external stressors, which originate from people or institutions impacting the individual (e.g., discriminatory policies/laws, acute major life events such as job loss, 'everyday' experiences of discrimination or microaggressions) (Meyer, 2003). Proximal stressors include internal stressors which arise from living in a society that stigmatises LGBTQ+ identities (e.g., internalised

stigma, expectations of rejection, concealment of identity to avoid distal stressors) (Meyer, 2003). Within the model, Meyer (2003) identifies that individuals may adopt coping mechanisms or social support which can reduce the negative impact of minority stress. Therefore, the overall impact of minority stress on the mental health of individuals is said to be determined by the interplay of distal and proximal stressors, and coping mechanisms and social support (Frost & Meyer, 2023).

As previously mentioned, since its initial publication, the Minority Stress Model has been applied to gender diverse communities (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Testa et al (2015) build on Meyer's (2003) model to reflect the unique experiences and stressors experienced by transgender and gender non-conforming people. They developed a tool, named the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience (GMSR) measure, which assesses minority stress and resilience factors in gender diverse people. Testa et al (2015) argue that gender diverse people experience a range of unique minority stressors which can negatively impact mental health, including gender-related discrimination, gender-related rejection, gender-related victimisation, non-affirmation, internalised transphobia, negative expectations for future events, and nondisclosure. They also argue that two resilience factors, community connectedness and pride, may reduce the negative impact of the minority stressors (Testa et al., 2015). When using their tool with a sample of 844 gender diverse participants, Testa et al (2015) found that the seven minority stress scales were positively correlated with depressive and social anxiety symptoms. Tan et al (2020) built on previous research in this area and explained the role of cisnormativity in creating the stressful social environments which negatively impact gender diverse people.

The Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) and Gender Minority Stress Framework (Testa et al., 2015) have been criticised for using broad identity terms to refer to one particular population. Tan et al (2020) argue that applications of the frameworks which do not include "indigenous, underprivileged or rural" gender diverse people can lead to limited understandings of gender diverse individuals' experiences and consequently "only advance the interests of subsections of the TGD [transgender and gender diverse] population who are already relatively privileged" (Tan et al., 2020, p. 1481). The idea that the existing minority stress frameworks fail

to acknowledge intersectional experiences is particularly important to consider within the present research, as the models may not capture the full range of potential stressors and protective factors experienced by gender diverse individuals who also belong to other communities, including the autistic community. Wattel et al (2024) describe that many studies discuss how minority stress may be experienced as a “double whammy” for gender diverse autistic people, as marginalisation can occur on two fronts. Tan et al (2020) emphasise the importance of an intersectional approach within gender diversity research, in order to “facilitate a shift in focus from the unitary effect of cisgenderism to the intersections among multiple systems of oppression” (Tan et al., 2020, p. 1485). Despite critiques of minority stress frameworks, Frost and Meyer (2023) argue that whilst there has been significant socio-cultural shifts in the 50 years since the beginning of the modern LGBT rights movements, the lives of individuals from the LGBTQ+ community continue to be impacted by stigma, prejudice and discrimination, therefore the Minority Stress Model continues to be relevant and useful.

Intersectionality

The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by Crenshaw (1989). It refers to the ways in which social identity structures (e.g., race, class and gender) interact, and shape lived experiences, particularly experiences of privilege and oppression (Gopaldas, 2013). Intersectionality initially was used to describe the ways in which race and gender interact to shape the employment experiences of black women (Crenshaw, 1989); however, the concept has since evolved to encompass all social identity structures (Gopaldas, 2013). Davis (2008) describes intersectionality as the interaction among “categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (p. 68). Similarly, McCall (2005) refers to the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations. In contemporary understandings of intersectionality, as particular social identity structures are not specified, this can include a range of structures including for example age, attractiveness, education, height, weight, immigration status, income, religion and sexual orientation (Gopaldas, 2013). Atewologun (2018) describes that within research, intersectionality is most often associated with qualitative research

methods due to the central role of giving voice, elicited through focus groups, interviews, observations and action research.

Within autism research, many scholars call for a greater focus on intersectionality. Cascio et al (2021) describe that intersectionality is particularly important to consider when conducting research with disabled individuals, as aspects of participants' identities, other than their 'label' or 'diagnosis', can be overlooked or ignored. Cascio et al (2021) call for autism researchers to explore other demographic characteristics of autistic participants which may lead to unique needs and considerations. Sassu and Volkmar (2023) argue that school-based practitioners must consider all aspects of a child's identity when engaging in autism assessment and intervention within the school setting, and that school-based practitioners must be provided with guidance for addressing the needs of diverse populations of autistic students. Botha and Gillespie-Lynch (2022) state that intersectionality has been neglected in autism research and practice, and that "we must understand differences *within* the autistic community if we wish to help all autistic people experience the dignity they deserve" (p. 107). They note that we are "only beginning to grapple with the degree to which intersectionality has been neglected in autism practice, research, and activism" (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022, p.96). The historical and contemporary narratives surrounding autism and autistic people have been "intertwined with a pervasive and persisting whiteness, cis-gender, middle-class, straight, maleness" (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022, p. 96). It is critical that autism research takes in to account the complex and multifaceted nature of people's identities, and the unique range of strengths and challenges experienced by members of the autistic community.

Similarly, within research with transgender and gender diverse individuals, there are calls to consider the concept of intersectionality. LaFave and Inwards-Breland (2025) found that young people who are gender diverse and from minoritised ethnic backgrounds experience significant health disparities, as a result of intersecting systems of oppression. Many researchers argue that gender cannot and should not be studied in isolation from other forms of diversity (Longman & De Graeve, 2014). As described in relation to the minority stress frameworks, Tan et al (2020) emphasise the importance of considering an intersectional approach within

gender diversity research, to ensure a focus on the intersections among multiple systems of oppression.

Queer Theory

Research relating to gender diversity increasingly draws on theoretical approaches which question how social norms shape the possibilities available to individuals (Watson, 2005). Queer theory provides a way of thinking that challenges traditional assumptions about identity and embodiment and moves away from fixed categories. Queer theory is described by Jagose (1996) as having “definitional indeterminacy”, in that it resists being defined by a neat set of principles, or as a single framework. Instead, the theory is open to questioning and reinterpretation. Butler (1994) similarly argues that the “queer” should not be fixed, and that such a definition would undermine the criticality underpinning the theory. The underpinnings of queer theory align with feminist scholarship, post-structuralism and broader critiques of binary thinking (Watson, 2005; Edkins, 2007). Queer theory highlights how identities are produced through social, cultural, and institutional practices, rather than emerging from biological truths (Watson, 2005). Queer theory can offer a conceptual lens through which identity can be understood. Jagose (1996) emphasises that identities develop in ways that are not linear or uniform. Queer theory aims to challenge pathologising or deficit-oriented interpretations which have historically shaped research. Queer theory provides a particularly important foundation for the present research and it situated gender diversity within a broader critical framework which questions how categories are formed and maintained. Within the present study, this will allow the diversity of participants’ experiences and identities to be explored. Further discussion relating to Queer Theory and the theoretical framing of the present research is provided within the Empirical Chapter.

Autism and Gender Diversity: the Intersection

Prevalence

An increasing amount of research is focused on the intersection between gender diversity and autism. To better understand the foci, methodological approaches and rigor within this body of research, Mittertreiner et al (2024) carried out a scoping review of literature in this area and found that the most studied sub-

topic was measuring the prevalence of autism among gender diverse individuals. Over recent years, increased attention has been placed on topics of sexuality and gender diversity both in the general population and within the autism research community (Øien et al., 2018). Within the literature, many studies report an “overrepresentation” of autism in individuals with gender dysphoria (e.g., van der Miesen et al., 2018; Shumer et al., 2016; Skagerberg et al., 2015). A number of literature reviews and meta-analyses further support the idea that there is a ‘link’ between gender diversity and autism (Manjra & Masic, 2022).

Glidden et al (2016) carried out a systematic literature search to appraise the current literature relating to the co-occurrence of gender dysphoria and autism. They found that the literature investigating autism in CYP with gender dysphoria showed a higher prevalence rate of autism compared with the general population, however the limited literature in the field does not allow for clear conclusions regarding the prevalence or aetiology of autism in trans individuals. Similarly, Manjra and Masic (2022) carried out a narrative review and found that all fifteen papers included reported an association between gender diversity and autism. However, there was great variation in the calculated co-occurrence rates, which ranged from 0.07% to 68% amongst the studies (Manjra & Masic, 2022). Amongst the studies reviewed, there was also variation in the way that terms associated with gender and autism were defined and understood by participants, which may result in the identification of a relationship which is under- or over-estimated (Manjra & Masic, 2022). Thrower et al (2020) also carried out a systematic review of studies examining the prevalence of autism and/or ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) in individuals with gender dysphoria. Of the studies they reviewed, 22 examined the prevalence of autism or ADHD in people with gender dysphoria, whilst 8 examined the reverse; prevalence of gender dysphoria in autistic individuals. They concluded that the few studies which employed diagnostic criteria for autism suggest a prevalence of 6-26% in transgender populations, which is higher than in the general population. They summarise that “low-level evidence exists to suggest a link between autism and gender dysphoria” (p. 695), though very few studies explore the prevalence of ADHD in individuals with gender dysphoria (Thrower et al., 2020). Van der Miesen et al (2016) compared the self-reported wish to be of the ‘opposite gender’ in a large sample of autistic adolescents and adults with a large sample of adolescents and

adults from the general population. They found that significantly more autistic adolescents (6.5%) and adults (11.4%) reported a wish to be of the opposite gender in comparison to the general population (3-5%) (van der Miesen et al., 2016).

Amongst the literature exploring the co-occurrence of autism and gender diversity, it is evident that there is an established overlap or link between the two constructs. However, conclusions differ regarding the extent of this co-occurrence, and reported rates vary considerably across studies. Much of the literature in this area adopts quantitative methodology and focuses on examining the prevalence of autism among gender diverse individuals (Mittertreiner et al., 2024). It should also be noted that there is variation within the literature regarding who is included as part of the autistic and gender diverse populations, for example whether diagnoses are required or self-identification. This is likely to impact the outcomes and conclusions drawn within the research. Øien et al (2018) argue that it is vital that more qualitative studies focus on the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse individuals to provide greater understanding and insight into these multifaceted experiences.

Possible Explanations for the Overlap

Much of the research exploring the 'overlap' between autism and gender diversity focuses on establishing whether or not a link, or co-occurrence, exists, as opposed to exploring possible explanations for the overlap (Wattel et al., 2024). However, there is a small body of research which does outline potential theories for the underlying mechanism of this association (Wattel et al., 2024). Van der Miesen et al (2016) provide a review of available theories which aim to explain the link between autism and gender diversity. They organise the possible explanations into three distinct categories: biological explanations, psychological explanations and social explanations. Wattel et al (2024) build on this research and provide an updated systematic review of the literature, including a review of 36 studies which result in 15 different theories which aim to explain the link. Similarly, the theories are categorised as either biological, psychological or social explanations.

Within 'Biological Theories', several ideas are discussed: that 'high birth weight' is a common factor between autism and gender diversity (Vanderlaan et al., 2015); that the 'extreme male brain' theory explains both gender diversity and autism

in people assigned female at birth (AFAB) (e.g., Nobili et al., 2018); that prenatal androgen exposure influences the development of both autism and gender identity (e.g., Zucker et al., 2017); and that there is a genetic link between autism and gender diversity (e.g., Cheung et al., 2018). It is important to note that the evidence relating to these theories is limited and contradictory. Furthermore, caution should be exercised when referring to correlational links (e.g., the theory of ‘high birth weight’) as a number of external factors may result in a correlation being present.

Within ‘Psychological Theories’, ideas discussed include: ‘atypical gender development’ in autistic populations as explaining the high prevalence of gender diversity (e.g., Kallitsounaki et al., 2020); the role of ‘obsessions’ in the autism-gender diversity link (e.g., Zucker et al., 2017); ‘rigid’ or ‘concrete’ thinking about gender in autistic populations contributing to the link (e.g., Walsh et al., 2018); ‘over- or under-responsivities to sensory stimuli’ as a shared factor in autistic and transgender individuals (Nabbijohn et al., 2019); the role of ‘sexual orientation’ in the overlap between autism and gender diversity (e.g., George & Stokes, 2018); and reduced mentalising abilities in autistic individuals resulting in individuals not internalising stereotypical attitudes of their sex assigned at birth (e.g., Kung, 2020). Similar to the biological explanations, many of these theories have limited supporting evidence. One psychological explanation which Wattel et al (2024) describe as ‘promising’ is the theory of ‘Weakened Sex Differences’. This refers to the idea that autistic people show fewer typical male-female differences, and this may explain why gender diversity is more common (Vermaat et al., 2018; Kallitsounaki & Williams, 2020).

Within ‘Social Theories’, ideas discussed include: the internal experience of ‘feeling different’ to others and a lower affiliation with gender groups among autistic people (e.g., Fielding & Bass, 2018); the impact of ‘minority stress’ amongst gender diverse people in contributing to the development of ‘social difficulties’ (e.g., Cheung et al., 2018); and ‘social communication’ as being associated with both autistic and gender diverse populations (e.g., Akgül et al., 2018). Another theory described alongside the social explanations, also described as ‘promising’, is the idea that autistic individuals are more likely to also be gender diverse as they are “less susceptible to societal prejudice/pressure than neurotypical people” (Wattel et al.,

2024). It is argued that autistic people are more resistant to social norms and are 'free' from normative influences when developing their gender identity, whereas neurotypical people are more likely to conform to the gender binary norm (Wattel et al., 2024). Walsh et al (2018) argues that a resistance to social norms may promote the initial exploration and self-recognition, as well as facilitate the disclosure of gender diverse identities in autistic people.

Many of the hypotheses presented within the literature lack strong supporting evidence (van der Miesen et al., 2016). Wattel et al (2024) identified that over a third of the theories mentioned above lack any claim of evidence for or against them. The language used within many of these theories could also be described as pathologizing or deficit-oriented, which does not align with the shift away from this within the wider autism literature (Bottini et al., 2024). Some theories discussed are also described as difficult to prove or disprove, as they relate to psychological or conceptual variables which are difficult to measure (Wattel et al., 2024). It is evident that the empirical basis for all theories relating to the autism-gender diversity link is limited. The body of literature in this area is small, due to the focus of the research being on establishing whether there is a link, rather than exploring possible explanations for the link. However, there are two theories which are identified as being 'promising' which may be explored further in future research, including the 'Weakened Sex Differences' and the 'Resistance to Social Norms' theories (Wattel et al., 2024). Wattel et al (2024) explain the importance of future research being not limited to investigating the existence of such a link, but the focus should be broadened to understand the consequences of the link, so that the needs of gender diverse autistic people can be better met. Similarly, Mezzatesta-Gava et al (2025) conducted a scoping review and concluded that the main gaps within the literature relating to the associations between autism and gender diversity are: "(1) the need to conduct future mixed-method research that is co-produced by autistic and gender diverse individuals; (2) the importance of working with autistic and gender diverse individuals from intersectional, neurodiverse, and gender diverse affirmative approaches in clinical, educational, and research settings; and (3) how online environments could potentially be used by autistic and gender diverse people to express their own identity throughout their lives" (p. 1).

Lived Experiences of Gender Diverse Autistic Adolescents

A narrative review of the existing qualitative research evidence relating to the lived experiences of gender diverse autistic adolescents is presented below. Much of the existing qualitative literature is focused on the perspectives of others (e.g., parent/professional perspectives), rather than the voices and lived experiences of the adolescents. There is also some literature which explores the lived experiences of adults who are both autistic and gender diverse. However, the qualitative literature exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of adolescents who are autistic and gender diverse is limited. Studies focused on adults, or the perspectives of others, were excluded. One study which focused on Educational Psychologist's perspectives was included. Studies which adopted a multi-perspectival design, but which sought the views and experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, were included. The review is organised thematically and is divided into 7 key themes: 'Identity Development', 'Mental Health & Wellbeing', 'The Interaction Between Autism and Gender Diversity', 'Educational Experiences', 'Healthcare Services & Educational Psychology Practice', 'Social Context, Stigma and Discrimination', and 'Community Connectedness and Peer Relationships'.

Identity Development

Across the body of qualitative literature exploring the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, the theme of identity development arises and is reported by researchers. Milne (2021) explored the lived experiences of gender diverse autistic young people, aged 16-26, in the UK. One superordinate theme that arose in their study related to 'My identity – understanding me, acceptance and rejection'. Milne (2021) reported that participants experienced stages of understanding (and sometimes questioning) of identity whilst also navigating others' responses to their identity, including parental acceptance and rejection. Participants in this study identified their autism diagnosis as being something that helped them to understand themselves and better explain to others who they were (Milne, 2021). The participants spoke of varied responses from parents in relation to their gender identity, as well as the importance of others using the correct language in relation to their gender and autistic identities (Milne, 2021).

Cooper et al (2023a) carried out a multi-perspectival IPA study with young people and parent pairs, focusing on the young person's experience of gender dysphoria. One superordinate theme which arose related to 'working out who I am', which had two subordinate themes: 'the centrality of different identities and needs' and 'thinking about gender'. This theme described how young people's narratives within the study tended to centre their gender identities, whilst autism was often unimportant to their sense of self. However, parents' narratives more often focused on their child's social differences and needs related to autism. The young people within the research experienced gender as a central, and real, part of themselves, which they were certain about. Similarly, Cooper et al (2023b) carried out a multi-perspectival IPA study, incorporating the perspectives of autistic and gender diverse young people, parents, and clinicians. They found that participants experienced gender as a 'deeply known and central identity', and incongruence between their bodies and sense of self had a negative impact. Cooper et al (2023b) found that participants tended to provide "minimal" and "detached" responses when asked about autism, and "separate themselves" from autism, perhaps to demonstrate the reality of their gender identity. Both of these studies highlight the ways in which autistic and gender diverse young people develop a sense of self, often conceptualising their gender identity as being a central part of who they are. However, on the contrary, Vines et al (2025) found that participants perceived that their neurodivergent identities shaped their experiences more so than their gender diverse identities.

Oliver et al (2025) explored the lived experiences of 5 autistic and gender diverse AFAB (assigned female at birth) individuals and one theme related to the role of 'labels' in participants' constructions of their identities. Participants saw themselves as "more than a dual diagnosis", and they had different experiences of developing a sense of self in adolescence. Some participants felt their identity was important, whilst for others this was less important. Whilst most participants felt that gender diversity and autism were part of their identity, these parts alone did not define them. Choate et al (2026) carried out an IPA study focused on the lived experiences of gender diverse autistic adolescents who also experience chronic pain. They also found that participants considered their relationships with labels and diagnoses. At times, participants felt that labels and diagnoses were validating

aspects of their identity (e.g., receiving a pain diagnosis), however at other times they found labels to be overly rigid and unnecessary (e.g., gender labels were described as arbitrary). Choate et al (2026) also described that participants understood society as ‘an additional identity in the room’, as they were required to navigate societal responses to their identities, including anticipating how others would respond whilst still trying to understand themselves. These studies indicate that labels and diagnoses play a role in the way autistic gender diverse adolescents construct their identities.

Patel (2019) explored the lived experiences of “gender variant” adolescents who were also autistic and found that they made sense of and explored their identities, and described this process as a ‘journey’. They found that participants went through a process whereby they were able to gain insight and understanding into why they felt ‘different’ to others, and as a consequence of this sense-making process they grew in confidence. Similarly, Strang et al (2018) carried out a qualitative study exploring the experiences of gender diverse autistic adolescents and found that participants described their gender identity as developing and coming into focus over time, similarly framing identity development as a process which evolves over time.

Mental Health & Wellbeing

Another theme which arose across the studies reviewed was participants experiences of mental health challenges, as well as experiences of distress associated with gender dysphoria. A superordinate theme within Milne’s (2021) research was ‘emotional & mental health challenges’, and this referred to participants referencing mental health challenges, as well as negative feelings associated with gender dysphoria. Similarly, Cooper et al (2023a) found that participants experienced being ‘overwhelmed’ with negative feelings which they found difficult to understand and express, and participants reported distress due to gender incongruence for which they sought gender-affirming treatments as a ‘solution’. Cooper et al (2023a) found that participants experienced gender dysphoria as compounding other mental health difficulties. Cooper et al (2023b) also found that participants experienced distress related to gender incongruence and expressed a desire to move towards gender comfort through undertaking a physical gender

transition. From the literature, it appears that autistic gender diverse adolescents often report emotional wellbeing challenges and distress associated with incongruence between their body and their gender identity, and many participants wish to relieve this distress through receiving gender-affirming care.

Oliver et al (2025) also describe that participants had experienced adversities and challenges within their life, and they highlight participants having to deal with other life stressors, on top of stressors related to their autistic and gender diverse identities. This aligns with the Minority Stress framework, in that marginalised individuals will encounter 'general stressors' (e.g., stressors which anybody might encounter) as well as unique stressors associated with marginalised aspects of their identity. Oliver et al (2025) also describe adolescents experiences of adopting coping skills to support their wellbeing, which is also captured within the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003). Vines et al (2025) describe the negative impact of the cis-normative culture of school on participants' mental health. They further describe that several elements of school life reinforced gender norms (e.g., sports days, gendered language from staff, gendered toilets), and this had a negative impact on wellbeing. It is evident from the literature that many autistic gender diverse young people experience challenges related to mental health and emotional wellbeing, associated with gender dysphoria, general life stressors, as well as social and gender norms.

The Interaction Between Autism and Gender Diversity

Within the qualitative literature, researchers document the ways in which participants make sense of the intersection between autism and gender diversity in their lived experience. Reutter (2024) carried out semi-structured interviews with 15 gender diverse and neurodivergent participants and found that participants reported interwoven internal experiences of neurodivergence and gender identity. Although the literature is limited in this area, this finding is consistent across many studies. Oliver et al (2025) found that participants felt that being both autistic and gender diverse made things more complex, and it was difficult at times to unpick the influence autism has had on their gender dysphoria. One participant in this study questioned whether they would have gender dysphoria if they were not autistic, highlighting the perceived intertwined nature of these experiences. Özel and Griffin (2025) found that almost all participants were familiar with the intersection of

neurodivergence and gender diverse identities. Vines et al (2025) found that participants acknowledged the connectedness of their neurodivergent and gender diverse identities, though the two identities did not impact participants equally. Participants described that learning about one of their identities had a ‘domino effect’ where they subsequently discovered the presence of other diverse identities.

Participants across studies articulate a range of ways that their autistic and gender diverse identities interact. Cooper et al (2023a) found that some participants experienced distress due to the interaction of sensory sensitivities and gender incongruence (e.g., when experiencing periods), and some parents identified that autism may have influenced their child’s thoughts about their gender identity, due to “black and white thinking”. Cooper et al (2023b) found that in many participants, sensory needs associated with autism ‘intensified’ experiences of gender dysphoria (e.g., sensory discomfort when wearing a binder, but bad gender dysphoria when not wearing it). Participants also described the ways in which autism influenced the process of coming to know their gender identity. Whilst many participants wished to undertake a physical gender transition to alleviate distress, there were sometimes barriers to accessing this as an autistic person (Cooper et al., 2023b). Strang et al (2018) found that participants presented with greater difficulties with self-advocacy and communication regarding their gender needs, and this was often attributed to autism. Furthermore, they found that participants felt their gender-related needs had been misunderstood or doubted due to them being autistic. Özel and Griffin (2025) found that participants felt that being autistic contributed to them not conforming to gender norms, thereby creating space for gender diverse identifications. This is supported by Strang et al (2018) who concluded that autistic people may feel less pressure to conform to gender stereotypes. Similarly, Patel (2019) found that participants tended to display a degree of resistance towards social pressures to conform to gendered expectations, particularly as they entered adolescence, and this was attributed directly to being autistic. In addition to this, participants described feeling more able to question gender norms, compared with their neurotypical peers who they felt may accept gender norms at face value. Participants also described experiencing increased social isolation which they attributed to being autistic, and this subsequently facilitated the exploration of their gender identity as they did not worry about how they were perceived as they felt that they were already disliked. It is

evident from the literature that autistic and gender diverse adolescents appear to recognise the interconnected nature of different aspects of their identities, and they describe ways in which their autistic identity has influenced the ways in which they make sense of their gender identity.

Educational Experiences

Whilst there remains a limited amount of literature exploring the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, this body of work is growing. However, there is still a significant lack of research specifically exploring the educational experiences of this community. Despite a number of qualitative studies exploring the experiences of school-aged adolescents, their educational experiences often remain overlooked or poorly understood. Milne (2021) carried out an IPA study which explored the lived experiences (including educational experiences) of 6 gender diverse autistic young people aged 16-26. They found that school experiences elicited negative feelings for all participants, and participants described stressors at school/college including “issues around social and communication challenges with peers, sensory overwhelm including response to noise and being around a lot of people, and for some the jump in expectations at secondary school” (p. 82). However, they also found that participants described some positive and supportive experiences at school, including supportive teachers and school staff making accommodations to meet their needs. One limitation of this study was that for many participants, they were reflecting retrospectively on their educational experiences due to their age. Furthermore, ethnically diverse voices were not represented within this research.

Vines et al (2025) explored how school shapes mental health for gender diverse and neurodivergent young people. They conducted interviews and focus groups with 12 young people aged 16-19 who attended education settings across England. They found that participants acknowledged their school experiences were turbulent, because of the way others treated them, due to their identities. They found that participants “did not feel understood and in turn, did not receive enough consistent and appropriate support, which negatively impacted mental health” (p. 1). However, similar to within Milne’s (2021) research, participants described some positive experiences which improved their mental health at school, including

understanding teachers, bespoke support and representation. Within this research, participants who identify as neurodivergent and gender diverse are included, with some participants identifying with an 'ADHD' label, therefore this study does not strictly explore the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, although the majority of participants identify as autistic. This study has a specific focus on the role of education in shaping the mental health of young people, rather than offering a general and exploratory account of their educational experiences. Whilst there is a growing body of research which explores the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, there is a significant lack of research which focuses specifically on educational experiences. Given that autistic gender diverse adolescents hold intersecting marginalised identities, it is critical that their educational experiences are explored and well understood.

Healthcare Services & Educational Psychology Practice

It appears from reviewing the literature that much of the qualitative research exploring the experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents is conducted from a clinical lens. As a result, much of the data collection and implications for practice are situated within clinical contexts. In comparison, educational contexts and implications for practice are underrepresented. Within the literature, it is identified that autistic gender diverse adolescents experience more barriers to accessing clinical services than their non-autistic and cisgender peers. Cooper et al (2023a) found that participants experienced difficulties in accessing mental health and clinical services due to sensory needs within the clinic environment, as well as difficulties in communicating with clinicians. Similarly, Cooper et al (2023b) found that participants perceived clinical services as a 'barrier' to gender comfort, as communication and autism-related adaptations were sometimes lacking within gender clinics. They found that autistic young people and adults sometimes struggled to understand healthcare clinicians, whilst at times, clinicians struggled to understand autistic patients (Cooper et al., 2023b), which aligns with the 'Double Empathy Problem' (Milton, 2012). Choate et al (2026) found that for autistic and gender diverse young people who experience chronic pain, the healthcare system was experienced as a 'maze' to be navigated. Participants experienced harmful impacts of invalidation across their identities from professionals, which led to a lack of trust, fear and frustration.

Similarly, Reutter (2024) found that neurodivergent and gender diverse participants experienced stigmatization related to gender diversity within healthcare settings, as well as healthcare professionals failing to respond appropriately to their intersecting dual identities. Though Patel (2019) explored the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, their research was conducted through a clinical psychology lens and therefore applications of the research and implications for practice focus on adolescents' experiences within clinical contexts. Whilst much of the research in this area highlights negative experiences and barriers within healthcare contexts, Oliver et al (2025) found that participants perceived clinical support as overwhelming, though it helped when clinicians were gender-affirming, empathetic, accepting and collaborative. From the research, it appears that autistic gender diverse adolescents experience a range of barriers to accessing clinical services, and it is therefore important to consider how adolescents can be better supported in these settings. However, it is also evident that the body of literature places emphasis on clinical contexts, whereas educational settings and experiences are underrepresented.

One study seeks the perspectives of Educational Psychologists (EPs) in relation to supporting autistic gender diverse adolescents. Allen-Biddell and Bond (2022) carried out semi-structured interviews with 5 EPs to explore the role of the EP in supporting autistic gender diverse CYP within UK schools. They explored EPs' experiences and practices when working with this population. The themes that arose in this study include 'EPs working with the uncertainty around gender diversity and autism', 'Understanding the child or young person', 'Working with schools' and 'Identifying research, policy and practice gaps'. EPs within this study described relying on their core psychological skills as scientist-practitioners to navigate the complexities of casework, and the need to employ skilful, psychologically-grounded formulation, consultation and respectful practice. Allen-Biddell and Bond (2022) concluded that more research, both practice-based and evidence-informed is required which specifically focuses on the intersection of autistic and gender identities. Further, more research which considers school-based and educational psychology practice is required to ensure that education professionals are well equipped to support autistic gender diverse adolescents.

Social Context, Stigma and Discrimination

Across studies, adolescents describe navigating the social landscape, including societal responses, stigmatization, discrimination and normative assumptions. Strang et al (2018) identified 'bias and harassment' as a theme within their research, which captured participants' experiences of feeling less comfortable expressing their gender due to worry about bias and harassment, as well as participants having their gender identity "questioned" due to their autism diagnosis. This study was carried out in America, so may reflect a different socio-cultural context. However, Cooper et al (2023a) research was conducted in the UK and they also found that participants experienced being bullied, feeling isolated, and 'like an outsider' due to their social and gender differences. Similarly, Oliver et al (2025) found that participants experienced transphobia, bullying and misgendering, which had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Vines et al (2025) found that in UK schools, participants tended to consciously 'mask' their gender diversity due to worry about hostility that has historically surrounded gender diversity. Furthermore, they found that participants described the cisnormative culture of school as negatively impacting their mental health. One of the Group Experiential Themes which came out of Choate et al's (2026) research was the 'impact of society as an additional identity in the room', where a central part of participants' experiences was navigating societal responses and anticipating how others would respond to them whilst they were still trying to understand themselves. The research in this area indicates that autistic gender diverse adolescents are more likely to experience bullying, stigma and discrimination when navigating social contexts.

Community Connectedness and Peer Relationships

The final theme which arose across the literature related to the importance of adolescents 'finding their people' and connecting with peers who belong to the LGBTQ+ and autistic communities. Strang et al (2021) sought the perspectives of autistic gender diverse adolescents, their parents, self-advocates and expert clinical providers in order to develop a clinical program for autistic gender diverse adolescents developing psychosocial support techniques. Data was analysed using Framework Analysis, and one key theme found that youth connections and community was important to participants. This research was carried out in the United States of America, and primarily related to clinical contexts. Both Milne (2021) and

Oliver et al (2025) conducted research in the UK and found similar things. Milne (2021) found that participants provided examples of social spheres where they felt able to be their authentic selves, and this was often when they were with autistic or LGBTQ+ others. Oliver et al (2025) found that all participants spoke of wanting to socialise with others and had motivation to do so for various reasons. Similarly to Milne (2021), they also found that participants spoke of finding places that they felt they could fit in. Two participants noted that they felt they fitted in more with other people who were also either trans and/or neurodivergent. Some participants felt they fitted in best in online spaces. It appears that many autistic gender diverse adolescents experience positive impacts of connecting with others with shared identities.

