How do staff members foster a Sense of Belonging in young people who have places within autism Specialist Resource Bases? A Mixed Methods embedded approach.

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Abstract

Whilst the psychological and physiological benefits of sense of belonging (SOB) are well known for adolescents, it remains unclear how SOB is fostered, especially for children and young people (YP) with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). With increasing numbers of YP being identified with SEND, it is crucial that research look into how SOB can be fostered to support inclusion. To meet the increasing demand, Local Authorities are placing YP with SEND in mainstream settings with the addition of a Specialist Resource Base (SRB) which provides extra support to enable YP to attend classes. For YP on the autism spectrum, school is often associated with many difficulties, from changes of routine, loud noises to miscommunications in social interactions. Autism SRBs can provide a safe place for these individuals to get extra support. The current study used an embedded approach collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to support further understanding of levels of SOB for YP in the autism SRB and to gain an understanding of teachers' perspectives on ways to foster SOB for these YP. Descriptive statistics revealed varying levels of SOB with no meaningful difference between SOB to the mainstream school and SOB to the SRB. Thematic Analysis of the SRB staff's interviews identified an overarching theme of 'Factors that Foster or Impede Sense of Belonging for YP in Autism SRBs' with the following four core themes; equal opportunities, meaningful relationships, communication and understanding of autism as well as whole-school policies. The findings of this study contributed to the development of a useful tool with practical strategies for SRBs to foster SOB in the mainstream and in the SRB setting. Contributions of this study to the existing literature are considered as well as future implications for both research in this area and the EP practice.

Access Condition and Agreement

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Acknowledgments

Table of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full term
EP	Educational Psychologist
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
LA	Local Authority
SRB	Specialist Resource Base
SOB	Sense of Belonging
YP	Young People
PSSM	Psychological Sense of School Membership
TA	Thematic Analysis
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
BPSEM	Bio-Psycho-Socio-Ecological Model of Belonging
LT	Lead Teachers

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Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.0 Introduction:

A sense of belonging (SOB) is shown in the literature to be an essential need that all people seek to satisfy (Allen et al., 2021, Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1991). SOB is associated with greater academic motivation (O'Keeffe, 2013), higher levels of school engagement (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013), self-esteem (Furlong et al., 2003), as well as psychological well-being (Karaman & Tarim, 2018). However, it is unclear how the SOB construct is fostered, especially for children and young people (YP) with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) (Carson, 2014). Especially considering the increased difficulties YP with social communication needs experience when forming peer friendships (Kreijns et al., 2003). As SOB has been found to have numerous physical and psychological health benefits, it is important that this lack of understanding be further explored to better support YP with SEND foster SOB. This review will explore the literature on SOB. It ultimately seeks to develop a greater understanding of how SOB is constructed and fostered for YP with SEND.

1.1 Why the topic is important:

From the literature it is evident that SOB has a crucial role in clarifying how the school environment can affect both psychological and academic outcomes (McMahon et al., 2008). Nonetheless, SOB is given significantly less attention and is often overshadowed by the prioritising of academic success (Allen & Bowles, 2013). Some indicate that this gap between research and practice is because of the failure of practitioners, school leaders and the public to recognise and act on the evidence that identifies the positive effect between social relationships and life satisfaction, health and well-being (Jetten et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the literature implies that schools have the opportunity to create a climate and culture that can foster SOB (Allen & Kern, 2017).

When considering the diversity of needs within a school, it is important that research explores how to foster SOB for YP with SEND to promote

inclusion. As a society, we have a responsibility to build an inclusive environment and this has come to the forefront of educational practices. There has been growing awareness in recent years with the Department for Education (DfE) providing guidance on SOB and identifying that a reduced SOB contributes to YP feeling disconnected from school and lower engagement in learning (Graham et al., 2019). The DfE also identified an overlap between SOB and wellbeing as well as SEMH needs (Graham et al., 2019). This emphasises the need to step away from the "one size fits all mentality" to promote the implementation of inclusive education. However, inclusive education is complex, and many teachers indicate it is difficult to grasp both in theory and implement effectively into practice (Warnes et al., 2022). Tomlinson (2015) identifies that inclusive education is underpinned by human rights and social justice. This was historically outlined in the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994). In England, legislation and statutory guidance define a "special" need as a learning difficulty calling for a "special educational provision to be made" (SEND Code of Practice, 2015). Under the Equality Act 2010, those with SEND may also have a disability which is identified as an impairment with long-term and substantially adverse effects on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. The percentage of YP being identified with SEND in England is rising and there is an increasing level of attendance at specialist provisions rather than mainstream (Warnes et al., 2022). With more YP being identified with SEND it is important that further research look at their schooling experiences.

1.2 SOB in Specialist Resource Bases (SRBs)

Some LA's have an increasing trend of placing YP with SEND in mainstream settings with the addition of a Specialist Resource Base (SRB). SRBs are provisions that aim to provide YP with the extra support they need within a mainstream school, enabling them to attend mainstream classes. A Local Authority (LA) in the East of England published their SEND strategy 2022 (SEND, 2022) which outlines the need for supporting inclusion and

meeting needs. One of the aims outlined is that there will be over 100 new learning places created within SRBs, this is part of the LA's 120 million-pound investment into building more specialist provisions.

One of the SRB provisions is for YP with social communication needs and sensory needs. The YP attending these provisions have a unique experience of school which has not been researched. With this in mind, it is crucial that this review explores the literature around SOB to fully understand the gap in the field. Increasing our awareness of how YP with SEND, and in particular YP with social communication needs construct their SOB will help inform EP practice and develop a greater understanding of the social barriers experienced by YP in SRBs.

1.3 Implications for EP Practice

EPs are well placed to advocate for the importance of SOB by working at a whole-school level and influencing school staff, parents and students (Shuttleworth, 2018). By having an understanding of the evidence base EPs are well placed to fill the gap between research and practice by highlighting existing evidence-based strategies and effective methods to support the development of SOB. However, our understanding of the best ways to foster SOB for YP, especially those with SEND is limited and therefore further research is needed (Shuttleworth, 2018). With greater awareness of what fosters SOB, EPs are well versed in considering how to empower school staff to deliver evidence informed best practice. Over time, this will enable schools to take ownership of developing students' SOB and work towards enhancing school culture.

2.0 The scope of the review

This narrative review has been divided into six sections that start with a large general theme and gradually narrow down to identify the gap in the field and then suggest areas for future research. The review will start by giving a theoretical overview of the various theories that have been associated with a SOB. It will do this by exploring three main theoretical strands (motivational theories, relational theories and ecological theories)

which underpin SOB. This gives the reader an overview of the field and the intertwining theoretical frameworks. The next section moves on to explore the construct of belonging and the various terms that have been used interchangeably with it. The third section will give a brief critical overview of the ways of measuring belonging. This will provide context and rationale for the project, giving the reader a critical lens through which to engage with the next section of empirical evidence supporting SOB, and allow the reader to be aware of measurements used in the various research methods. The fifth section focuses on exploring the factors that influence SOB, particularly looking at types of school, age, personal characteristics and social relationships. This identifies the gap in the field of SOB of individuals with SEND, and how educational provisions influence this. The final section gives a review of the literature that looks at the experiences of individuals on the autism spectrum and SOB. The review concludes with areas for future research, identifying the YP with social communication needs in autism SRBs as a unique sample whose educational experiences are under-researched.

2.1 Search Strategy

Extensive literature searches were carried out between September 2021 and March 2023. The initial focus was on Google Scholar and the university catalogue. They then consisted of searches in several academic databases (EBSCO (PsycINFO), Education Research Information Centre (ERIC), Web of Science (WoS) which informed the review. Multiple search term combinations were used based on the keywords of "sense of belonging", "belonging", "school attachment", "school bonding", "school involvement", "school connectedness", "foster", "specialist resource bases", "SEN", "SEND" and "autism". To obtain a holistic research picture, both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were included. The author also conducted manual searches, by checking the reference lists of relevant articles and books.

3.0. Theoretical underpinnings of SOB

School belonging has been defined as a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and connection with peers, teachers, and school (Goodenow,

1993). A common theme amongst the various constructs is the need to connect with other people (Allen & Kern, 2017). Others, coming from a psychiatric nursing perspective, have suggested the concept of belonging is associated with one's perception of their involvement in the social systems around them (Hagerty et al.,1992). This section will explore the common strands within the theoretical underpinning of SOB. It should be noted that many theorists have examined the study of school belonging from different theoretical frameworks exploring the relationship between it and motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), school engagement and academic achievement (Allen at al., 2018; Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Juvonen, 2006). With the varying definitions, there are multiple theoretical frameworks that include the concept of belonging. Allen and Bowles (2012) conducted a literature review on belonging and outlined several other contributing factors such as parental involvement (Epstein, 2019), belonging and attachment (Bowlby, 1969), Social Capital (Putnam, 2000), and Self-Presentation (Fiske, 2018). It would be outside the scope of this literature review to give a thorough examination of all the theoretical models that relate to SOB. However, it does aim to explore common strands that appear in the theoretical underpinnings, such as motivation, relationships and ecology.

3.1 Motivational theories

Motivational theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) place belonging as one of the four fundamental human needs that every individual requires to succeed. Maslow suggested that individuals have a hierarchy of needs ranging from lower-level needs for survival (safety, belonging, and self-esteem) to higher-level needs for intellectual achievement and self-fulfilment. Here, belonging is identified as a psychological concept that aligns with one's social groups, such as close friends and family. Maslow's theory of identifying SOB as an important human need is generally accepted (Osterman, 2000). More recently, Griffin and Tyrrell (2013) expanded Maslow's list of five basic human needs to nine. Some argued this to be more of a "cocktail" of essential requirements rather than a hierarchy of need (Coates, 2018). Researchers have explored belonging in a school setting and found that it positively affects motivational measures, for example, self-reported effort and expectancy of success

(Goodenow, 1993). In fact, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) proposes that psychological relatedness (or belonging) is fundamental to supporting intrinsic motivation. Therefore, motivational theories view SOB as a basic need or intrinsic desire to relate to others and we are motivated to affiliate with others (Vallerand, 1997). These theories, along with Glasser's Choice Theory (1999) and Belongingness Hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) suggest that having a SOB is a fundamentally innate need that motivates us.

3.2 Relational theories

Since the early 1990s, there has been substantial interest in the role that social relationships and SOB play in motivating students to do well in school (Juvonen, 2006). The assumption is that environments that foster caring and supportive relationships facilitate student engagement (Brand et al., 2003). This can be seen in Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969) which explores the role of infant attachment styles and how these impact future relationships including those formed in school. In a school setting, the student develops belonging through positive interaction with their peers and teachers, and this ties students to their school, enabling enhancement of motivation and academic achievement (Osterman, 2000). Theorists have suggested that these positive social relationships between teachers and students have a direct and positive influence on students' school belonging (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Newman & Schwager, 1992).

Putnam's Social Capital Theory (2000) also looks at relationships and explores the networks of interactions between people, it identifies that social networks contribute to shared identity through common norms, values and trust. Nevertheless, Juvonen (2006) conducted a literature review and suggested that many types of social bonds exist among peers, such as dyadic relations, friendships, or peer acceptance. Interestingly, the review suggested that not all bonds are equal and that sometimes SOB promotes disengagement from school. However, it is important to note that several factors can contribute to students' disengagement from school and evidence suggests that being socially disconnected places students at higher risk (Juvonen, 2007). Crucially relational approaches also indicate that SOB, reflects the individual perception of involvement in their social system

(Hagerty et al., 1992). Therefore, relational theories view SOB as not reliant on large proximity to others, but rather the perception of quality social interactions.

3.3 Sociological and ecological theories

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1994) identifies that a child's development is influenced by a range of factors, from biological to cultural and environmental. The Ecological Systems Theory is often portrayed with the child at the centre of concentric circles, depicting the microsystem (family, friends, school), mesosystem (interactions between family, school, multi-professional agencies), exosystem (education and political systems), macrosystem (societal and cultural beliefs and values) and the chronosystem (changes over time). While many of the theories mentioned up until this point have explored belonging through the perspective of the individual's pursuit of fulfilling the need to belong, the Ecological Systems Theory differs by acknowledging that people are intertwined within the complex systems around them (Allen & Kern, 2017).