Conclusion

This literature review began by situating both autism and gender diversity within the wider historical, national and sociopolitical contexts, and by defining key terminology. Following this, key psychological theories were explored as frameworks for understanding the experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, including theories relating to identity development, intersectionality and minority stress. A review was then provided of existing theoretical and empirical literature relating to the overlap between autistic experiences and gender diverse identities, as well as the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents. In reviewing this literature, it became apparent that gaps are present in existing knowledge. Relating to the overlap between autism and gender diversity, much of the literature adopts qualitative methodology and focuses on examining the prevalence of autism among gender diverse individuals (Mittertreiner et al., 2024). Wattel et al (2024) argue that future research exploring the overlap between autism and gender diversity “should not be limited to investigating the existence of such a link but should broaden its focus to understanding the consequences of the link for efforts to meet the needs of trans autistic people” (Wattel et al., 2024, p. 292). Similarly, Øien et al (2018) argue that it is vital that more qualitative studies focus on the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse individuals to provide greater understanding and insight into these multifaceted experiences.

There is a significant lack of research which explores the educational experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents. Whilst Milne (2021) and Vines et al (2025) explore the educational experiences of this population, gaps in the research remain and there are therefore opportunities to build on the existing literature. Within Milne's (2021) research, participants were aged 16-26, and many were reflecting retrospectively on their educational experiences. Within Vines et al (2025) research, participants identifying as neurodivergent were included, and whilst many identified as autistic, a few did not. Therefore, this research did not exclusively explore the educational experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, as some participants identified with an 'ADHD' label. To date, no research which explores the educational experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents makes use of participatory-informed or creative activities. Fletcher-Watson et al (2019) argue that enabling greater participation can potentially transform the lives of autistic (and non-autistic) individuals. Mezzatesta-Gava et al (2025) highlight the need for future research exploring the association between autism and gender diversity to be co-produced by autistic and gender diverse individuals. From this literature review, it is concluded that further research is warranted which uses qualitative and participatory-informed methods to explore the lived and educational experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, particularly those currently attending education settings.

Chapter 2: Empirical Chapter

Abstract

Whilst an overlap between autism and gender diversity has been established in the literature, less attention is paid to the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, and in particular considering educational experiences and implications for practice in educational contexts. Several researchers call for greater consideration of intersectionality in autism and gender diversity research. Furthermore, no research in this area has adopted participatory-informed or creative activities to elicit participants' views. The present study explored the lived experiences, including educational experiences, of autistic gender diverse adolescents. Semi-structured interviews, integrating some optional creative activities, were conducted with five autistic gender diverse adolescents (aged 16-18). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. Four Group Experiential Themes (GETs) arose from data analysis: 'Evolving Understanding of Self', 'Intersection of Autistic Experience and Gender Identity', 'Navigating Educational Systems that Shape Success and Wellbeing' and 'Navigating Family Relationships and Finding Community', as well as thirteen subthemes. The findings generally align with existing theoretical literature and empirical research within this area, though some unique findings and contributions are discussed. Key implications for practice for educational professionals, as well as directions for future research, are explored.

Introduction

Whilst in a clinical context, 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' is diagnosed as per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V), it is increasingly conceptualised in ways which challenge a deficit-oriented framework (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). It is argued that medical conceptualisations of autism have an inherent focus on deficit, and this has been found to have a significant negative impact on the identity development of autistic individuals (Bagatell, 2007). Autism can be understood in the context of the neurodiversity paradigm, which posits that neurodevelopmental differences are important, natural and valuable parts of human variation, and therefore these differences should not be pathologized (Hughes,

2021). Many members of the autistic community express concerns that their experiences are misunderstood or minimised by non-autistic researchers, educators and allies (Lebenhagen, 2020). Therefore, many autistic individuals express a desire to be collaborators, consenting participants and colleagues within autism research, and many adopt the slogan ‘nothing about us, without us’ (Milton, 2013). Within existing research, it has been identified that the views of teachers, parents, clinicians and siblings are often sought, however little emphasis has been placed on the accounts of autistic adolescents (Tesfaye et al., 2023). There are also calls for researchers to make greater use of participatory approaches within autism research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019), which are thought to produce better quality research which can be more easily translated into practice (Hobson et al., 2023).

Over recent years, there have been shifts in the national, legislative and sociopolitical context, with particular implications for how gender diverse populations are understood and supported. One example of a shift in the wider context relates to the UK Supreme Court ruling in 2025 which stated that the definition of ‘sex’ in the Equality Act (2010) should be interpreted as biological sex only, with individuals not able to change their legal sex through obtaining a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC). This has had important implications for access to single-sex spaces for gender diverse people (e.g., bathrooms, changing rooms), including in educational contexts. This ruling has been widely criticised, with Phipps and Alsop (2025) arguing that it reflects a wider trend of “legitimising transphobia in public discourse and public institutions”. Another example of a shift in the wider context relates to the Department for Education (DfE) publication of draft guidance relating to “Gender Questioning Children” (DfE, 2023). This guidance received a significant amount of criticism, including from children’s charities such as Barnardo’s and the NSPCC. The Cass Review was published in April 2024 and has implications for the future of gender affirming care and the wider political context (Noone et al., 2024). This has been criticised, with researchers expressing concern over the methodology and risk of bias (Noone et al., 2024).

Within the literature, an overlap between autism and gender diversity has been established. Several empirical studies report an “overrepresentation” of autism in individuals presenting with gender dysphoria (van der Miesen et al., 2018; Shumer

et al., 2016), as well as literature reviews and meta-analyses supporting the idea that there is an overlap (Manjra & Masic, 2022). Whilst it appears evident within the literature that autistic people are ‘over-represented’ in gender clinics, conclusions differ regarding the extent of this co-occurrence, and reported rates vary across studies. Some researchers present possible theories explaining the overlap (Wattel et al., 2024). One theory which Wattel et al (2024) identify as “promising” relates to the idea that autistic people are more resistant to social norms more generally and are therefore less likely to conform to gender norms than non-autistic people. This is supported by Walsh et al (2018) who found that in autistic people, a resistance to social norms may facilitate both the initial exploration and self-recognition, as well as the disclosure of gender diverse identities. Much of the literature exploring the overlap between autism and gender diversity adopts quantitative methodology and focuses on examining the prevalence of autism among gender diverse individuals (Mittertreiner et al., 2024). Øien et al (2018) call for future research to focus on understanding the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse individuals, using qualitative methodologies.

There is an emerging body of research which uses qualitative methodology to explore the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents. However, it appears that much of this research is conducted from a clinical lens, and therefore implications for practice often focus on clinical settings. Despite some researchers exploring the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents who are of school-age, many fail to explore educational experiences. There is therefore a significant lack of research exploring the educational experiences of this population. To the researcher’s knowledge, two studies within a UK context explore this. Milne (2021) conducted an IPA study which explored the lived experiences, including educational experiences, of six autistic gender diverse young people aged 16-26. Milne (2021) reports that a limitation of this research was that many participants were no longer within education and were reflecting on their experiences retrospectively. They also report an inability to capture the perspectives of transmen, as five participants were transwomen and one was gender questioning. Vines et al (2025) conducted interviews and focus groups with twelve neurodivergent and gender diverse young people aged 16-19 and specifically explored how school shapes mental health for participants. Within Vines et al (2025) research,

participants identified as neurodivergent, so whilst the majority of participants identified as being autistic, a few did not. Therefore, Vines et al (2025) was not exclusively exploring the experiences of autistic gender diverse young people, but of neurodivergent gender diverse young people. Vines et al (2025) research also adopted a specific focus on school experiences shaping mental health. Considering the existing research exploring the educational experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, there appear to be gaps in exploring the experiences of those currently attending education settings, with a broad focus (not specifically considering the impact of school on the mental health of participants). There also appears to be an opportunity to offer a novel perspective through adopting participatory-informed approaches, including creative activities to elicit participants' views. Furthermore, given the shifting national and sociopolitical context over recent years, it will be important that adolescents' experiences are understood within this broader landscape.

Research Aims and Rationale

The aim of the current study is to explore the lived experiences, including the educational experiences, of autistic gender diverse adolescents who are aged 14-18 and are currently accessing education in the UK. The study aims to build on existing literature relating to the experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, and specifically the limited research which considers educational contexts. Therefore, it is hoped that implications for practice for educational professionals, including school/college staff and Educational Psychologists, will be contributed. The research aims to offer novel perspectives in this area, through the age range and the education status of the participant sample, and through the integration of participatory-informed/creative activities to offer alternative ways for participants to share their experiences. Milne's (2021) research was conducted a number of years ago and given the shifts in the national and socio-political context, and the influence of macrosystemic factors on a child's development and experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), it is important that up-to-date research is conducted to explore adolescents' current experiences.

Research Question

This study is guided by the following research question: What are the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents navigating their identities across family, education and community contexts?

Theoretical Frameworks

This research is underpinned by a number of critical psychological theories and frameworks, including Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), Queer Theory and Critical Autism Studies. In addition, the theoretical foundations of IPA underpinned the research. Although IPA is an inductive approach and therefore led by the data collected, there are various theories which are central in supporting the interpretation of the research findings.

Theoretical Foundations of IPA

It is important that IPA researchers are aware of the underlying philosophy informing IPA, as this will enable them to produce analysis which is nuanced and sophisticated (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is concerned with carrying out a detailed analysis of the lived experience of a small number of participants (Tuffour, 2017). In order to examine the way that individuals make sense of their experiences, including the way that they interpret the events, objects and people in their lives, IPA draws upon the fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). These three key philosophical principles are briefly explored below.

Phenomenology. First developed by Edmund Husserl, and later extended by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, phenomenology is an approach which seeks to study human lived experiences and the way things are perceived (Tuffour, 2017). It aims to describe phenomena as they have been experienced 'within' by the individual and how they appear to consciousness, rather than imposing prior assumptions, theories, or explanations (Moran, 2002). Husserl emphasised the importance of 'bracketing' one's preconceptions, in order to get to the essence of subjective experience and allow phenomena to speak for themselves (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Studies underpinned by phenomenology therefore focus on how

people perceive and talk about objects and events, rather than describing phenomena according to predetermined categories, concepts or criteria (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This reflects Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's view of phenomenology as a "means of going beyond narrow empiricist, psychological assumptions about human existence", and rather a way to "capture life as it is lived" (Moran, 2002, p. 5). Whilst IPA recognises the role of the researcher and their preconceptions when interpreting the experiences of others, it remains underpinned by phenomenology through its focus on how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, whilst emphasising the importance of researcher reflexivity (Smith et al., 2022). Within the present research, the phenomenological underpinnings of IPA align with the researcher's aim to understand and explore the lived experiences of gender-diverse autistic adolescents, including how participants navigate their identities across family, education and community contexts.

Hermeneutics. Smith et al (2022) explain that hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. Whilst IPA is phenomenological in its aim to get as close as possible to the participant's lived experience, its hermeneutic underpinnings recognise that this process is interpretative for both the participant and the researcher (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al (2022) further explain that data analysis within IPA always involves interpretation; there is a phenomenon ready to shine forth, but detective work is required by the researcher to facilitate the coming forth, and then to make sense of it once it has happened. IPA researchers acknowledge the role of biases, preoccupations and assumptions when conducting research, and they reflect on how these shape their research inquiries and influence their interpretations (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2012). The idea of a 'hermeneutic circle' is discussed within the literature and refers to the "dynamic relationship between the part and the whole" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 22). We understand the whole by looking at the parts, and we understand the parts by looking at the whole. Within IPA research, this means that the data analysis process is iterative. The researcher moves back and forth through different ways of thinking about the data, which offers different perspectives on the part-whole coherence of the data (Smith et al., 2022). The researcher's own perspectives and experiences interact with the participants' accounts; however, the researcher will not necessarily be aware of all of their preconceptions in advance of analysing the data, therefore reflective practices and a cyclical approach are

required (Smith et al., 2022). Smith & Osborn (2003) describe that IPA involves a 'double hermeneutic', in which the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant, who is trying to make sense of their lived experience of a particular phenomenon. The researcher therefore assumes a central role in the analysis and interpretation of the participants' experiences (Tuffour, 2017). The researcher only has access to the participant's experience through what the participant reports about it, and is also seeing this through the researcher's own, experientially-informed lens (Smith et al., 2022). The double hermeneutic is particularly significant within the present research, given the researcher's positionality as a non-autistic and cisgender person. Reflexivity is therefore essential when interpreting participant's experiences.

Idiography. There is an abundance of psychological literature that adopts a nomothetic approach to inquiry, describing the characteristics of large groups of individuals and predicting relationships among group-level variables (Harris, 2003). Nomothetic research is concerned with establishing general laws of human behaviour, by collecting and analysing data "in a manner which prevents the retrieval or analysis of the individuals who provided the data in the first place" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 24). Therefore, nomothetic inquiry focuses more on group averages rather than particular cases. However, many writers have highlighted limitations of nomothetic approaches, particularly relating to their efficiency, their flexibility, and the generality of the results they produce (Barlow & Nock, 2009). IPA research is said to be fundamentally idiographic (Tuffour, 2017), in that it "is committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 24). Consequently, IPA research often uses small, purposively-selected samples, in order to provide detailed, nuanced analyses of particular instances of lived experience (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is said to value each case in its own merits before moving to the general cross-case analysis for convergence and divergence between cases (Tuffour, 2017). The idiographic nature of IPA means that the analysis involves an inductive examination of each individual's account, allowing the unique experiences of participants to be illuminated whilst also identifying commonalities across the group (Love et al., 2020). The present research aligns with an idiographic approach as it prioritises an in-depth, detailed exploration of how each participant makes sense of

their lived experiences. Each participant's account is analysed individually, before shared patterns are identified.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), explains that the development of a child or young person is influenced by the wider systems surrounding them, and the interactions within and between these systems. This theory was adopted as an organising framework within the present research, as it supported the researcher to consider the research findings through the systems in which participants are living. The theory describes five different systems surrounding individuals, including the 'microsystem', 'mesosystem', 'exosystem', 'macrosystem' and 'chronosystem'. The microsystem refers to an individual's immediate relationships and environments, including their family and school setting. The mesosystem highlights the interconnected nature of the systems and describes the ways in which an individual's microsystems interact with each other to impact the individual's development, for example, the relationship between a child or young person's parent and school staff. The exosystem refers to relationships and environments which do not directly interact with the individual, but which still influence the microsystems and the individual's development, such as local government, or family friends. The macrosystem focuses on the impact of cultural factors, such as societal values, ideologies and attitudes, which influence an individual's experiences and development. The final level of the Ecological Systems Theory is the chronosystem, which refers to changes over the course of an individual's lifetime, such as transition to school, or parental divorce. The various systems surrounding a child or young person should not be considered in isolation, and instead should be understood as interacting and dynamic.

The present research explores the experiences of gender-diverse autistic adolescents through an Ecological Systems Theory lens, foregrounding how the surrounding systems impact their experiences and development, rather than viewing the adolescent in isolation. For this reason, within the Interview Schedule (Appendix 1), questions are included which explore the participant's relationships with people in their life, as well as their experiences at home, at school, in the community, and

within online spaces. The Eco-Mapping creative activity included within this research closely aligns with the Ecological Systems Theory, mapping out the important people and places in an individual's life, and the nature of the relationship they have with them. As well as considering the relationships and environments which participants directly interact with, it is also vital within this research to consider the macrosystem and current context, including the impact of statutory guidance, political opinions, and societal attitudes on gender-diverse people, and the impact of living in a largely neurotypical world on autistic people.

Intersectionality

The term 'intersectionality' was first coined by Crenshaw (1989) to explain Black women's experiences of oppression; however the theory is now applied within many different contexts. Intersectionality "views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another" (Collins & Bilge, 2020, section 1). It is said to be a way of understanding complexity in the world and within human experiences. Collins and Bilge (2020) further explain that power relations are not discrete and mutually exclusive, but they build on each other and work together. Intersecting power structures, whilst often invisible, impact the social world. Different identities and personal characteristics interact with each other, and impact power and privilege. Intersectionality aims to make visible and explicit the "multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it" (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006, p. 187). Cho et al (2013) emphasise the importance of focusing on what intersectionality does, rather than what intersectionality is. Vincent (2018) reports that much of the research with trans people has been on predominantly white, middle class and non-disabled populations. They argue that "recognising and giving voice to trans people impacted by multiple oppressions produces knowledge that can empower the most marginalised" (Vincent, 2018, p. 110). Furthermore, Mallipeddi and VanDaalen (2022) suggest that researchers working with autistic communities must consider how intersectionality and social influences impact autistic people. They recommend that researchers consider racial, gender and sexual minority group experiences within the autistic community (Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022). The present research considers the intersection between autism and gender

identity, and therefore the experiences of young people who hold multiple marginalised identities. Intersectionality theory was viewed as a central theory in supporting the researcher to make sense of the findings and in considering how power relations operate in the lives of autistic gender-diverse adolescents.

Queer Theory

The term ‘queer theory’ was first introduced by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991 to “make sense of an already deeply entrenched set of questionings and abrasions of normality” (Watson, 2005, p. 69). Whilst queer theory is generally understood as a way of thinking which challenges traditional assumptions about gender and sexual identities, many researchers and theorists argue that an important feature of queer theory is its “definitional indeterminacy”, and the idea that it is not a fixed construct or a unified and coherent theory (Jagose, 1996; Watson, 2005). Jagose (1996) further explains that to attempt to provide a definition or overview of queer theory is to risk domesticating it and “fixing it in ways that queer theory resists fixing itself” (p. 2). Judith Butler was a key theorist in the development of queer theory, who cautioned that “normalising the queer would be, after all, its sad finish” (Butler, 1994). Queer theory builds on liberal ideas of equality, and feminist and post-structural ideas (Watson, 2005). Post-structuralism is a movement which challenges and rejects the tenets of structuralism, a model which leans towards a binary view of the world (Edkins, 2007). Within the present research, queer theory provides a perspective through which the experiences of participants whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth can be explored and understood. Queer theory aligns with the researcher’s philosophical orientation and complements the IPA methodology, viewing gender identity as performative and socially constructed rather than fixed, and it supports the exploration of lived experiences which differ from dominant social norms. Queer theory highlights the fluid and unpredictable ways in which identities and lived experiences develop (Jagose, 1996). Within the present study, queer theory supported the researcher to understand the research findings, and to embrace the individual and unique experiences of participants.

Critical Autism Studies

Critical Autism Studies can be defined as encompassing three parts: “exploring power relationships that construct autism”; “enabling narratives that challenge the dominant negative medical autism discourses”; and “creation of theoretical and methodological approaches that are emancipatory and value the highly individual nature of autism and its nascent culture” (Davidson & Orsini, 2013; Woods et al, 2018). Critical Autism Studies is informed by and is complementary to Critical Disability Studies however, the focus of research is placed on issues specific to autism rather than on the broader construct of disability (O’Dell et al., 2016). It explores the manufacture of autism, and it aligns with a social model of disability, which shifts focus from an individual’s perceived deficits to how an impaired person is oppressed by society (Woods et al, 2018). Critical Autism Studies allows autistic people to reclaim autism narratives (Woods et al., 2018). Waltz (2014) proposes that the ‘criticality’ in Critical Autism Studies comes from exploring power dynamics that operate in autism discourses, challenging deficit-oriented conceptualisations of autism, and considering how biology and culture interact to produce ‘disability’. This includes autistic individuals being able to take a more active role in the production of autism knowledge (Waltz, 2014). Ryan and Milton (2022) argue that Critical Autism Studies offers possibilities to “seek the emancipation of autistic people” and to focus on intersectionality. Critical Autism Studies offers a powerful frame of reference through which to explore the lived experiences of gender-diverse autistic adolescents, whose experiences will be shaped by social norms and dominant discourses around autism. It aligns closely with the overarching aim of the research to amplify the voices of autistic adolescents as it values the production of autistic-led knowledge. It supported the researcher to make sense of the research findings, and it is also helpful when considering the role of power and culture in shaping the experiences of autistic participants. Critical Autism Studies ensures that the research is not conducted in line with a deficit-orientated approach, and rather that the perspectives of autistic individuals are centred.

Methodology

Ontology and Epistemology

Philosophical meta-theory refers to broad theoretical frameworks, addressing concepts such as the nature of reality (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This differs from explanatory theories which describe specific processes (Davidoff, 2019). Philosophical meta-theory underpins all decisions when producing knowledge, whether one's orientation is made explicit or not (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Ontology refers to the nature of reality including whether an independent reality exists (Grant & Giddings, 2002), whereas epistemology considers assumptions about generating 'meaningful knowledge' (Jovanović, 2010). Ontological orientations lie on a continuum, from realist to relativist (Madill et al., 2000). Realism can be described as accepting a singular knowable reality that we can uncover and is independent (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Relativism emphasises human action and interaction in constructing multiple realities, all of which are equally valid (Jovanović, 2010). Ontologically, the present research aligns with relativism. This position posits that no singular reality exists which is independent of human practices, and reality and truth are contingent, local and multiple (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within the present research, this meant that the focus was on participants' 'meaning making' of their experiences, rather than with conceptually tying back to a 'truth' or 'reality'.

Some epistemological orientations including positivism, contextualism and social constructionism. Positivism emphasises objectivity in testing hypotheses to establish cause and effect (Grant & Giddings, 2002). In contrast, social constructionism stipulates that there are multiple realities, and knowledge is constructed by individuals and located in cultural and historical contexts (Mertens, 2015). Contextualism accepts that multiple realities can exist, as interpretations of reality are contextually dependent (Madill et al., 2000), however, some interpretations may be more valid. Epistemologically, this research aligns with a social constructionist position. This position posits that knowledge is 'produced' rather than 'revealed', and knowledge is understood as being situated and tied to human practices, and historically and culturally constituted (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within the present research, this meant that the researcher explored how the participants constructed reality and what the implications of this are. This position aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, to explore human life as it is lived, rather than by imposing predefined assumptions or ideas.

Research Design

Given the study's aim to amplify the voices of autistic gender-diverse adolescents within research, and to explore and understand the lived experiences of autistic gender-diverse adolescents, a qualitative design was adopted. This aligns with the researcher's ontological and epistemological position. A qualitative design was felt to be most appropriate in order to address the identified research question. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with meaning, including how individuals make sense of the world and experience events, rather than causal relationships (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It generally aims to provide rich and descriptive accounts of the particular phenomenon being investigated (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). An iterative and inductive approach to data collection and analysis was adopted (Smith et al., 2022). Within the qualitative research design, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodological approach was used, which guided the theoretical underpinnings of the research as well as aspects of the research design (sampling, methods of data collection and analysis; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA is a qualitative research approach which focuses on the ways in which people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2022). As IPA values foregrounding participants' interpretations, it has been found to be a particularly useful approach in gaining an insight into the lived experience of autistic individuals (MacLeod, 2019). Furthermore, Chan & Farmer (2017) identify IPA as a suitable approach to explore the lived experiences of members of the LGBTQ+ community, as it can give voice and value to identities that fall within LGBTQ+ communities, and the idiographic nature of IPA allows the researcher to treat each participant's narrative with value and meaning. IPA seeks to "establish an equality of voice between the researcher and the researched" which was particularly important in the present study to equalise the balance of power between autistic and gender-diverse participants and the non-autistic cisgender researcher (Howard et al., 2019, p. 1871).

Many autistic individuals have adopted the phrase "nothing about us, without us", referring to the wishes of many members of the autistic community to be collaborators, consenting participants and colleagues in autism research, rather than passive subjects (Milton, 2013). In addition, Vincent (2018) suggested recommendations to consider when working on trans-focused research. They

reported that community involvement in a project's formulation may grant valuable insights and offer reassurance. This may include using an advisory group containing non-academic community members (Vincent, 2018). Tebbe & Budge (2016) also suggested that principles of community participatory action research should be drawn on when conducting research with trans populations, and the research process should be empowering to and collaborative with trans communities. Within the present study, the researcher attempted to involve community members at different stages of the research. The present research does not constitute participatory research in a methodological sense, as decision-making power remained with the researcher. The study is best described as adopting some participatory-informed approaches. In the planning stages of the research project, a scoping activity was carried out with an advisory group of 4 autistic genderqueer young people aged 17-22. The advisory group reviewed the interview schedule and materials and provided feedback on changes to be made (Appendix 4). Within the data collection phase of the study, some creative activities were suggested as optional activities to be completed within the interview. These methods are discussed further in the Data Collection section below.

Participants

Participant Recruitment and Inclusion Criteria. The recruitment strategy within the present research involved advertising the study through various social media platforms (including Facebook and TikTok; see research advert poster in Appendix 2), as well as contacting a large number of relevant autism and LGBTQ+ charities and youth groups via email (see email sent to organisations and youth groups in Appendix 3). Some organisations subsequently advertised the research through their newsletters and social media channels. Participants were also recruited through a 'snowballing' method (Smith et al., 2022), whereby participants referred others that were known to them. Prior to scheduling the research interview, all participants and their parent/carer had an 'initial chat' with the researcher via Microsoft Teams, to have more detailed conversations about the research, build rapport, and allow participants and their parents/carers to ask questions about the study. Typically, IPA researchers aim to recruit a homogeneous sample of participants, where the group have been defined as similar according to important variables (Pietkiewicz & Smith,

2014). Therefore, in line with the theoretical foundations of IPA, a purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants who could offer a particular perspective on the phenomena under study (Smith et al., 2022). The following participant inclusion criteria was applied within this research:

1. Aged between 14 and 18 (in Key Stage 4 or 5)
2. Formal Diagnosis of Autism
3. Identify as Gender Diverse (Including anyone who is transgender, non-binary, agender, gender fluid, genderqueer, gender questioning or otherwise gender non-conforming)
4. Able and Willing to Participate in an Online Interview
5. Currently Attend an Education Setting in England

Participant Characteristics. In total, five autistic gender diverse young people, aged between 16 and 18, took part in this study. Table 1 presents further information about the participants' characteristics. The primary concern in IPA research is to give full appreciation to each participant's account; therefore, sample sizes are usually small (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). There is no rule relating to how many participants should be included, and IPA studies have been published with, for example, "one, four, nine, fifteen participants" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 9). Smith et al (2022) emphasise that the detailed case-by-case analysis required in IPA is time consuming, and sample size can depend on several factors, including organisational constraints and the richness of the individual cases. Smith et al (2009) propose that for doctoral research, between four and ten participants is usually appropriate. In order to protect anonymity, all participants were given a pseudonym. Participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym. Two decided on their own pseudonym (Celeste and Daniel Green), whilst three had no preference and therefore have been allocated a name at random. Giving participants the opportunity to exert agency through choosing their own pseudonym aligns with Vincent's (2008) recommendations for ethical recruitment and collaboration with transgender participants in academic research.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Participant Pseudonym	Preferred Pronouns	Age at time of interview	Gender Identity (as described by participant)	Age when diagnosed with autism	Type of Educational Setting	Length of Interview (in minutes)
Emily	she/her	17	Female	Year 5	Sixth Form College	67 minutes
George	he/him	17	Male	Aged 8	Learning Centre (Tutoring)	100 minutes
Celeste	she/her	17	Transgender Girl	Aged 12/13	Specialised Sixth Form College	108 minutes
Alex	she/her or they/them	16	Not sure	Aged 8	Sixth Form	99 minutes
Daniel Green	he/him	17	Transgender Male	Aged 16	Sixth Form	71 minutes

Data Collection

Semi Structured Interviews. Within IPA research, it is important that a data collection method is selected which elicits detailed stories, thoughts and feelings from the participant (Smith et al., 2022). This was particularly important within the present research as the voices of gender-diverse autistic adolescents are often not represented within the literature (Özel & Griffin, 2025). Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews have tended to be the preferred means for collecting such data (Reid et al., 2005). Semi-structured interviews were selected within the present research in order to gain rich, detailed and first-person accounts from participants about their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Harrington et al (2014) discuss that when given the opportunity, autistic young people can provide rich, valuable and meaningful insights into their experiences within research interviews. This aligns with shifting perspectives towards viewing children and young people as active participants in research rather than passive subjects (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up during the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021), which can further enhance the researcher's understanding of the nuanced, idiographic details of each participant's lived experience.

Within the present research, semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2025 and February 2026 with participants via Microsoft Teams. Virtual interviewing has been used successfully within previous research to explore the experiences of autistic young people (e.g., McNally et al., 2025), and it is increasingly recognised as a method that supports the inclusion of marginalised groups, as well as increasing access across geographical locations (Keen et al., 2022). An interview schedule was created (Appendix 1) in order to explore the lived experiences of gender-diverse autistic adolescents. Recommendations provided by Smith et al (2022) informed the creation of the interview schedule, including preparing questions that are open and expansive, and avoiding questions that are over-empathic, manipulative, leading or closed. Interview schedules used in previous IPA studies exploring the experiences of autistic young people were also consulted (e.g., Milne (2021); Da Mata Da Silva Costa (2023)). Smith et al (2022) also suggest that when constructing an interview schedule, it may be helpful to discuss the list of

questions with someone else (e.g., a potential participant, supervisor). Harrington et al (2014) suggest that involving a reference group of autistic young people can enhance the design of interview schedules by incorporating their perspectives on what information should be collected and how best to approach it. As previously discussed, a scoping activity was conducted during the planning stages of the research project, with a group of 4 autistic and genderqueer young people, aged 17-22. The young people provided feedback on the interview schedule, and changes to the schedule were made following this in discussion during research supervision (Appendix 4). A final interview schedule was then devised, exploring a number of key areas, including identity, lived experiences & relationships, educational experiences, and plans for the future. By exploring these areas, the researcher was able to gain detailed insights into the participant's experiences and gather information which would answer the research question. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher clarified the format and purpose of the interview. Menzies et al (2011) identified that some autistic young people may experience anxiety relating to research interviews, particularly where they may hold the belief that there is a 'single' correct answer that is expected. For this reason, the researcher clarified that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, and the questions are designed to explore lived experiences. Smith et al (2022) describes that verbal input from the interviewer can be minimal, therefore the researcher clarified at the beginning of the interview that they will likely be listening more than talking. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The length of the interviews varied between 67 and 108 minutes. However, on average, interviews lasted 89 minutes. Within the interviews, participants were provided with a number of options in an attempt to make the interview situation feel more comfortable. Participants were given the option to have their camera on or off or type their answers in the chat instead of talking. They also had the option to have a parent or trusted adult present in the room during the interview.