Allen and Kern (2017) build upon Bronfenbrenner's work and suggest a theoretical framework that presents school belonging as a multidimensional construct that exists with multiple layers. Here they use the lens of Bronfenbrenner's theory with the additional emphasis given to psychological and social aspects. They call it the bio-psycho-socio-ecological model of belonging (BPSEM; Figure 1).
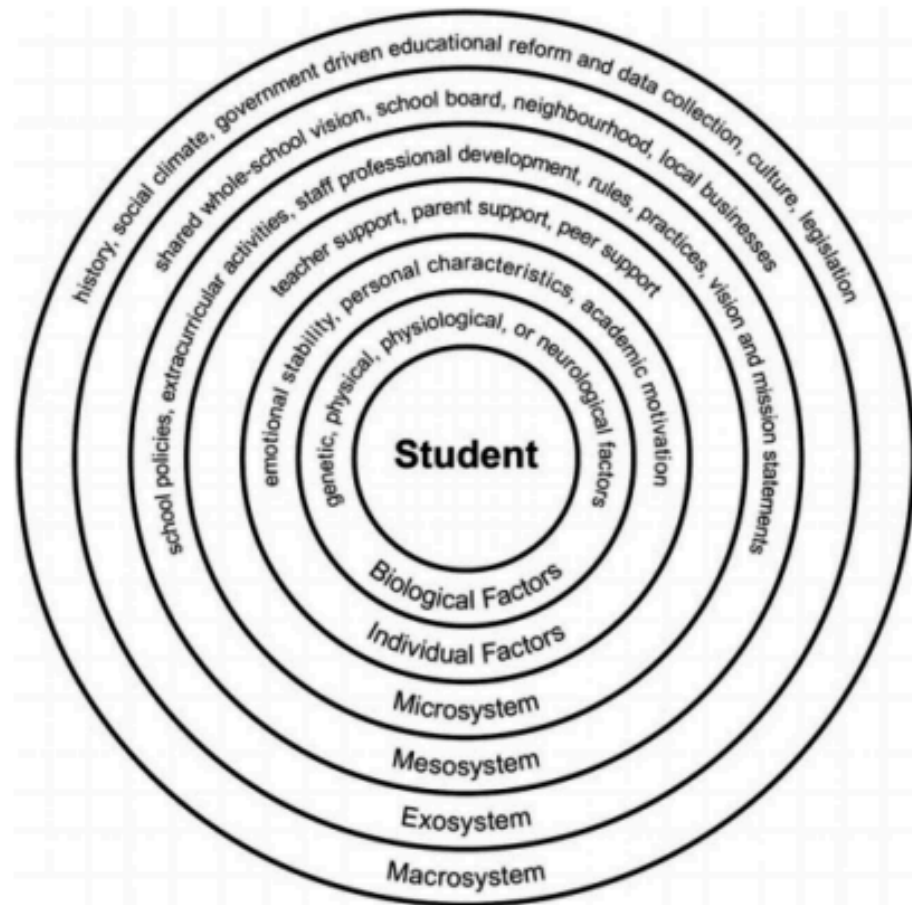
Figure 1: Bio-psycho-socio-ecological model of belonging (BPSEM) (Allen & Kern, 2017).

Allen and Kern (2017) indicated that there is no simple determinate of school belonging, but it should instead be viewed through the lens of biological, psychological, and social interactions with people across various ecological environments. In simpler words, they suggest that school belonging is one's perceived feelings of being connected within a complex school social system. However, the authors give an important caveat and identified that the framework was developed from empirical studies, and that these studies relied heavily on correlational data. Therefore, they indicate that the themes associated with school belonging cannot be regarded as causal and more analysis is needed to understand the direction of the relationship. Nevertheless, these theories place the child at the centre and depict the environmental and systemic influences on child development and SOB.

3.4 Theoretical framework of the literature review

Having explored the various theoretical underpinnings through the themes of motivational, relational and ecological interaction, this section will now turn to clarify what this project aligns to. Although motivational theories do present a rationale for an innate need for belonging, they are often intertwined with academic achievement and motivation, as measured through engagement. This project wishes to step away from this perspective and take on a more holistic view of SOB through the use of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1994) and the BPSEM (Allen & Kern, 2017). This theoretical framework allows for the use of a social model of ability when exploring SOB. This contrasts with the other theories mentioned by not focussing on the individual's pursuit towards fulfilling the need to belong but identifying that belonging is a multidimensional construct. In the micro-system, this is seen to incorporate teacher support, parent support and peer support. Therefore, this would include the relational theories and acknowledges the importance of positive relationships to support SOB. The use of more holistic frameworks is also helpful when considering research on a population with SEND as they encourage moving away from a within child focus to viewing the complex system the child is placed within.

4.0 Exploring the various constructs related to SOB

Having identified the various theoretical underpinnings to SOB it is evident how the construct has been explored using different terms. SOB has been studied since the 1950s, over the years, researchers have used various definitions and even used multiple terms when describing the same general idea. These terms have been used interchangeably with numerous other terms, such as students' relationships with school; including school connectedness, engagement, school attachment, school bonding, school involvement, and teacher support (Libbey, 2004). At times, these terms have been used with the intention of meaning similar things and at others, they carry slightly altered meanings. Allen and Kern (2017) identify that even when terminology varies, there are a number of consistent themes which they illustrate as pieces of a puzzle (Figure 2), to encapsulate what they see as school belonging.
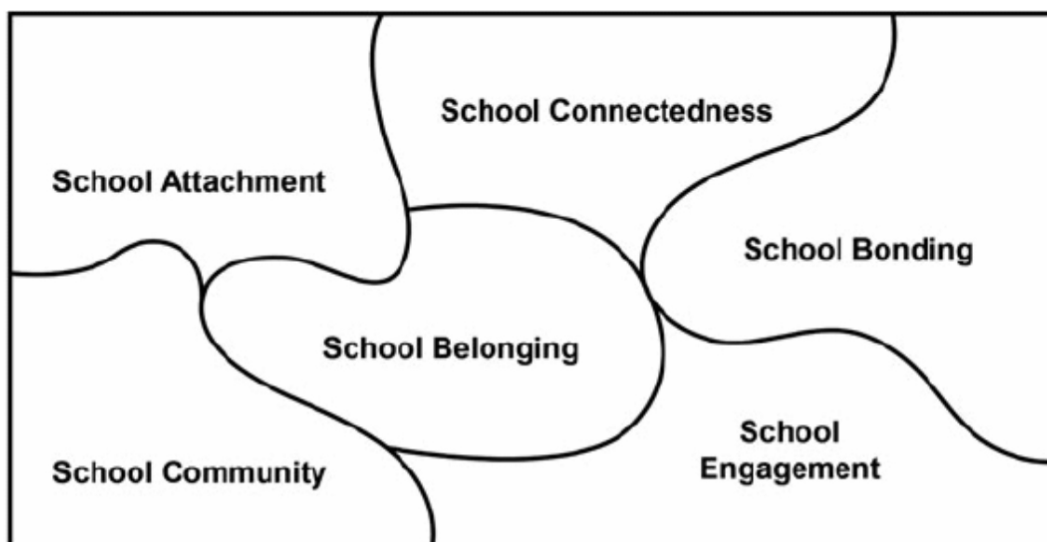
Figure 2: Key terms that have been used interchangeably with SOB (Allen & Kern, 2017)

This section will review the literature and some of these terms with the aim of bringing them together to define what is meant by a pupil's SOB and how this influences the interpretation of findings from the research.

4.1 School connectedness

The first term that is often used interchangeably with SOB is school connectedness. It is often defined using a combination of the theoretical frameworks explored above, carrying elements of school attachment, engagement, social identity and relationships with school staff (Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Interestingly, school connectedness has its origins in understanding school avoidance or dropouts (Hebron, 2018). Often being conceptualised by describing what it is not, for example; loneliness, alienation and social isolation (Allen & Kern, 2017). Libbey (2007) suggests that school connectedness is a protective factor that encapsulates how a YP feels they belong to their school. They proposed that it was predominately around affect and beliefs that adults within their school were invested in their learning, noticed them as individuals, and maintained high academic expectations. This allows for students and teachers to foster positive relationships and for students to feel safe in school.

Others have viewed school connectedness as part of identity development, where YP strive to develop connectedness beyond their family

(Karcher & Lee, 2002). On the other hand, others have associated it with the relational theoretical framework proposing that feelings of closeness to individuals at school contribute to feelings of being part of the school (McNeely et al., 2002). School connectedness has also been associated with the importance of having extracurricular activities and a firm belief in the school rules, and a commitment to school (Brown & Evans, 2002). Interestingly, school connectedness has been argued to differ from belonging due to it conveying social memberships or affiliations, for example, connectedness to religion or reading (Karcher & Lee, 2002). Belonging is seen as a self-assessment of social support, whereas connectedness denotes one's involvement in those relationships. Lastly, and most importantly some have identified that theoretically connectedness can be viewed as a function of belonging (Karcher & Lee, 2002). Therefore, putting SOB as an element that contributes to school connectedness instead of being defined by it.

4.2 School Attachment and School Bonding

Two other popular constructs evident in the literature are School Attachment and School Bonding. These constructs place more emphasis on the relational theoretical framework when defining these terms. Bowlby (1969) identified attachment through lasting connections between individuals, emphasising the importance of the endurance and evolution of the relationship through developmental stages. High levels of school attachment have been found to be linked to effective learning environments (Zwarych, 2004). Researchers exploring school attachment found that these learning environments were impacted by YP's perceptions of their belonging, peer relationships, involvement in activities as well as feeling secure and a part of the school (Zwarych, 2004). Bearman and Moody, (2004), having detailed social network data and friendship data, indicated the importance of the student's emotional attitude to their school. Social bonding and school bonding on the other hand place the emphasis on the specific type of attachment a student forms to their school (Hawkins & Weis, 1985). Strong formations of bonds to the school decrease the likelihood of delinquent behaviour and promote better academic performance (Hawkins & Weis, 1985). This concept of social bonds was developed from Social Control

Theory (Hirschi, 1969) which builds on social learning and the importance of societal order (Simons-Morton et al., 1999). This suggests again that it is not necessarily the quantity of relationships, but the quality of positive relationships that can have a positive impact on school attachment.

4.3 School Engagement

A lot of research has explored the construct of School Engagement and its influences on academic outcomes and motivation (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Ryan, 2000; Wang & Eccles, 2013). This is often viewed as a multidimensional construct that incorporates cognitive (investment in learning), behavioural (effort, school activities) and psychological components (emotional or affective) (Appleton et al., 2008). Others have described engagement as placing the emphasis on behavioural actions and social identity (Tyler & Blader, 2003). Similarly, to school connectedness researchers have also explored engagement by looking at what it is not. Therefore, exploring what disengagement looks like in students, for example, when they are uninterested in class or withdrawing from activities (Juvonen, 2007).

Allen and Kern (2017) identify that although some of the definitions of school engagement are similar to school belonging, they call for caution when using the term. They indicate that there may be overlap in the definitions when considering the affective and behavioural aspects of school belonging. Unsurprisingly, psychological components of engagement are associated with adaptive behaviours, for example attendance and task persistence (Goodenow, 1993). However, Allen and Kern (2017) suggest that the cognitive aspects align more with engagement in learning rather than belonging to the school community. Therefore, SOB may be seen as contributing to school engagement rather than being defined by it (Allen & Kern, 2017).

4.4 School community

Lastly, to delve into the sociological theoretical framework, the terms "school community" and "belonging" are often used interchangeably. Sánchez, Colón and Esparza (2005) described a sense of community as

encompassing a SOB. Here, they indicated that the community can be the whole-school or a small group within the school. Others suggest that in order for a community to exist, the members have to already have a SOB (Osterman, 2010). Solomon et al. (1996) indicate that community has been defined in multiple ways, but a similarity always exists amongst the various definitions and that is belonging. Nonetheless, are the two constructs the same or is one again a by-product of the other? Osterman (2000) defines school community as the connection with others, where one feels cared for and supported. This shows that one needs to cultivate a sense of belongingness in order for a community to develop (Allen & Kern, 2017). Therefore, making the school community a product of high levels of SOB.