Creative Methods. Ozano (2021) describes that conducting a fully participatory study requires a lot of time, developing strong relationships with the community, and usually funding is required to facilitate this. However, Aldridge (2016) suggests that participatory research can be thought of as on a spectrum, and participatory-informed methods can be implemented in various ways throughout the

research cycle, such as in the planning stages (e.g., a scoping activity or advisory team), the data collection stages (e.g., visual methods), and in the data analysis stages (e.g., co-analysis, member checking). Participatory-informed methods can involve adapting traditional interviewing methods to meet the communication needs and preferences of participants (Harrington et al., 2014). These approaches are increasingly used in research with autistic young people, foregrounding their lived experiences and ensuring meaningful participation (McNally et al., 2025). Winstone et al (2014) found that using activity-oriented interview methods provided a context within which autistic young people were better able to express their perspectives. Within the data collection phase of the present research, two ‘creative activities’ were incorporated alongside the interview schedule to provide an opportunity for participants to express their stories using different means (e.g., drawing, writing, talking). The creative methods adopted were the ‘Grid Elaboration Method’ and ‘Eco-Mapping’, which are described in greater detail below. It was hoped that using these resources would allow participants further opportunities to share their constructs and lived experiences and give more insight into the phenomena being explored. The resources were presented to participants as optional activities, and they were used flexibly depending on participants’ preferences.

As research interviews were carried out online via Microsoft Teams, the creative activities required adaptation to ensure they were accessible and meaningful. Participants were asked prior to the interview to have some pens and paper to hand during the interview, and then when it was time to introduce an activity, this was explained verbally to the participant, step-by-step. Participants were reassured that participation was optional and the activity could be completed in whatever way felt most comfortable (e.g., drawing, writing, symbols). During the interview, the activities were completed in real time, with the researcher checking in to ensure instructions were clear, and to invite participants to talk through their thinking if they wished. Once the activity was completed, participants were invited to hold their paper up to the camera if they felt comfortable to, allowing the researcher to ask clarifying questions where appropriate. Participants were asked to take photographs of the activities (Grid Elaboration Method grids and/or eco-maps) once the interview was complete, and they were sent a link to a secure OneDrive folder to upload their images. This ensured that the visual data could be incorporated directly

into the analytic process alongside the interview transcript. Feedback from the scoping activity during the planning stages suggested that these activities were a helpful way to gather information from participants who might find verbal expression difficult, though the young people emphasised that taking part should be optional.

Grid Elaboration Method. One creative activity incorporated into the present research was the Grid Elaboration Method (GEM). The GEM is a visually-oriented method of data collection which is based on the principles of free association (Park & Mortell, 2020). It involves participants being presented with a blank grid comprising four boxes on an A4 sheet of paper, and they are asked to represent with a word, image or phrase, their first associations to a given topic (Park & Mortell, 2020). Within the present study, the topics under study were 'gender' and 'autism', allowing participants to identify their first associations to those topics. The GEM gives insights into the participants' thoughts and feelings related to particular issues (Joffe & Elsey, 2014). Once participants have recorded their associations within the grid, the researcher enquires about each association in turn, and the participant is encouraged to elaborate in as much detail as possible (Park & Mortell, 2020), further providing rich and detailed data which is valued in an IPA study. The GEM has been used with autistic young people in previous research to redefine the power relations in research and include autistic young people in the research process (Park & Mortell, 2020). See Appendix 5 for an example of a GEM within the current study.

Eco-Mapping. The Eco Map is a tool often used by social workers and was introduced many years ago to highlight the connections between a family and its environment (Harold et al., 1997). Eco-mapping is a creative and visual method which involves an individual or family being drawn within a circle in the centre of a page, and external systems (e.g., school, professionals, important people, church) are drawn as circles surrounding the individual/family (Harold et al., 1997). Different kinds of connecting lines, and the positioning of the circles, present information about the nature of the relationship between the individual/family and the external systems. Eco-mapping has been used successfully in previous research. For example, Baumgartner et al (2012) found that using eco-maps with children, parents and teachers may contribute to educational research and practice through providing detailed information about children's social support networks. The use of eco-

mapping aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of the present study, as it provides a visual representation of the important systems in a young person's life, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. It gave an opportunity for participants to provide information relating to key players and systems impacting them through drawing/writing.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using IPA, following the seven-stage process as described by Smith et al (2022), which includes updated terminology (e.g., what were previously called 'emergent themes' are now called 'experiential statements'). The analysis of data obtained through visual creative methods was incorporated into this process. Though the stages are described in a step-by-step manner, Smith et al (2022) describe that the analysis process will not be linear, rather it is an iterative and fluid process of engagement with the transcript. In line with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, the researcher is required to move back and forth between the part and the whole of the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2022).

After each interview was conducted, the researcher used the audio recordings to transcribe the interviews verbatim. IPA is primarily concerned with the content of the participant's account, therefore all non-verbal utterances are not required to be recorded, though the researcher noted features that differed from the normal pattern of talking for the participant (Smith et al., 2022). Following each interview, the researcher noted initial thoughts and reflections in a research diary (Appendix 6).

With regards to the visual data collected through the creative activities, this was treated as part of the participant's experiential account and analysed alongside their interview transcript, using IPA. Each output from the creative activity was analysed in detail, and exploratory notes were made about its content (e.g., words/phrases included in the GEM grid, the placement of systems within the eco-map). In addition, the participants' verbal elaborations of the activities were included within the interview transcript and analysed in the same way as the rest of the interview data. Following exploratory notes being generated from the visual material, these were then developed into experiential statements, in line with the steps included in IPA detailed below. The seven stages of IPA analysis are described

further below, though should not be thought of as steps in a recipe, rather as each offering a different way of thinking about the data (Smith et al., 2022).

Step 1: Reading and Re-reading. The first step of an IPA analysis involves the researcher immersing themselves in the original data by closely reading the transcript a number of times (Smith et al., 2022; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), beginning with the first interview transcript. The researcher initially listened to the audio recording of the interview whilst reading the transcript, to become familiar with the data. This is said to help the researcher to recall the atmosphere of the interview and the setting in which it was conducted (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), and each reading and listening to the interview may provide new insights. The researcher imagined the voice of the participant during subsequent readings of the transcript, which is said to assist with a more complete analysis (Smith et al., 2022). As well as reading and re-reading the transcript, the creative activities were examined. As recommended by Smith et al (2022), in a parallel process alongside reading the data, the researcher wrote down recollections and reflections on the interview experience, as well as initial observations about the transcript.

Step 2: Exploratory Noting. Within this stage of analysis, the researcher begins to explore the semantic content and language use, whilst maintaining an open mind (Smith et al., 2022). The researcher noted (in the margin) anything of interest within the transcript to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments (see Appendix 7). Within this stage, there is no requirement to divide the text into meaning units and assign a comment to each unit (Smith et al., 2022). Exploratory notes can be considered to be descriptive (i.e., focused on describing the content of that the participant has said, taking things at 'face value'), linguistic (i.e., focused on how language is used by the participant and considering how this might contribute to our understanding of the participant's experience, the researcher may focus on linguistic features such as pronoun use, pauses, laughter, functional aspects of language, repetition, tone, degree of fluency) or conceptual (i.e., engaging with the data at a more 'interrogative' level, asking questions of the data) (Smith et al., 2022).

Step 3: Constructing Experiential Statements. The next stage of analysis involves the researcher reviewing both the original data and the exploratory notes to

develop experiential statements (see Appendix 7, Smith et al., 2022). The researcher attempts to simultaneously reduce the volume of detail whilst maintaining complexity by articulating the most important points. An experiential statement should relate directly to the participant's experiences or to the experience of making sense of the things that happened to them (Smith et al., 2022). When forming experiential statements, the researcher turned notes into a concise summary of what is important, and the statements reflected not only the participant's original words and thoughts, but also the researcher's interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). Experiential statements were written in the left-hand margin.

Step 4: Searching for Connections Across Experiential Statements. After the researcher has established a set of experiential statements within the transcript, they will map out how they think the statements fit together by looking for connections (Smith et al., 2022). The researcher scattered the experiential statements in no particular order (see Appendix 8) and began to explore connections. Some experiential statements were discarded at this stage, depending on the research question and the scope of the research. This stage involved trial and error, with grouping experiential statements together to make sense of the findings and notice connections. The aim within this stage was to produce a structure which points towards the most important aspects of the participant's account (Smith et al., 2022). See Appendix 9 for an example of experiential statements that had been clustered to form Personal Experiential Themes.

Step 5: Naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and Consolidating and Organising Them in a Table. Within this stage of analysis, each cluster of experiential statements is given a title to describe its characteristics, and these clusters become that participant's Personal Experiential Themes (PETs; Smith et al., 2022). The researcher then created a table to present all of the PETs for that participant, as well as sub-themes, and the set of experiential statements brought together in developing it (Smith et al., 2022). See Appendix 10 for an example of a table of PETs.

Step 6: Continuing the Individual Analysis of Other Cases. After stages 1-5 of the analysis had been completed for one participant, the researcher then moved to the next participant's transcript and repeated the process (Smith et al., 2022). The

researcher remained cautious about reproducing ideas from the analysis of previous cases and attempted to treat each case on its own terms, whilst recognising that previous findings would inevitably influence future analysis (Smith et al., 2022). The rigour of systematically following the stages of analysis for each case was helpful in treating each case as “a complete universe of inquiry” (Smith et al., 2022).

Step 7: Working With Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) to Develop Group Experiential Themes (GETs) Across Cases. The final stage of analysis occurs once all of the individual transcripts have been analysed individually. This involves the researcher looking for patterns of similarity and differences across the PETs previously generated (see Appendix 11), and the researcher thereby creates a set of Group Experiential Themes (GETs; Smith et al., 2022). Whilst the aim of IPA is not to produce a ‘group norm’ or ‘average’, it is useful to understand and explore points of convergence and divergence, to highlight the shared and unique features of experience across participants (Smith et al., 2022). At this stage of analysis, each case will have been thought about on its own terms. As recommended by Smith et al (2022), within this stage, the researcher reflected on questions such as: “Are your analytic entries reflecting participants’ experience?” and “Are you doing justice to their data and your own analytic work?”. See Appendix 12 for the final table of GETs.

Ethical Considerations

This research was given ethical approval by the UEA’s Research Ethics Committee in July 2025 (Appendix 13). The research was completed in line with the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2024). The researcher implemented several measures to mitigate potential risks associated with participating in the research. Following expression of interest in the research via email, Participant Information Sheets (Appendix 14 and 15) were shared with potential participants and their parents/carers to allow them to decide whether they would like to take part in the research. Initial virtual meetings were also facilitated via Microsoft Teams with prospective participants, to discuss the research in more detail, and provide opportunities for them to ask questions about the project. Following the initial meetings, consent forms were shared with potential participants and parents/carers

(Appendix 14 and 15). Informed consent was sought prior to interviews being facilitated. Whilst parental/guardian consent was required in order to participate in the research, assent was sought from participants at the beginning of the interviews. The right to withdraw from the research up until data analysis was explained to participants. The researcher ensured that the participant and their parent/carer were aware that the interview would be audio/video recorded and consent was sought for this. Participants were able to choose if they had a trusted adult present during the interview, but part of the condition of the interview included having a parent/carer in the house, who could be present in case of any safeguarding concerns. Participants were also given the option of having their camera on or off during the interview, or to type their responses in the chat. The researcher followed up with the participant's parent after the interview to ensure the parent was able to check in with the participant. No safeguarding concerns arose during the interviews, however if they had arisen, I would have discussed them with my research supervisor and reported them to the ethics committee as required. Participants were given the opportunity to check their transcript for accuracy and completeness before data analysis commenced. The debrief process involved checking in with participants at the end of the interview, checking in with a named adult following the interview, and providing participants with a detailed debrief form (Appendix 16) which signposted them to relevant support services. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for the transcripts to protect their anonymity, which were either chosen by the participants themselves during the end of their interviews, or were assigned randomly by the researcher if not specified by the participant. Any data collected as part of this project was handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018) and the principles of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Interview recordings were stored on the encrypted UEA OneDrive system in line with the university's data storage policy and were deleted at the end of the project. There were some challenges in obtaining ethical approval due to the perceived vulnerability of the participant group and the sensitive nature of the research topic. However, adopting a thorough and rigorous approach to ethical considerations provided the researcher with a clear framework for undertaking the research whilst fulfilling ethical responsibilities.

Methodological Rigour

To evaluate and demonstrate the validity of the present research, Yardley's (2000) four key principles were considered: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance. Smith et al (2022) report that this framework is still highly relevant to much of today's qualitative research, and it is a framework which is widely used to assess issues of quality and validity. Table 2 demonstrates how the researcher considered and addressed these principles within the present IPA study.

Table 2

Application of Yardley's (2000) Principles

Yardley's (2000) Principles	Application Within Present Research
Sensitivity to Context	• Literature Review was conducted which situated the research within the existing literature and the wider national and sociopolitical context. • Needs of participants were considered throughout. Participants were provided with options regarding the online interview (e.g., having camera on or off, typing answers in the chat). Optional creative activities were included within the interview to provide participants with alternative ways to express their views and experiences. • The researcher was sensitive to the fact that participants may discuss challenging topics within the interviews, therefore the researcher remained alive to indicators that the participants were distressed or uncomfortable. Participants were given the opportunity to agree a 'sign' with the researcher that they could use if they wanted to terminate the interview. • All participants had an 'initial chat' via Microsoft Teams with the researcher before the research interview was scheduled, to build rapport and provide an opportunity to

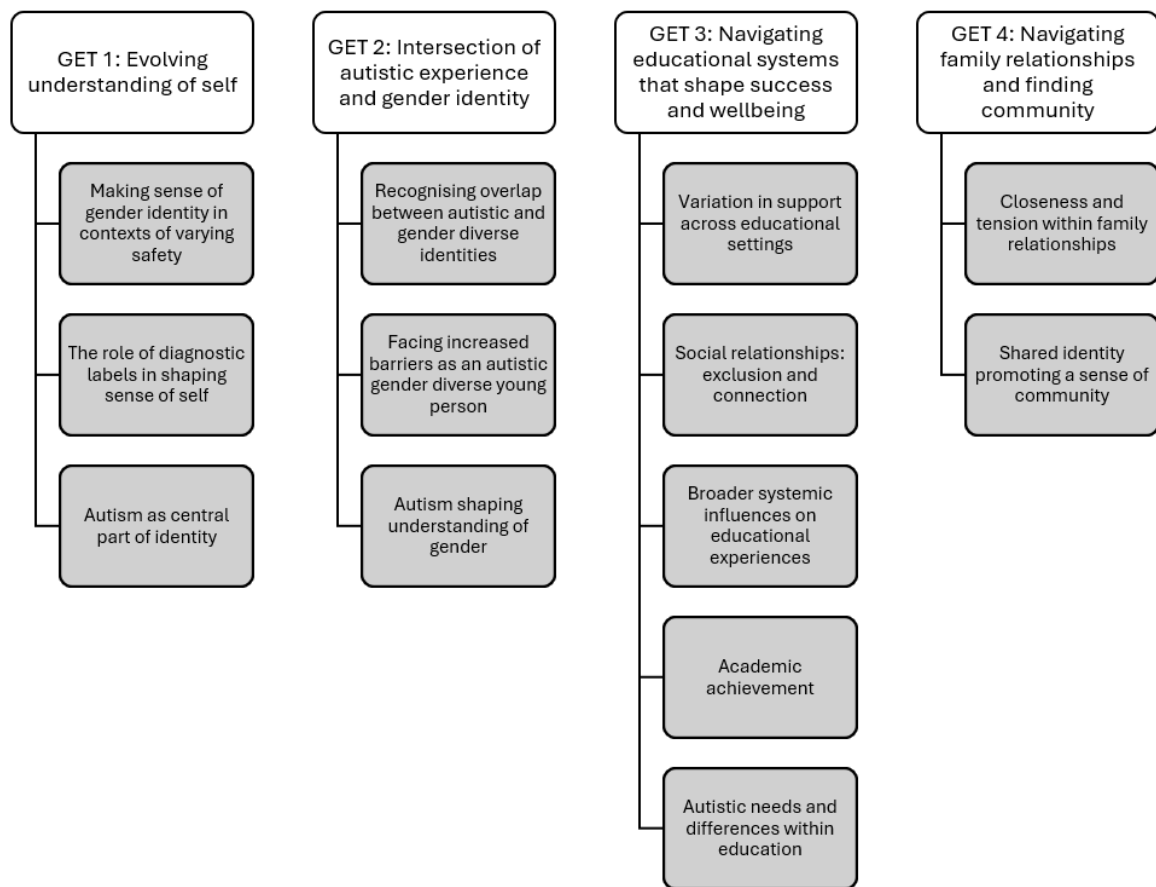
	discuss the research in more detail and answer questions. • Advisory group of autistic genderqueer young people provided feedback on the interview schedule. • Reflective diaries kept by the researcher throughout to support the researcher with 'bracketing' their own assumptions and perspectives. • Direct participant quotes incorporated into the 'Findings' section to ensure the centrality of the individual participants' accounts.
Commitment and Rigour	• Rigour in the selection of participants using a purposive sampling method and applying specific participant inclusion criteria to ensure reasonable homogeneity. • Engagement in research supervision throughout the research process. • Data analysis was conducted using IPA, in line with explanations by Smith et al (2022). • An IPA approach required the researcher to attend carefully to the participant throughout the data collection process. The idiographic nature of IPA meant that the researcher considered each participant's account in detail prior to generating group level themes. • Participants given opportunity to check their transcript for accuracy.
Transparency and Coherence	• Coherence was considered when using the literature to identify a research question and ensure the selected philosophical position and methodological approach aligned with this. • The researcher was transparent about the steps taken throughout the research and provided detail to ensure this was understood. The researcher is able to provide a rationale for research decisions taken.

Impact and Importance

- The researcher remained transparent about her own positionality and continuously reflected on this throughout the research journey. Further reflections are provided within the Reflective Chapter.
 - The researcher made use of a research reflective diary throughout the process, including reflecting on their own assumptions and preconceptions.
 - The study addresses a gap in the current literature and is unique regarding the age range and education status of participants, the inclusion of the perspectives of transgender males, as well as in the application of participatory activities.
 - This study has important implications for Educational Psychologists and other educational professionals including members of staff working in schools and colleges.
 - Plans for dissemination of this work are included within the Reflective Chapter.
-

Findings

This section presents the phenomenological and interpretative findings of the present research, where the experiential accounts of five autistic gender diverse adolescents were analysed. Four Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and thirteen subthemes emerged through the process of analysis. The GETs which emerged were: 'Evolving Understanding of Self', 'Intersection of Autistic Experience and Gender Identity', 'Navigating Educational Systems that Shape Success and Wellbeing' and 'Navigating Family Relationships and Finding Community'. Within this section, each GET and subtheme will be explored, including highlighting areas of convergence and divergence across the individual cases, and with the use of supporting extracts from participants' interview transcripts (Smith et al., 2022). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the GETs and subthemes.

Figure 1**Visual Representation of GETs and Subthemes*****GET 1: Evolving Understanding of Self***

A feature of all participants' accounts was the ways in which they developed their identities and sense of self, and this being something which evolved over time and took place within varying contexts. This GET includes the ways in which participants have made sense of their gender identity with a consideration of the varying contexts in which this has occurred, the role of various diagnostic labels in shaping participants' identities, as well as most participants understanding autism to be a central part of who they are. Table 3 outlines the adolescents in whose accounts each GET 1 subtheme appeared.

Table 3

Relevance of GET 1 Subthemes Across Participants

	Making Sense of Gender Identity in Contexts of Varying Safety	The Role of Diagnostic Labels in Shaping Sense of Self	Autism as Central Part of Identity
Emily	✓	✓	✓
George	✓	✓	
Celeste	✓	✓	✓
Alex	✓	✓	✓
Daniel Green	✓	✓	✓

Subtheme: Making Sense of Gender Identity in Contexts of Varying Safety. An important element of all participants' descriptions of their experiences was the ways in which they explored and made sense of their gender identity, in a range of situations and contexts which varied in perceived safety. Participants spoke of experiences of social transition, with varied responses from others, and with some spaces in their lives feeling safer than others to socially transition in. For example, Celeste said:

Celeste: *"So I'm not I'm I'm not openly trans at my college, and I've had about four or five people just assume I'm trans. I have told them I'm not because I frankly there are quite a lot of people there who I don't feel safe around."* (647-649).

Celeste's statement that there are a lot of people who 'I don't feel safe around' indicates an awareness and attunement to the social risks associated with disclosing her gender identity, specifically in college which she doesn't deem to be a safe place. Celeste's description of not being 'openly' trans highlights a sense of parts of her identity being concealed in certain contexts. Similarly, Alex describes social transition as being context dependent, with it feeling safe and easy in some spaces, and unsafe and stressful in others. She has also not yet socially transitioned within her Sixth Form. She says:

Alex: *"It's added some stress because I'm not out many places yet, so there's the stress of trying to keep... one identity alive with some people and then another one alive with other sets of people and then manage it they end up interacting with each other" (244-247)*

Alex: *"Socially, where I have transitioned, it's been quite easy because it's been spaces where there have already been other people who have transitioned" (293-295)*

Alex's repetition of 'stress' emphasises the negative impact of managing tensions between authenticity and psychological safety. Her descriptions indicate that she is able to find safety and acceptance in spaces where others have also socially transitioned. Alex's description of keeping different identities 'alive' with different groups of people conveys the emotional labour of presenting different identities and the ways in which she is required to navigate social complexity with regards to disclosing her gender identity. Similarly, Emily describes things being 'easier' since she has socially transitioned and only uses one name/set of pronouns:

Emily: *"It's been a lot easier because you've just, I've gone in with one name, one set of pronouns, and no one has any reason to know anything else" (260-262)*

Her repetition of 'one' in 'one name, one set of pronouns' perhaps conveys a sense of relief of only having to manage one 'identity'.

The way that George also describes making sense of his gender identity indicates that it was an evolving journey, though he describes not really 'coming out' as trans:

George: *"I didn't really come out as such. I came out as non-binary, but my mum knew it was coming" (236-237)*

George: *"then it got to a point where I can't remember how much later, but I don't think it was too long that I said, 'actually, I think I'm a boy', and my mum was like, 'yeah, I think you probably are'" (254-256)*

George's explanation of identifying with a 'non-binary' label, before then identifying as a boy, conveys that making sense of his gender identity involved exploration and

experimentation to figure out what felt 'right'. A sense of 'rightness' and comfort following social transition was described by Daniel Green:

Daniel Green: *"I started experimenting, I used different pronouns, I changed my name and it just felt right and I didn't feel like so ashamed or uncomfortable anymore" (200-202)*

Daniel Green's description of his gender expression aligning with his gender identity as just feeling 'right' highlights how this exploration brought an immediate sense of comfort and clarity. Emily also refers to the role of experimentation in facilitating identity development:

Emily: *"I think having people be able to experiment with different things, different identities and all of that kind of thing" (924-926)*

This further emphasises the development of a sense of self as a process which evolves over time and involves experimentation to find what feels authentic. George describes both feelings of certainty as well as some moments of doubt on his journey to making sense of his gender identity:

George: *"sometimes I'll think, I'll have the sort of fleeting thought of, oh, what if I'm wrong and then I'll think... well, no, because it's obvious" (159-161)*

George's reference to this as a 'fleeting thought', and use of the word 'obvious', highlights that the majority of the time he feels certain about his gender identity, though this is at times contrasted with uncertainty or doubt. This aligns with a comment made by Alex relating to ongoing uncertainty about her preferred pronouns:

Alex: *"Not entirely sure on this yet, to be honest, but I'm like either if she/her or they/them for the time being" (89-90)*

Alex's use of the phrase 'for the time being' indicates the ongoing nature of making sense of her gender identity and this as something which is evolving and continues to evolve over time.

Participants refer to a range of affirming and non-affirming experiences in relation to their gender identity, which impacts how they feel and how they make sense of

themselves. Emily, George, Celeste and Daniel Green all describe the negative impact of being misgendered by others. For example, Celeste described:

Celeste: *“When they he/him’ed me in physics I had like I had a breakdown. I had to leave early, like I properly I went home early” (697-698)*

This event emphasises the significant negative impact on Celeste of her gender identity and inner sense of self not being affirmed by others around her. Similarly, Daniel Green expressed a desire for his gender identity to be affirmed, and upsetting experiences of where it hasn’t been:

Daniel Green: *“it’s very hit or miss if people see you as you want to be seen” (233-234)*

Daniel Green: *“sometimes they’re talking about me and they say ‘she’ and I’m like, ‘oh, that’s a bit upsetting, but it’s understandable because you knew me when I was a girl’” (247-249)*

Daniel Green expresses a desire to be ‘seen’ by others in the way that he understands himself and his own identity, and whilst it is upsetting when others don’t affirm his gender identity, he can understand why this sometimes happens and attributes this to others’ knowledge of his identity prior to his transition. As well as experiences which do not affirm gender identity, some participants also spoke of the positive impact of experiences which do affirm their gender identity:

George: *“I mean, my mum called me and me and my brother boys the other like yesterday, she was like ‘right boys, we’re going to do this’, and I was like, oh, it’s quite nice” (699-701)*

George: *“if I went to an appointment or whatever or like with my psychiatrist because he’s not great at the pronouns thing, my mum always goes ‘he’. Just like an, she corrects him when I wouldn’t” (703-705)*

Alex: *“It’s nice around people I’ve told to feel as if I’m more me” (356-357)*

Daniel Green: *“My sister started calling me her brother, which is very nice, and they’re very nice and supportive now” (460-461)*

Alex's reference to feeling 'more me' highlights the ways in which interactions with others, and affirming and non-affirming experiences, can influence the way she feels about herself and in relation to her identity. Participants also discuss the responses they receive from family members and others in relation to their gender identity. For example, Emily shared:

Emily: *"As for socially, it's more and it again, it depends on the people that are around, but it's definitely felt like I have just cut people out of my life for not accepting me and that's just been the end of it."* (251-253)

Her use of the metaphor 'cut people out of my life', as well as 'that's just been the end of it', emphasises the finality in the boundaries she has set, and the importance of others accepting and affirming her gender identity. This indicates the role that others play in making sense of gender identity. Most participants spoke of familial responses, for example, George shared varied responses from family members in relation to sharing his gender identity with them:

George: *"it kind of my dad didn't use my preferred name... for... quite a while, and my pronouns he's only, he kind of, I think he would call me [name] most of the time, like he would now"* (257-260)

George's account indicated a contrast in his responses from different members of his family. His explanation suggests that it also took his family members some time to make sense of his gender identity. This aligns with Daniel Green's experience:

Daniel Green: *"Yeah, so my mum and dad, they know that I'm transgender and it took them a while to get their heads around it because it is quite a crazy concept. But once they understood, they were very supportive and it was a slow change, but slowly they started calling me their son."* (456-459)

Daniel Green's description of his parents understanding being a 'slow change' further highlights the evolving nature with which people, including parents, often navigate and make sense of gender identity. Celeste similarly describes it taking some time for people to use her preferred name and pronouns:

Celeste: *"But yeah, so I and then I told everyone about a few, you know, a few weeks before school started. And they again they were all getting it right"*

consistently after about two weeks in except the one guy who was genuinely even about 3 months in getting it right, less consistently than my 83-year-old grandmother” (505-509)

Celeste’s repetition of ‘getting it right’ emphasises the importance of using the name and pronouns which affirm her gender identity. Her account highlights the varied responses she received from people, with most people in her life ‘getting it right’ after a couple of weeks. Her comparison to her ‘83-year-old grandmother’ perhaps indicates an expectation that those from an older generation might struggle more with using preferred names and pronouns, highlighting her surprise that a peer of her age was unable to consistently ‘get it right’. Alex highlights support and acceptance received from family members in relation to her gender identity:

Alex: *“I think that generally with fairly relaxed and accepting, I think, almost as a byproduct of everything else going on, so... it’s quite nice because I don’t really have to stress about hiding my true self much” (688-694)*

Alex’s reference to her ‘true self’ indicates that she has a strong sense of self and identity, and she values being able to be authentic around her supportive family members. Her description of her family being relaxed and accepting as a ‘byproduct’ of everything else indicates that within her family context, her gender identity is integrated into the broader complexity of family life.

All participants describe experiences of gender dysphoria in their journey of exploring and making sense of their gender identity. Emily and Daniel Green describe the negative impact of dysphoria on their wellbeing:

Emily: *“It’s just kind of... waking up and being like, well, this doesn’t feel right” (180) ... “Kind of... obviously just general sadness... but like also kind of disappointment almost” (198-199)*

Daniel Green: *“And then when I hit puberty and I started growing like female stuff, I was deeply uncomfortable and I just felt like that’s not right” (196-198)*

Emily’s description of ‘waking up’ and experiencing dysphoria indicates that she is immediately aware of the feeling and it is perhaps one of the first things she thinks of when she wakes. Celeste also describes her experience of gender dysphoria,

though highlights that she experiences it in a different way to what might be expected:

Celeste: *“Yes, but not in the way that people seem to think about being trans. People seem to think about being trans as being born in the wrong body, but it’s not. It’s the body being wrong, if that makes sense.” (386-388) ... “It’s like it’s wrong, but it’s not wrong because the entirety of the body is wrong. It’s just been sort of malformed” (403-404)*

Celeste’s description of dysphoria perhaps indicates that she experiences her body as incomplete (or a partial incongruence), rather than fundamentally wrong. She further explains that the body isn’t ‘wrong’, but it just ‘doesn’t have the bits that it should’. For George, chest-based dysphoria is central to his experience of gender and shapes his daily activities and interactions:

George: *“Yeah, I base pretty much everything off like everything I wear on ‘do I look flat enough in it?’” (192-193)*

In contrast to other participants, Alex contrasts the experiences of gender euphoria and gender dysphoria:

Alex: *“so until I tried things and realised I’d get the euphoria from that, the dysphoria or lack of the feeling me” (268-269)*

Alex describes her experience of exploring her gender identity, which brought a feeling of euphoria, and then subsequently a realisation of dysphoria.