4.5 Defining SOB

This section has explored how the vast theoretical frameworks have used similar constructs to that of SOB. By doing so, it has demonstrated how these constructs are often used interchangeably and at times how they may carry different meanings. For the purpose of this project, the author proposes that SOB be defined by the most agreed upon definition 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment' (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80). This incorporates the affective, psychological and behavioural elements which were explored above. However, this definition separates itself from the more cognitive aspects which may align more with engagement in learning rather than belonging. This definition also separates SOB from the community allowing SOB to stand as a contributing factor instead of being defined by it. It is generally accepted that regardless of how belonging has been defined or measured there is compelling evidence for the importance of one's SOB influencing academic, psychological and behavioural outcomes (Allen & Kern, 2017). However, there is a need to better explore diverse school experiences and develop a greater understanding of how these influence YP's SOB in their setting in order to promote positive outcomes.

5.0 Various approaches to measuring

The complexity of both the theoretical frameworks that underpin SOB and the various constructs that are used within the field contribute to there being a vast number of measurement tools that have been developed and used to assess the construct of school belonging. Before delving into the research around belonging, it is important to consider how this research data was measured and explored. This section will compare some of the measures available. This will provide an overview of a sample of the tools used to measure SOB. This also provides the reader with a comparison of what each tool views as the important factors that might impact SOB. When considering which tools to use, it is crucial that they align with the theoretical framework and definition. This section will not be able to contrast all the available tools. It has, therefore, chosen to focus on three standardised tools and a discussion around holistic assessments. To ensure that the literature review remains consistent with its theoretical underpinnings and definition of SOB, this section has deliberately excluded measures that place emphasis on engagement as well as cognitive aspects (e.g. The Student Engagement Instrument, Appleton et al., 2006).

5.1 Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (HMAC)

A tool that is often used to assess SOB is the Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (HMAC) (Karcher, 1999). This questionnaire is developed from the ecological framework that includes the social, institutional and self domains (Karcher & Lee, 2002). The measure is based on Ecological Theory of Adolescent Connectedness which suggests that connectedness develops in two separate categories a self-in-the-present and a self-in-the-future (Karcher & Lee, 2002). It proposes that during adolescence, an individual seeks to maintain their peer-mediated connectedness as well as adult-mediated connectedness. The measure includes items that capture features of attachment (Ainsworth, 1989) and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It does this by assessing various types of connectedness across the adolescent's widening social network. It consists of 74 items divided into 15 subscales of 15 ecological worlds and four composite scales. This includes assessing the four domains of Family (parents and sibling items), Friends (friends and neighbourhood items),

School (school and teacher items), and Self (present and future self-items). This is an extensive questionnaire that places SOB as one of the contributing factors to connectedness.

5.2 School Connectedness Scale (SCS)

Another similar scale is the School Connectedness Scale (SCS; Parker et al., 2008) which is a 54-item questionnaire that assesses relationships with school, adults and peers. They use three different levels of general support (or belongingness), specific support (or relatedness) and engagement (or connectedness) (Allen & Kern, 2017). The SCS has demonstrated good psychometric properties across multiple populations (Furlong et al., 2011). As the scale has numerous items, there is a tendency to use an abbreviated measure of the SCS, for example, the measure used in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health: a longitudinal analysis of adolescent's connectedness (Zhu, 2018). Others have indicated that although abbreviated scales are frequently used, they have been criticised for being too brief to capture the complexity of school belonging (Fredricks et al., 2004). Although the SCS is based on the relational theoretical framework, it incorporates engagement into the measuring of school connectedness. Engagement as noted in the section above can be seen as a product of belonging or perhaps in this case as a product of school connectedness.

5.3 Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM)

One of the most commonly used measures for school belonging is the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM) (Allen & Kern, 2017; Goodenow, 1993). It is said to capture the perceptions of belongingness or school membership by providing an indicator of the quality of school social relations. In doing this, it identifies social and contextual factors that influence SOB. The PSSM consists of 18 items which are made up of three main constructs; connection to the school, connection to adults and connection to peers. It was developed for pupils aged 10-14. Some items include: 'Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here' and 'I am treated with as much respect as other pupils'. Longitudinal research in Australia using the

PSSM indicated a predictive link between PSSM scores to future mental health problems (Shochet et al., 2006).

The measure has also been used with YP with SEND (McMahon et al., 2008). This scale can be administered to individuals or to a whole group. When scoring Goodenow (1993) specifies that the scale midpoint of 3.0 may be regarded as a tipping point, indicating potential risk in terms of pupils' SOB and social inclusion. Goodenow (1993) reported high internal consistency reliability values of .77 to .88 for pupils aged 9-14 years on the PSSM.

5.4 Measuring SOB using non-standardised approaches

It is important to note that the tools explored up until this point have been developed and designed to be used with the general population without SEND needs. Similar measures and instruments may be unsuitable for all population subtests due to differing needs and abilities (International Wellbeing Group, 2013). Migden et al. (2019) highlight that there is a lack of emphasis on seeking the views of YP with SEND and they are often ignored in the research with more focus on adult perspectives for example teachers' or parents' views.

Milton and Sims (2016), indicate that well-being and social belonging in adults on the autism spectrum are not well understood. In fact, they are often measured using tools that were not designed for that use which often feature self-assessment measures (Milton & Sims, 2016). This brings into question the extent to which these standardised measures of well-being capture the experiences of individuals with SEND needs (Robertson, 2010). If these measures are developed without gaining the perspectives of individuals with SEND needs, then to what extent do they reflect an appropriate measurement for these individuals? This debate has been gaining increasing attention over the years (Billstedt et al., 2011; Milton & Sims, 2016; Robertson, 2010) and has been reinforced by the discussions around the social and the medical models of viewing disability (Oliver & Sapey, 2018). This has led to a growing push towards the use of a holistic approach when assessing individuals with SEND. This encourages a move away from the within-child or medical model toward a social model of disability (Oliver & Sapey, 2018). With this in mind, researchers moved away

from standardised approaches and used more holistic assessments, such as semi-structured interviews (Cridland et al., 2014; Haegele & Maher, 2021; Tierney et al., 2016). However, Milton and Sims (2016), suggest that potentially the core domains within questionaries may not always differ depending on particular needs; here they were looking at individuals on the autism spectrum. They concluded that perhaps the standardised measures could be used without much adaptation, however, particular attention should be paid to the intervention that followed. This they noted should only be employed with the informed perspective from the intended population sample.

5.5 Identifying an appropriate measure

This section so far has assessed three scales that are often used and seen as the preferred assessments in the research for looking into school belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017). The first two tools explored placed the emphasis on connectedness. Interestingly, Karcher and Lee (2002) indicate that although connectedness is commonly used as a synonym for relatedness and belonging, they suggest that connectedness in the literature is different from these terms in at least three ways. They indicate that belongingness generally refers to a self-assessment of the degree of social support one experiences in social groups. Whereas, relatedness is one's assessment of the interpersonal social support one experiences or perception of specific relationships. They considered connectedness as a response to relatedness and belonging as it conveys the individual's direct involvement in and caring for those supporting relationships and groups (Karcher & Lee, 2002). Therefore, when wanting to measure SOB, the scale that is most commonly used is the PSSM. However, it is important to note that these scales were not developed and designed to be used with a sample with SEND (Robertson, 2010). Therefore, some indicate that they may not accurately measure belonging for this population. This has contributed to a shift in the research and the use of more holistic measurements such as semi-structured interviews (Tierney et al., 2016).

6.0 Benefits of a strong SOB

Having explored the theoretical underpinning of belonging and the constructs that are associated with it, this literature review will now turn to critically summarise the immense field of literature that has looked at belonging. This section will provide evidence for the importance of belonging, it's benefits, and the effects of a lack of belonging. It will start with an overview of the evidence which supports belonging and then narrow down the focus to school belonging. This section will end with an exploration of SEND and SOB.

Considerable research shows that developing a general SOB is crucial to psychological and physical health with both short- and long-term impacts (Hale et al., 2005; O'Keeffe, 2013; Karaman & Tarim, 2018). For example, those with a greater SOB have been seen to have faster recovery rates from infectious diseases (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009). As noted above, school belonging has been found to be related to higher levels of motivation, engagement and academic self-efficacy (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Sanchez et al., 2005; Sari, 2012). Researchers examined the relationship between school stressors, SOB, academic outcomes, and psychological outcomes. Their findings indicated that SOB plays a central role within the school environment and it affects both psychological and academic outcomes (McMahon et al., 2008).

6.1 Overview of SOB within the school context

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data on school belonging reveals that across 34 countries, almost one in three children report feeling that they do not belong in school (OECD, 2019). Using the data from Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is managed by OECD, researchers analysed the impact of educational policy change in Sweden on pupils' SOB at school. They found that a greater emphasis on results, testing and grading may be a contributing factor to the decline in SOB as well as having a negative impact on pupil wellbeing (Högberg & Lindgren, 2023).

Research has also explored the effects of lack of belonging, for example loneliness and isolation and it has found this is linked to a greater

risk of self-harm behaviours and mental illnesses (Shochet et al., 2006). In addition, the effects of a lack of school belonging have been found to link to anxiety, depression and suicide ideation (Bearman & Moody, 2004; McMahon et al., 2008). For example, peer rejection acting as a school stressor which has been found to correlate with increased levels of depression (McMahon et al., 2008). Some suggested that SOB may act as a buffer against emotional instability (McMahon et al., 2008). This has also been explored in adolescence, the results indicated that those with higher levels of SOB subsequently report higher well-being (Jose et al., 2012).

Therefore, there is persuasive evidence for the importance of one's SOB influencing academic, psychological and behavioural outcomes (Allen & Kern, 2017). This not only includes the impact due to a lack of belonging but also the protective factors associated with developing a SOB. Which also includes SOB being linked to psychological well-being for example happiness (O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010), psychological functioning, adjustment (Law, Cuskelly, & Carroll, 2013), self-esteem and social identity (Tyler, & Blader, 2003). Unsurprisingly, family involvement has also been seen to act as a protective factor supporting the development of SOB (Uslu & Gizir, 2017). It is therefore evident that SOB is an important factor to support well-being and development in education. However, whilst there is a vast amount of research demonstrating the importance of SOB, there are very few attempts to understand how SOB can be fostered especially for minority groups (Allen & Kern, 2017).

7.0 Factors that influence belonging:

When reviewing the literature, it is also important to understand the factors that influence SOB. The Wingspread Declaration (2004), aimed to identify the strategies that positively influenced YP's connection to school. However, the findings were criticised for their lack of methodological rigour as well as difficulties with implementation of strategies to support SOB (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen & Kern, 2017; Shuttleworth, 2018).

Factors influencing SOB have been considered at a systemic level, identifying that schools are one of the few places that can offer continuity and stability in YPs lives (Riley, 2022). Riley (2022) encourages schools to ask

"why" questions about SOB to push staff to acknowledge the scale of exclusion and the impacts of not belonging. She specifies that this paves the way for the "how" and "what" questions that allow schools to start to think systemically about the issues. Identifying that the conditions for school belonging are created through purposeful connected and compassionate approaches. Riley (2022) proposes the three Cs framework of compassion, connectivity and communication to strive to bring leadership, policy and practice together. This aligns with the literature, which suggests a strong relationship between teacher relationship and SOB (Allen & Kern, 2017; Riley, 2022). It also acts as compelling evidence against policies that contribute to a lack of belonging, for example the "zero tolerance" policies which are sanction driven (Allen et al., 2020).

Allen and Kern, (2017) systematically reviewed the literature and identified several themes that have an effect on one's SOB. These included gender, school type, school location, year level, race and ethnicity, extracurricular activities, academic motivation, personal characteristics, emotional instability, peer support, family support, teacher support and environmental variables. However, it is worth noting that the interplay between the variables themselves and the relationship between them and SOB is not clear, it may be causal, an antecedent or spurious (Allen & Kern, 2017). A lot of the studies researching SOB have done so by investigating a bivariate relationship between variables. Therefore, although these may be thought of as factors that cause SOB, they could instead be a result of belonging.

Allen et al. (2018) completed a meta-analysis of the literature to identify the areas that might have the biggest impact. They found most had moderate effect size with personal characteristics and teacher support being the strongest correlates of school belonging. Interestingly, the results varied according to the geographic location, with effects generally stronger in rural than urban locations. It would be outside the scope of this project to review the same literature, however, to further identify the gap in the literature, it will be crucial to understand the relationship SOB has with school type, age, personal characteristics and social relationships. Therefore, this section will give an overview of the literature in these areas.

7.1 The influences of location and type of school on a SOB

When considering factors that may influence SOB, location and type of school are evident throughout the literature. This could include several variables, such as public versus private, religious versus non-religious, and special educational provisions versus mainstream. Some researchers have found in a longitudinal study that the SOB was higher for students in Catholic schools as compared with students in non-Catholic schools (Marks et al., 2000). Others have questioned whether socioeconomic status, as well as extracurricular activities in the settings, might be influencing these relationships (Allen & Kern, 2017). Few studies have considered the impact of location on one's SOB. Anderman (2002) found that students in urban schools reported lower SOB than those in rural schools. This is similar to Cueto et al. (2010) who found rural students had a higher SOB when compared to urban peers. They noted that in rural locations, peers were more likely to have attended primary school together and transitioned to the same secondary, this would enhance their peer support network. Lastly, students in rural settings may have more opportunities to interact with peers outside of school. They found that socioeconomic status had no direct effect on SOB but did have an indirect effect through achievement (Cueto et al., 2010).

A recent systematic literature review explored how staff in secondary schools foster a school belonging for their pupils (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). They explored how the theoretical concept of belonging translated into educational professionals' everyday practice and found themes that focused both on individual support as well as systemic support at a whole-school level, through school routines and procedures. With this in mind, it is then important to consider inclusive versus non-inclusive practices and how these impact YP with special needs. Frederickson and Simmonds, (2008) define inclusive education at its most basic level as educating children with SEND in the mainstream alongside their peers. Warnock (2006) identifies that SOB is an important aspect of inclusion due to its importance for successful learning and well-being. However, little research has looked into YP with SEND and their school experiences of SOB.

7.2 The influence of age on one's SOB

The evidence around the influence of age and school level on SOB is mixed (Allen & Kern, 2017). Several studies found no difference across year levels (Anderman, 2002; Sari, 2012). However, others find that SOB decreases as students' progress in secondary (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Some researchers have identified adolescence as a specific period sensitive to SOB (Hebron, 2018). Significantly, more Year 10 students reported not feeling connected to their school, as compared to Year 8 and Year 12 students (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010). This seems reasonable since as pupils age priorities, developmental needs change and expectations shift through school. It is also impacted by the transition from primary to secondary which incorporates changes in school structures and class size as well as teaching approaches. Which coincides with the adolescence period of development ranging from 12 to 18 years of age.

Although SOB is important at all ages (Allen & Kern, 2017), it plays a crucial role during adolescent development (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010). Reasons for this may be due to it being a fundamental period for identity formation (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011) with the ongoing inner battles of determining who they are and how they merge with the social contexts around them. Karcher and Lee (2002) propose that during this period, adolescents' self-esteem informs their connectedness to self. This helps adolescents develop the ability to think abstractly in terms of both a present self and a future self (Harter, 2006). During this period, YP spend increasingly more time with social groups outside the family context, therefore friendship groups appear to have a pivotal role in the formation of identity (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). This then will impact YP's development or experiences of SOB which has been found to lead to better psychosocial adjustment and easier transitions into adulthood (Tanti et al., 2011). Therefore, adolescence may offer a fundamental period for developing SOB which may lead to long-term benefits (Allen & Kern, 2017). These could include mindsets and behaviours that individuals carry with them into adulthood.

7.3 The importance of SOB and SEND

Pinto et al. (2019) research indicates that children identified with SEND are generally less accepted in school by peers, have fewer reciprocated friendships and are less integrated this is also the case for children with SEND who are socially motivated (Gillooly et al., 2022). As was covered in the previous section, adolescence is an important period due to the increase in peer relationships which play a crucial role in the development of SOB (Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). It is not the number and quantity of friends that is said to be most influential, however, it is the quality and reciprocated friendships that contribute to higher levels of school belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992). These highlight other possible contributing factors influencing SOB which researchers often refer to as "personal characteristics" (Allen & Kern, 2017; Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2006).

Personal characteristics refer to students' personal qualities, attributes, temperaments, and nature (Allen & Kern, 2017). These have been studied by looking at those "positive characteristics", for example, self-efficacy, positive affect and coping skills (seeking social support, self-reliance), that tend to support the development of school belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017). Others looked into "negative personal factors" such as anxiety and depression (Bearman & Moody 2004; McMahon et al., 2008). These factors included maladaptive coping skills, fear of failure, negative affect, and stress (Shochet et al., 2006).

Researchers have explored the experiences of YP with disabilities within the context of physical education (Haegele & Maher, 2021; Maher, McVeigh, Thomson & Knight, 2023). Identifying that while the experiences are unique to the individual and they are not a homogenous group, there are common themes of difficulties that disabled YP experience when developing social capital as well as when seeking positive and meaningful relationships with non-disabled peers (Maher et al., 2023). In fact, research has found that teenagers with physical disabilities experience more loneliness and isolation in school as compared to their peers (Armstrong et al., 1992). Some individuals reported having good relationships in school but less contact with their peers outside of school (Stevens et al., 1996). This contributes to lower levels of peer integration. Sabornie (1994) looked at middle school-aged students with learning disabilities and found that they reported higher levels of loneliness, victimisation, and lower levels of school participation. This

implies that SOB would have a valuable relevance for these vulnerable and at-risk YPs (Carson, 2014). Therefore, teachers have a role in fostering a SOB and supporting how these pupils are perceived by others (Armstrong et al., 1992).

7.4 Relationship with peers and teachers

Research shows the important influence relationships have on SOB. The perceived support from peers plays a crucial role in one's SOB (Allen & Kern, 2017; Goodenow & Grandy,1993; Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). The role of friendships was explored through semi-structured interviews and found that strong relationships contributed to a sense of community (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). They noted that quality was more important than quantity.

In a meta-analysis they found that, although peer support had an influence on SOB, parent and teacher support had a greater impact (Allen et al., 2018). Similar findings were reported when directly researching teacher support (Anderman, 2002; Hattie, 2009). In fact, Hattie, (2009) highlights that research has indicated for a long time that the relationship between student and teachers should not be undermined. When students feel that their teachers care about them, are fair and can support them with problems, the pupils feel more connected to the school (Allen et al., 2018). Of the themes identified as having an influence on SOB, teacher support and personal characteristics are identified as having the largest impact on SOB, therefore these may be essential areas for school to target to foster SOB.

7.5 Interventions to foster belonging

The overview of the different areas that influence relationships highlights the complexity of identifying ideal ways forward to foster SOB for pupils. Many researchers emphasise the discrepancy between the evidence base and practice when it comes to strategies to promote SOB in school (Allen & Bowles, 2012). An educational psychology doctorate thesis explored this topic by conducting a systematic review and identified 21 different intervention programmes (only one of these reported including YP with disabilities) which aimed at increasing SOB (Shuttleworth, 2018). The interventions were divided into two categories, universal and targeted.

Approaches within the different interventions varied, the universal interventions included curriculum-based teaching, systemic change, cognitive reflection and mentoring. The targeted interventions included curriculum-based teaching, project work and mentoring. Shuttleworth's, (2018) results supported the notion that SOB can be enhanced through intervention identifying that twelve studies reported a positive and significant effect of experimental condition on SOB scores. The most successful interventions incorporated teacher support and/or personal characteristics which Allen et al. (2018), acknowledged as having the largest effects on SOB. Interestingly Shuttleworth, (2018) reported a trend indicating that targeted interventions may be more effective than universal ones. However, this trend may be explained by lower baseline scores for "at-risk" targeted samples as well as a greater opportunity to develop positive relationships in individual or small group sessions.

An intervention that is commonly used in schools is the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme which is an evidence-informed intervention delivered by teaching assistants and supervised by EPs. Within this training the ELSAs are introduced to psychological theories, such as Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and the theoretical framework developed by Borba (1989) known as the building blocks of self-esteem. This model includes affiliation or a SOB as one of the five components that contributes to self-esteem (the others being security, selfhood, mission, and competence). A lot of research has explored the impact of ELSAs on increasing emotional literacy. Mann, (2014) looked at the literature and noted that a failure to address difficulties in research design made it challenging to say with certainty what it is that makes a particular ELSA intervention successful. Others have identified that there is a lack of research exploring the ELSA's effectiveness in secondary schools (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). This highlights the need for a greater understanding of ELSAs role and exploring how they could be used to foster SOB in schools, especially in secondary schools.

8.0 Area for future research

This literature review has started with an overview of the theoretical frameworks associated with a SOB. It then went on to explore the various constructs that have been used within the literature. This led to an exploration of how SOB has been measured and identified the gap in the field in awareness of SOB for individuals and YP with SEND. The review then explored the evidence that supports fostering a SOB in school, highlighting themes in the literature that have an influence on SOB. These identified school type, age, personal characteristics, and social relationships. This highlighted the need for further research to assess what fosters SOB especially YP with SEND in school. It is unclear how YP with SEND develop their SOB, especially considering the importance of relationships and the possible impact of social communication needs on the forming of these relationships (Kreijns et al., 2003). Connell and Wellborn (1991) identify that YP with skills in social awareness and self-awareness can better define their SOB. This opens up a whole other area of research that examines how YP with needs in the area of social skills develop their SOB. Haegele and Maher (2021) researched the experiences of YP on the autism spectrum regarding the role of peer interactions and relationships in feelings of SOB in physical education in the mainstream schools in the United States. They identified that the need for a SOB is not being fulfilled in these classes, with most participants experiencing bullying, both verbal and physical. The researchers concluded with a call for more research to be done to understand what fosters SOB.

With more funding being allocated to support YP with social communication needs through placements in SRBs, this is an opportunity to explore what fosters SOB for these YP. This section will now narrow its focus and look specifically at the literature around YP with social communication and social interaction needs, such as autism. Giving an overview of the research and educational provision available will shine a light on the need for future research to be done in this area to support further inclusion.

8.1 Comment on language

Before delving into the literature, it is worth noting the importance of the choice of language as it is crucial to how things are communicated and

understood. In reference to the field of research that has been conducted by non-autistic researchers on participants that are identified as on the autistic spectrum, there have been discussions about it perpetuating ableist ideologies (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). Perhaps unintentionally or unconsciously researchers have described autism as something needing to be fixed which impacts systemically the societal perceptions of autism as well as of the individuals themselves. This stems from the use of medical model frameworks, which advocate for the curing of deficits through interventions. In contrast, this project wishes to use the social model which distinguishes between the social and environmental impairments impacting opportunities to participate within society. It, therefore, seeks to work towards efforts of removing barriers that autistic individuals face. However, as the researcher is not identified as autistic and wishes to research this field, they risked subconsciously falling into their "ableist bias." In an attempt to work with the research bias, it was crucial to explore the literature and conceptualise the correct terminology.

Research on an Australian sample showed that autistic adults rated "autistic," "person on the spectrum," and "autistic person" significantly higher than "person with autism," "person with ASD" (autism spectrum disorder), and "person with ASC" (autism spectrum condition) (Bury et al., 2020). Research in the UK has shown that self-identification as autistic is associated with stronger preferences for the term "autistic person" over "person with autism" (Kapp et al., 2013). Overall, the literature suggests that "on the autism spectrum" may be the least polarising terminology, however even this is associated with a political decision (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). It is also worth mentioning that YP do not need a diagnosis of autism to be in autism SRBs, but they may present with needs including; difficulties with social communication, repetitive behaviours, sensory sensitivities, highly focused interests and SEMH needs. Therefore, the researcher has felt that the most appropriate terminology is "YP in autism SRBs" and individuals "on the autism spectrum" or "autistic" when referring to research that has used this sample. Interestingly, since starting the project, the LA has changed their terminology from "Autistic Spectrum Disorder Special Resource Base" to "autism SRBs". This aligns with the researcher's wishes of moving away from

terminology such as "disorder" and "condition" in line with recent literature (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021).