Subtheme: The Role of Diagnostic Labels in Shaping Sense of Self. All participants described identifying with a range of diagnostic labels, which appeared to inform to varying degrees the ways in which they made sense of themselves and constructed their identity. All participants had received clinical diagnoses of autism, and for some this was viewed as ‘confirmation’:

Emily: *“it was more a case of just getting the actual confirmation of it” (125)*

Daniel Green: *“Because then it was confirmation that I’m not just a bad person, just bad at being human, I just work differently” (169-170)*

Emily's description indicates the role of the autism diagnosis as providing external confirmation, or validation, of something she already felt. Her use of the phrase 'actual confirmation' implies that it served to have her sense of self recognised. Whilst Daniel Green's description highlights the role of diagnosis for him in reframing his struggles from being 'bad at being human' to being 'different'. Receiving an autism diagnosis evoked a range of emotions in participants. For example, Alex shared:

Alex: *"I think that there was a lot of curiosity to learning more about what *inaudible*. There was some level of realising this explains quite a lot. Some anxiety, I think" (185-187)*

Alex experienced a range of feelings associated with the diagnosis, though it appeared to provide some clarity (a sense of realisation) and perhaps an explanation for her internal experiences. As well as experiences of receiving autism diagnoses, participants also described identifying with other labels which shaped their sense of self. George identified with a number of diagnostic labels:

George: *"I've got... I think I've got ADHD, I've got OCD, I've got... generalised anxiety... I've got... oh, I've got tics, I've got... well, it's tricky, I do have a diagnosis of depression, but my psychiatrist is really quite vague, so it kind of changes every time he sends a letter. The latest one we had was low mood dash improving" (329-333)*

George's listing and repetition of 'I've got' indicates the role of these labels in shaping his perception of himself. Both Daniel Green and Celeste also identified with the ADHD label, despite Celeste not having a formal diagnosis:

Celeste: *"So there's there's some weird stuff where also I know I'm ADHD, but I haven't been diagnosed ADHD at all" (26-27)*

Celeste's comment 'I know I'm ADHD' suggests that this is something which shapes her sense of self, and it provides language or a framework through which she can make sense of her experiences. George also identified with a 'PDA' label and felt that his PDA characteristics had a greater impact on his daily experiences:

George: *“I think I notice my PDA traits more than my autism traits a lot of the time” (145-146)*

George: *“but I do have other like a couple of different diagnoses as well. So it kind of I sometimes I’m not really sure which, like if I’m having an issue I don’t know which is why like which one it is that that’s the problem” (300-303)*

George’s descriptions indicate the complexity and multi-faceted nature of identity construction, and perhaps a lack of clarity in relation to his sense of self. He appears to be using diagnostic frameworks to map his lived experiences. All participants discussed the role of their family members in relation to seeking or receiving diagnoses. Some described advocacy from family during the diagnostic process:

Emily: *“So they [her parents] kind of picked up on it when I was very young and just straight through the system before I was really aware of what was going on around me” (116-118)*

George: *“my parents were very much the ones like pushing for my diagnosis, but I’ve always just sort of as long as I can remember really just thought, oh, I’m autistic” (116-118)*

Both Emily and George describe their parents pursuing an autism diagnosis for them. George’s use of the word ‘pushing’ emphasises the advocacy displayed by his parents, and possibly alludes to some perceived resistance or barriers, that his parents were required to overcome. On the contrary, Daniel Green describes self-advocacy in relation to seeking diagnosis:

Daniel Green: *“Yeah, I had to be like the advocate, like I went to my parents, I like wrote down lists of like examples I showed in childhood, I pushed them to go to the doctor, the doctor said go to the school, I pushed the school” (183-185)*

Daniel Green’s persistence and self-advocacy in pursuing an autism assessment indicates the strength of his identification with an autism label. Similar to George, he repeats the word ‘pushed’, also indicating a need to overcome barriers.

Subtheme: Autism as Central Part of Identity. For Emily, Celeste, Alex and Daniel Green, their descriptions of their experiences suggest that autism is a central

part of their identity. For example, in response to the question ‘what does being autistic mean to you?’, Emily shared:

Emily: *“It’s just kind of part of being me, I guess” (140)*

This suggests that autism is something which is integrated into Emily’s identity. Her use of the words ‘part of’ implies that her identity is made up of multiple components. When discussing her preferred use of language in relation to autism, Celeste said:

Celeste: *“I have a weird pet peeve when people say that thing that individuals have autism because it makes it sound like you... they say it in the same way that you would say ‘have cancer’ like I’m it’s it’s not, I don’t ‘have’ autism, it’s not like a a lump in my brain that’s the autism lump, I just I’m autistic” (101-104)*

Celeste’s strong preference for identity-first language (i.e., ‘I’m autistic’) suggests that she experiences autism as a way of being and something which is integral to her identity and sense of self, rather than an addition. By using a comparison to ‘have cancer’, it appears that she is rejecting medicalised conceptualisations of autism. Alex similarly described autism as a central part of her experiences:

Alex: *“Yeah, this makes me realise quite how autism-centric all of my experiences have been” (545-546)*

In this quote, Alex appears to be noticing a pattern across her lived experiences and is emphasising the significance of autism within her life. Both Alex and Daniel Green describe being autistic as a ‘difference’:

Alex: *“I suppose it just means that I’m a bit different” (153)*

Daniel Green: *“Because my brain works differently, and yeah, it’s not like other people who don’t have autism” (344-345)*

Here, both participants understand their autistic identity through the lens of ‘difference’, and in the way they position themselves in relation to others.

Whilst the majority of participants appeared to experience autism as a central part of their identity and lived experiences, George perceived other aspects of his identity as more integral than autism:

George: “I don’t... the thing that I think of myself as first and foremost is always going to be a carer. I am a young carer, I know I’m a carer, it’s my, I’d say it’s one of my defining, not yeah, probably one of my defining traits. Umm, so yeah, I think of them before I think of trans and autistic. I think I then think of autistic before trans” (293-300)

Here, George is describing the way in which he navigates and makes sense of multiple aspects of his identity, almost in a hierarchical way. His description of a being a young carer as being a ‘defining trait’ emphasises the centrality of this to his identity and experiences. This indicates how he understands himself before anything else.

GET 2: Intersection of Autistic Experience and Gender Identity

This GET refers to the ways participants made sense of the overlap between their autistic and gender diverse identities. It relates to participants navigating and understanding the complexity of holding multiple marginalised identities. This GET includes participants’ recognition of the prevalence of an overlap between autistic and gender diverse identities, participants’ experiences of facing increased barriers as autistic gender diverse young people, and reflections on how they feel their autism has shaped the way in which they understand gender. Table 4 outlines the adolescents in whose accounts each GET 2 subtheme appeared.

Table 4

Relevance of GET 2 Subthemes Across Participants

	Recognising Overlap Between Autistic and Gender Diverse Identities	Facing Increased Barriers as an Autistic Gender Diverse Young Person	Autism Shaping Understanding of Gender
Emily		✓	
George	✓	✓	✓
Celeste	✓	✓	✓
Alex	✓	✓	✓

Daniel Green

✓

✓

✓

Subtheme: Recognising Overlap Between Autistic and Gender Diverse Identities. The majority of participants expressed that they are aware of or have noticed an overlap between autistic and gender diverse experiences and often knew other autistic gender diverse people personally. Daniel Green identified an overlap between neurodivergence and belonging to the LGBTQ+ community:

Daniel Green: *“Umm I’m not sure because I go to an LGBT youth group, and I think about 95% of the people there are also autistic. So I don’t think I’ve ever met a trans person who isn’t autistic or has ADHD. But I think it definitely, there’s a big correlation” (287-290)*

Here, Daniel’s understanding of the overlap between autism and gender diversity appears to be shaped by his lived experiences and connections with many other neurodivergent and trans people. His estimation of ‘about 95%’ of peers at the youth group being autistic highlights that this is familiar and expected for him. Similarly, Celeste shared:

Celeste: *“so it was an autism specialist school, about ¼ of the year was transgender” (542-543)*

Celeste: *“There are cis autistic people? Huh” (802)*

Here, Celeste’s confused response emphasises that within her social world, autistic and gender diverse identities are so intertwined that the idea of a cisgender autistic person feels unfamiliar. She also shares an observation about her previous school setting, an autism specialist school, where many of her peers were also both autistic and gender diverse. Alex also recognises the overlap between the two identities:

Alex: *“I think all of the people who I’m in regular communication with, who I know are gender diverse, all of them are autistic” (346-348)*

Alex’s repetition of ‘all of’ suggests that she connects with several peers who are also autistic and gender diverse. George also expresses an awareness of an overlap:

George: *“I know that so many autistic people, or so many trans people, there’s so much correlation” (365-366)*

Similar to Daniel Green, George uses the word ‘correlation’ to describe the overlap between autistic and gender diverse identities.

Subtheme: Facing Increased Barriers as an Autistic Gender Diverse Young Person. Participants spoke of experiencing additional challenges directly associated with holding both marginalised identities. This highlights the way that autism and gender identity interact and shape participants experiences. For example, George explained:

George: *“I think it just means that I’m disadvantaged in the world generally. It’s like oh, autistic, oh alright, then, oh, and trans, right, yeah. So I think that it... I think it makes me very vulnerable” (303-305)*

Here, George mimics how he imagines others reacting to him in relation to his autistic and gender identities. This is perhaps reflective of judgement he anticipates from others. He identifies that the impact of holding these intersecting identities is that it means he is ‘very vulnerable’ and ‘disadvantaged in the world’, indicating increased risk. He also shares:

George: *“Yeah, I think it’s... I think it adds another element of trickiness, I don’t even know if that’s a word, I think it is, difficulty, perhaps. I think it because it gives you that extra thing to always be aware of” (377-379)*

George: *“I think it can be hard for every autistic person, but I think that being trans does add another sort of little layer to it, dimension” (408-409)*

George’s descriptions and use of the phrases ‘another element’ and ‘extra thing’ speak to there being a compounding impact of holding both identities. The use of the word ‘trickiness’ conveys ongoing complexity and barriers. His reflection conveys a sense of greater difficulty when navigating the world as an autistic gender diverse person. Daniel Green specifically highlights the increased risk of bullying:

Researcher: *“What would you say kind of being a transgender autistic person means to you?” (260-261)*

Daniel Green: *“I’d say it means that I’m a good target for bullying and... there’s, I’m quite peculiar in many ways, but there are some people that are like me and they really understand me” (263-265)*

Daniel Green’s description of being a ‘good target’ for bullying emphasises the increased risk he associates with being both autistic and gender diverse, and a sense of exposure and vulnerability. His use of the word ‘peculiar’ to describe himself conveys a sense of difference and comparison to others, though he appears to value finding connection with similar people to him. Celeste describes barriers within healthcare settings resulting from holding autistic and gender diverse identities:

Celeste: *“because trans autistic people are infant infantilised so heavily, people act like we have no autonomy at all, and that we must have been tricked into it because autistic people just can’t think for themselves and trans people must have been tricked into it and that overlaps in a horrible way” (2163-2167)*

Celeste provides a powerful description of increased barriers in clinical contexts due to the overlap between autistic and gender diverse identities. The phrase ‘overlaps in a horrible way’ illustrates the compounded marginalisation she experiences. She emphasises being treated as less capable and less competent than she is, and these instances are experienced as invalidating.

Emily identifies an increased risk of discrimination due to holding both autistic and gender diverse identities:

Emily: *“Just more discrimination that is kind of just it” (324)*

Her repetition of the word ‘just’ may minimise the negative impact of discrimination. However, she goes on to explain her experience of predominantly experiencing ‘gender-based discrimination’ rather than ‘autism-based discrimination’:

Emily: *“I’m very high functioning, so it’s a lot of time people don’t realise, so I don’t really face a lot of that kind of autism discrimination I primarily face gender-based discrimination or sexuality-based discrimination, but I also don’t know if that’s just because most people don’t face discrimination from autism*

or it's a specific thing because people don't realise very quickly. So I wouldn't want to comment on that simply from a lack of experience" (337-343)

Emily's account appears to differ to that of other participants, as George and Daniel Green both describe a compounding impact and vulnerability as a result of holding both identities, whereas Emily does not appear to experience the impact as compounding, sharing that she primarily experiences discrimination on the basis of gender or sexuality. For Emily, it appears that being both gender diverse and not heterosexual has a compounding impact.

Subtheme: Autism Shaping Understanding of Gender. Participants reflected on ways in which they felt that being autistic had shaped how they understand and make sense of gender and gender identity. Celeste, Alex, Daniel Green and Emily all described gender as socially constructed, and some felt that being autistic meant that they were more likely to challenge social and gender norms:

Daniel Green: *"I think it very well could have because I am not so like confined by social constructs. So I'd be like, what is gender? Does that feel right for me?" (272-274)*

Daniel Green describes not being so 'confined' by social constructs and he attributes this to being autistic. His use of the word 'confined' illustrates the way in which he understands social constructs as rigid or limiting. His sense of questioning gender as a construct highlights reflection on social norms. Celeste shares similar experiences:

Celeste: *"Oh, not understanding things that don't make any sense, like, I mean, prime example of this, 'gender', what is gender? It doesn't make any sense. It's entirely fabricated and... people just accept it. Why? Why is there? What is a gender? Is this gender in the room with us now?" (290-294)*

Celeste: *"Autistic people tend to be tend to think more logically, and the logical conclusion when you think about gender for more than five seconds, just that it's not real" (762-764)*

Celeste is also repeatedly questioning gender as a construct and expresses this in a humorous way, to emphasise how absurd she perceives social and gender norms to

be. She attributes her stance on gender to her logical thinking style associated with being autistic. She further reflects on why society categorises people into groups:

Celeste: *“I mean, as with most societal groups, they were simply made up so that some person so that one group could be better than another” (755-756)*

Here, Celeste demonstrates reflection on the role of categorisation and labelling in creating uneven power structures in society. Emily and Alex also describe gender as socially constructed:

Alex: *“The first one is social construct, because although gender roles and so on, it just is something that society has constructed rather than something that’s innate and that” (566-568)*

Though George does not understand gender as a construct, he discusses ways in which he feels being autistic has shaped his understanding and experience of gender:

George: *“I think that... it has... I don’t know, but I think it’s allowed me to... in a way, be more introspective. I think in a lot of ways I’m not, but well, I kind of am, but I’m not very good at identifying things. But I think that it’s allowed me to sort of... like if I’m sure of something, I’m very sure of myself and I’m not, I’m not really, I don’t really submit to peer pressure of any sort because I just don’t get it, I’m like, well, why would I do that?” (349-354)*

Here, George speaks of the ways in which he feels being autistic has shaped his view of gender. He describes that he is ‘very sure’ of himself and is not likely to ‘submit’ to peer pressure, which means that he feels certain about his gender identity and is not likely to let others around him influence this, which he attributes to being autistic. He further shared:

George: *“And then I think that to then... try and figure out what the feelings of dysphoria are before you know it’s really hard, because you could be hungry, you know, it could be that you’re stressed about something and you just and your body feels it because, it’s hard, like I know for me that I’m not really good at feeling emotions when they’re not presenting themselves physically” (391-396)*

George describes his experience of perhaps having difficulty making sense of physiological sensations inside his body, which he attributes to being autistic, and this can make it difficult to ‘figure out’ feelings of dysphoria. Daniel Green and Alex describe ways in which being autistic has facilitated their coming out or exploration of their gender identity:

Alex: *“my previous school was an autistic specialist school and as such, because autistic people are a lot more likely to be gender diverse, I’d say I’ve had more exposure to people and that probably made it easier for me to confront myself and gain a better understanding for myself having seen more examples” (383-388)*

For Alex, he felt that the environment he was in and increased connection with autistic and gender diverse peers facilitated his own exploration and self-discovery. His use of the phrase ‘confront myself’ emphasises self-reflection and courage.

Daniel Green: *“And also maybe it helped me in coming out because I was already a bit odd, so I didn’t have this perfect perception I had to keep up, so I was like, I might as well say that I am trans because the people that don’t like me, they’re not going to like me anyway” (278-281)*

Daniel Green’s experience conveys a sense of relief from the need to conform and seek acceptance from others, due to holding both autistic and gender diverse identities. His description of already feeling a ‘bit odd’ suggests that this facilitated authentic expression in other ways. Celeste further reflects on why she feels that there is an overlap between autistic and trans identities:

Celeste: *“So the the two, the two main ideas I’ve had of it, autistic people tend to conform to society less anyway. Autistic people are more likely to have societally abnormal interests, that is to say, actually being interested in something instead of just sort of looking at it once and also autistic people are thrown in front of a psychologist so much more because we have to jump through about 70 hoops to get necessary healthcare” (775-780)*

Celeste’s observation of autistic people tending to ‘conform to society less’ aligns with the experience of other participants, in that there is some rejection of social

norms and expectations. Her use of the metaphor ‘thrown in front of a psychologist’ suggests that this is something that tends to be ‘done to’ autistic people.

GET 3: Navigating Educational Systems that Shape Success and Wellbeing

Across participants’ accounts, experiences of the education system were shared and were characterised by a range of factors which participants were required to navigate, and which shaped their wellbeing and ability to be successful. This GET includes participants’ experiences of varying levels of support across different educational settings, the ways in which they navigated the social landscape within education including experiences of exclusion and connection, broader systemic factors which had an influence on their educational experiences, academic achievement, and how participants experienced autism related needs and differences within their education. Table 5 outlines the adolescents in whose accounts each GET 3 subtheme appeared.

Table 5

Relevance of GET 3 Subthemes Across Participants

	Variation in Support Across Educational Settings	Social Relationships: Exclusion and Connection	Broader Systemic Influences on Educational Experiences	Academic Achievement	Autistic Needs and Differences Within Education
Emily	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
George	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Celeste	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Alex	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Daniel	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Green					

Subtheme: Variation in Support Across Educational Settings. During the interviews, participants often compared and contrasted their experiences across

different types of education settings and spoke of significant experiences of feeling misunderstood and unsupported, as well as some positive experiences of support and accommodations. Daniel Green described a significant lack of support at his mainstream secondary school:

Daniel Green: *“It’s nice that they can just listen and understand the struggle that I have to go through to get my accommodations at school because it is a long battle and it is quite draining to get the support you need” (468-470)*

Daniel Green: *“For about a month I had to keep going back to the year office saying, ‘have you done it yet? Have you done it?’ They’re like, ‘no’. And then I went back to the SENCo and she said, ‘oh, I’m so sorry, they should have done that’. So I had to be my own admin worker to actually get referred and then get the accommodations, which was really frustrating because it was like really simple things, like I wasn’t asking for something which requires an EHCP” (933-940)*

Daniel Green’s account highlights the self-advocacy he was required to do in order to receive accommodations at school. His use of the phrases ‘struggle’ and ‘long battle’ indicate that he faced barriers along the way in ‘fighting’ to be supported by school staff. His educational experience appeared to be characterised by a lack of support. He further shared experiences of feeling dismissed and invalidated:

Daniel Green: *“I was just sort of told to like struggle through” (701-702)*

Daniel Green’s descriptions highlight that he felt not taken seriously by school staff. Celeste described feeling misunderstood and not well supported at school:

Celeste: *“I wasn’t talking, I was stimming. I was stimming and they punished me for it” (1489-1490)*

Celeste describes experiences of her autistic characteristics being misunderstood or punished. She appears to convey a sense of injustice in relation to this incident.

George similarly describes a lack of support within his educational experience:

George: *“Well, I think that the secondary school that I went to, the first one was completely everything I didn’t need and want. I think that... it was really bad with autism. There was they did I seem to re... I mean they kind of did my*

accommodations, but only to a level that they could say they were doing them” (1018-1022)

George’s use of the phrase ‘completely everything I didn’t need and want’ conveys a mismatch between the support he needed and what was provided. This emphasises the inadequate support he received, and possibly the impact this had on his wellbeing. Emily describes that within education, gender-related needs are not well supported:

Emily: *“But the like gender diverse and LGBT aspect feels like gets thrown under the rug a lot” (883-884)*

The metaphor ‘thrown under the rug’ emphasises the lack of attention that Emily feels gender and LGBT related issues receive in schools, and highlights the support in this area as inadequate. As well as participants experiencing a lack of support within their educational experiences, they all also speak of some positive experiences of where they have been supported and received accommodations:

Alex: *“And they were able to, each person, because it was so specialised, they were able to push each person as far as they needed, so it wasn’t a one-size fits all approach, by a long way” (1021-1024)*

Here, Alex describes the bespoke and individualised support she experienced in an autism specialist school, to which she attributes her GCSE success. Her repetition of ‘each person’ emphasises the individualised approach and perhaps each person being seen as unique and important. George shared:

George: *“I just remember feeling really like, safe and really sort of OK to say things and stuff with her [Teaching Assistant]. And I felt like I could leave my mum because she was going to be there, you know, and my tutor, just because she’s so lovely and she single handedly got me a GCSE or two” (1360-1364)*

This shows that within George’s educational experiences, some key adults were supportive, safe and facilitated academic success. Many participants reflected on the differences between educational settings, and it appeared that many participants had experiences where they felt better supported in either a specialist or further

education setting, in comparison to a mainstream setting they had attended. For example, Emily shared:

Emily: *“College for the aspect of like support learning needs and like gender diversity, really good on it. I’m struggling more with academics just from generally, it’s obviously a difficult environment so... that’s more of my struggle, which I would rather have than what I had at high school, but they’re very much, if something happens, they respond to it very much appropriately” (803-811)*

Emily contrasts her college experience to her high school experience and has found college to be a supportive and accepting place, where she feels that staff respond to issues ‘very much appropriately’. Similarly, Daniel Green shared:

Daniel Green: *“I’ve really enjoyed sixth form, way more than secondary school” (854)*

Daniel Green: *“I think, um... more support is offered probably because there’s fewer students and more funding, so they are open to suggestions. Like if I said this thing will really help me, they would look into it, which is nice that I don’t have to do all the work myself anymore” (949-952)*

Daniel Green attributes the increased support received at sixth form to ‘fewer students and more funding’, and he appreciates not needing to self-advocate in order to receive support. George also reports more positive experiences within further education:

George: *“Yeah, I really like it. The tutors are really nice and I feel like I’m learning a lot and yeah, because it’s good” (993-994)*

George’s mention of the tutors highlights the importance of positive relationships and their impact on overall educational experience. Both Alex and Celeste describe transitioning from mainstream secondary schools to autism specialist settings, where they felt better supported.

Subtheme: Social Relationships: Exclusion and Connection. This subtheme relates to participants experiences of navigating the social landscape within their education settings, including both difficult experiences (including bullying,

hostility and social exclusion) and positive experiences (including connection, friendship and supportive relationships). For example, Emily describes experiences of bullying, social isolation and scrutiny:

Emily: *“I just wouldn’t come in to school for two or three hours in the morning just so I could avoid people” (765-766)*

Emily: *“And then kind of... later on ended up getting bullied as well” (721)*

Emily: *“At school, definitely it just, it was very much a picking point. People would constantly have something to say about it all” (863-864)*

These descriptions suggest that Emily’s experience of education felt socially unsafe and uncomfortable, which resulted in her actively avoiding attending at times. Her use of ‘picking point’ emphasises being singled out and scrutinised by others due to the identities she holds. Both Celeste and Daniel Green also describe experiences of bullying:

Celeste: *“Yeah so there was an incident where someone walked up to me and called me a bunch of slurs, and by the way, incurred no punishment because that was one of the schools of all time” (1650-1652)*

Celeste: *“I was bullied quite a lot, because I had no social skills at all” (1426)*

Daniel Green: *“I was I was bullied quite a lot, so sometimes I’d just spend time playing on my own, and I didn’t mind playing on my own, but... I remember one time I was so excited because I had two friends and I thought I’ll be great if they could make friends together and then they made friends together and ganged up and bullied me” (604-608)*

Both Celeste and Daniel Green describe social hostility and experiences within school where bullying occurred. Celeste’s use of sarcasm and humour in that ‘was one of the schools of all time’ in relation to somebody not incurring a punishment for calling her ‘a bunch of slurs’ indicates the lack of protection she felt from school staff. Whilst George describes not being bullied, he describes peers deliberately annoying him:

George: *“And then she wouldn’t, she wasn’t bullying me, per SE, but she’d do stuff that she knew annoyed me and she joined up with this other girl and they*

started again, not bullying me, but they'd do stuff that they knew would annoy me, like they'd break rules on purpose" (863-867)

George's understanding of his peers 'joining up' to do things to annoy him conveys a sense of being targeted or singled out. His peers breaking the rules as being something which annoyed him suggests that a strong adherence to rules is important to him. Whilst many participants describe social challenges including bullying and hostility, many also describe supportive relationships, connection and friendship:

Alex: *"Then, the next most important people to me are probably my friends from my previous school, because I was there for... five years and in a year group of I think just over 20 who I formed quite close bonds with four or five of them" (612-615)*

Alex's use of the phrase 'close bonds' emphasises the depth of the relationships with her friends from her previous school. She positions these people as the 'next most important people', after her immediate family, highlighting these connections as important and providing a sense of belonging. Celeste also described finding friendship within her school experiences. Emily shared:

Emily: *"I tend to find it's a lot different to high school where it feels like if you don't know someone, they won't just try and talk to you, it's just you don't know them, you stay in separate bubbles almost. I just feel like generally people are much more accepting" (795-798)*

Emily contrasts her experience at college with her experience at school, describing college as a place which feels much more accepting and safer. Her illustration of there being social 'bubbles' at college conveys a layer of protection from difficult social experiences. Daniel Green has also experienced some positive connections with others:

Daniel Green: *"So every day after school I'd go there and she [Teaching Assistant] was really lovely. She really helped me like manage my time and she was just really supportive. My friends, I think... the major friend groups have changed but there's always been a couple of people that have been there and they're really nice and supportive" (784-792)*

Daniel Green's repetition of 'supportive' suggests that he values the social support he has received from both peers and a Teaching Assistant at school.

Subtheme: Broader Systemic Influences on Educational Experiences.

This subtheme encompasses both the impact of organisational factors at a whole school level (e.g., school culture, systems and policies), as well as the national and socio-political context and broader systemic factors which shaped the educational experiences of participants. Both George and Celeste reference the impact of school behaviour policies/systems:

George: *"I do remember if I ever so we had like colours and you'd have your name, and if I ever got moved down to like yellow, I think I got moved down to yellow once, I don't even think I did it either, the thing that I got put down for, fuming, completely broke me. I was like, nope, can't be doing that. And B I was like seeing my name on there, I'm like 'oooh', got really upset by that."*
(816-821)

George's use of the word 'fuming', and metaphor 'completely broke me', emphasises the significant negative impact of the behaviour system being applied. His description conveys how deeply he felt the weight of this action. He also appears to convey a sense of injustice, explaining that he doesn't think he did the 'thing' he got 'put down for'. Celeste also refers to a school behaviour system:

Celeste: *"there was a special prize for people who didn't get either yellow card or red cards that entire year. And on year 3, in year 3, I was looking like I was going to get that. And then I got framed for talking when I wasn't talking in a PE lesson. And then like, like April and I was just f***** because I didn't do that and they gave me and like, I broke down crying in the PE lesson. Because I'd tried my bloody hardest. I mean in hindsight, it was an abysmal system, it was also, believe it or not, incredibly biased against autistic people, because of course it was, because everything is"* (1454-1468)

Celeste's account emphasises her understanding of the behaviour system as unjust and biased against autistic people. She expresses a deep sense of injustice, through her description of being 'framed' for talking when she wasn't talking. Her use of the phrase 'broke down crying' highlights the weight of the emotional impact this had on

her. Alex refers to a shift in the school culture at her first primary school which led to increased stress over time:

Alex: *“They started with quite different sets of values, which I think is what made it so good for me, and then through a series of stuff, it became much more strict and rigorous, which I think is what led to me somewhere, again, more relaxed and more suitable. And that probably made it more stressful in the first school as time went on” (948-957)*

Here, Alex reflects on the impact the school’s values and ethos had on her experience, and a shift towards a culture which was more ‘strict and rigorous’ resulted in increased stress and her eventually moving school. This indicates how important a calm, accepting and inclusive school is to her. Emily recognised the pressures faced by school staff in her college:

Emily: *“generally the only real thing would be that they need more learning support staff because they’re just kind of always overwhelmed” (825-827)*

As well as factors at a whole school level which influenced participants’ experiences, participants also alluded to factors within the broader national and legislative context which impact their educational experiences. Celeste, Alex and Daniel Green all make reference to the coronavirus pandemic:

Alex: *“I think the thing that I was initially most annoyed about during the pandemic was the fact that I wouldn’t be able to complete my SATs” (892-894)*

Daniel Green: *“So... my secondary school experience probably isn’t typical because halfway through year six we had lockdown. So all of year seven we couldn’t go around the main school and have the high school experience, we just stayed in one block, stayed in one classroom, the same seats. The teachers came to us and I think I think that helped me a lot because in year eight I really struggled with like the noise of the corridors and all of the change” (734-740)*

For Alex, the impact of the pandemic on her ability to complete her SATs was a source of frustration and perhaps conveys the importance she places on being able to demonstrate her knowledge in assessments. For Daniel Green, the changes that

occurred within the school environment as a result of the pandemic were experienced as creating a more manageable and accessible environment for him. It seemed to offer some predictability and sameness which he valued. Some participants discussed the impact of legislation and government guidance on their experiences:

Celeste: *“There have been quite a few issues about me being trans because, but because of the EHRC guidance which is, as I said before, I mean I haven’t said this before, but it is a violation of the EHRC, right? Like that absolute categorical violation of the human right to privacy, because it requires trans people to be exposed by doing anything. So trans girls aren’t allowed, I’m going to use trans girls, but obviously all of these apply right to retroactively to trans boys as well. Trans girls can’t use the girls bathroom, can’t share tents with cis girls on DofE” (1785-1796)*

Celeste: *“But I mean, like, genuinely repeal the new school guidance about teaching queer people. I mean, clause 72 of that is literally Section 28” (1890-1891)*

Celeste: *“so it was it was quite difficult because a) transphobic laws, so they had to get my mum’s permission, my mum is lovely, but they had to they had to wait on gendering me and naming me correctly because they had to get my mum’s permission” (630-633)*

Wider legal frameworks and guidance appeared to play a central role in shaping Celeste’s educational experiences, and her accounts demonstrate that she feels deeply passionate about the safety, equality and wellbeing of trans people. Her reference to ‘Section 28’ suggests that she makes sense of her experiences in the context of historical discriminatory legislation. Celeste highlights how under new guidance, everyday activities (e.g., using the toilet, sharing tents on a DofE trip) become a source of exclusion and violation for gender diverse young people. Alex and Daniel Green also make reference to the legislative context:

Alex: *“I think something which I’m not fully aware of what they can and can’t do legally is that I’m aware that there’s someone in my year who is trans and is out to some extent, but they’re not able to change their name on the*

register without it being legally changed, and that, I think, has led to them choosing not to attend registration” (1319-1323)

For Alex, though she doesn’t describe the legislation as directly impacting her educational experiences, she notices the impact it has on the experiences of others. Daniel Green shared:

Daniel Green: *“because there’s some talks of rulings about transgender stuff, I hope that people whose parents aren’t supportive can still get support at school, because it’s so frightening” (976-978)*

This emphasises the influence legislative and policy changes can have on the school experiences of gender diverse young people.

Subtheme: Academic Achievement. Across participants accounts, it appeared that participants generally perceived fewer academic difficulties at school compared to social or emotional challenges or barriers, and most participants expressed a desire to pursue academia beyond further education. George shared:

George: *“because academically, schools want me, but everything else, they don’t” (1306-1307)*

George: *“I was good, like I taught myself to read when I was three. It’s like I’m academically, I was never an issue. But obviously I wasn’t great at at going and coming home and being there sometimes” (784-786)*

Here, he highlights a discrepancy between his academic abilities, and emotional barriers in accessing education. It suggests that he felt valued by school settings academically, but not holistically. Similarly, Emily shared:

Emily: *“I didn’t struggle with... the academic stuff. It was the people that I didn’t like.” (779-780)*

Emily presents a distinction between the academic and social elements of school, with the social elements posing more challenges. Daniel Green experienced a sense of invisibility or dismissal which he attributed to his academic ability:

Daniel Green: *“if someone had just gave me a pair of ear defenders and told me it was going to be okay, I think that would have helped enormously, but no*

one paid attention because I was doing well academically. They just thought I was a shy little girl. So I flew under the radar” (707-711)

Daniel Green’s account indicates that he didn’t feel ‘seen’ by school staff and his needs were not recognised, which he understands as being due to his academic achievements. He expresses a desire for reassurance and recognition from school staff. Most participants spoke of ambitions to pursue academia beyond further education, for example:

Celeste: *“Ideally I would do maths at university. And then I don’t know, a lecturer. I’d quite like to be a maths lecturer... PhD would be useful.” (2085-2093)*

Emily: *“Chemistry degree. No no idea what I’m gonna do with it. Just, that’s what I want” (934-938)*

Daniel Green: *“I want to do Psychology and become an Educational Psychologist” (60-61)*

These quotes illustrate the ambitions and goals of participants to pursue higher education, in spite of challenging experiences. They highlight a sense of direction amongst participants.