8.2 Autism and SOB

Research into the educational experience of YP on the autism spectrum has increased over the years, with a general focus on the challenges that these YP experience during their time in school. Most research has investigated how these YP are more likely to experience higher levels of exclusion (Hatton, 2018), experience mental health difficulties (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014), as well as be labelled as having "behaviour problems" (Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2006). Previous research has indicated that YP on the autism spectrum present with a "diminished sense of engagement" and "more challenging behaviours" due to schools not understanding or being able to meet their needs (Brede et al., 2017; Haegele & Maher, 2021). Mainstream settings have been identified as inappropriate for YP on the autism spectrum, due to the sensory environment, as well as the lack of staff awareness of their communication needs, which contributes to increased difficulties in establishing good relationships with staff and peers (Sproston et al., 2017).

As seen above, schools have a huge potential to influence pupils' levels of SOB. Some researchers have considered the influence of gender on SOB. Brennan De Vine (2022) explored how girls on the autism spectrum come to develop a SOB. The researcher founds that the participants defined belonging from a relational perspective, as they want to be externally valued, for example by peers and staff having an understanding of their interests, identity and behaviours.

Longitudinal research has indicated that YP on the autism spectrum in a mainstream setting report lower levels of SOB compared to their comparison group of non-autistic peers (Hebron, 2018). They measured school connectedness across the transition from primary to secondary for YP on the autism spectrum. Students completed the PSSM four times and reported positive levels of school connectedness across the transition, however, across the transition, they were lower than the control group. Higher belonging scores on the PSSM were associated with academic self-

efficacy and school satisfaction, whereas lower scores were associated with depression. A limitation of this study was that it did not factor in the heterogeneous nature of the participants and relied solely on quantitative data. Despite this, it still provides a rationale for promoting school SOB in all YP, particularly in those who may be more vulnerable to lower levels of SOB due to SEND.

Secondary school has been seen as a crucial point with the experiences of YP on the autism spectrum, being associated with a mismatch between the explicit features of autism and the physical and psychosocial environment that exists in a secondary. Making the YP particularly vulnerable to a range of negative mental health outcomes and creating barriers to their learning and academic engagement (Morewood et al., 2011). This is impacted by a combination of lack of teacher training and understanding of autism (Falkmer et al., 2012; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). Some suggest that a way forward could be the use of student self-rated perceptions of participation to evaluate the inclusiveness of mainstream schools and the effectiveness of inclusive strategies (Falkmer et al., 2012).

Researchers have explored the experiences of adults on the autism spectrum and identified a number of barriers to belonging and the effects this has on wellbeing (Milton & Sims, 2016). They identified a number of common narratives, such as the impact of living with an "othered identity," and the importance of connections and acceptance. These were found to impact social isolation, mental health and constructs highly relevant to belonging and wellbeing.

Recently, there has been an increase in interventions based on promoting a strength-based framework (Lee et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2023). For example, the strength-based technology clubs for autistic adolescents (Jones et al., 2023). Others have prioritised relationships and implemented Autism Mentorship Programs that pair autistic adolescents and autistic adults in one-to-one mentoring relationships (Tomfohrde et al., 2023). Although reporting success rates these interventions risk falling into the bias, perhaps unconsciously, with a hidden aim of autism being something needing to be fixed (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). To work towards inclusion, it is important that there is greater awareness of the systemic and environmental factors that can foster SOB for YP with social communication needs.

8.3 Educational provisions

Having explored how the literature on personal characteristics, in particular, YP with social communication needs contributes to one's development of SOB. It is now important to turn to the educational provisions and their influence with this particular group in mind. Specifically, this section will focus on autism SRBs. Many individuals value the social aspects of their formal education and school experiences. They recall a community and a SOB fostered by personal relationships and connections (Allen & Kern, 2017). However, this is not always the case, especially for YP with SEND.

8.4 Specialist Resource Bases

As noted above, SRBs are provisions that aim to provide YP with the extra support they need within a mainstream school, enabling them to attend mainstream classes. Studies looking into the use of resource bases have identified that they are a popular choice for children with SEND (Cline & Frederickson, 2010; McAllister & Hadjri, 2013). A LA in the East of England outline in their SEND strategy 2022 (SEND, 2022), the need for supporting inclusion and meeting needs. There are many benefits to be gained from the inclusion of pupils with SEND in the school setting. Such as increased opportunity for social interaction as well as promoting acceptance and understanding amongst all pupils (McAllister & Hadjri, 2013). These can potentially act as a gateway to a truly inclusive society. However, tensions exist between the theoretical ideology and application of inclusion and if in fact, it is effective for all (Lindsay, 2003).

Norwich (2005), argues that positions towards inclusive policy and practices are inextricably linked to values, conceptual and empirical matters. This signifies that the aspiration of inclusion does not only come with potential benefits, but also highlights the challenges. McAllister and Hadjri (2013) point out that the aim is for genuine inclusion, which they define as all pupils participating in the school life to the best of their ability, then they indicate that simply using a SEND resource base falls a long way short of this. Questioning if this is really contributing to genuine inclusion or instead merely a form of integration.

For YP on the autism spectrum, attending school carries many difficulties, from changes of routine, loud noises to miscommunications in social interactions. This can make schools difficult and even frightening places. Therefore, an autism SRB can provide a safe place for these individuals to go to. Hebron (2018) findings, mentioned above, suggest that autistic YP in mainstream provision have lower levels of SOB as measured on the PSSM. One could therefore hypothesise that as SRBs are providing greater opportunities for social interaction with adults and peers, a known factor to foster SOB, then the YP in the autism SRBs may score higher on the PSSM. Interestingly, Brennan De Vine (2022) found that the girls' who attended mainstream schools which had an autism resource base reported feeling safer and more comfortable to show parts of themselves and not mask their behaviours. Others have explored the transition from specialist provisions to "satellite" provisions that function in a similar way to SRBs and found that YP felt a deep sense of belonging to their new mainstream school despite minimal exposure to classes and activities (Croydon et al., 2019). Given the recent investment in SRBs to support YP on the autism spectrum in mainstream settings, it is surprising that little research in the UK has looked into how we can foster SOB for YPs in the autism SRBs. These YP within the SRB represent a unique sample whose experiences could be researched to further support inclusion into the school.

9.0 Summary of chapter

This literature review aimed to develop a greater understanding of how SOB is defined and constructed for YP with SEND. In doing so, it explored the theoretical underpinnings of belonging by looking at it through the lens of motivation, relationship, and ecological theoretical frameworks. It then went on to assess the current literature around the various constructs associated with belonging. This allowed for an exploration of how these themes are often used interchangeably even though they have different theoretical underpinnings and carry diverse meanings.

The literature review then went on to critically evaluate the various tools used to measure SOB. This highlighted that several standardised tools have not been developed to effectively be used with SEND populations and

noted ways to assess SOB using more holistic means. This allowed for a critical exploration of the research conducted which highlighted several factors that influence SOB. Of which four were further explored; school type, age, personal characteristics and social relationships.

When exploring the research associated with personal characteristics, it was noted that individuals with positive affect and coping skills (seeking social support, self-reliance) tend to develop a greater sense of school belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017). This contributed to the question of how then do the individuals with SEND in particular social communication needs develop their SOB? The last section narrowed the focus by looking specifically at the literature which examined the relationship with social communication needs (for example, autism) and SOB. This highlighted the current educational provision for many YP with social communication needs with in the local area being SRB as well as the lack of research that has been conducted to explore their SOB within their school.

Further research looking into factors that foster SOB for YP within autism SRBs could contribute to systemic changes to support further inclusion. It would be useful for this research to develop a greater understanding of the levels of SOB for YP in SRBs which could be compared with research highlighted in this review (Hebron, 2018). This literature review identified that little is known about what fosters SOB for YP with SEND therefore it would be helpful to explore what staff within SRBs do to foster SOB. This would contribute to closing the gap between research and practice which has been previously evidenced (Jetten et al., 2012). The findings could impact on multiple levels from raising staff awareness of the importance of SOB for educational attainment, as well as, identifying what are the factors that support SOB and barriers to developing SOB in SRBs and mainstream for this unique sample.

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

1.0 Introduction

In England, the SEND Code of Practice (2015), defines a "special" need as a learning difficulty calling for a "special educational provision to be made". Under the Equality Act 2010, those identified with SEN may also have a disability which is defined as an impairment with long-term and substantially adverse effects on one's ability to carry out normal day to day activities. Over the years, the percentage of YP being identified with SEND in England is increasing (Warnes et al., 2022). This has contributed to a growing level of YP attending specialist provisions rather than the mainstream provisions (Warnes et al., 2022). To meet this demand, some Local Authorities (LA) are placing YP with SEND in mainstream settings with the addition of a Specialist Resource Base (SRB). SRBs are provisions that aim to provide YP with the extra support they need within a mainstream school, enabling them to attend mainstream classes. A LA in the East of England has published their SEND strategy 2022 (SEND, 2022) which outlines how there will be over 100 new places created within SRBs, as part of a 120-million-pound investment. Given such investment in SRBs to support YP in mainstream settings, it is surprising that so little research in the UK has investigated how staff support these YP. This research will help inform EP practice and develop a greater understanding of the social barriers experienced by YP in SRBs.

1.1 What is SOB?

Many theorists have researched school belonging from different theoretical frameworks, for example, the relationship between SOB and; motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), school engagement and academic achievement (Allen et al., 2018; Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Juvonen, 2006). Many of these theories view belonging through the lens of the individual's pursuit of fulfilling the need to belong. Instead, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1994) identifies that a child's development is influenced by a range of factors from biological, to cultural and environmental. Therefore, the model acknowledges that people are intertwined within the complex systems around them (Allen & Kern, 2017). Allen and Kern, (2017) built upon Bronfenbrenner's model, placing additional emphasis on

psychological and social aspects of SOB. They call it the bio-psycho-socio-ecological model of belonging (BPSEM). This model contextualises the complexities of developing a SOB and will therefore be used as an underpinning framework for interpreting the findings and implications of this project.

SOB is 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment' (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80). A student's SOB has been found to be a protective factor against mental health problems (McMahon et al., 2008; Allen et al., 2017; Allen et al., 2018; Karaman & Tarim, 2018). Low levels of SOB are associated with depression in adolescence (Parr et al., 2020). Whereas high levels are associated with academic achievement (Abdollahi et al., 2020; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Riley (2022) argues that the conditions for school belonging are created through purposeful, connected, and compassionate approaches. However, it remains unclear how the SOB is fostered, particularly for YP with SEND (Carson, 2014), it is important that this be further explored in order to better support YP with SEND.

1.2 Fostering a SOB in Schools

Considerable research implies that developing a general SOB is crucial to psychological and physical health (Hale et al., 2005; O'Keeffe, 2013; Karaman & Tarim, 2018). However, while there is a vast amount of research demonstrating the importance of SOB, there are very few attempts to understand how SOB can be fostered (Allen & Kern, 2017). Having identified this gap Allen and Kern (2017) conducted a systematic literature review and found several themes that have an effect on one's SOB. These included gender, school type, school location, year level, race and ethnicity, extracurricular activities, academic motivation, personal characteristics, emotional instability, peer support, family support, teacher support, and environmental variables. Although they identified that these themes had an influence on one's SOB it remains unclear what the relationship and interaction between the themes and SOB is. Therefore, they conducted a meta-analysis of the literature to identify the themes that have the biggest

impact, they found most had moderate effect size with personal characteristics (personal qualities, attributes, temperaments, and nature) and teacher support being the strongest correlates of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018).

1.3 Fostering a SOB in Schools for Children with SEND

Some have explored personal characteristics through the lens of social awareness, relationship skills, and self-awareness and found that YP with these attributes are more likely to develop their SOB (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). In contrast, researchers have found that teenagers with physical disabilities experience more loneliness and isolation in school compared to their peers (Armstrong et al., 1992). Sabornie (1994) looked at middle school-aged students with learning disabilities and reported higher levels of loneliness, victimisation, and lower levels of school participation. Research reveals that YP who are isolated from their community and experience more school stressors not only have a lower level of SOB but are at greater risk of suicidal thoughts compared to those who are embedded in a cohesive friendship group (Bearman & Moody, 2004; McMahon et al., 2008). In fact, SOB has been seen to have a strong negative correlation with self-report symptoms of depression and anxiety, the results indicate that the direction of the prediction is from school connectedness to depression as opposed to the other way around (Shochet et al., 2006). Contributing factors included maladaptive coping skills, fear of failure, negative affect, and stress (Shochet et al., 2006). Therefore, taking these findings together, one could postulate that YP with SEND needs are more likely to experience low levels of SOB and this could impact their mental health. This highlights the need to identify effective strategies to foster SOB for YP identified with SEND.

1.4 Autism SRBs and SOB

Social communication and interaction skills appear to support YP in developing SOB (Kreijns et al., 2003). However, some YP identified with SEND have specific needs in social communication and social interaction. These YP are sometimes identified as being on the autism spectrum, however, it is important to note that all individuals will present with diverse needs and strengths. Research exploring the educational experience of YP

on the autism spectrum has had a focus on the challenges that these YP experience during their time in school. For example, YP on the autism spectrum are more likely to have higher levels of exclusion (Hatton, 2018), experience mental health difficulties (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014), as well as be labelled as having "behaviour problems" (Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2006). Some have argued that mainstream settings are currently unsuitable for YP on the autism spectrum, due to the sensory environment, as well as the lack of staff awareness of their communication needs, which contribute to increased difficulties in establishing good relationships with staff and peers (Sproston et al., 2017).

Longitudinal research identified that YP on the autism spectrum in a mainstream setting reported lower levels of SOB as compared to their comparison group (Hebron, 2018). Students completed the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) four times and reported positive levels of school connectedness across the transition, however, across the transition they were lower than the control group. The PSSM consists of 18 items which are made up of three main constructs; connection to the school, connection to adults, and connection to peers. Longitudinal research in Australia using the PSSM indicated a predictive link between PSSM scores and future mental health problems (Shochet et al., 2006). A limitation of Hebron's (2018) study was that it did not account for the heterogeneous nature of the participants and relied solely on quantitative data. However, the study still provides a convincing rationale for promoting school SOB in all YP, particularly in those who may be more vulnerable to lower levels of SOB due to SEND. Similar findings were identified when exploring the experiences of adults on the autism spectrum (Milton & Sims, 2016). This included themes such as impact of living with an "othered identity," and the importance of connections and acceptance. However, to the author's knowledge, little is known in relation to what fosters SOB for YP with social communication needs in school.

2.0 Rationale and aims of the study

Given the recent investment in autism SRBs to support YP in mainstream settings, it is surprising that there is limited research that has looked into how to foster SOB for these YP. It is well known that SOB can

have a great impact on individual life outcomes, including the links between academic and psychological outcomes. Some have identified teacher relationship and personal characteristics as key elements that contribute to one's development of SOB (Allen et al., 2018). However, research suggests YP with social communication and interaction needs appear to have more difficulty developing a SOB (Kreijns et al., 2003). Reasons for this may be due to difficulties with social awareness, relationship skills, and self-awareness as well as the lack of staff awareness of individual communication needs, which contributes to increased barriers in forming good relationships with both staff and peers (Sproston et al., 2017). The YP within the SRB represent a unique sample whose experiences could support further inclusion into the school. As YP with SEND are more likely to experience loneliness and isolation in school and hence a lower level of SOB (Armstrong et al., 1992; Hebron, 2018), it is crucial that research is conducted to explore how staff can foster SOB for YP in autism SRBs.

2.1 Research questions

1. Do YP in autism SRBs have higher levels of SOB to the SRB in comparison to their levels of SOB to the mainstream?
2. What influences SOB and how can SRB staff foster YP's SOB:
   a. to their mainstream school
   b. to their SRB

3.0 Methodology

Having previously outlined the aims and the purpose of the current research, this chapter will now give an overview of research design, rationale for the approaches used in the thesis, procedures used for data analysis and finally ethical considerations for the current research.

3.1 Research Paradigm

This project aligns with the pragmatist paradigm, which aims to solve practical problems in the real world (Feilzer, 2010). It is commonly referred to as the "what works" approach which enables researchers to address questions that do not comfortably sit within one paradigm (Armitage, 2007).

Pragmatism acknowledges the interplay between knowledge and action (Goldkuhl, 2011). It outlines clear goals with an emphasis on exploring a "desired end" which can be achieved through pragmatic research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In this project, the desired end is twofold; first to gain an understanding of the levels of SOB for YP in autism SRBs, and second to develop greater understanding of what fosters and what are the barriers to developing SOB. These two goals will help inform possible systemic changes to increase SOB and inclusion. Therefore, to maintain the golden research thread, the approach that was felt to be most suitable in terms of its added practical value for the research questions (Hall, 2013), was to use a mixed method research design which draws on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods to research the multifaceted elements that exist in the research questions.

3.2 Design

This project used an embedded approach, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data will provide a supportive, secondary role in the study which will be based primarily on the qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This is consistent with the philosophically pragmatist underpinning, which acknowledges that there are singular and multiple truths that are open to empirical inquiry, with an emphasis on solving real world practical problems (Creswell et al., 2011).

3.3 Data collection

When exploring the complexity of how SOB is constructed and fostered, researchers have found using multiple samples, teacher and pupil, effective (Riley, 2022). This has not only contributed to supporting the research but also increased collaboration, awareness and understanding of SOB through participating in the project (Riley, 2022). Data collection for this project consisted of two phases, with phase one recruiting YP from autism SRBs and phase two recruiting staff members that work in the SRBs.
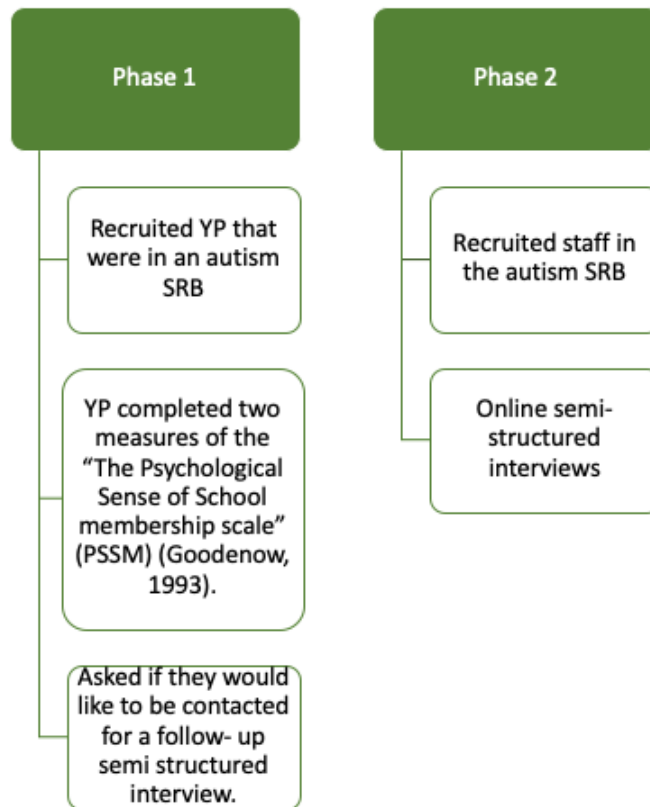
Figure 3: Embedded mixed methods Concurrent Design

Phase one recruited YP that were in an autism SRB to complete two measures of the "The Psychological Sense of School membership scale" (PSSM) (Goodenow, 1993). The first scale was used to gather their "whole-school level of school belongingness" and the second was an adapted version which replaces the stem of the PSSM, changing "school" to "SRB". The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete and was administered online. The questionnaire included 36 Likert scale statements with 5 scaled responses: Completely False, Somewhat False, Neither True nor False, Somewhat True and Completely True. PPSM can be scored as a total score, this is calculated by reverse coding of the negative items and then by calculating the average to obtain the SOB score. The measure was deemed appropriate for this study as it has previously been used with YP with SEND (McMahon et al., 2008) as well as Allen and Kern, (2017) indicating that the PSSM has a well-researched underpinning to support its validity and reliability, with an internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) ranging from 0.77 to 0.88 across various samples. The questionnaire was

developed on Microsoft Forms to allow for virtual data collection and entirely anonymous responses. Consent was assumed with the submission of the online questionnaire (as outlined in the participants' information sheet, see Appendix B.1). All YP that completed the questionnaire were asked if they would like to be contacted for a follow up semi-structured interview.

Phase two of the project looked to gain an understanding of how staff in the SRB foster SOB. The author completed online semi-structured interviews with SRB staff. The interviews explored staff views and experiences in regard to belonging within school and SRB for the YP. This method has been used effectively in previous research which gathered the views of staff in mainstream schools and was found to be effective (Allen et al., 2020). Semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate data collection method for this phase as their versatile structure allowed for flexibility in answering research questions (Kelly, 2010).

As a prompt for discussion in the semi-structured interviews the researcher used a sorting exercise on school belonging which has previously been used with school staff and was intended to be a prompt for understanding teachers' perspectives on school belonging (Appendix C.1: Allen et al., 2020). This activity is a rich way to understand the beliefs and actions of participants, as it is a reflective exercise with no right or wrong answers. Riley (2022) reported that it enabled participants to seem comfortable in raising issues that were deeply important to them and which they may not have articulated in other circumstances.

3.4 Participants

Following ethical approval, the participants were recruited via opportunity sampling by contacting the five Secondary autism SRBs in the region. The researcher was introduced to the Lead Teachers (LT) of the SRBs by their link EP. All five SRBs agreed to support the study and informed the researcher that they had forwarded the project information to eligible participants' parents. The participant inclusion criteria for phase one was to be aged between 10-18 and have been in the autism SRB for at least one month. Parents and YP were contacted by the LT to gain informed consent. At the time, there were 60 pupils that would have been eligible to complete the study. The LT were asked to forward the first email in the summer term

of 2022, three additional reminder emails were sent in the autumn term of 2022 and spring term of 2023. A total of 8 YP completed the questionnaires, none of the YP agreed to be contacted for a follow up interview.

For the second part of the study, the researcher contacted the LTs of the five SRBs in the region in the Autumn term of 2022, to recruit staff members for an online semi-structured interview. Three out of the five secondary SRBs in the region agreed to be part of the second phase and forwarded on the recruitment information to their staff. Five staff members from two SRBs completed the interview in the early Autumn term. A reminder email was sent out that recruited two more participants. Therefore, a total of seven staff members that work in three different SRBs completed the interview. The interviews explored how staff foster YP's SOB. The semi-structured interviews lasted for just under one hour. The interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams and they were automatically transcribed by the software and the researcher manually went over it to ensure that the transcription was verbatim. Ethical approval was discussed with all participants, confidentiality was assured, and they were advised that they would only be referred to by a pseudonym in any write up of the study.

A summary of the participants information can be found in Table 1. Pseudonyms and SRB identification number are used for the purpose of confidentiality.

Name	Role	SRB number
Rachel	HLTA	1
Sofia	SRB Lead Teacher	1
Conor	Teaching Assistant	2
Chloe	Teaching Assistant	2
Tess	HLTA	1
Abbie	Teaching Assistant	2
Scott	SRB Lead Teacher	3

Table 1: Participant information

3.5 Interview protocol and pilot

The aim of the interview protocol was to act as a guide, it was not prescriptive, and did not dictate the precise course of the discussion. The ultimate aim was to generate a clear picture of the views of the SRB staff on what works to foster SOB for YP in autism SRBs. The interview schedule focused on the themes of "how is belonging constructed and understood" and "do staff and students feel a sense of belonging".

A pilot interview was completed to aid design and test the interview schedule. The interview was conducted in October 2022 with a staff member who worked as a learning support assistant in an autism SRB. This was done to check for procedural problems with the interview, as well as to give the researcher a chance to practice the interviewing technique. The researcher then discussed the process with the interviewee following the pilot and no problems were encountered. The interview schedule was not altered after the pilot and therefore, with the interviewee's consent, the interview was transcribed and included in the data analyses.

3.6 Procedure

Each interview started with a brief introduction and a reminder about the purpose of the interview. Participants were asked if they had any questions and consent was verbally checked before the recording started. The interviews lasted on average 55 minutes (ranging from 45 to 60 minutes). The discussions were guided by an interview schedule and the interviews were semi-structured to ensure participants were free enough to discuss a variety of situations (see Appendix C.1). Participants were emailed the prompt sorting activity prior to their scheduled interview and asked to complete it independently. The participants' answers were then discussed at the start of their interview to help focus the interview and explore participant's beliefs.