Subtheme: Autistic Needs and Differences Within Education. Participants expressed specific characteristics associated with autism and the ways in which they have been experienced within educational contexts. This includes participants accounts of sensory needs and differences, experiences of masking, differences relating to social interaction and communication, and emotional needs. These needs interacted with the school environment (e.g., noisy/busy spaces, rigid behaviour systems, navigating social landscapes). Alex, George and Daniel Green all shared experiences of ‘masking’ within education:

Alex: *“I’ve always masked quite heavily and tried to fit in to the best of my ability, so that has, I’d say it probably influenced stuff on how I behaved, and then... it’s quite stressful just trying to maintain the image of normalness because I... show all of what I suppose the typical behaviours at school, and*

then I'd just be much more stressed at home because of that and holding everything" (223-228)

Here, Alex describes a long-standing pattern of constantly monitoring how she appears and behaves and emphasises the emotional load of doing this. The phrase 'it's quite stressful just trying to maintain the image of normalness' highlights how demanding this is. The phrase 'holding everything' illustrates the weight of this.

Daniel Green shares:

Daniel Green: *"And then they gave that report back saying that I don't seem like I'm struggling, forgetting that masking is a thing that many autistic females do" (917-919)*

Daniel Green's account relates to school staff not recognising his struggles due to him masking. This conveys a sense of internal struggle whilst externally he appeared to be coping and achieving. George said:

George: *"I think I was viewed as quite alright at school because I was very good at masking at that point. And then every day I would just go home and scream, and have meltdowns all the time" (778-781)*

Similarly to Alex, George emphasises the discrepancy in his behaviour at home compared to at school. Most participants also describe sensory needs which often led to feeling overwhelmed within the school environment:

Celeste: *"her preferred response to me doing this *hands over ears* and going under the table when because everything was really loud and muttering about everything being loud was to shout at me to come up" (1545-1547)*

Celeste highlights that her sensory needs didn't appear to be well understood by a member of school staff who responded punitively rather than with support or accommodations. Celeste describes taking actions to self-regulate within the school environment, including placing her hands over her ears and going underneath the table. Daniel Green also highlights the impact of sensory sensitivities in education:

Daniel Green: *"it's like a lot of the issues I had before were sensory wise because of the uniform. We don't have a uniform anymore, so that's really good" (858-860)*

Daniel Green describes how his preferences relating to clothing shaped his experience and resulted in 'issues' within school. Alex and George describe finding the mainstream secondary school environment overwhelming:

Alex: *"I tried to go to lunch, but I didn't really know what to do and it was very overwhelming, just the environment" (1092-1094)*

George: *"it was just too loud otherwise, there was too many people" (875)*

For Alex, the school environment was experienced as 'overwhelming' and this impacted her ability to go to lunch. Alex further explained that she left the mainstream school and sought a place at an autism specialist setting which she attended for the majority of her education. Alex also shared:

Alex: *"I get overstimulated a bit easier than others too. So that is something that happens not on a regular basis, but something that... happens. ... It's usually when there's lots of people in the space without a... and when they're talking about several different things, so that it's not one collective conversation, I'm trying to understand what's going on in multiple things at once" (166-176)*

Alex describes her overstimulation as shaped by navigating social situations where she is required to selectively attend to and process a large amount of information. Her observation that this 'happens not on a regular basis' highlights that it isn't constant but context specific. Emily describes emotional regulation difficulties within her school experiences:

Emily: *"When I was... a lot younger, I used to act out quite a lot. ... Then I kind of stopped acting out, but was very much alone" (707-712)*

Similarly, George experienced difficulties with emotional awareness and understanding which he associates with being autistic:

George: *"Not very good at knowing what they [emotions] mean and what they are and how they work" (519-520)*

This highlights the complexity for George in navigating his emotional experiences. Other participants similar describe difficulties with recognising and understanding

their emotions. George also describes social interaction and communication differences and their role in his educational experience:

George: *“Looking back, it’s a miracle I wasn’t bullied, to be honest, because I was weird” (811-812)*

George conveys surprise when retrospectively considering his school experiences, due to perceived social vulnerability and an expectation that others would have perhaps misunderstood his autistic characteristics. Alex shared:

Alex: *“So, I’m not particularly good at stuff like social cues, so I’ve got a tendency to... although I may be present and paying attention to conversations, I tend to sit there listening but not engaging really” (1188-1190)*

Alex: *“So I’ve got to the point where I can engage people in small talk and join into stuff if there’s something going on in the common room, I feel just about comfortable involving myself in that so that I can participate” (1209-1212)*

Alex’s accounts demonstrate that she experiences difficulties in navigating social interactions and interpreting ‘social cues’, and although since being in sixth form she feels more able to engage in ‘small talk’, socialising still feels effortful, illustrated by the phrase ‘I feel just about comfortable’. She appears to be becoming more comfortable, and developing a sense of belonging in sixth form as time goes on. Daniel Green further describes some challenges associated with autism which he has experienced within the school context:

Daniel Green: *“it made it harder for me to be in this big, loud environment, like going in the busy corridors between lessons, like not not knowing which rules that had to be followed and which rules were sort of not optional, but they didn’t care so much about” (802-806)*

Here, Daniel Green speaks of not only sensory sensitivities impacting his school experience, but also perhaps differences in his interpretation and understanding of school rules which appeared to lead to confusion.

GET 4: Navigating Family Relationships and Finding Community

Participants described aspects of their lived experiences more generally, outside of an education context, and the ways in which they navigated different spaces within their lives, including within their homes and in the community. This GET includes participants experiences of navigating familial relationships which are close and supportive, and some participants experiences of tension within their familial relationships. It also includes participants experiences of finding a sense of belonging and connection amongst peers who share similar characteristics. Table 6 outlines the adolescents in whose accounts each GET 4 subtheme appeared.

Table 6

Relevance of GET 4 Subthemes Across Participants

	Closeness and Tension Within Family Relationships	Shared Identity Promoting a Sense of Community
Emily	✓	
George	✓	✓
Celeste	✓	✓
Alex	✓	✓
Daniel Green	✓	✓

Subtheme: Closeness and Tension Within Family Relationships. This subtheme captures the ways in which participants made sense of their familial relationships, with many speaking about family members as strong sources of closeness, safety and support, and some describing moments of tension or strain within the relationship. Alex expresses gratitude for her family:

Alex: *“It’s quite nice because I don’t really have to stress about hiding my true self much” (693-694)*

Alex: *“I think just the fact that they’re aware that if I need to back out of anything at pretty much any moment, they’re okay for me to just go and do that if I need to. ... I’m aware that not all families might be.” (705-711)*

Here, through the use of the phrase ‘I’m aware that not all families might be’ conveys a sense of gratitude for the support and acceptance that her family provide. She also describes feeling able to be her authentic self around her family, indicating a sense of safety. George similarly shares experiences of receiving support from family members:

George: *“And with my autism very... good at like, generally very... aware of my limits, a lot of the time and like, ‘OK, do you want me to go away now? Do you want me to stop talking now?’. Very good at sort of, I can just go, ‘oh, I’m putting my headphones on now’, they’ll go ‘oh OK’. So that sort of thing and also my like, I’ve always been given sensory toys, I’ve always been advocated for. So I think in I’m very lucky, in a lot of ways” (707-712)*

Similarly to Alex, George expresses gratitude for the support and accommodations provided by his family members and also refers to instances where he may need some space away from his family. Despite George describing his family members as supportive in many ways, he also depicts ‘stressful’ relationships with a few family members on his eco-map. Whilst these people were written close to his name, indicating importance, the nature of the relationships were identified by him as stressful. Daniel Green shared:

Daniel Green: *“because they’d be like, you’re not like your sister, so you can’t have this [autism], but it is a spectrum. But now they’re quite understanding and quite accommodating, like they will turn the television down if it’s too loud, and they will try to accommodate my sensory needs” (446-450)*

Daniel Green: *“But once they understood, they were very supportive and it was a slow change, but slowly they started calling me their son” (458-459)*

Daniel Green’s descriptions indicate that his family members had an evolving understanding of his autistic and gender diverse identities, where he now receives support, affirmation and accommodations from them. However, his repetition of ‘quite’ in ‘quite understanding and quite accommodating’ indicates that their

understanding may still be developing and therefore support received may feel partial at times. Emily describes a similar experience:

Emily: *“Kind of yes and no. Generally, obviously the I feel accepted because it just we all kind of well say everyone just runs with everything that happens. But I don’t know if I would say supported as much definitely, my mum usually makes me feel supported” (638-641)*

Emily’s account captures perhaps some inconsistencies in her interactions with family members, with her feeling accepted due to open mindedness (‘everyone just runs with everything’) though supportiveness is perceived as inconsistent. This may indicate some unpredictability in her interactions with family. Whilst Celeste describes her mum as ‘lovely’, she also describes some tension in her relationships with family members:

Celeste: *“And also, weirdly, my dad defended very heavily the DofE policy. The policy on DofE tents where you trans girls aren’t allowed to share with cis girls. Trans girls have to share tents with boys. ... And my dad is a weirdly was defend, like he’s not transphobic, but sometimes I feel like he might be just in the way he’s defending it.” (1289-1302)*

Celeste appears to convey a sense of confusion through repeating ‘weirdly’, and surprise that her father was ‘defending’ government guidance relating to gender diverse people. Her father’s view of the policy appears to clash with her own experiences and needs. She appears to present a tension between protecting the image of her father as supportive whilst acknowledging opposing views they hold. She also shared:

Celeste: *“she’s [Celeste’s mother] also talked about how, she’s said how no one deserves to be shouted at for doing their job, no matter what their job is or who they’re harming by doing it. ... In response to me raising my voice at my local MP” (1263-1269)*

Here, Celeste is referring to an incident she describes where she raised her voice at her local MP because he was “actively defending” the actions of other politicians who have “reintroduced Section 28 for trans people”. Her description of subsequent interactions with her mother reflects tension within their relationship and opposing

views, and Celeste's account conveys a sense of invalidation and sense of injustice. She appears to want to be understood by her mother, who displays a desire for politeness.

Subtheme: Shared Identity Promoting a Sense of Community. This subtheme captures how participants found a sense of belonging and community in spaces shared with other autistic gender diverse people. Many participants attended youth groups where they met other young people with shared identities:

***Alex:** "I attend a local youth group, which... has two sessions run by different people. One's a specific LGBTQ thing and then one's a more general one. And at present, I'm out at the LGBTQ one, but not the other." (304-306)*

***Alex:** "Socially, where I have transitioned, it's been quite easy because it's been spaces where there have already been other people who have transitioned, so everyone's mostly used to it" (293-295)*

Alex's account indicates that she has found safety and acceptance amongst other LGBTQ+ people at her youth group, and this has facilitated her social transition in this space. She appears to navigate community spaces with caution, and socially transitioning may depend on the perceived safety and norms within each space. Alex further describes:

***Alex:** "I find it easier to talk to people who I shared similar qualities with, so... I don't know if this is something that I've just done subconsciously or something, but I've begun talking to the trans people in my social group a lot more than I did previously, even if it's not about stuff relating to gender" (405-409)*

She appears to find increased comfort, belonging and safety amongst other peers with 'similar qualities', and she seeks connection more with these people. She perhaps feels more understood by people who have had shared experiences. Celeste also describes being more likely to communicate with peers with shared characteristics:

***Celeste:** "And I've now co-opted two of my friends to come with me, so one of which conveniently being [REDACTED], the autistic one, as opposed to*

obviously [REDACTED], the autistic one, [REDACTED], the autistic one, [REDACTED], the autistic one, [REDACTED], the autistic one, what's her name? [REDACTED], the autistic one, [REDACTED], who was weirdly heterosexual and thus I'm less friends with, like I just talk I just interact with her less" (1142-1147)

Celeste's listing of her friends, and repetition of 'the autistic one' conveys humorously a sense of familiarity and tendency to form friendships with other neurodivergent people. She jokingly highlights that she is less likely to talk to her peer who is 'weirdly heterosexual', indicating that shared identities and characteristics are a facilitator of connection and friendship. Daniel Green describes finding people who understand him:

Daniel Green: *"there are some people that are like me and they really understand me" (264-265)*

Daniel Green emphasises a sense of affirmation and community through finding people who can relate to him and his experiences, who share aspects of his identity. Most participants described attending youth groups which they enjoyed. For example, George added his youth group to his eco-map, and shared:

George: *"Main ones, probably my youth, my youth group, [REDACTED]. I've been going for a long time, it's great." (679-680)*

Alex shared her experience of using online spaces to find a sense of belonging:

Alex: *"I suppose a lot of it for me is that it means that I found a lot more people online that I can relate to in ways that I couldn't before and so I feel much more connected to the rest of the world" (238-240)*

Alex: *"I tend to browse Reddit quite a lot to just see people who are like me, which... are quite rare to find people in person" (650-651)*

Alex's accounts convey the significance for her in finding community online which has provided connection 'to the rest of the world' which she didn't have previously. Online spaces for Alex appear to be somewhere where she can find a sense of belonging and community with others who share aspects of her identity.

Discussion

This research explored the lived experiences, including educational experiences, of autistic gender diverse adolescents aged 16-18, who currently attend an education setting in England. It aimed to address the research question: What are the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents navigating their identities across family, education and community contexts? Four GETs and thirteen subthemes were identified. This section discusses the findings of the current study and situates them within the context of the broader literature.

Evolving Understanding of Self

One GET which arose during data analysis related to the participants' making sense of their identities, and this being a process which evolved over time and was shaped by varying contexts and social factors. Many psychological theories may be relevant to understanding this GET, as well as previous empirical research. It is accepted within the literature that adolescence is an important time for identity development, with adolescents engaging in a complex social and discursive process of developing a sense of self (Kroger et al., 2010; Taylor, 2014). Within the existing literature exploring the experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, Patel (2019) found that participants described going through a process of gaining insight and understanding into their identities and differences, and participants described this process as a 'journey'. Similarly, Strang et al (2018) found that participants described their gender identity as developing and coming into focus over time. This aligns with the findings of the present research, where a number of factors influenced the ways in which participants made sense of their identities, and they went through processes of exploration and experimentation.

Marcia (1966) built on Erikson's (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development, identifying 'statuses' of adolescents' identities, including 'moratorium' (where adolescents are exploring options but haven't yet committed to an identity) and 'identity achievement' (where adolescents have explored options and committed to an identity). Within the present research, many of the participants described aspects of their identity with a sense of certainty, perhaps indicating a commitment to an identity and therefore reaching 'identity achievement'. However, some participants also conveyed a sense of uncertainty relating to aspects of their identity, possibly reflecting the 'moratorium' stage. Within Milne's (2021) research, one superordinate

theme related to 'My identity – understanding me, acceptance and rejection'. Milne (2021) found that participants experienced stages of understanding (and sometimes questioning) their identity, whilst simultaneously navigating the responses of others, which encompassed acceptance and rejection. This aligns with the findings of the present research, in that Milne (2021) not only captures participants' experiences of making sense of their identity, but also the contexts in which this occurred and varying levels of acceptance from others.

The subtheme 'Making Sense of Gender Identity in Contexts of Varying Safety' referred not only to participants gender identity development but also captured the contexts which shaped their sense-making in relation to their gender identity, with some spaces being safer, and more affirming and accepting than others. This encompassed experiences of social transition and self-protection, affirming and non-affirming experiences, making sense of gender dysphoria, and responses of family members. Some aspects of this subtheme align with the findings of Milne (2021). For example, Milne (2021) found that participants had experienced gender dysphoria and describe the negative emotional impact of this. Further, Milne (2021) found that participants experienced varying responses to their social transitions, and participants described personal journeys in understanding their gender identity. Milne (2021) highlights that a limitation of their study is that five participants were transwomen and one was gender questioning, therefore the voices of transmen were absent. The present research builds on Milne's (2021) findings by also exploring the experiences of two transgender men. A Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) perspective on gender identity development would argue that gender identity develops not only from self-knowledge of biological sex, but also from a combination of personal and social factors (Bussey, 2011). Within the present study, participants highlight a range of personal and social factors within their journey to understanding their gender identity and 'coming out', aligning with a Social Cognitive Theory perspective. Furthermore, Choate et al (2026) found that autistic gender diverse adolescents understood society as 'an additional identity in the room' and they were required to navigate varying responses from others relating to their identity. This also aligns with the finding from the present research that participants were making sense of their gender identity in contexts of varying safety and acceptance.

The subtheme ‘The Role of Diagnostic Labels in Shaping Sense of Self’, as well as the subtheme ‘Autism as Central Part of Identity’, also align with findings of previous studies. Botha et al (2022) found that participants experienced autism as influencing their entire perception of the world and therefore an autistic identity is significant, which aligns with the finding of the present research that many participants perceived autism as being a central part of who they are. However, there is some conflicting research in this area, as Cooper et al (2023a) explored the experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents and found that autism was often “unimportant” to their sense of self, and young people tended to centre their gender identities. Oliver et al (2025) highlighted the role of ‘labels’ in participants’ identity construction and found that whilst most participants felt that gender diversity and autism were part of their identity, these parts alone did not define them. This is reflected within the findings of the present research, as though labels appeared to play an important role in participants’ journeys to making sense of their identities, participants also identified with a range of other labels beyond their autistic and gender diverse identities, indicating that there are multiple aspects to their identities. Cooper et al (2017) found that a number of factors can contribute to the process of identity construction for autistic people, including social stigma, family response to diagnosis and knowledge of autism. The role of family in relation to autism diagnosis is highlighted in the present study.

Intersection of Autistic Experience and Gender Identity

Another GET which arose during data analysis related to the ways in which participants experienced and made sense of holding both an autistic and gender diverse identity, and how they understood the overlap between the two identities. The concept of intersectionality is particularly relevant to making sense of the findings in this area. Intersectionality refers to the ways in which social identity structures interact to shape lived experiences, particularly experiences of privilege and oppression (Gopaldas, 2013). Within autism research, a number of researchers call for a greater focus on intersectionality, as this is argued to have been neglected, and historical autism research has tended to focus on the perspectives of white, cisgender, middle-class, straight males (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). Similarly, within research with gender diverse individuals, there are calls for greater

consideration for intersectionality (Longman & De Graeve, 2014; Tan et al., 2020). The present research contributes an intersectional perspective, exploring the experiences of autistic adolescents who are also gender diverse. Within this GET, the subtheme 'Recognising Overlap Between Autistic and Gender Diverse Identities' aligns with the body of existing quantitative research which highlights the prevalence of co-occurring autistic and gender diverse identities. It is generally accepted within the literature that there is a link between gender diversity and autism (e.g., Manjra & Masic, 2022; van der Miesen et al., 2018; Shumer et al., 2016), however much of the literature adopts a quantitative methodology to examine the prevalence, whilst Øien et al (2018) call for more qualitative research focused on the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse individuals. Within the present study, a qualitative perspective on the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse individuals is contributed. Participants demonstrated an awareness of the overlap between autism and gender diversity and had generally noticed this as a pattern in the social contexts they experience. This aligns with the findings of Özel and Griffin (2025) who found that almost all participants were familiar with the intersection of neurodivergence and gender diverse identities.

Psychological theory and existing literature can be drawn upon to make sense of findings relating to the subtheme 'Facing Increased Barriers as an Autistic Gender Diverse Young Person'. Oliver et al (2025) found that participants felt that being both autistic and gender diverse made things "more complex". This aligns strongly with findings of the present research, in that participants described the compounding impact of holding both identities as resulting in greater difficulty, including increased discrimination or a greater risk of bullying. Minority Stress frameworks (e.g., Meyer, 2003) have been applied to gender diverse communities, and they highlight the unique experiences and stressors experienced by gender diverse people, including gender-related discrimination, nonaffirmation, internalised transphobia, and gender-related rejection (Testa et al., 2015). Wattel et al (2024) identifies that minority stress may be experienced as a "double whammy" for autistic gender diverse people, due to holding two marginalised identities. These ideas align with the findings of the present research, as participants described increased stressors which they attributed to being both autistic and gender diverse.

The subtheme of 'Autism Shaping Understanding of Gender' relates to participants descriptions of the ways in which they have made sense of how being autistic interacts with their experience and understanding of gender identity. Some qualitative research in this area is beginning to explore the ways in which autistic gender diverse people make sense of how the two aspects of their identities interact (Vines et al., 2025; Cooper et al., 2023a; Cooper et al., 2023b). Many participants within the present research understood gender as socially constructed and described that as an autistic person they feel less likely to conform to social norms. This aligns with the findings of other qualitative researchers (e.g., Özel and Griffin, 2025; Patel, 2019; Strang et al., 2018). Wattel et al (2024) described that one theory for the overlap between autistic and gender diverse identities is that autistic individuals are more resistant to social norms and are 'free' from normative influences when developing their gender identity, whereas non-autistic people are more likely to conform to gender norms. Within the present research, one participant discussed the interaction of sensory needs and gender dysphoria, which aligns with Cooper et al (2023b) who found that sensory needs 'intensified' feelings of gender dysphoria. The present research builds on the research of Milne (2021), as whilst they explored the lived experiences (including educational experiences) of autistic gender diverse adolescents, to the researcher's knowledge no conclusions were drawn specifically relating to the ways in which participants felt their autistic and gender diverse identities interact.

Navigating Educational Systems that Shape Success and Wellbeing

The third GET which arose from the data analysis related to participants experiences of navigating a range of education settings, and how this shaped their success and wellbeing. To the researcher's knowledge, only two studies have been conducted in the UK which specifically explore the educational experiences of autistic gender diverse young people. Milne (2021) carried out an IPA study which explored the lived experiences, including the educational experiences, of gender diverse autistic young people aged 16-26. Milne (2021) identifies limitations of their research, particularly that participants were aged 16-26 so for some educational experiences were viewed retrospectively. In addition, five participants were transwomen and one was gender questioning, therefore there was a lack of

representation of the voices of transgender males. The present research addresses these limitations, as all participants were under 18 and currently attending an education setting in England, and the sample included two transgender males. Vines et al (2025) explored how school shapes mental health for gender diverse and neurodivergent young people. They conducted interviews and focus groups with 12 young people aged 16-19 who attended education settings in England, and data was analysed using thematic analysis. The participant sample within this research included young people who identified as neurodivergent and gender diverse. Whilst the majority of participants identified as autistic, a few did not but identified with other neurodivergent labels. This research had a specific focus on mental health. The present research builds on the research of Vines et al (2025), though specifically explores the experiences of gender diverse young people who have received a diagnosis of autism. Within the present research, educational experiences are explored more broadly, rather than a specific focus on mental health. Furthermore, neither Milne (2021) or Vines et al (2025) used participatory-informed activities within their data collection, so the present research contributes a novel methodological approach by integrating participatory-informed/creative activities.

The ways in which the present research aligns with the findings of Vines et al (2025) and Milne (2021) will be outlined, followed by the ways in which the present research offers unique contributions relating to the educational experiences of autistic gender diverse young people. A number of findings from the present research were consistent with that of Milne (2021) and Vines et al (2025). For example, Vines et al (2025) found that participants described not receiving enough consistent and appropriate support at school. However, participants also described some positive school experiences where they received bespoke support and felt understood by school staff. This aligns with the subtheme of 'Variation in Support Across Educational Settings' in the current research, where participants described experiences of feeling unsupported, dismissed and misunderstood, as well as experiences of receiving appropriate support and accommodations. Milne's (2021) research echoes this, as participants within this study described experiencing stressors within education settings, as well as some positive and supportive experiences. Both Milne (2021) and Vines et al (2025) found that participants shared experiences of navigating social situations at school, which involved experiences of

bullying and social isolation (Milne, 2021) and ‘turbulent’ experiences due to the way they were treated by others (Vines et al., 2025). Milne (2021) highlights that participants experienced “sensory overwhelm including response to noise and being around a lot of people” which is consistent with the present research.

The present research also extends and builds on the existing research by offering findings which were not identified in previous studies. Whilst Vines et al (2025) make some reference to the influence of systemic policies at an organisational level (e.g., at a whole school or college level), the present research extends this finding to highlight the influence of the wider national and legislative context on participants educational experiences. Within the present research, participants educational experiences were shaped by factors such as legislation, recent government guidance, and the coronavirus pandemic. Participants in Milne (2021) or Vines et al (2025) research did not appear to explain the impact of these factors on their educational experiences. Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) Ecological Systems Theory is relevant in making sense of this finding, as this captures the influence of macrosystemic factors (e.g., legislation, socio-political context) on an individual’s development and experiences. Furthermore, within the present research, participants appeared to experience further education settings (e.g., college, sixth form), and specialist settings, as more supportive and accommodating than other settings they had attended. This finding does not appear present within the existing research. Also, within the present research, most participants expressed a desire to pursue academia and attend university, which perhaps challenges deficit-oriented conceptualisations. This finding does also not appear to be present within the existing research.

Navigating Family Relationships and Finding Community

The fourth GET which arose from data analysis related to participants experiences of navigating family relationships which are close, safe and supportive, as well as experiencing tension or strain within some relationships. This GET also includes participants experiences of finding a sense of belonging and community with other autistic and gender diverse people. Relating to the subtheme of ‘Closeness and Tension Within Family Relationships’, the findings of the present research are consistent with some findings from within the literature. For example,

Milne (2021) had a subtheme titled 'Parents – acceptance & rejection' which captured participants mixed accounts of parental acceptance and rejection in relation mainly to their gender identity, which for most elicited a stronger response than their autistic identity. Whilst this aligns with the findings of the present research in some ways, in that it captures varied family dynamics, it also differs from the present research. Of Milne's (2021) participants, some felt well accepted, though some had to leave home due to high conflict with their parents. This differs from findings of the present research, in that whilst some participants experienced some strain or tension in their relationships with their family members, they all still describe feeling supported, and were all living at home with their family. This may reflect the age of participants in the present sample, compared with the sample in Milne's (2021) research. There appears to be a lack of research which explores the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents in navigating family relationships, and this may be a consideration for future research.

Within the present research, the subtheme 'Shared Identity Promoting a Sense of Community' related to participants experiences of connection and finding a sense of belonging amongst peers with shared characteristics. This idea is reflected in the wider literature. For example, within the Minority Stress framework applied to specifically consider the experiences of gender diverse individuals (Testa et al., 2015), two resilience factors are identified which can reduce the negative impact of minority stressors: community connectedness & pride. The idea that connectedness with the wider autistic and gender diverse communities can have a positive impact on wellbeing is consistent with findings from the present research, in that participants often felt safe and accepted around other autistic or gender diverse individuals. Oliver et al (2025) found that participants felt that they fit in better with others who were also either transgender or neurodivergent, which is consistent with findings of the present research. Similarly, Milne (2021) found that participants identified 'social spheres' in which they felt able to be their authentic selves, and this was often when they were with autistic or LGBTQ+ peers. In line with the current findings, Strang et al (2021) found that youth connections and community was important to participants. These findings may be explained by the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) which posits that belonging and self-esteem is enhanced through identifying

with 'in-groups' and differentiating from 'out-groups'. Cooper et al (2017) found that autism social identification was positively associated with personal self-esteem.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the present research have important implications for the practice of a range of professionals, most notably educational professionals (e.g., school/college staff), and Educational Psychologists (EPs). This section will outline implications for practice, including some relevant quotes and perspectives from participants.

Implications for Educational Professionals

Findings from the present research can be applied to consider important implications for staff working within education settings, most notably schools and colleges. Implications are considered at an individual level, when working with an autistic and gender diverse young person, and also at an organisational level, to consider systemic changes within schools and colleges to better support autistic gender diverse adolescents.

At an individual level, the present study demonstrates that autistic gender diverse adolescents value being listened to and understood, and to not have their experiences invalidated or dismissed. Participants also highlight the importance of receiving appropriate support and relevant accommodations which meet their needs. Participants call for more resources to be provided to queer students in schools, and for gender diverse students to have their gender identity affirmed by school staff. The following quotes illustrate some of these implications:

Daniel Green: *"It's nice to have someone just like listen and not dismiss my experiences."*

George: *"I think that just being a little bit more flexible about things makes because like if if you're having a like an if you're having an an accommodation, for example, and they make it feel like it's a chore, it's like, then you feel bad about needing that or you feel like you don't actually need it"*

Celeste: *“People need to promote queer resources more, because they’ve got they don’t have any they’re got resources for like if your parents were abusing you ... but they don’t have resources for if your parents are abusing you because you’re queer”*

Emily: *“I think that it would be nice to have known about places like what [REDACTED] youth service do, sooner. I think that would have been beneficial”*

Celeste: *“Trans girls are girls, trans boys are boys”*

Furthermore, the findings of the present research highlight the importance of both positive and supportive relationships with key adults in school, as well as connection with peers with shared identities. School/college staff should consider ways in which safe and supportive relationships can be built with adults and peers in education settings, to support the wellbeing of autistic gender diverse young people. Autistic gender diverse adolescents should be valued holistically by school/college staff and encouraged to achieve their potential. Many participants within the present research expressed a desire to pursue academia and attend university. School/college staff should be prepared to challenge deficit-orientated narratives and ensure that the strengths and potential of autistic gender diverse young people is highlighted.