3.7 Ethical Approval

This research was given ethical approval by the UEA's Ethics Committee (Appendix A.1). It was completed in accordance with the BPS

Code of Human Research Ethics (The British Psychological Society, 2021) and the HCPC standards (2015). All participants received an information sheet (Appendix B.1, B.2). For phase one, this was distributed to prospective participants by the SRB LT and included both parent and YP information sheets. Particular importance was given to ensuring that the YP understood the research project. Therefore, the YP's information sheets were designed to be easily understood and parents or carers were asked to read through the sheet with them. The information sheet outlined that implied consent was gathered by participants submitting the answers to the anonymous questionnaire.

For phase two, the SRB staff members received an information sheet attached with separate consent forms (Appendix B.2). The participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions via email or phone call prior to returning the signed consent forms to the researcher. Additional clarification for video / audio recording of the interviews was stressed to the staff members at the beginning of each remote interview to reconfirm consent for this.

The process of data collection during this project was completed in accordance with requirements of the Data Protection Act (2018) and the principles of General Data Protection Regulation. Video recording of the interviews were stored in the encrypted UEA (University of East Anglia) OneDrive system as per the University's Data Storage policy and were deleted after transcription. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for the transcripts and for all communications between the researcher and research supervisor to protect the participants' anonymity. These were assigned randomly by the researcher.

4.0 Analysis of data

4.1 Analysis of Phase one

The original aim for the quantitative data was to analyse if there was a difference between levels of SOB to the mainstream verses the levels of SOB to the SRB. It was hypothesised that YP would have greater levels of SOB to the SRB as this is where they have greater opportunities for social interaction with adults and peers, a known factor to foster SOB in YP not

identified with SEND (Allen & Kern, 2017; Goodenow & Grandy,1993; Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). However, following data collection and difficulties with recruitment, a total of 8 YP completed the questionnaire which was too small a sample for in depth analysis. Therefore, the data were imported into Excel and descriptive statistics were used to summarise the findings. As previous research using the PSSM (Goodenow, 1993) questionnaire had focused on descriptive statistics, it was thought useful to apply the same analysis techniques in the current research in order to be able to compare and contrast the findings with previous studies in the area. The researcher was aware of the sparsity of the quantitative data however felt strongly ethically compelled to include the summary as this was the only data that directly represented the YP views. Therefore, the quantitative data collected in phase one of the study was analysed with descriptive statistics, examining averages in levels of SOB in mainstream and within the SRB.

4.2 Analysis of Phase two

The data from phase two of the study, the semi-structured interviews, was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) based on the framework outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). The thematic analysis, using the template proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was completed to identify patterns of meaning and experience across the entire dataset collected from participants. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), this method involves seven steps: transcription, reading and familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and finalising the analysis.

The analysis used inductive and deductive thematic analysis to identify and analyse patterns (themes) that emerge from data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that inductive and deductive are not mutually exclusive and at times reflect points on a spectrum. This aligns with the declared ontological and epistemological position of the researcher in relation to the present study. The data was inductively coded where the content itself guided the developing analysis (Braun et al., 2016). However, most knowledge coding and theme development can capture meaning across the previously mentioned spectrum (Braun & Clarke, 2006;

Joffe, 2012). This helped the researcher gain a richer understanding of how staff foster SOB for YP within the autism SRBs.

Some argue that qualitative research should adhere to a more structured approach to minimise the researcher's influence on the process and achieve objective results (Brinkmann, 2015). On the other hand, reflexive thematic analysis requires a continual questioning of the researcher's bias and assumptions when interpreting and coding, allowing for reflective and thoughtful engagement with the data and the process (Braun & Clarke, 2022), and going beyond simply following a process of steps. In fact, Braun & Clarke (2022) recognise the recursive nature of reflexive thematic analysis, highlighting the need for researchers to move back and forward between steps.

Braun and Clarke (2022) note that there is no definitive answer to dataset size. They highlight the complexity of the influencing factors and note how the notion of statistical models and the concept of data saturation are problematic (Braun & Clarke, 2019). They instead invite the researcher to reflect on the information richness of the dataset and how this aligns with the requirements of the study.
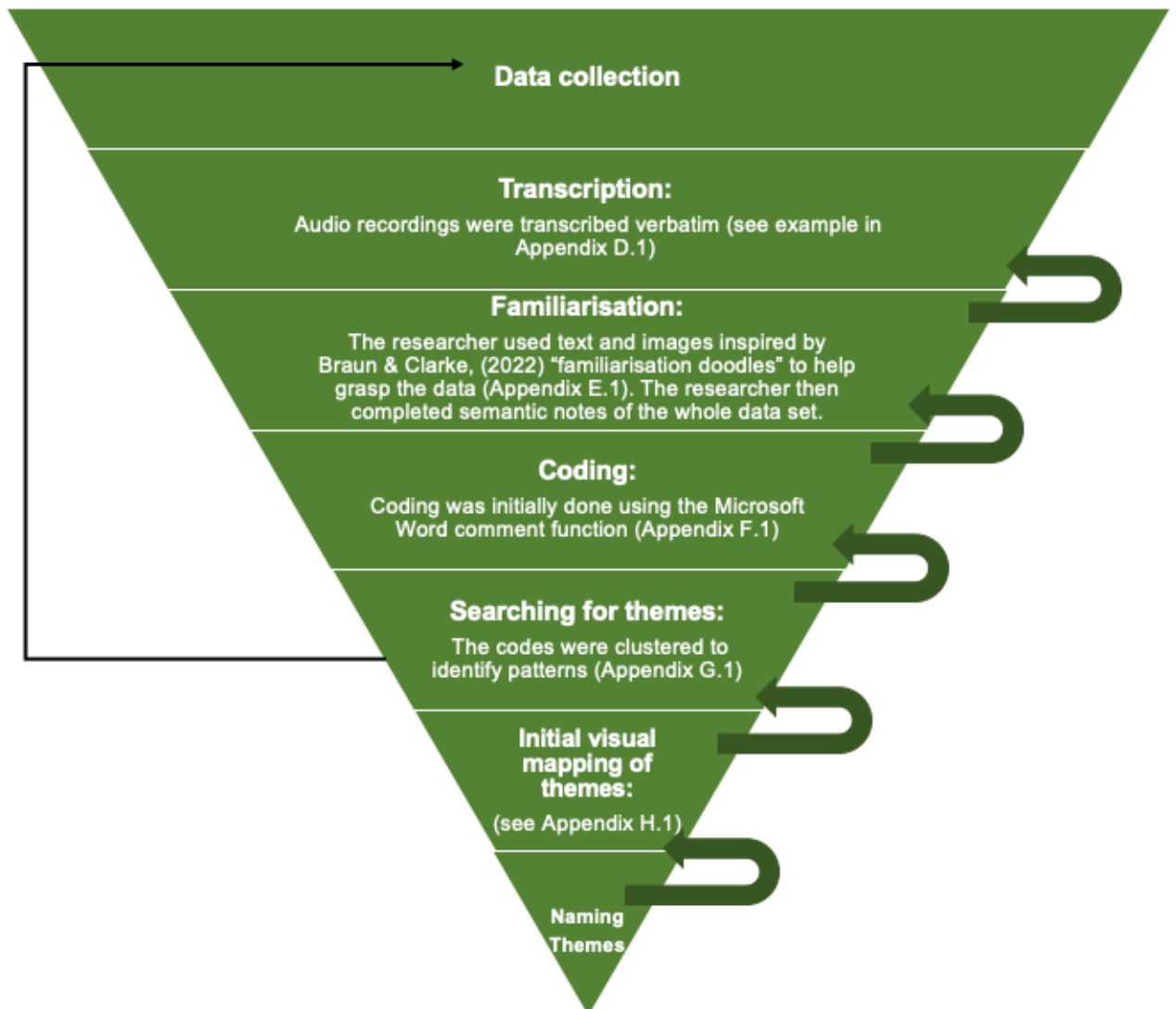
Figure 4: "Finding, losing and finding your way again" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 79)

This is outlined in Figure 4, highlighting the researcher's recursive journey using reflective thematic analysis (for further reflection on this, please see Chapter 3). The green arrows indicate the reflective process of moving between stages. The black arrow was part of the author's journey and shows the reflection and realisation that more data collection was needed.

5.0 Findings

5.1 Phase 1

Goodman, (1997) indicates that YP who score below "3" are indicative of low levels of school belonging. Overall, the mean SOB score for sense of school belonging remained above the threshold of concern (m=4.26 ± 0.58).
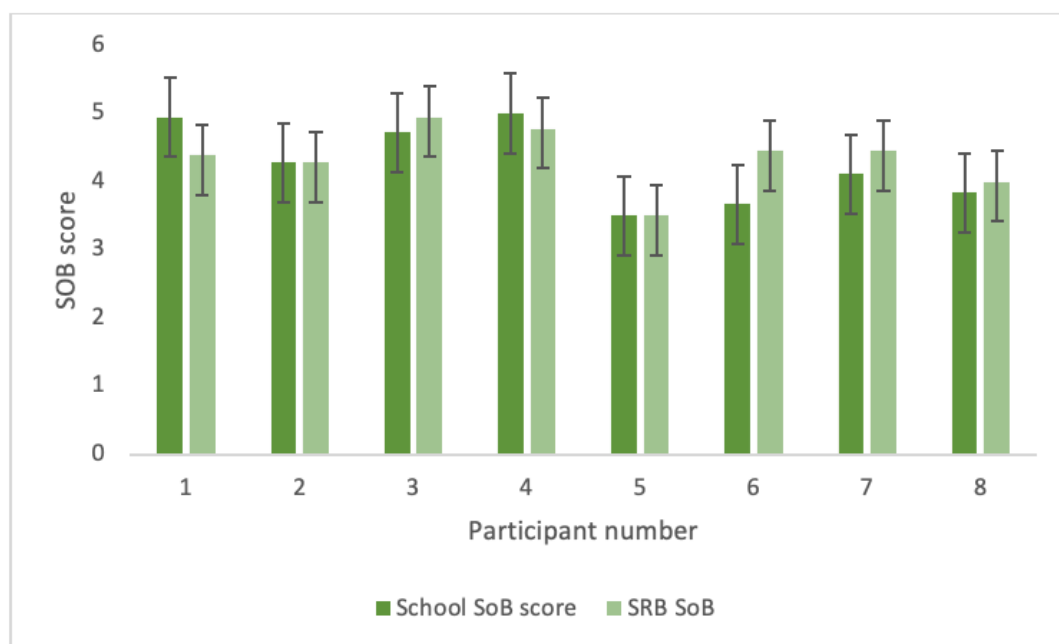
Figure 5: Levels of SOB

This was the same for the mean SOB score for SOB within the SRB (m=4.34 ± 0.45). 50% of participants had higher SRB SOB scores and 25% had higher school SOB scores. There was no meaningful difference between SRB SOB scores and school SOB scores, as evident in the figure above the error bars overlap.

The results from this study indicate that pupils in the SRB's overall reported levels of school belonging are above the threshold of concern according to Goodman (1997). The results are comparable to Hebron's (2018) findings that reported similar levels of SOB for YP on the autism spectrum through transition from primary to secondary. When assessed using the innovative questionnaire devised for this study to measure SOB to the SRB the average levels of SOB were slightly higher than the levels of general school belonging. However, there was no meaningful difference between the two groups. This could negate the hypothesis that YP would

have significantly higher levels of SOB to the SRB as compared to their school. Nonetheless, these results should be viewed with caution due to the limited sample size and the inclusion of different SRBs contributing to multiple factors that could not be controlled for.