At an organisational level, the present study identifies potential areas for further awareness or training for school/college staff. It will be important that educational professionals have an awareness of the increased barriers faced by autistic gender diverse adolescents, as highlighted within the research. Furthermore, school/college staff should have an awareness of the social risks that autistic gender diverse adolescents may experience, and the ways in which they can experience the social landscape within education settings, including increased bullying, social exclusion, non-affirming experiences in relation to their gender identity, etc. One participant explained that school staff should receive training relating to the microaggressions that transgender and gender diverse young people can experience. Both transgender male participants identify that educational

professionals should have a greater understanding of varying presentations of autism, including paying attention to young people who are assigned female at birth (AFAB), as they are more likely to “go under the radar”. The following participant quotes illustrate some of these implications for practice:

Emily: *“the other thing would be there needs to be more training with staff about what kind of is microaggressions the right term, like little things that don't seem problematic but really are that kind of thing a lot more about them, like general microaggressions that trans people and gender diverse people face.”*

George: *“I think paying attention to different types of autism. I think paying attention to young girls, especially more because it's so often unseen because they're not lashing out and they're not making a scene, well not making a scene, but you know what I mean it's not seen”*

Daniel Green: *“just like the fact that I and many others go under the radar because they were born as females and they're not a disruption to others and they're not failing every subject.”*

Other implications for practice are relevant at an organisational level, e.g., to be implemented at a whole school or college level. It will be important that school/college staff foster a whole organisational culture of acceptance and safety for autistic gender diverse adolescents. This should aim to reduce stigmatising attitudes relating to both autism and gender diversity. School and college staff should reflect on how cisnormative and neuronormative assumptions may be shaping their expectations and everyday practices, and the impact these have on autistic and gender diverse students (see Alex and George's quotes below for examples). School and college staff should aim to reduce the impact of cisnormativity and neuronormativity within the setting, to ensure approaches are inclusive of all students. School and college staff should consider their systems and processes in relation to when students socially transition, ensuring that there are clear and accepting processes in place. School and college staff should adopt a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and discrimination, and ensure effective processes are in place

to manage such incidents if they are to occur. There should be increased representation of autistic and gender diverse identities in education settings, one participant suggested having queer people visit settings. The following participant quotes are relevant to some of these implications:

Emily: *"I think having less stigma around social transitioning would be kind of a main a main thing that I would say is important."*

Emily: *"They just need to be more strict on general discrimination and that kind of thing that just needs to be much more... the punishments need to be greater and the actions need to be taken quicker."*

George: *"I'd hope that they're [autistic gender diverse adolescents] taken seriously by teachers and parents. I'd hope that they remain safe... in every way."*

George: *"I think that taking bullying seriously, not for me, but I know a lot of people, especially autistic or trans people that are being bullied or have been bullied, and it's so often just swept under the rug."*

George: *"Also not expect, not thinking that not looking at you means that you're not listening. A lot of people don't look at the teacher and it's like, oh, you're not listening. It's like, well, that's not true. They can prove that they're listening by telling you what you've said, by getting good results. It doesn't matter if they're looking at you, that kind of stuff."*

Celeste: *"Get queer people come and talk. That'd be good."*

Alex: *"I think there should be better processes for if someone wants to transition, because I don't know who I speak to if I want to make my teachers aware if I've got to go around individually telling every teacher I interact with, and it, it shouldn't be a big deal either. It should just be something that happens and no one really takes notice of then just adapting to do that."*

Alex: *"So my school's got head students which are voted for, and I feel like stuff like the gendering of that, which I mean, I admit that there are probably gender biases which mean that the results will not be as representative for those should be without some level of representation enforcing but... people*

will just say head boy and head girl, which feels... just unfair on a) non-binary people and people who haven't socially transitioned yet."

Implications for Educational Psychologists

Considering the findings of the present research, one implication for Educational Psychology practice relates to the psychological theories that inform the practice of EPs. When supporting autistic gender diverse young people, EPs may draw on theories such as the Social Graces (Burnham, 2018) framework in order to reflect on aspects of an individual's identity and the role of power and privilege, as well as to reflect on their own identity in relation to the individual. In line with this, EPs may draw on Intersectionality Theory, as well as Minority Stress frameworks, to consider the ways in which multiple aspects of an individual's identity interact and present unique stressors. EPs may utilise theories which challenge cisnormative and neuronormative assumptions, including Queer Theory and neurodiversity affirming conceptualisations. EPs may apply these theories when completing individual casework, or when working with an education setting at an organisational level. Furthermore, EPs may apply theories of identity development when working with adolescents, particularly considering literature relating to how autistic and gender diverse adolescents make sense of their developing identities. In line with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Ecological Systems Theory, EPs should be aware of macrosystemic factors which can shape the development and experiences of individuals. Particularly relating to gender diverse individuals, EPs should consider the impact of government guidance, legislation, and wider societal attitudes.

Research is a core function of the EP role highlighted in the Currie Report (Scottish Executive, 2002). To the researcher's knowledge, only one study explores the experiences and perspectives of EPs in supporting autistic gender diverse young people. EPs should consider contributing to the research in this area to build on existing findings. Another implication for practice relates to increased awareness amongst EPs about intersectionality in relation to autism, and there may be opportunities for teaching on EP training programmes about the experiences of autistic and gender diverse adolescents, considering the overlap between the two identities which is established within the literature. EPs are well positioned to elicit the voices of autistic gender diverse young people within their practice, and they may

utilise creative activities such as the activities applied within the present research (GEM, eco-map) to support the elicitation of perspectives. When considering provision or recommendations to support autistic gender diverse adolescents, EPs should ensure the voices of the young people are considered, and their experiences are listened to. Another core function of the EP role highlighted in the Currie Report is training (Scottish Executive, 2002). An implication for practice based on the findings of the present research may be for EPs to deliver training to educational professionals in areas relevant to the findings within this research.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although the current research has made unique contributions in building on literature relating to the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, it is important to acknowledge limitations of the study. One limitation of the research is the generalisability of the findings, as a small sample size of five participants were recruited. However, it is important to recognise that in line with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, the aim of the research was not to generalise findings but was instead to adopt an idiographic focus and explore in detail the lived experiences of a small sample of participants.

Within the present research, strict participant inclusion criteria were adopted in order to achieve a reasonable level of homogeneity across the sample, in line with an IPA approach (Smith et al., 2022). However, in doing so, a number of potential participants were excluded from partaking in the research. For example, only participants who were willing and able to take part in an online interview were included, and therefore participants were required to have the necessary verbal and attention skills to be able to engage in this. In addition, only participants with a formal diagnosis of autism were included, despite an increasing number of individuals engaging in self-identification or self-diagnosis with an autism label. Only participants who currently attended an education setting in England were included, which meant that participants who were out of education were not able to contribute to the research. Furthermore, parental consent was required for participants to be able to take part in the research. It was felt that this was necessary in order to safeguard participants, though it meant that gender diverse young people who were not 'out' to their parents were potentially excluded from the research. Therefore, as a direction

for future research, researchers should consider exploring the lived experiences and capturing the views of those groups of individuals who were not able to partake in the current research.

Whilst the current research incorporated some participatory-informed approaches, including consulting with an advisory group during the planning stages of the research, and integrating some creative activities into the data collection stage, more could be done with regards to including participants and the autistic community more generally within the research. Future research may aim to include members of the autistic community at more stages throughout the research. Furthermore, given the researcher's positionality as a non-autistic and cisgender person, a limitation of the current research relates to the possible subjectivity when adopting IPA methodology. In line with the double hermeneutic, the researcher provided their own interpretation of the participants interpretation of their lived experiences. When considering the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012), it is possible that misunderstandings can occur between autistic and non-autistic people, due to the differences in the way they understand the world. It is important to acknowledge that the researcher's interpretation may have been different to the participant's intention. Future research may address this limitation by ensuring that a member checking approach is used, where participants are given the opportunity to review the researcher's analysis to ensure their experiences are captured accurately.

Another limitation of the present research relates to the lack of demographic information collected relating to participants' cultural backgrounds. Within the existing literature exploring the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, it is evident that the experiences of adolescents who are autistic and gender diverse, and of a minoritised ethnic background, are not well represented within the literature. Future research should ensure that demographic information relating to cultural background is gathered, to ensure that the research is truly intersectional. To the researcher's knowledge, there is only one existing study which explores the perspectives of Educational Psychologists in supporting autistic gender diverse young people. Future research may consider exploring this area further and building on the existing literature.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents aged 16-18 who currently attend an education setting in England. It was the first to broadly explore the educational experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents aged under 18 who are all currently attending an education setting, and the first to adopt participatory-informed/creative activities to support participants in sharing their experiences. This research builds upon existing literature to provide important insights into the lived experiences, and particularly the educational experiences, of autistic gender diverse adolescents. Four GETs emerged from the analysis which highlighted areas of convergence and divergence across individuals' accounts. Much of these findings were consistent with the existing theoretical and empirical literature, though some unique contributions also emerged which are discussed. The findings of the present research have important implications for educational professionals, including school/college staff and EPs.

Chapter 3: Reflective Chapter

Introduction

Within qualitative research, where the ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ are both living, experiencing human beings, is it necessary for researchers to reflect on how that might impact the research scenario (Shaw, 2010). Goldspink and Engward (2019) describe that IPA researchers are both part of and apart from their research, and reflexivity aids this dual perspective by maintaining the researcher’s self-awareness and the participant’s perspective. Shaw (2010) highlights that we experience the world from a particular perspective, and we can never fully escape this subjectivity. Gadamer (1975) uses an analogy of ‘horizons’ to illustrate this: we each have our own preconceptions, assumptions and beliefs which make up our own ‘horizon’ of understanding. To not let our prejudices dominate our research, we must examine ourselves and make ourselves more transparent. By adopting a reflexive stance within qualitative research, we will more effectively appreciate “the nature of our investigation, its relationship to us personally and professionally, and our relationship as a researcher and experienter in the world to those with whom we wish to gather experiential data” (Shaw, 2010, p. 235). Within this chapter, critical reflections on various aspects of the research journey will be provided and will be written in the first person to highlight the centrality of my role in shaping the research.

Choosing a Research Topic

I found the process of deciding on a research topic to be one of the most challenging parts of my research journey. For several months, I developed an initial idea, from which my research proposal was formed. Initially, I hoped to explore autistic adolescents’ experiences of using online spaces to find a sense of community connectedness and belonging. Over time, through discussions in research supervision, engagement with the literature, and feedback from a research presentation, this idea evolved to exploring spaces (in a more general sense) which facilitate a sense of belonging for autistic adolescents. Whilst a relevant area of research, I found myself recognising that the topic no longer aligned with the kind of inquiry I wanted to pursue, which led me to completely change direction.

From the beginning of my research journey, the idea of exploring the experiences of gender diverse autistic adolescents was present in the back of my mind. This was likely informed by prior professional experiences. In a previous role, I worked as an Assistant Psychologist in an NHS Autism and ADHD Diagnostic Service, where I became aware of the overlap between gender diverse and autistic identities, and worked with a number of adolescents who identified as transgender or non-binary. Initially, I did not consider it an option for my research project, largely due to my positionality as a non-autistic and cisgender researcher. I questioned whether it was my place to represent the stories of gender diverse autistic adolescents. However, as I continued to engage with the literature relating to autism, I repeatedly encountered calls for greater consideration of intersectionality within autism research, and I felt a growing desire to address this gap, whilst continually reflecting on my own positionality.

When I took the decision to change the focus of my research project, and I began to engage with the literature relating to the experiences of gender diverse autistic adolescents, I came across Milne's (2021) unpublished doctoral thesis. I wanted to ensure that my research was extending the existing literature, so I took the decision to incorporate some participatory-informed/creative activities, as well as exploring the experiences of adolescents who were currently in education (rather than reflecting retrospectively as many of Milne's participants). Following participant recruitment, I also noticed that whilst a limitation of Milne's (2021) research related to the perspectives of transmen not being captured, two of the participants that I recruited were transgender males, therefore I was also able to make a unique contribution with regards to the characteristics and sample of participants.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality as a researcher is something that I reflected on continuously throughout my research journey, and that inevitably shaped the research project. This included reflecting on my social identities, professional background, values, and lived experiences. As previously mentioned, of particular relevance is my position as a non-autistic and cisgender researcher. In addition, my previous professional experiences, which includes my role as an Assistant Psychologist in an Autism and ADHD Service, and my role as a SEN Teaching Assistant, undoubtedly influenced

this project. A commitment to social justice also motivated me to amplify voices that are often marginalised within research. In line with Gadamer's (1975) 'horizons of understanding' analogy, these aspects will have shaped the preconceptions and beliefs that I hold, and in turn will have influenced the ways in which I make sense of the participants' experiences. In relation to the participants of the current research, my social identities and lived experiences as a non-autistic cisgender researcher likely introduce a power imbalance and shape the relationship between us.

MacLeod (2019) highlights that where a non-autistic researcher is interviewing an autistic participant about their lived experience in relation to autism, "there is much to be gained from deeper exploration of this, potentially very specific, hermeneutic". They call for the researcher to adopt a reflexive stance to actively critique their positionality and consider the ways in which it might "colour, limit or undermine the exchange". When participants described experiences associated with autism, such as sensory sensitivities or masking, this highlighted the limits of my own understanding as I was consciously aware that I have not experienced such phenomena. By remaining aware of this, I aimed to ensure that my interpretations respected and did justice to their accounts. Galupo (2017) reflects on her positionality as a cisgender researcher conducting research with transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. She recognises that her relative distance from the topic impacts her research approach, and that her identity is an important consideration and potential source of bias. She argues that as cisgender researchers, we must actively acknowledge our "cis-ness". Drawing on this article, I reflected on how my own cisgender identity, and the presence of cisnormative assumptions within society, have shaped my own experiences and the wider societal context within which the research was conducted.

At various stages throughout the research, I reflected on my positionality as a non-autistic, cisgender researcher and how this shaped my approach to the study's rationale, data collection, and data analysis. Before and during the research interviews, I was particularly aware that my social identities positioned me differently from the adolescents who participated, and I carried a concern that participants may feel less comfortable sharing certain aspects of their experiences with someone who did not share their identities, and I was aware of how this might impact the depth or

direction of what they choose to share. I feel that reflecting on this impacted my approach to the interviews, in that I placed emphasis on creating a warm and non-judgemental space where participants could speak freely. Furthermore, when analysing the research data, and engaging with the participants' accounts through IPA, I was required to interpret experiences that I had not personally lived, and I was conscious of the interpretative distance this created. At times, I felt a sense of responsibility and doubt about whether I was able to fully do justice to experiences that I had not lived. These thoughts prompted me to approach the data very slowly and reflexively, repeatedly returning to the participants' words to ensure that my interpretations were grounded in the data, rather than in my own assumptions or expectations. The double hermeneutic underpinnings of IPA made my role within the analysis explicit. Across the study as a whole, my positionality influenced how I navigated the framing of the research rationale and aims. I entered the project with some hesitation about whether it was my place to explore the experiences of gender-diverse autistic adolescents, and this doubt resurfaced at times throughout my research journey. These reflections and deliberations I feel were an important part of the ethical and reflexive grounding of the research, and they encouraged me to remain aware of my responsibility as a research in interpreting participants' experiences and of issues of power and privilege.

Within one particular research interview, the participant spoke often about their political values and beliefs, and as my own political views aligned with theirs, I found it challenging at times to remain neutral and avoid asking leading questions. I wanted to balance this with signalling that the interview was a safe space and that I did not hold views that might be recognised as harmful, reassuring the participant that they could speak openly. I navigated this by using active listening, reflecting on my responses before responding, and bracketing my own assumptions and beliefs so that the participant's meaning making was central to the interview. Considering my positionality more generally, to mitigate the influence of my own assumptions and experiences, I made use of a reflective diary throughout the research journey, particularly throughout the data analysis phase. I continuously reflected on whether my interpretations remained close to participants' accounts (Smith et al., 2022).

Philosophical Orientation

In the planning phase of this research project, I decided on the philosophical stance underpinning the research. I spent time considering critical realism, as within the context of the current research it would acknowledge the ‘real’ structural forces shaping the lives of gender diverse autistic adolescents. However, I reflected that my own stance as a researcher, and the way in which I would engage with participants’ accounts, more comfortably aligned with a social constructionist position. I was focused on how participants constructed and made sense of their social landscapes and experiences. In line with IPA methodology, I paid attention to participants language and meaning making, and I was constantly aware of my own role in interpreting and making sense of their sense making of their experiences. A social constructionist position felt like the best fit, both for how I tend to understand individuals’ experiences, and in line with the research project and methodology.

Terminology

Whilst key terminology is defined within the Literature Review chapter, the language used throughout this thesis to describe gender diversity became an important point of reflection for me. When discussing language with an advisory group during the planning stages of the project, all four young people expressed a preference for the term ‘genderqueer’ as an umbrella term to describe individuals whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth. Whilst they were comfortable with the term ‘gender diverse’, they felt that it could be used to describe everybody (akin to ‘neurodiverse’). However, when I asked my participants about their own preferences regarding umbrella terms, four participants liked the term ‘gender diverse’, and one felt that ‘transgender’ was a more accurate umbrella term to describe individuals whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth, noting that it does not only refer to binary transgender people. When consulting the literature, a range of terms are used, including ‘transgender’, ‘gender diverse’, ‘gender variant’, and ‘gender non-conforming’. Following reflection, and discussion within research supervision, I decided to use ‘gender diverse’ as the umbrella term throughout this thesis. Whilst I recognise that it is not a perfect term, as it does not reflect the preferences of all transgender and gender diverse people, I felt that it best aligned with the preferences of my participant group as a whole.

Participant Recruitment and Inclusion Criteria

Whilst participant recruitment was something that I was anxious about at the beginning of my research journey, I found that many young people were keen to take part in the study and I was able to reach my aim of recruiting around 5 participants. This challenged my initial assumptions about the difficulty of accessing this population. In relation to the participant inclusion criteria, I found myself often reflecting on the impact of this. Although the inclusion criteria were put in place to ensure a reasonable level of homogeneity in line with IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2022), they also meant that a number of young people who expressed interest were ultimately excluded from taking part in the study. I became increasingly aware of the discomfort this raised for me, and I continuously reflected on the power I held as a researcher to define whose voices were included and whose were not. It is important to acknowledge that whilst I prioritised homogeneity in line with my chosen methodology, I have potentially missed out on rich experiential accounts from other young people. For example, a few young people expressed interest in taking part, either via social media comments or email, and met all of the inclusion criteria except for the fact that they were on a waiting list for an autism assessment and therefore had not yet received a formal diagnosis. I turned these young people away, which I felt uncomfortable about. This discomfort likely comes from my awareness of current difficulties in accessing diagnostic services in the UK. Further, at the beginning of my research journey, I intended to include autistic individuals who were self-identified or awaiting assessment, however changed this to ensure homogeneity. I was conscious that by adopting inclusion criteria related to diagnosis, I was inadvertently privileging a medicalised conceptualisation of autism. On reflection, if I were to conduct the research study again, I would ensure that the experiences of self-identified autistic gender diverse young people are explored.

I also had to turn down a small number of potential participants who were willing to provide their own informed consent however who were unable to obtain parental consent. Although the age range of my participant sample included participants over the age of 16, where parental consent is not typically required, I decided in consultation with my supervisor and ethics procedures that parental consent would be sought for all participants, primarily for safeguarding reasons. I anticipated that during participant interviews, emotionally challenging or sensitive topics may arise, and I reflected on this within my ethics application. I felt it was

important that a trusted adult was aware that the participant was engaging in a research interview and was available in person after the online interview to check in with them and ensure their wellbeing. By seeking parental consent, having contact details for a parent/carer and being able to check in with them following the interview, I was able to provide additional safeguards for participants. However, it is important to recognise that this meant that some young people were excluded from taking part in the research, for example gender diverse young people who were not out to their parents. As a result, this means that the participants who did take part may represent a particular sub-group of the wider population, in that those who were out to their parents and whose parents were supportive of their involvement in the research were included. This has implications for the kinds of experiences captured within the study. Future research should consider alternative approaches to seeking informed consent and flexible arrangements that allow a wider range of participants to share their experiences.

In reflecting further on the characteristics of the young people who were included within the research sample, I became aware that the sample may represent individuals who, to some extent, may have found ways to navigate or mitigate some of the adversity they had experienced. All participants were currently attending education, had parents/carers who were willing to provide consent as part of the research, had received a formal autism diagnosis, and were willing and able to take part in the research interviews. These factors may have shaped the kinds of experiences participants felt able to share. It is possible that young people who were not in education, who lacked parental support, who were self-identified autistic, or who would not be able to access a research interview, may hold different accounts of gender diversity, school experiences, or wellbeing, that were not captured in this research. The perspectives of these young people are valuable and deserve to be captured within the literature. This reflection deepened my sense of moral discomfort about having to turn potential participants away, as I was acutely aware that the decisions I made, though justified methodologically (to ensure homogeneity in line with IPA), contributed to whose voices were heard and whose were absent within the research. This has prompted me to consider directions for future research and more flexible and inclusive approaches to recruitment and consent in future, to ensure that the experiences of a wider range of young people are not excluded.

Participatory-Informed Elements of the Research

One important aspect of my research study, and a way in which I was able to incorporate elements of participatory-informed approaches, was by meeting with an 'advisory group' of young people within the planning stages of the research. To do this, I attended a local youth group, run by an autism charity. Attending the youth group were four autistic and genderqueer young people, aged 17-22. I shared with them my ideas for my research project, as well as my proposed interview schedule, and asked for their feedback. They made notes and also provided verbal feedback, and we had discussions about some of the questions and activities. I found their feedback invaluable, and it allowed me to reflect on the wording of some of my questions. For one question in particular, I realised that the language I initially used was slightly 'othering', and it therefore highlighted to me the importance of continuously reflecting on my positionality and the language I am using, so not to perpetuate inequality or exclusion.

I was mindful whilst conducting the present research that participation can be considered a spectrum. I was conscious that my research was not completely participatory, though I incorporated some participatory-informed approaches. Through incorporating some participatory-informed approaches, I aimed to shift the power dynamic and prioritise 'insider knowledge'. Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) describe that there are a range of benefits to using participatory-informed approaches, including producing research which is informed by and relevant to real-world contexts, by integrating researchers' theoretical and methodological expertise with participants' real-world knowledge and experience. I felt that this was particularly important, again given my position as a cisgender non-autistic researcher, as members of the autistic and gender diverse communities provided invaluable insights and knowledge of real-world contexts. I reflected on the framing of my research and ensuring that the use of participatory-informed approaches was highlighted whilst being mindful that my research does not constitute participatory research in a methodological sense.

Data Collection

The data collection element of this research project was the most rewarding aspect for me, as engaging directly with young people and hearing their experiences felt meaningful and energising. One thing that I think felt quite difficult was the fact that as I was engaging in 'one-off' interviews with participants, I didn't have the luxury of time to build rapport with them prior to asking quite personal questions about their lives, identities and experiences. This may have impacted the amount that participants felt comfortable to share with me, particularly given my position as a non-autistic and cisgender researcher. I attempted to mitigate this by setting up a short 'initial chat' meeting via Microsoft Teams with participants and their parent/carer prior to arranging the research interview. This allowed us to begin to build rapport and create a foundation of trust before moving to more in-depth conversations.

For the research interview, participants were informed that there were options to make the interview situation feel more comfortable, including the option to have a trusted adult present in the room, and the option to have their camera on or off, or type responses in the chat rather than verbally. Despite being provided with these options, all participants chose to not have anybody else present during the interview, and all kept their camera on throughout and provided responses verbally. When listening back to participants' interview recordings, I reflected on my own style of interviewing, and moments where I could have made better use of the 'prompt' questions to elicit more information from participants. Whilst I was still able to obtain rich and detailed information from participants, perhaps there were opportunities to explore their experiences in greater depth. Also reflecting back on the research interviews, I recognised a couple of moments where I felt that the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012) appeared to play a role. For example, within the first interview, I explained the Grid Elaboration Method (GEM) activity, however there was a misunderstanding between myself and the participant about how the information should be presented. Although this did not cause any issues beyond the format of the GEM, and I was still able to use it as a conversational tool, it prompted me to reflect on the clarity of my explanation and the assumptions I was making about shared understanding. As a result, I ensured that I used clearer, more explicit language when explaining the activity in subsequent interviews.

Salifu (2025) highlights that where practitioners adopt a dual role as researchers, this can provide both valuable insights and also lead to ethical dilemmas. They explain that practitioner-researchers may experience tensions between their “professional obligations to intervene and the methodological imperative to maintain critical reflexivity and ethical integrity” (p.2). Although I did not experience any extreme tensions during data collection, I did become aware of the differences in how I was required to behave as a researcher compared with my usual practice as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. In my professional role, when working with children and young people, I would often draw on core therapeutic skills including summarising, validating emotions, and offering empathetic responses. However, within the research interviews, I was conscious of the need to remain neutral and minimise my own influence on participants’ accounts. This created some tension between the relational approach I would usually adopt, and the expectations of qualitative research.

With regards to the creative activities used within the interview (Grid Elaboration Method and Eco-Mapping), participants varied in how they engaged with them. I felt that the flexibility of the activities allowed the participants to express their experiences in the way that best suited them. I felt that including the activities facilitated richer discussion and allowed space for topics to be discussed that were not brought up during other parts of the interview. Participants at times appeared to use their written outputs as prompts to explain experiences that they had not articulated at other times or which may be more difficult to articulate. Of the five participants, all participants completed the Grid Elaboration Method, and four participants completed the Eco-Mapping activity. Participants were generally willing to take part, though I felt that some may have preferred discussing their experiences verbally rather than through creative means. On the whole, I felt that these activities were a meaningful and useful addition to the interview process.

Data Analysis

In line with IPA methodology, reflexivity throughout data analysis was critical to this research project. I kept a reflective diary throughout my research journey and made particular use of this during the data analysis process. Goldspink and Engward (2019) refer to ‘echoes’, where the participant’s and researcher’s experiences

resonate with each other during the research process. They explain that exploring and attending to these ‘echoes’ enables the researcher to work with their own presuppositions. During some of the research interviews, where participants were describing their experiences, this often resonated with stories I hear when working with children and young people on placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. When this did occur, I made use of my reflective diary and ensured that my interpretations were grounded in the participant’s lived experiences, rather than my own assumptions. Whilst analysing data, I often asked myself questions, such as ‘what does this tell me about how the participant is making sense of their experience?’, ‘what is beneath the surface?’ and ‘what does this tell me about the participant’s world?’, informed by descriptions by Smith et al (2022). This supported me to move from surface level descriptions, to being more interpretative.

Prior to selecting IPA as the methodology for the current study, I reflected on alternative methodologies that I could use to explore the experiences of autistic gender diverse adolescents, including Thematic Analysis (TA) and Narrative Inquiry (NI). I decided to choose IPA rather than TA as my research was concerned with participants lived experiences, which lends itself well to the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, e.g., hermeneutics, phenomenology. Furthermore, my research was concerned with individual meaning-making rather than broader patterns across the dataset. Whilst both IPA and NI would have offered useful insights into the experiences of my participants, I decided not to adopt NI methodology as it appears more focused on participants’ stories of their experiences, whilst IPA aligns well with a focus on lived experience itself.

One thing that I found challenging and often reflected on during data analysis was a tendency to use my skills as a trainee psychologist to ‘formulate’ what might be going on for the young person, where instead I was required to inductively analyse the data and focus on the way in which the participant is making sense of their experiences. Smith et al (2022) report that sometimes it is tempting to import a theoretical construct for a process of claim (moving towards explanation) or make notes which focus on understanding why someone is how they are (moving towards formulation). They report that whilst it is valid to notice these things, they should belong in your reflective notes and not as part of the analysis per se. They advise

remaining focused on what is important to the participant, and not to judge or diagnose them. This guidance resonated with me and supported me to focus my analysis on the participant's meaning making.

Current Context and Plans for Dissemination

Interest in the 'research to practice gap' has increased, and it is argued that both in the UK and internationally, there are deficiencies in the dissemination of research-based knowledge into practice (Wilson et al., 2010). I plan to disseminate the findings of the current research in the hope that this will benefit both gender diverse autistic young people, and adults supporting this population, in the future. Firstly, a one-page summary will be shared with all participants who expressed a desire to receive feedback about the findings of the research, which will include a summary of the findings and an overview of the research implications. I hope to disseminate the findings of this research to Educational Psychologists and other professionals within the Local Authority context within which I work, likely as part of team meetings, peer supervision, consultations, or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions. I also hope to disseminate the findings to a wider audience through seeking publication opportunities, such as in the 'Educational Psychology in Practice' journal. Alongside considering plans to disseminate the findings of this research, it is important to reflect on what it means to be conducting and publishing research with gender diverse adolescents within the current context. At a time of such intense hostility towards trans people (Gavin et al., 2025), publishing research in this context carries an ethical responsibility to ensure that participants' voices are represented with care and respect.

Personal and Professional Implications

As well as implications for practice for educational professionals discussed within the Empirical Chapter, conducting this research has also had a significant personal and professional impact on me. Working so closely with, and learning from, gender diverse autistic young people, both within the advisory group and as participants, has deepened my understanding of the lived experiences of members of these communities, and how to best provide support. It has allowed me to reflect more deeply on the concept of intersectionality and the compounding effects of

holding multiple marginalised identities, which has in turn made me feel even more strongly about issues of social justice, something which I will carry forward into my work as a future Educational Psychologist. Conducting this research project has increased my knowledge of and confidence in research methods, and critical reflection. My increased awareness of philosophical orientations such as social constructionism, and the experience of applying this within the research project, is another thing that I will carry forward into my work with children and young people, particularly when considering how they make sense of their worlds and experiences. Completing a doctoral research project alongside placement demands and personal commitments was extremely challenging at times, though it has reminded me of both my resilience and the importance of maintaining balance. I genuinely enjoyed the research process and feel I have learnt so much, which I know will make me a more thoughtful and responsive practitioner.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I hope to have provided reflections on various elements of my research journey and provided a rationale for the research decisions I have made. I have reflected on both challenges and successes experienced throughout the project, and implications for my own personal and professional development. The knowledge and skills I have gained as a result of conducting this research will undoubtedly enhance my professional practice. I am confident that many of the stories told by participants will guide my practice as an Educational Psychologist. I feel extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to conduct this research and to contribute to amplifying the voices of my participants within the literature. I look forward to disseminating the findings of this research as I embark on my career as an Educational Psychologist and continuing to advocate for young autistic and gender diverse people within research and practice.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Introduction:

Hi, my name is Emma Potter (she/her), I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. This means that I work with children and young people across different schools and colleges to find out about their strengths, what they find difficult, and how school can be made better for them. I also go to university where I learn things and carry out research.

I want to carry out some research into the experiences of young people (aged 14-18) who are autistic and are also gender-diverse/genderqueer. I'd like to find out about your lived experiences in your day-to-day life, and about your experiences of school/college.

Everything that you tell me will be kept confidential, which means I won't tell anyone what we talk about. The only exception is if you tell me something that makes me worried about your safety or the safety of others, I will have to let someone else know. When I write up my research, I will not use your real name or the name of your school/college, so nobody will know that it was you in my research.

I have some questions I'd like to ask you. There are no right or wrong answers, they will just help me to find out about your experiences. Please share whatever you feel comfortable to. I would like to understand your experiences, so I will likely be listening more than talking. If there are any questions you wouldn't like to answer, please just let me know. If you'd like to stop, or take a break, this is okay, just let me know. *Agree a sign/signal with the YP that they can use if they would like to stop the interview.*

Do you have any questions for me before we start?

Topic	Possible Questions	Prompts	Creative activities
Demographic information	What are your pronouns and preferred name? Gather information about age, age of autism diagnosis, any co-occurring diagnoses, type of educational setting		

Identity	• Are there any labels you would describe your gender with? • What words would you prefer me to use when talking about your identity around autism? • When did you find/start identifying with the label of autism? • What does being autistic mean to you? • What does being gender-diverse/genderqueer (or other word used by participant) mean to you? • Have you experienced times when your body has felt like it didn't match how you see or feel about your gender? • Can you tell me about any experiences you've had with gender transition — either socially (like names, pronouns, clothing) or medically (like hormones or surgeries), or both? • What does being a _____ (name the gender identity the young person used to describe themselves) autistic person mean to you? • Do you think that being autistic has influenced your view/experience of gender? • Do you think that there are differences for _____ (name the gender identity the young person used to describe	• What does it mean to you when people use the correct words? Is it important? • When did you start to think you were autistic? When did you receive your autism diagnosis? Did someone make you aware? Were there any emotions you remember feeling? • Can you tell me a bit more about this? What did you notice? Are there any emotions that you have felt at these times? Are there particular situations where this feels stronger or different? • How do you feel about the way other people see or treat you in terms of your gender? Have you had experiences where people made assumptions about your gender? How did that feel? • What happened? How did you feel? What helped you? How was it at home? How about at school? • If yes, what are they?	<i>*OPTIONAL* Grid Elaboration Method (GEM) - this will involve the participant having a blank piece of paper and splitting it into a grid containing four boxes. The participant will be required to write or draw in each box any image, word or feeling that comes to mind when they hear or think of the term firstly 'autism' and secondly 'gender'.</i> "Split your page into 4 equal parts. What are the first 4 ideas that come to mind when you hear the term X? Please express what comes to mind using words and/or drawings, putting each idea in a single box. There are no correct or incorrect answers, I am simply interested in what you associate with X".
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	themselves) autistic people compared to autistic people with other gender identities?		
Lived experiences & relationships	• Can you tell me about the people in your life that are important to you? • Are there any places or activities that are important to you? • Can you tell me about your experiences at home with your family/carers? • Can you tell me about your experiences in public spaces/within the community? • Are there any online spaces which are important to you?	• Are there any particular experiences that stand out to you? Any experiences that relate to your autistic/genderqueer identity? How do your family or carers understand and talk about your autism and/or gender identity? Do your family or carers do things that help you feel supported or understood? • If so, what are they? Can you tell me about your experiences of using online spaces?	<i>*OPTIONAL* Eco-mapping – This will involve the participant having a blank sheet of paper and drawing a circle in the middle of the paper with their name inside. They will then draw circles around the page, representing people, places, activities and services in their life. They will draw things most important to them close to their name, and things less important further away. They will draw different types of lines between their circle and the other circles to represent the strength of the relationships.</i>
Educational experiences	• Can you describe what primary school was like for you?	• Are there any particular experiences or moments that stand out for you (both positive and negative)? How	

	• Can you describe what secondary school/college has been like for you so far? • Would you change anything about your school/college if you could? • What does a good day at school/college look like for you? What does a bad day look like?	are/were you treated by others? Are there particular people at school who are important to you (Friends? Teachers?)? • If so, what would you change? • Do you think being autistic or transgender/gender-diverse has impacted your school experiences? If so, how?	
Moving Forwards	• Thinking about your own experiences, what do you wish adults knew or did differently to help autistic and genderqueer/gender-diverse young people feel understood and supported? • What do you hope for future young people who are both autistic and transgender/gender-diverse in the education system? • What are your plans for the future?	• What would you like to tell teachers, Educational Psychologists or school/college staff? How could adults support you better at school/college? What should be different in schools/colleges? Would you change anything about the resources that were available to you? • What needs to change in the future? Does anything need to be improved? What should stay the same? • How do you feel about the future? What are your hopes and dreams? Jobs? University? Lifestyle? Further plans around gender transition?	
Closing Questions	• Can you tell me if there are any other experiences that feel important to you that I have not asked about?		

	• Are there any questions that you think I should add to my list for other young people? • When I write about what we've talked about in the study, I will use a made-up name (called a pseudonym) instead of your real name to keep everything private and confidential. Would you like to pick your made-up name, or would you prefer I choose one for you? DEBRIEF - Verbal check in at end of interview to see how participant is feeling. Email will be sent straight afterwards with debrief form. Transcript will be shared so participant can check for accuracy if they wish.	• Could you answer that question now yourself? • Which name would you like to choose?	
		<i>Generic prompts (to be used throughout where necessary)</i> - <i>Can you tell me more about that?</i> - <i>What was that experience like for you?</i> - <i>Were there any emotions you remember feeling?</i> - <i>Could you give me an example of that?</i> - <i>How did you respond to that?</i> - <i>How did other people respond to that?</i>	

		- <i>What did you learn from that experience?</i>	
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Appendix 2: Research Advert Poster




CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS!

Research Exploring the Lived Experiences of Autistic Genderqueer/Gender-Diverse Young People









My name is Emma Potter and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist from the University of East Anglia (UEA). Taking part in this study would involve a one-to-one interview with myself about your experiences.

You are eligible to take part if you:

- Are Gender Diverse** (this includes anyone who is transgender, non-binary, agender, gender fluid, genderqueer, gender questioning or otherwise gender non-conforming)
- Are aged between 14 and 18**
- Currently attend an education setting in England**
- Have a diagnosis of Autism**
- Are able and willing to take part in an online interview to share your experiences**

Consent from a parent or carer will be required to take part in this study. Parents/carers are welcome to contact me on the below email address for more information.



If you'd like to find out more, please email me at:

e.potter1@uea.ac.uk

Research approved by: UEA School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Application No: ETH2425-1965). Research project supervised by Imogen Nasta Gorman (Associate Professor).

Appendix 3: Recruitment Email

Subject: Doctoral Research Project

Dear X,

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Emma Potter, and I am currently studying towards a doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of East Anglia (UEA).

I am writing to ask for your help with my current doctoral research. I am conducting research with autistic adolescents who are also gender-diverse (including transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, gender questioning, and otherwise gender non-conforming identities). I am looking to talk to those who are aged between 14-18 and are currently attending school or college in England.

I am interested in talking with these young people (remotely via Microsoft Teams) to learn about their experiences. The attached 'Research Advert Poster' (which gives a brief overview) and 'Participant Information Sheets' (for parents and young people) offer more detailed information about my study. The attached email will accompany the recruitment materials when sent to potential participants.

Parent/carers consent will be required for the young person to be able to participate in this research.

As you may be aware, much of the current research is centred around the experiences of cisgender autistic people, therefore, I am hoping to give gender-diverse autistic people an opportunity to have their voices amplified within research. I would be very grateful if you could share my research advert with the young people in your organisation/group.

If you have any questions about this research study or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you in advance for your support. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,
Emma Potter (she/her)
Trainee Educational Psychologist

This research has been approved by the UEA School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Application No: ETH2425-1965). This research is being supervised by Imogen Nasta-Gorman, who can be contacted at i.gorman@uea.ac.uk.

Appendix 4: Notes from Feedback from Advisory Group

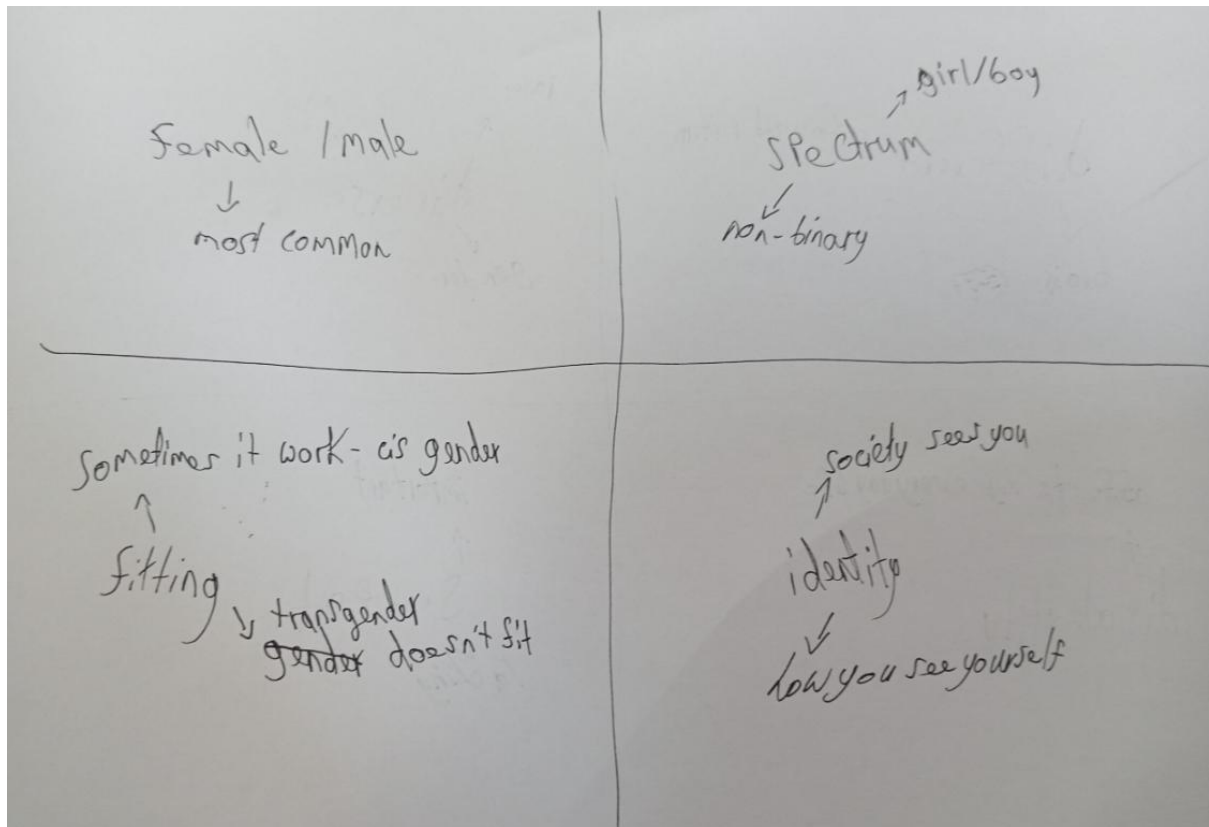
Thursday 14th August 2025 – Attended Autism youth group – created a focus group with 4 young people (aged 17-22) who identify as autistic and genderqueer – provided feedback on interview schedule and pre-study considerations:

Feedback/Suggestion	Outcome
In introduction script, it said “I’d like to find out about your lived experiences more generally, and about your experiences of school/college” - feedback suggested that the words ‘more generally’ don’t offer much information and cover basically everything – suggested using ‘day-to-day life’ instead	Changed wording of sentence to “I’d like to find out about your lived experiences in your day-to-day life, and about your experiences of school/college”
Include pronouns when introducing yourself	Added my pronouns to introduction script within interview schedule
One question was “When did you know that you were autistic?” - feedback suggested that it may be better to ask ‘when did you find/start identifying with the label?’ as “a lot of people know something is different before gaining the language” Other feedback suggested that “know” can be subjective, does this mean start to think they are autistic or became 100% confident? Many don’t know for sure until they are diagnosed.	Changed wording of questions to “When did you find/start identifying with the label of autism?”

One question was “Can you tell me about when you first came to notice that your body did not fit with your feelings about your gender and how did these feelings affect you?” - feedback suggested asking the participant if there is a disconnect with body first as gender identity can arise from perceptions/labels as well as physical dysphoria	Changed wording – instead asked first “Have you experienced times where your body has felt like it didn’t match how you see or feel about your gender?” and added additional prompts following this.
One question was “Can you describe your experience of gender transition?” - feedback suggested splitting this into ‘social’ and ‘medical’ transition	Changed wording of question to “Can you tell me about any experiences you’ve had with gender transition - either socially (like names, pronouns, clothing) or medically (like hormones or surgeries), or both?”
One question was “Can you tell me about your experiences at home with your family/carers?” - feedback suggested this question was very vague	Added additional prompts, including “Are there any particular experiences that stand out to you? Any experiences that relate to your autistic/gender diverse identity? How do your family or carers understand and talk about your autism and/or gender identity?”
In introductory script, the phrase “the experiences of young people (aged 14-18) who are autistic and are also transgender/non-binary/gender diverse” was used – feedback suggested genderqueer could be used as an umbrella term for those who are not cisgender.	Changed to gender diverse/genderqueer to encompass two umbrella terms

Participant should be asked what their pronouns and preferred name are	Added question to start of interview schedule - What are your pronouns and preferred name?
One question was “What if anything, would you like to tell adults about what a person like you needs in order to feel happy, feel understood and be able to succeed?” - feedback suggested they were not sure about the wording of ‘what a person like you needs’	Changed wording of question to “Thinking about your own experiences, what do you wish adults knew or did differently to help autistic and genderqueer/gender-diverse young people feel understood and supported?”
One question in the prompts said “Further plans around transition (e.g., surgery)?” - feedback commented that “not everyone will want surgery and stuff”	Took out surgery example and changed wording to “Further plans around gender transition?”
One question was “what does autism mean to you?” - feedback suggested changing the wording to “What does being autistic mean to you?”	Changed wording of question to “What does being autistic mean to you?”
One question was “What words would you prefer me to use when talking about your identity around your gender?” - feedback suggested this was possibly too open ended, and could be separated into more direct questions like ‘what are your pronouns?’ and ‘are there any labels you would describe your gender with?’	Separated questions out – in demographic info I will ask what the YPs pronouns and preferred name are, and then I will later ask ‘are there any labels you would describe your gender with?’

Grid Elaboration Method – feedback was “good activity for including ppl who might explain differently, but should be optional if considered too vague”	GEM activity will remain optional
Suggested additional question of “Do you think that being autistic influenced your view/experience of gender?”	Added question into identity section of interview schedule
One prompt question is “How did that make you feel?” - feedback suggested that this may be difficult for an autistic person to answer as they may have difficulties naming or describing their emotions	Changed wording of the prompt to “were there any emotions you remember feeling?”

Appendix 5: Daniel Green's Grid Elaboration Method (GEM)

Appendix 6: Extract from Research Reflective Diary

5	18/02/2026	I have just completed my final participant interview. I feel a sense of relief that I was able to recruit 5 participants for my research project given that I initially anticipated challenges with participant recruitment due to the specificity of my participant inclusion criteria. I also feel a sense of apprehension as I now go into the data analysis phase of my research, given that IPA analysis is something that was new to me at the beginning of this project. One thing which I felt came up quite frequently during Interview 5 was the impact of receiving a diagnosis on the participant's sense of self, self-esteem and the support they received in their education. The impact of diagnosis on support received within education settings surprised me, likely due to my dual role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, and the emphasis within this role of supporting the presenting need rather than waiting for a medical diagnosis. The participant referred to the ways in which support at school changed following their autism diagnosis. I am reflecting that despite the dominant discourse used within educational psychology likely sitting within a social model of disability, and discussions focused on 'needs', within wider society and amongst education staff, there is perhaps a focus on medicalised models of disability and clinical diagnoses are perhaps prioritised. The participant also frequently alluded to what may be known as a 'female presentation' of autism, and how as someone who was assigned female at birth, they often went "under the radar" due to education staff not being aware of the different ways in which autism can present. Although research relating to masking/camouflaging is progressing and my observations as a TEP on placement indicate that more and more education professionals are aware of different presentations of autism, it appears that there is still a long way to go within wider society and the education system in educating people in this area. Throughout this interview, I noticed myself thinking about experiences or conversations that I have had on placement as a TEP and the ways in which the participants' experiences mirrored stories I had heard in the past (either in other research interviews, or as a practitioner on placement), and whilst it is important to recognise that my experiences will impact the ways in which I make sense of participants' experiences, it is important to continuously reflect on the impact this has on my sense-making and ensure that when I come to analyse the data, it is as inductive as possible, whilst naming the fact that I am unable to truly separate my previous experiences, values and core beliefs from my role as a researcher. I will need to be particularly mindful that I am not attempting to make comparisons between participants whilst initially analysing individual transcripts, to ensure that the theoretical underpinning of idiography is upheld.
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Appendix 7: Example of Exploratory Noting and Experiential Statements for Emily

Exploratory Notes – red (linguistic), blue (descriptive), green (conceptual)

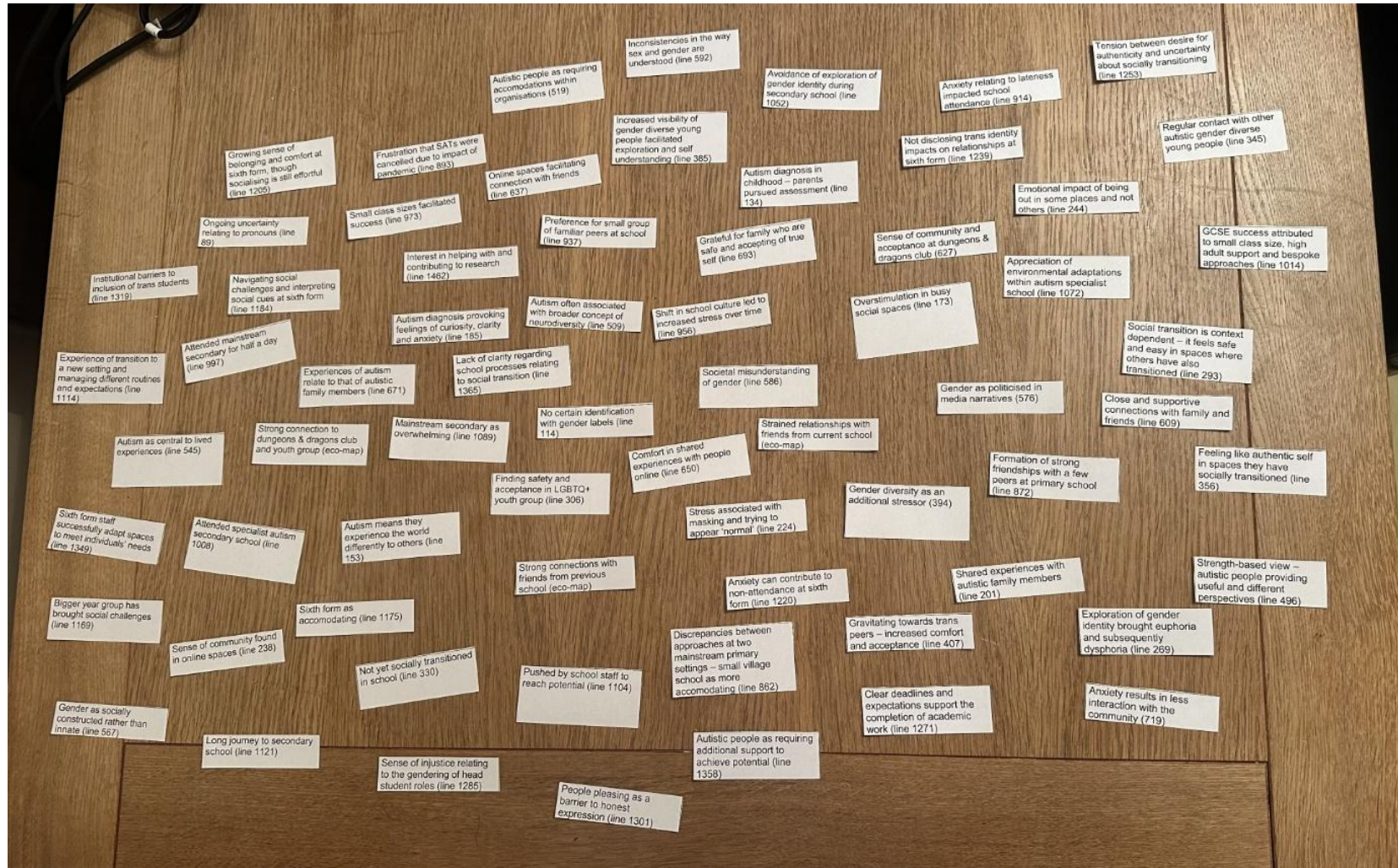
Experiential Statements – highlighted in yellow

803 College for the aspect of like support learning needs and like gender
 804 diversity, really good on it. I'm struggling more with academics just from
 805 generally, it's obviously a difficult environment so...
 806 **Researcher**
 807 Mm-hmm.
 808 **Participant 1**
 809 That's more of my struggle, which I would rather have than what I had at
 810 high school, but they're very much, if something happens, they respond to
 811 it very much appropriately. So at the start of last year when I started at
 812 college, there was, I had issues with a few people constantly kind of
 813 misgendering me and the college just literally came, went up to them and
 814 said stop it or leave.
 815 **Researcher**
 816 Mm-hmm.
 817 **Participant 1**
 818 There was no alternative and it was that simple to them.
 819 **Researcher**
 820 Yeah, that's that sounds really positive. OK. I'm glad that you're in a space
 821 now where that's happening a bit more than before. OK. If kind of if you
 822 could kind of change anything about college, would you, is there anything
 823 that you would change about it?
 824 **Participant 1**
 825 Again, not related to gender diversity or learning support needs, generally
 826 the only real thing would be that they need more learning support staff
 827 because they're just kind of always overwhelmed.
 828 **Researcher**
 829 Mmm, yeah.
 830 **Participant 1**
 831 But aside from that I wouldn't say I can think of anything massive.
 832 **Researcher**
 833 Yeah, OK. And if you think back to your secondary school experience, what
 834 if you could change anything about the about the school, what do you
 835 think would there be anything that would change or?
 836 **Participant 1**

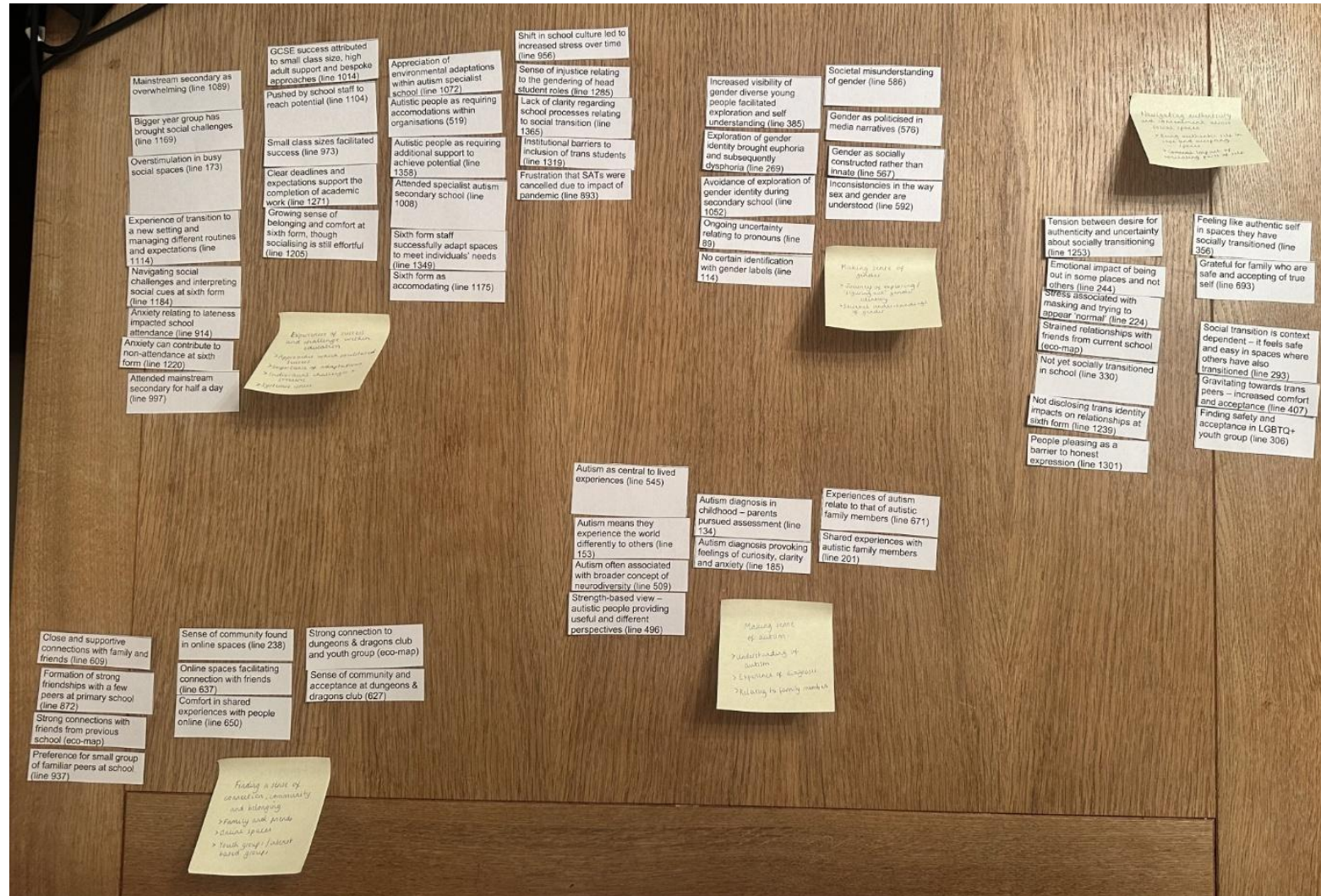
Exploratory Notes (Handwritten):

- ACADEMIC DIFFICULTY IS PREFERRED OVER SOCIAL HOSTILITY PREVIOUSLY EXPERIENCED** (Yellow)
- ZERO TOLERANCE APPROACH TO MIS-GENDERING FACILITATES BELONGING SAFETY** (Yellow)
- RECOGNITION OF PRESSURES FACED BY COLLEGE STAFF** (Yellow)
- MIS-GENDERING FACILITATES BELONGING SAFETY** (Yellow)
- ACADEMIC STRUGGLE** (Blue)
- REpetition of 'very much'** (Red)
- Quick + appropriate responses** (Blue)
- Accepting & supportive place** (Blue)
- Greater academic demands at college** (Blue)
- KS5 curriculum more difficult** (Blue)
- PREFERENCE for academic difficulties over social ones** (Blue)
- Persistent** (Blue)
- Prompt sense of belonging** (Blue)
- Expectation that others' affirm gender identity** (Blue)
- Reporting issues to college** (Blue)
- Negative impact of misgendering** (Blue)
- Sees herself as female - some others make assumptions** (Blue)
- Simple processes to ensure students feel a sense of belonging** (Blue)
- resolved before they escalated** (Blue)
- Accepting of gender and autism related needs** (Blue)
- pressures on staff within college leading to overwhelm** (Blue)
- she values the contribution they can have** (Blue)
- Perhaps little things could be different** (Blue)
- contradictory?** (Red)
- Having support staff is important** (Blue)

Appendix 8: Initial Scattering of Experiential Statements (in no particular order) for Alex



Appendix 9: Clustering of Experiential Statements for Alex



Appendix 10: Table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for Alex

PET A: MAKING SENSE OF AUTISM

Personal Understanding of Autism

Autism as central to lived experiences. (line 545)

"this makes me realise quite how autism-centric all of my experiences have been"

Autism means experiencing the world differently to others. (line 153)

"it just means I'm a bit different"

Autism associated with broader concept of neurodiversity. (line 508)

"I associate autism with neurodiversity in a way that they're often connected"

Strengths-based view – autistic people providing useful and different perspectives. (line 496)

"they might have a different perspective on something which could be quite useful"

Experience of Diagnosis

Autism diagnosis received in childhood and pursued by parents. (line 134)

"about the same sort of time I was diagnosed because my parents were quite transparent"

Autism diagnosis provoking feelings of curiosity, clarity and anxiety. (line 185)

"There was some level of realising this explains quite a lot. Some anxiety, I think"

Relating to Family Members

Experiences of autism relate to that of autistic family members. (line 671)

"Autism in understanding, I think it relates quite a lot to my younger siblings"

Shared experiences with autistic family members. (line 201)

"it's also just general experience because I live in a household where all five of us are autistic"

PET B: MAKING SENSE OF GENDER

Journey of Exploring Gender Identity

Avoidance of exploration of gender identity during secondary school. (line 1052)

"a way of stopping myself from figuring it out almost to maintain the normality and prevent the stress"

Exploration of gender identity brought euphoria and subsequently dysphoria. (line 269)

"I tried things and realised I'd get the euphoria from that, the dysphoria or the lack of the feeling me"

Increased visibility and representation facilitated exploration and self-understanding. (line 385)

"I've had more exposure to people and that probably made it easier for me to confront myself"

Ongoing uncertainty relating to preferred pronouns. (line 89)

"Not entirely sure on this yet, to be honest, but I'm like either she/her or they/them for the time being"

No certain identification with gender-based labels. (line 114)

"I'm not too sure. I'm not great at finding labels"

Gender understood as socially constructed rather than innate. (line 567)

"it just is something that society has constructed rather than something that's innate"

Societal Understandings of Gender

Gender as politicised in media narratives. (line 576)

"headlines were the fact that it was a transgender individual, I think, and that shouldn't be the focus"

Inconsistencies in the ways sex and gender are understood. (line 592)

"it uses gender and sex as interchangeable terms, which I feel like if you... it shouldn't be something that's done"

Societal misunderstanding of gender. (line 586)

"not a great proportion of the population has a proper understanding of what gender means"

PET C: FINDING A SENSE OF CONNECTION, COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

Family and Friends

Close and supportive connections with family and friends. (line 609)

"important to me just because they're there, they're supportive, they've always been there"

Formation of strong friendships with a few peers at primary school. (line 872)

"I formed quite strong friendships with two or three people"

Preference for a small group of familiar peers at school. (line 937)

"I stayed away from people who weren't my close circle of friends for the most part"

Strong connections with friends from previous school. (eco-map)

See eco-map

Online Spaces

Sense of community found in online spaces. (line 238)

"I found a lot more people online that I can relate to in ways that I couldn't before and so I feel much more connected to the rest of the world"

Online spaces facilitating connection with friends. (line 637)

"that's quite important for my connections with people and allows me to interact too"

Comfort in shared experiences with people online. (line 650)

"I tend to browse Reddit quite a lot to just see people who are like me, which... are quite rare to find"

Clubs and Youth Groups

Strong connection to Dungeons & Dragons club and youth group. (eco-map)

See eco-map

Sense of community and acceptance at Dungeons & Dragons club. (line 627)

“they’ve been very supportive of my transition and it’s just a sense of community that I really like”

Sixth Form

Growing sense of belonging and comfort at sixth form, though socialising is still effortful. (line 1205)

“I feel just about comfortable involving myself in that so that I can participate”

PET D: EXPERIENCES OF SUCCESS AND CHALLENGE WITHIN EDUCATION

Approaches Which Facilitate Success

Small class sizes facilitated success. (line 973)

“they had more time to focus on each individual because of the small class sizes”

Clear deadlines and expectations support the completion of academic work. (line 1271)

“if I have deadlines for stuff that are very solid, I am much more likely to... work on something”

Pushed by school staff to reach potential. (line 1104)

“they were able to push us, I’d say, towards the best of our capabilities”

GCSE success attributed to small classes, high adult support and bespoke approaches. (line 1014)

“it wasn’t a one-size-fits-all approach, by a long way”

Importance of Accommodations

Autistic people as requiring accommodations within organisations. (line 519)

“what can we do to make sure that this person gets the support they need”

Appreciation of environmental adaptations within autism specialist school. (line 1072)

“a lot of the stuff I need is environmental stuff, such as small class sizes and quite clear expectations”

Autistic people as requiring additional support to reach potential. (line 1358)

“there isn’t necessarily enough support available to allow them to reach the best of their potential”

Sixth form staff successfully adapt spaces to meet individual needs. (line 1349)

“in adapting spaces to how people need them... dependent on who will be using the spaces”

Sixth form as accommodating. (line 1175)

“they’ve been really accommodating for what isn’t a specialist school”

Individual Challenges and Stressors

Overstimulation in busy social spaces. (line 166)

“I get overstimulated a bit easier than others too”

Bigger year group has brought social challenges. (line 1169)

“going from a year group of... what was it? 20-something to something just over twice that”

Anxiety contributes to non-attendance within education. (line 1220)

“mostly I get quite stressed in the morning and don’t end up going, which isn’t that uncommon”

Mainstream secondary setting was overwhelming. (line 1089)

“I didn’t really know what to do and it was very overwhelming”

Managing different routines and expectations within a new setting. (line 1114)

“struggled with figuring out how to schedule that and get it done in a way that I might not have”

Navigating social challenges and interpreting social cues at sixth form. (line 1184)

“So, I’m not particularly good at stuff like social cues”

Systemic Challenges

Shift in school culture led to increased stress over time. (line 956)

“through a series of stuff, it became much more strict and rigorous”

Sense of injustice relating to the gendering of head student roles. (line 1285)

“people will just say head boy and head girl, which feels... just unfair”

Lack of clarity regarding school processes relating to social transition. (line 1365)

“I think there should be better processes for if someone wants to transition, because I don’t know who I speak to”

Institutional barriers to the inclusion of trans students. (line 1319)

“I’m not fully aware of what they can and can’t do legally”

Frustration that SATs were cancelled due to impact of global pandemic. (line 893)

“most annoyed about during the pandemic was the fact that I wouldn’t be able to complete my SATs”

PET E: NAVIGATING AUTHENTICITY AND CONCEALMENT ACROSS SOCIAL SPACES

Being Authentic Self in Safe and Accepting Spaces

Feeling like authentic self in spaces they have socially transitioned. (line 356)

“it’s nice around people I’ve told to feel as if I’m more me”

Grateful for family who are safe and accepting of true self. (line 693)

“it’s quite nice because I don’t really have to stress about hiding my true self”

Social transition is context dependent – it feels safe and easy in spaces where others have also transitioned. (line 293)

“it’s been quite easy because it’s been spaces where there have already been other people who have transitioned, so everyone’s mostly used to it”

Gravitating towards trans peers – increased comfort and acceptance. (line 407)

“I’ve begun talking to the trans people in my social group a lot more than I did previously”

Finding safety and acceptance in LGBTQ+ youth group. (line 306)

“I’m out at the LGBTQ one, but not the other”

Impact of Concealing Parts of Self

Tension between desire for authenticity and uncertainty about socially transitioning. (line 1253)

“there’s this slight thing always in the background of, I want to tell these people, how do I go about telling these people?”

Emotional impact of being out in some places and not others. (line 244)

“there’s the stress of trying to keep... one identity alive with some people and then another one alive with other sets of people”

Stress associated with masking and trying to appear ‘normal’. (line 224)

“it’s quite stressful just trying to maintain the image of normalness”

Not yet socially transitioned within school. (line 330)

“I haven’t done anything actionable as of yet”

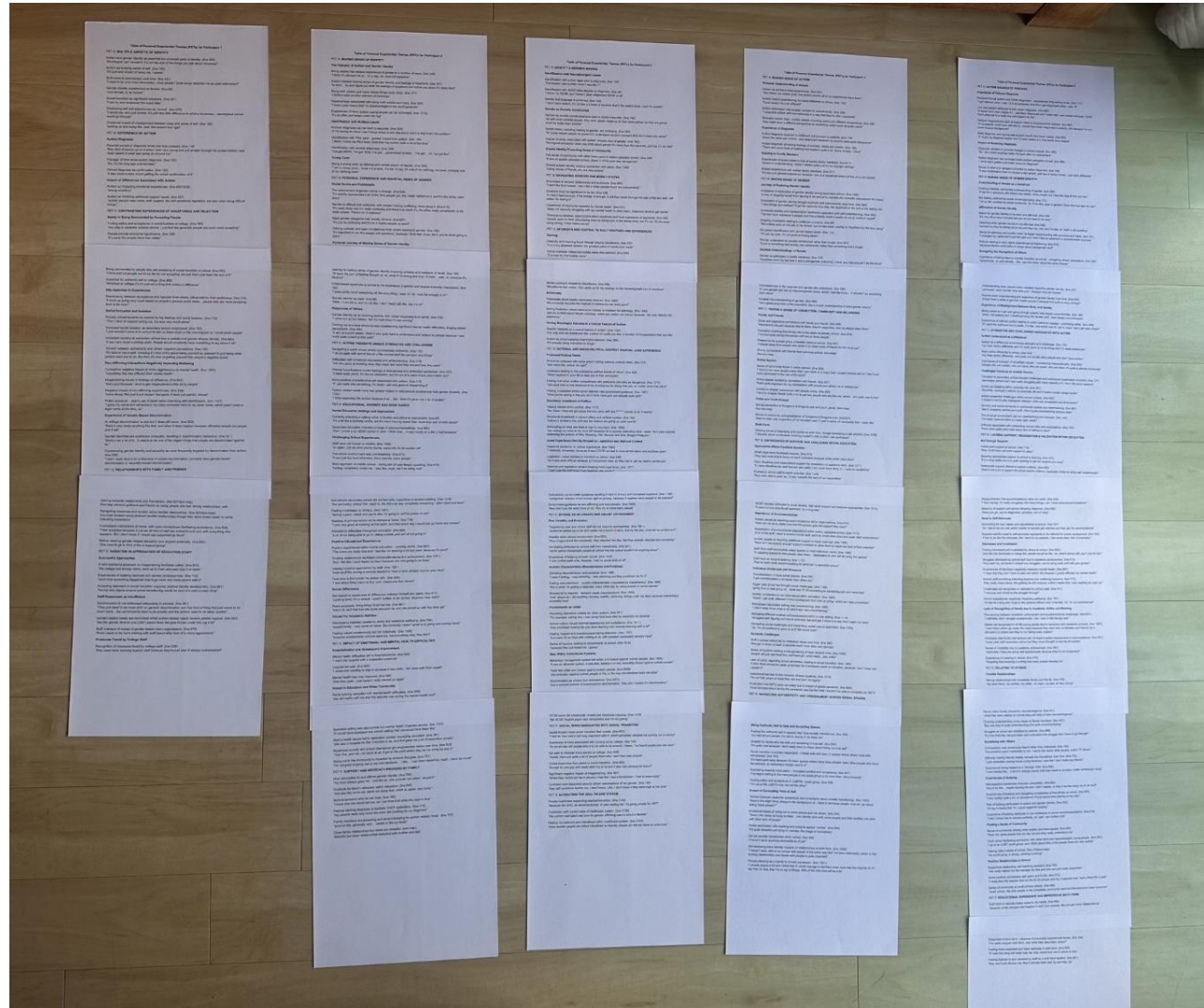
Not disclosing trans identity impacts on relationships at sixth form. (line 1239)

“I haven’t been able to be honest with people in the same way that I’ve been historically, which is that forming relationships and bonds with people is quite important”

People pleasing as a barrier to honest expression. (line 1301)

“I people please a lot and I think that if I could manage to tell them even once that the majority of, if I say that I’m fine, that I’m on top of things, 95% of the time that will be a lie”

Appendix 11: Working with PETs to Develop GETs Across Cases



Appendix 12: Table of Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Table of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and Subthemes, as well as some examples of pertinent experiential statements and quotes.

A. EVOLVING UNDERSTANDING OF SELF

Making sense of gender identity in contexts of varying safety

Being surrounded by people who are accepting of social transition is critical.

"I have just cut people out of my life for not accepting me and that's just been the end of it" (Emily, line 252)

Negative impact of non-affirming experiences.

"some things that just it just doesn't feel good. It feels just painful, almost" (Emily, line 239)

Journey to making sense of gender identity involving certainty and moments of doubt.

"I'll have the sort of fleeting thought of, oh, what if I'm wrong and then I'll think... well, no, because it's obvious" (George, line 159)

Gender identity as an evolving journey with varied responses from family.

"I came out as non-binary, but my mum knew it was coming" (George, line 236)

Not safe to disclose trans identity at college.

"frankly there are quite a lot of people there who I don't feel safe around" (Celeste, line 649)

Significant negative impact of misgendering.

"When they he/him'ed me in physics I had like I had a breakdown. I had to leave early" (Celeste, line 697)

Increased visibility and representation facilitated exploration and self-understanding.

"I've had more exposure to people and that probably made it easier for me to confront myself" (Alex, line 385)

Exploration of gender identity brought euphoria and subsequently dysphoria.

"I tried things and realised I'd get the euphoria from that, the dysphoria or the lack of feeling me" (Alex, line 269)

Sense of rightness and comfort when he began experimenting with pronouns and name.

"I changed my name and it just felt right and I didn't feel so ashamed or uncomfortable anymore" (Daniel Green, line 201)

Upsetting when gender identity is not affirmed.

"sometimes they're talking about me and they say 'she' and I'm like, oh, that's a bit upsetting" (Daniel Green, line 248)

The role of diagnostic labels in shaping sense of self

Clinical diagnosis as confirmation.

"It was more a case of just getting the actual confirmation of it" (Emily, line 125)

Identification with several diagnoses.

"I've got ADHD, I've got OCD, I've got... generalised anxiety... I've got... oh, I've got tics" (George, line 329)

Identification with PDA label – greater impact than autism.

"I think I notice my PDA traits more than my autism traits a lot of the time" (George, line 145)

Identification with ADHD label despite no diagnosis.

"I know I'm ADHD, but I haven't been diagnosed ADHD at all" (Celeste, line 26)

Identification with autism label prior to diagnosis.

"I've known I was autistic since I was like 7" (Celeste, line 153)

Autism diagnosis provoking feelings of curiosity, clarity and anxiety.

"There was some level of realising this explains quite a lot" (Alex, line 185)

Sense of relief and validation provided by autism diagnosis.

"it was confirmation that I'm not just a bad person, just bad at being human, I just work differently"
(Daniel Green, line 169)

Autism diagnosis has promoted more positive perception of self.

"I think that's gotten a bit better since my diagnosis" (Daniel Green, line 696)

Autism as central part of identity

Autism as shaping sense of self.

"It's just kind of part of being me, I guess" (Emily, line 140)

Identity first language is preferred.

"I don't have autism, it's not like a lump in my brain that's the autism lump, I just I'm autistic"
(Celeste, line 103)

Autism as central to lived experience.

"this makes me realise quite how autism-centric all of my experiences have been" (Alex, line 545)

Autism means experiencing the world differently to others.

"it just means I'm a bit different" (Alex, line 153)

Brain works differently to others.

"my brain works differently. And yeah, it's not like other people who don't have autism" (Daniel Green, line 344)

B. INTERSECTION OF AUTISTIC EXPERIENCE AND GENDER IDENTITY

Recognising overlap between autistic and gender diverse identities

Youth group facilitating connection with other trans and neurodivergent young people.

"I go to an LGBT youth group, and I think about 95% of the people there are also autistic" (Daniel Green, line 287)

"so it was an autism specialist school, about ¼ of the year was transgender" (Celeste, 542-543)

"I think all of the people who I'm in regular communication with, who I know are gender diverse, all of them are autistic" (Alex, 346-348)

"I know that so many autistic people, or so many trans people, there's so much correlation" (George, 365-366)

Facing increased barriers as an autistic gender diverse young person

"Just more discrimination that is kind of just it." (Emily, 324)

Being both autistic and trans makes things more tricky.

"I think it adds another element of trickiness" (George, line 377)

Disadvantage associated with being both autistic and trans.

"I think it just means that I'm disadvantaged in the world generally" (George, line 303)

Risk of bullying attributable to autism and gender identity.

"I'd say it means that I'm a good target for bullying" (Daniel Green, line 263)

Feeling not believed and infantilised within healthcare system.

"trans autistic people are infant infantilised so heavily, people act like we have no autonomy" (Celeste, line 2163)

Autism shaping understanding of gender

Being autistic has shaped experience of gender in a number of ways.

"I think it's allowed me to... in a way, be more introspective" (George, line 349)

Autism impacts making sense of gender identity and feelings of dysphoria.

"to then... try and figure out what the feelings of dysphoria are before you know it's really hard" (George, 391)

Social norms, including relating to gender, are confusing.

"for some reason people do pretend to understand random concepts that don't make any sense" (Celeste, line 300)

Logical thinking, associated with autism, shapes view of gender.

"the logical conclusion when you think about gender for more than five seconds, just that it's not real" (Celeste, line 762)

Gender understood as socially constructed rather than innate.

"it just is something that society has constructed rather than something that's innate" (Alex, line 567)

Not feeling confined by social constructs/norms.

“not so like confined by social constructs. So I’d be like, what is gender? Does that feel right for me?”
(Daniel Green, line 273)

“maybe it helped me in coming out because I was already a bit odd” (Daniel Green, line 278)

“I’d say I’ve had more exposure to people and that probably made it easier for me to confront myself”
(Alex, line 385)

C. NAVIGATING EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS THAT SHAPE SUCCESS AND WELLBEING

Variation in support across educational settings

Gender-related needs are minimised whilst autism-related needs receive greater support.

“But the gender diverse and LGBT aspect feels like gets thrown under the rug a lot” (Emily, line 883)

Mainstream secondary school did not feel safe, supportive or accommodating.

“the secondary school that I went to, the first one was completely everything I didn’t need and want”
(George, line 1018)

Positive experiences within further education – tutoring centre.

“The tutors are really nice and I feel like I’m learning a lot and yeah, because it’s good” (George, line 993)

Feeling misunderstood – autistic characteristics interpreted as misbehaviour.

“this is while I’m getting a detention every other day for being autistic in some manner” (Celeste, line 1696)

GCSE success attributed to small class sizes, high adult support and bespoke approaches.

“it wasn’t a one-size-fits-all approach, by a long way” (Alex, line 1014)

Sixth form as accommodating.

“they’ve been really accommodating for what isn’t a specialist school” (Alex, line 1175)

Securing appropriate support at school is draining.

“it is a long battle and it is quite draining to get the support you need” (Daniel Green, line 470)

Feeling more supported and taken seriously in sixth form.

“if I said this thing will really help me, they would look into it, which is nice” (Daniel Green, line 950)

Social relationships: exclusion and connection

Increased scrutiny at secondary school due to autistic and gender diverse identity.

“it was very much a picking point. People would constantly have something to say about it all” (Emily, line 863)

Increased social isolation as secondary school progressed.

"I just wouldn't come in to school for two or three hours in the morning just so I could avoid people"
(Emily, line 765)

Finding safety and acceptance in social bubbles at college.

"you stay in separate bubbles almost. I just feel like generally people are much more accepting"
(Emily, line 796)

Trusting relationships facilitated school attendance and achievement.

"And I felt like I could leave my mum because she was going to be there" (George, line 1361)

Experience of bullying at lower school.

"I was bullied quite a lot, because I had no social skills at all" (Celeste, line 1426)

Hostility within school environment.

"they misgendered him constantly, they attacked him like, like they verbally attacked him constantly"
(Celeste, 593)

Navigating social challenges and interpreting social cues at sixth form.

"So, I'm not particularly good at stuff like social cues" (Alex, line 1184)

Strong connections with friends from previous school.

Strong relationships with friends (Alex, eco-map)

Experiences of bullying and navigating complexities of friendships at school.

"I was bullied quite a lot, so sometimes I'd just spend time playing on my own" (Daniel Green, line 604)

Some positive connections with peers and ELSA.

"I really liked the teacher that ran the ELSA groups and my, it seemed that I had a friend for a year"
(Daniel Green, line 673)

Broader systemic influences on educational experiences

Recognition of pressures faced by college staff.

"they need more learning support staff because they're just kind of always overwhelmed" (Emily, line 826)

Strict approach at middle school – being told off was deeply upsetting.

"fuming, completely broke me. I was like, nope, can't be doing that" (George, line 819)

Exclusionary government guidance resulting in lack of privacy and increased exposure.

"categorical violation of the human right to privacy, because it requires trans people to be exposed"
(Celeste, line 1788)

National and legislative context shaping lived experience.

"I can't use the bathroom if any teachers are nearby" (Celeste, line 1877)

Impact of pandemic on school experience.

"I distinctly remember, because it was COVID we had to have all the doors and windows open"
(Celeste, line 1603)

Shift in school culture led to increased stress over time.

"through a series of stuff, it became much more strict and rigorous" (Alex, line 956)

Institutional barriers to the inclusion of trans students.

"I'm not fully aware of what they can and can't do legally" (Alex, line 1319)

Frustration that SATs were cancelled due to impact of global pandemic.

"most annoyed about during the pandemic was the fact that I wouldn't be able to complete my SATs"
(Alex, line 893)

Academic achievement

Feeling valued academically but not holistically.

"because academically schools want me, but everything else, they don't" (George, line 1306)

Discrepancy between academic ability and emotional wellbeing.

"academically, I was never an issue. But obviously I wasn't great at at going and coming home"
(George, line 785)

Sense of invisibility due to academic achievement.

"especially if they are doing well academically because they're not recognised" (Daniel Green, line 987)

Needs not recognised in AFAB young people due to behaviour and academic success.

"I and many others go under the radar because they were born as females and they're not a disruption to others and they're not failing every subject" (Daniel Green, line 1007)

Autistic needs and differences within education

Autism as involving additional support needs.

"autistic people need more, both support, like with emotional regulation, but also when doing difficult things" (Emily, line 451)

Masking at primary school led to distress at home.

"I was very good at masking at that point. And then every day I would just go home and scream"
(George, line 776)

The school environment was overwhelming.

"it was just too loud otherwise, there was too many people" (George, line 875)

Shouted at by teacher – sensory needs misunderstood.

"well, whenever I did anything remotely autistic, stimming, hiding under my desk because everything's incredibly loud" (Celeste, line 1545)

Overstimulation in busy social spaces.

"I get overstimulated a bit easier than others too." (Alex, line 166)

Experience of masking in school.

"forgetting that masking is a thing that many autistic females do" (Daniel Green, line 918)

Autism presented challenges within school context.

"I found it hard to like distinguish between what was acceptable and what wasn't" (Daniel Green, line 800)

"I've always masked quite heavily to fit in to the best of my ability.... It's quite stressful just trying to maintain the image of normalness" (Alex, 223)

D. NAVIGATING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND FINDING COMMUNITY

Closeness and tension within family relationships

Inconsistent interactions at home, with open-mindedness facilitating acceptance.

"I feel accepted because it just we all kind of well say everyone just runs with everything that happens. But I don't know if I would say supported as much" (Emily, line 638)

Mum is someone who he can trust.

"I know that she would tell me, so I can trust that what she says is true" (George, line 196)

Close family relationships but some are stressful.

Stressful but close relationships indicated with brother and dad (George, eco-map)

Feeling invalidated where father defends new government guidance.

"what you're saying is that you don't think trans girls are actually girls" (Celeste, line 1307)

Feeling hurt when mother sympathises with politicians she sees as dangerous.

"she says that no one deserves to be shouted at for doing their job, no matter what their job is" (Celeste, line 1279)

Grateful for family who are safe and accepting of true self.

"it's quite nice because I don't really have to stress about hiding my true self" (Alex, line 693)

Evolving understanding of his needs by family members.

"But now they're quite understanding and quite accommodating" (Daniel Green, line 447)

Shared identity promoting a sense of community

Felt sense of community with other trans peers in autism specialist school.

"it was an autism specialist school, about 1/4 of the year was transgender" (Celeste, line 540)

Finding safety and acceptance in LGBTQ+ youth group.

"I'm out at the LGBTQ one, but not the other" (Alex, line 306)

Gravitating towards trans peers – increased comfort and acceptance.

“I’ve begun talking to the trans people in my social group a lot more than I did previously” (Alex, line 407)

Sense of community among other autistic and trans people.

“there are some people that are like me and they really understand me” (Daniel Green, line 264)

Sense of community found in online spaces.

“I found a lot more people online that I can relate to” (Alex, line 238)

Appendix 13: Ethics Approval



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

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

Study title: Working title: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Autistic Transgender and Gender-Diverse Adolescents

Application ID: ETH2425-1965

Dear Emma,

Your application was considered on 28th July 2025 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

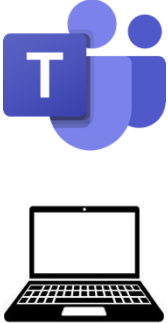
Yours sincerely,

Melanie Aplin

Appendix 14: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Participation Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it's important you understand what being part of the study would involve. Please take some time to read through this sheet carefully. If you have any questions, you can email me. My email address is at the end of this sheet.

What is this study about? This study is about the experiences of gender-diverse autistic young people (aged 14-18) who are currently going to school or college in England. I want to understand more about what life is like, especially in education settings.	
Who is doing this study? Hi! My name is Emma Potter (she/her) and I am training to be an Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia.	
Why am I invited to take part? You're being asked to take part because you fit the group of young people I would like to talk to. I would like to talk to young people who are autistic, aged 14–18, and gender-diverse. By “gender-diverse”, I mean people who are transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, or anyone whose gender identity doesn't align with the one they were assigned at birth. I would like to talk to people who are currently attending an education setting (like a school or college) in England. It is important to know that your parent or carer will need to give their permission for you to take part.	
Do I have to take part? No, taking part is completely up to you. If you decide to take part, you can stop at any time, and you don't have to say why.	
What will happen next if I choose to take part in this project? If you decide that you want to take part in the study, here's what will happen next: 1. We'll set up a short meeting (on Microsoft Teams) where I'll explain the study again and answer any questions you might have. Your parent/carers will need to be there too. 2. After that, we'll arrange a longer interview, also online. I'll ask you some questions, and you can also choose to do some creative activities which involve writing or drawing if you'd like to. I'll record the interview so I can remember what you've shared, but only I will listen to the recording, and it will be deleted at the end of the project. This	

meeting will last about an hour. It might be longer or shorter, depending on what you'd like to share with me.	
What happens after the interview? Once we've finished the interview, I'll write up what we talked about and check in with you to make sure I understood everything the way you meant it. You'll be able to tell me if anything doesn't feel right or needs changing – but you don't have to if you don't want to.	
What will happen to my information? Everything that you tell me will be kept 'confidential'. This means that I will not tell anyone what we talk about. The only time I would need to tell someone is if you say something that makes me worried about your safety or someone else's. All of the information I have about you will be kept on a password protected laptop that only I can access. I will not use your real name or the name of your school/college, so nobody will know that it was you in my research. You will be able to choose a 'made up name' that you would like me to use instead of your real name.	
Who has checked this study? When somebody carries out a research project at a university, it needs to be checked by a research ethics committee. This is a group of people who make sure that the research is safe to do. This study has been looked at by a Research Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia.	
Are there any good things about taking part in this project? You will get the chance to share your experiences and be part of research, which you may enjoy. Things you talk to me about might also help to support other autistic gender-diverse people in the future.	
Are there any bad things about taking part in this project? Because we might be talking about personal things, there is a small chance that this could make you upset. Remember, you can stop the interview at any time if you are finding it difficult. At the end of the interview, I will let you know about some organisations that might be able to help if you would like some support with your wellbeing.	
What if I want to withdraw (stop taking part in the project)? You can withdraw from the study at any time without needing to give a reason for this. If you do not want your answers to be used in my research project, then you (or your parent/carer) can let me know and I will delete your information.	

However, if I've already removed your name and included your information in the analysis, it won't be possible to take it out at that point.	
Will I be able to find out what you learned in the study? Yes! If you would like to find out what I learned from the research, I can send you a one-page summary of the findings, once I have completed the project (this will be around Summer 2026). You can let me know by email if you would like to find out about this.	
What if I am unhappy or would like to complain about the research project? If you are not happy with how I am doing the study or how I treat you, then you or your parent/carer can: • Email me on e.potter1@uea.ac.uk • Email the supervisor of this project. Imogen Nasta Gorman works at my university and she is supervising my project. Her email address is i.gorman@uea.ac.uk • Email Professor Yann Lebeau who is the Head of School. His email address is y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk	
What happens now? Talk to your parent/carer about whether you'd like to take part. • If you don't want to take part – you don't need to do anything. • If you do want to take part, your parent/carer will need to read the information, fill out a consent form and email it back to me. • You will also need to fill out and sign the consent form that is attached to this sheet. If you have any questions at all, feel free to email me on e.potter1@uea.ac.uk.	 

Participant Consent Form

Research study about the experiences of gender-diverse autistic young people (aged 14-18) who are currently going to school or college in England.

Please read each statement carefully, and tick 'yes' or 'no'. Once you have filled it out, and written your signature and the date, please send this back to the researcher.

		Yes 	No 
I have read the participant information sheet, or had somebody else read it to me.			
I understand that this interview will be audio recorded, and I agree to this.			
I understand that it is okay to stop taking part in the study at any time, and I don't need to give a reason for this.			
I understand that I will be able to ask questions about the research at any time.			
I understand that my real name will not be included in the research, so nobody will be able to identify me.			
I understand that if I say something which makes the researcher worried about my safety, she will have to let someone else know.			
I understand that my information will be stored in a secure password protected folder.			
I would like to take part in this research.			
I would like to read a one-page summary about the research after it is finished.			

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 15: Parent/Carer Information Sheet and Consent Form

Miss Emma Potter
Trainee Educational Psychologist

30 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: E.Potter1@uea.ac.uk
Tel: N/A
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Research Exploring the Lived Experiences of Autistic Gender-Diverse Adolescents

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?

Your child is invited to take part in a research study about the lived experiences (particularly educational experiences) of autistic gender-diverse adolescents. Your child has been invited to participate in this study because the voices of transgender and gender-diverse young people are underrepresented in autism research, and it is important that their lived experiences are understood and amplified. This Participant 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 for your child 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.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Miss Emma Potter (Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia).

This will take place under the supervision of Mrs Imogen Nasta Gorman (Course Director and Associate Professor at the University of East Anglia).

(3) What will the study involve for my child?

Your child will be eligible to take part in the study if they are aged between 14 and 18, have a diagnosis of Autism, are gender-diverse (including transgender, non-binary, and otherwise gender non-conforming identities), and currently attend an education setting in England. They must also be able and willing to take part in an online interview to share their experiences.

Your child will participate in an interview via Microsoft Teams with the researcher which will involve questions about their identity and their lived experiences (including experiences of school/college). They will also get the opportunity to do some activities which may involve writing or drawing, to support them in expressing their views.

You will have an initial meeting with the researcher and your child which will likely last around 20-30 minutes. Your child will then be required to take part in an interview with the researcher, which will

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likely last around 1 hour. After the interview has been transcribed, your child will be given the opportunity to review their transcript, to ensure that I have recorded all of their views and experiences accurately.

An audio/video recording will be taken.

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

You will have an initial meeting with the researcher and your child which will likely last 20-30 minutes. Your child will then be required to read the participant information sheet, and engage in an interview with the researcher which will likely last around 1 hour. After their interview has been transcribed, they will have the opportunity to review their transcript to ensure that I have captured their experiences and views accurately.

(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. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to let your child take part in the study and then change your mind later (or they no longer wish to take part), they are free to withdraw from the study at any time and you can withdraw your consent up to the point that their data is fully anonymised. You can do this by telling the researcher during the interview, or contacting the researcher on E.Potter1@uea.ac.uk, expressing that you'd like to withdraw from the study.

(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 and materials (e.g., images, text) will be erased and the information your child has provided will not be included in the study results. Your child may also refuse to answer any questions that they do not wish to answer during the interview. Your child may refuse to participate in any of the activities if they wish. 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 we have analysed and published the results.

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

As your child will be discussing their experiences, there is a small risk that this may evoke unhappy feelings, if the child has had negative experiences (e.g., at school). In order to ensure that this risk is minimised, the interview will be terminated if your child displays signs of distress, and they will be reminded that they can withdraw from the research at any time. Your child will be given a debrief sheet at the end of the interview, which tells them about organisations they may wish to contact to seek support for their wellbeing.

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

Your child may enjoy sharing their experiences as a gender-diverse autistic person with the researcher, and knowing that their voice will be captured within research. It is hoped that by taking part in this research, education professionals will better understand the experiences of gender-diverse autistic people, and will know how to best support young people similar to your child. The voices of gender-diverse autistic people will be represented within research, which is important as the majority of autism research currently comes from a cisgender perspective.

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

The interview your child partakes in will be recorded, and will later will be transcribed into an anonymised transcript. This data will then be analysed using IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) methodology.

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](#).

Your child's information 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 you and your child decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were used.

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

When you have read this information, Miss Emma Potter (E.Potter1@uea.ac.uk) 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 a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by contacting the researcher at E.Potter1@uea.ac.uk. This feedback will be in the form of a one page summary, and it will be available on completion of the research project, which will likely be in the summer of 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 Emma Potter
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
E.Potter1@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: Yann Lebeau (y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk).

(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 fill in one copy of the consent form and return this to the researcher by contacting E.Potter1@uea.ac.uk. Please keep the information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 30th May 2025.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by an email sent from the researcher

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

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.
- 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. 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.

I consent to:

Audio-recording of my child YES ☐ NO ☐

Video-recording of my child YES ☐ NO ☐

My child reviewing transcripts YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

.....
Signature

.....
PRINT name

.....
Date

Appendix 16: Participant Debrief Form

Thank you for taking part in this study!

This study is interested in the lived experiences (particularly school experiences) of autistic young people who are also transgender or gender diverse. This is important, because there is not a lot of research that considers the experiences of transgender or gender diverse autistic people.



You were asked to be involved in the research by taking part in an interview to talk about your experiences, and you may have completed some activities.

Your recorded interview will be written up as a transcript and kept by me until I have finished my research project. Your data will be destroyed after the thesis is passed and any potential publication of the thesis (usually ten years after the last use).



I will not use your name or the name of your school in my thesis, I will use a made-up name instead. If you want me to, I will share the findings of the research with you and your parents in a one-page summary. But remember your actual name will not be included so only the researcher will know what you said.



The information you have shared with me will be kept securely.

You are 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 you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

If you have found participating in the research challenging, distressing or uncomfortable, you may find the following services helpful in relation to obtaining support:

- **Switchboard** is a national LGBTQIA+ support line, who you can contact to discuss anything related to sexuality and gender identity. You can get in touch with them by calling 0800 0119100, emailing hello@switchboard.lgbt or by following this link to access the online chat service: <https://switchboard.lgbt/>

Switchboard are open from 10am-10pm, 365 days of the year, however if you require support and Switchboard are not available, you can contact some of the other services below:

- **Childline** have trained counsellors who can offer support to anybody under 19 in the UK, to talk about any issue they are going through. The service is available at any time, day or night. You can contact Childline by calling them on 0800 1111 or you can follow this link to chat online with a counsellor: <https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat/>
- **Samaritans** offer listening and support to people in times of need. They are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. You can contact Samaritans by calling 116 123 or emailing jo@samaritans.org.
- **Shout** is a free, confidential text messaging support service which is open 24/7 and can be used by anybody in the UK who is struggling to cope. You can access support by texting the word 'Shout' to 85258.

For more information or to access resources, you may find the following websites helpful:

- **National Autistic Society** (<https://www.autism.org.uk/>) – a national charity in the UK which supports autistic people and their families.
- **Mermaids** (<https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/>) – charity which supports trans, non-binary and gender-diverse children, young people and their families
- **Stonewall** (<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/>) – a UK-based charity which campaigns for the rights and equality of LGBTQ+ people

- You might find some useful information and resources about being gender-diverse and autistic by visiting the following webpage on the **Autistic Girls Network** website: <https://autisticgirlsnetwork.org/lgbqtia/>



If you have any questions, you can contact me at:

Miss Emma Potter

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich

NR4 7TJ

E.Potter1@uea.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the research, then you or your parent/carer can contact my supervisor: i.gorman@uea.ac.uk



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