5.2 Phase 2

Following multiple iterations of grouping codes to identify themes and refining the themes, the following core themes were identified:

  1. Equal opportunities

  2. 'Meaningful' relationships

  3. Communication and understanding of autism

  4. Whole-school policies

Each theme has subthemes, as seen in Figure 6 below:
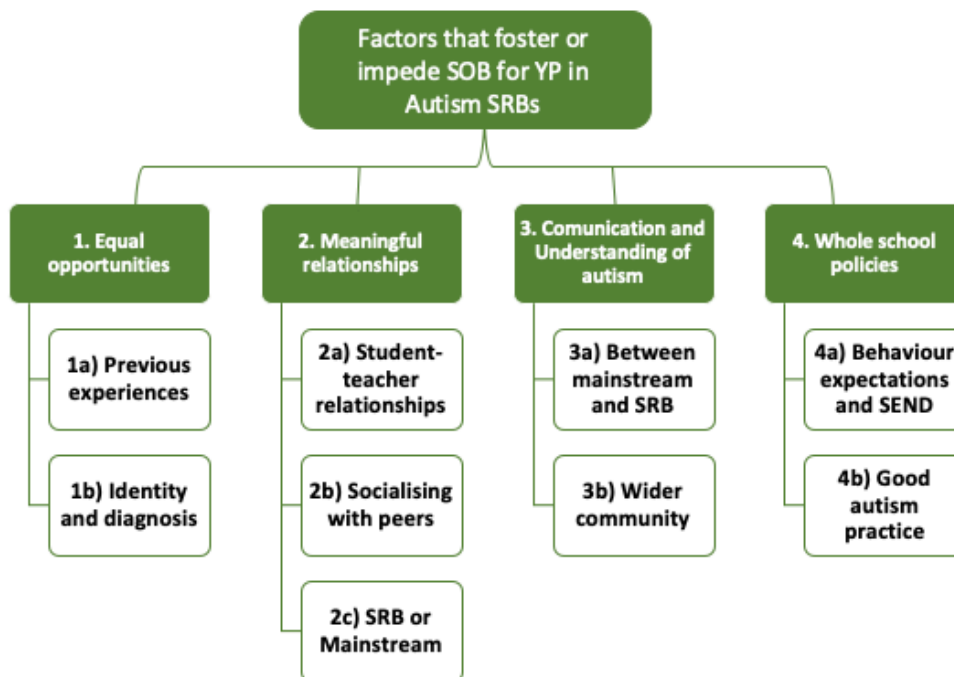
Figure 6: Thematic Map

The figure above shows the overarching theme of 'Factors that Foster or Impede Sense of Belonging for YP in Autism SRBs.' Overarching themes tend to organise an analysis as they provide structure with an idea that underpins a number of themes. However, overarching themes are rarely analysed in depth (Braun & Clark, 2019).

Throughout the process of analysis and upon identifying the five main themes, the author noted an underlying pattern within each theme. The theme either fostered or impeded the SOB for YP in autism SRBs. This indicates that the SOB for YP in autism SRBs seems to be linked to the four themes as described in depth below.

1: Equal opportunities – Striving for an inclusive world

The data analysis revealed the impact of the narrative around autism has on YP's SOB. Participants noted the impact of the systemic structures around these YP and how they have contributed to the creation of a "problem" narrative around the YP which with time became embedded within their identity. The participants noted the impact this has on the YP and how they work to promote inclusion and foster equal opportunities. Sofia worded it as:

> "*a lot of our children who have come to us have come from environments where they have felt like they are the problem… Everything that we talk to our children about is that the world, actually the big wide world is the problem and they're not making adaptations for you… if there's been a problem in the lesson where they've become sensory overwhelmed or people are being too loud. Whatever they'll [the YP] always apologise, they'll say I'm sorry I had to leave that lesson... Why are you sorry about the fact that the room is too noisy? Do you know what I mean? They [the class] need to be quiet for you… we're not moulding you into a mainstream state. We have to check the mainstream is fit for you.*"

This highlighted the unique role of the SRB and evidenced that it was not to "fix" the YP or "mould" them into mainstream but instead to ensure adaptations and support was in place, so the school was more inclusive. Others noted that within the school system they found these problem narratives were supported by the systemic structures in place. Rachel indicated:

"So, you might find that actually, when a child is labelled as naughty actually, they've got sensory processing disorder that's not been diagnosed, and they've sought out an environment that suits their needs."

Chloe on the other hand recounted an event of a mainstream teacher who had asked her to work independently with a YP as they were "too low" for this lesson. Chloe specified the effects this conversation had on the YP who overheard:

"Just one look, one negative comment, one little glance, can… particularly for that student… I mean if someone just looks at him wrong that is…like [that is] enough for him to feel so judged. His anxiety goes through the roof, he can't, he can't access the class. And so, he doesn't belong there. Because again, his words would be he is specialised."

This shows the impact of the YP's understanding of the environment as well as the teacher's comment and body language, which with time, contributes and reinforces an internalised narrative of where the YP feels they belong. Participants also reflected on how they work to change the narrative around the child, enabling them to understand their rights and support inclusion. Sofia said:

"So, I hope that they are empowered by those conversations, and I hope that they understand that they are fundamentally are entitled to have a Fidget toy. They're fundamentally entitled to sit on that wobble cushion. They're entitled to that extra five-minute break. They're entitled to a sensory space… as people they have entitlement just like everybody else…. I think sometimes [I am] quite defending of my children because actually that is the standard that they should be

getting. That's the standard they should be expecting and actually we should be empowering our children to… to have a voice and to say: 'I'm in your school and I need a Fidget toy' or 'I'm in your school and I you know I might not be able to sit up straight when you asked me to and I might sit down, [but that is] because I'm not quite sure of the social conventions, yet'… that's what I think."

Participants spoke about the problem narrative that surrounds the YP in the SRB, alluding to its effects on identity formation and how they come to understand themselves in relation to the systems around them. The staff's reflections shone a light on the negative or problem narrative that is often ingrained in conversations about these YP, recognising how with time these start to inform the YP's internalised discourse of identity as well as feelings of belonging. Tess phrased it as "*a lot of the times they [the YP] don't realise their own importance and their place in the world.*" Some staff members indicated that they felt part of their role is to empower these YP to stand up for themselves allowing the YP to see that they have a voice that will be listened to. The SRB staff communicated their role of advocating for the YP to ensure that they not only learn to advocate for themselves but also together work towards a more inclusive world where adaptations are made to the mainstream to ensure they belong. This theme was further elaborated by two subthemes that of "The impact of previous experiences at school and with family" and "Identity and diagnosis." These will be further explored in the following two sections.

1a: The impact of previous experiences at school and with family

This subtheme contributed to the theme of equal opportunities by identifying key experiences and adult figures that contribute to how YP come to understand themselves. It emerged from how the participants recognised the impact of previous non inclusive experiences both at school and at home were influencing YP's beliefs and values. Tess indicated that these experiences lead to "personal barriers" as the YP *"come with a lot of their sort of own self esteem issues and self-confidence"* needs. This section will

first explore the participants' reflections on previous school experiences and then look at the role of families around the YP.

Many participants spoke about the impact of previous school experiences and the YP's unmet needs in primary being the root cause of the YP's identity being intertwined with the problem narrative. For example, Sofia said:

> "*I think lots of children come with these preconceived ideas from either coming from a school placement that wasn't successful or coming from a primary school that didn't make those adjustments.*"

Rachel also indicated how previous experiences impact YP's desire to engage with peers and how this influences the YP's sense of belonging:

> "*our children are still trying to develop sense of belonging in themselves, let alone then sense of belonging amongst the community. And…those neurotypical children in the mainstream… they haven't yet developed that sense of belonging with them because they see them as obviously children that have always bullied them or targeted them and still see them as a danger.*"

These excerpts illustrate how the experiences and discourse around the YP impacts how the YP come to view themselves as well as how they learn to relate to others in the school. Participants note the "preconceived" ideas which are informed by negative past experiences act as a barrier to developing SOB for some. Participants raised key points about how getting a place in an SRB in itself can impact YP's perceptions and identity. Sofia acknowledges the complexities of telling YP that they need to be taught in a specialist provision and how that experience alone will impact how the YP identifies with the world and where they belong. Sofia described the transition as:

> "*at the moment…a placement has to fail… for them to get a place in a secondary SRB. Or they have to be transitioning to a*

school and [unlike their peers] they are not transitioning with their friends. Like you know they are transitioning to an SRB. Yeah, so what are we teaching them, therefore, about themselves if we [are] saying you need this specialist placement? So, a lot of that confidence… around themselves and their self-identity and their self-understanding has been diminished by a system that they've been in. Or a schooling system that hasn't understood them or they haven't got the same friendship groups, or they don't understand social niceties, or you know. What are we teaching our children about themselves when we put them into environments that don't understand them?"

These powerful words show the impact of placing YP in environments with adults that are not aware of their needs or how to support them. Recognising that YP will develop their identity and self-understanding in relation to their surroundings, therefore questioning the long-term impact of these environments that are diminishing the YP's confidence. This was also noted by other participants who spoke about the impact of school experiences for example being on a reduced timetable, excluded or taught outside or in a different classroom. They communicated how these experiences have time and time again taught these YP that they do not belong in mainstream schooling.

Others identified the influences of family experiences and how these played a crucial role in the YP's development of SOB. Chloe noted the differences in how families support YP:

"So, for those students that have parents…that know that their child has a special need…They'll [the parents] support that child with their barriers to learning, and with that special need. But that child is still treated as an equal within that family unit…[Other YP might get] *told off all the time or ridiculed or…made to feel an inconvenience or told they can't do things all the time or called names.*"

Here, Chloe expressed the various home environments and how having a loving and supportive home environment can act as a protective factor supporting equal opportunities. However, also acknowledging how family's beliefs and understanding of SEND can act as a barrier when reinforcing the problem narrative. Rachel alluded to the imbalance of the power dynamics within the system and the need for parents to fight to get the support for their children, she commented on how this influences how parents' can go on to interact with school staff.

> "*I think, a lot of the times, parents can be a bit of a barrier. Sometimes they've spent years fighting the system, and when they're finally in a position where they don't need to fight, they kind of feel a little bit lost.*"

The subtheme of previous experiences highlighted how non-inclusive schooling can feed into YP views of not belonging to the mainstream school. This subtheme was further explored through the lens of the family network and ascertains the different roles parents can play. Participants identified how some families can act as a protective factor by supporting and fighting the system to ensure the YP's needs are met, however unsupportive families can act as a barrier to developing SOB for these YP. Interestingly, SRB staff described a dichotomy between previous school experiences and how SRBs work, elaborating on how these systems around the child impact the YP's view of themselves. Participants commented on the inherent structures in place, questioning if they are fit for purpose, by putting YP in difficult environments that do not understand them and having parents battle for appropriate support. Staff raised multiple concerns about what the previous negative school experiences are teaching the YP about themselves.

1b: Identity and diagnosis

Identity and diagnosis is another subtheme that emerged under the Equal opportunities theme. This subtheme captures the different influences of diagnosis on identity and how that contributes to the narratives around the YP and their development of SOB. Abbie commented that a lot of YP feel limited by their diagnosis, saying:

> *"the children… will come in and say, 'oh, I can't do this because I've got autism'…because, that's what they've been told by their parents…So many limits and caps and restrictions, [are] put on their growth not because of their ability, but because of the attitude of their family."*

Although this extract shares similarities with the previous subtheme (that highlighted the role of families around the YP), it contrasts by exploring the power of labels. Abbie identifies the nuances of how the YP come to understand themselves through their understanding of the diagnosis attached to them. Rachel also noted the influences of the negative stigmatisation of autism and describe how within the SRB they work to change that:

> *"they [the YP in the SRBs] come with a negative stigmatisation of their diagnosis. Or they didn't have a diagnosis. And when they have been given the ability to turn it [the label] into this superpower and learn more about it for themselves and for the community… They wear that [as a] label with pride. Now, I think, if we can embed that into children from a young age, we can have less anxious children, less children worrying about being neurodiverse, and it might be celebrated more and accepted more."*

> *"[Helping YP say] 'Yeah I'm autistic and this is great'. And watching them create a belonging around their diagnosis, around their needs, it is just huge. And I think that's contributed a lot to their sense of belonging and them feeling happy."*

Rachel comments on the importance of how that label is viewed by the adults around the YP. Speaking of her work in the SRB as a transition for YP, going from having a negative perception to becoming proud of who they are. This was further explored by describing the systemic structures in place and the inequality around the process of getting a diagnosis. Rachel mentioned how YP waiting for a diagnosis are presented with ambiguity

around their identity. She described how the process can impact on the YP's SOB as at times YP are given misinformation or being misdiagnosed:

> "*four years to get an official diagnosis and… and I can't say to her … you've been diagnosed with this [autism]. It's telling her "that you present as this" and I don't want to give her misinformation about her own identity. For each of the years she ended up, not having that diagnosis…I've miscommunicated her own needs to her. I think being diagnosed as soon as you can is really important because there are children here [in the SRB] that are so clearly autistic that still haven't been diagnosed…I feel they can't [yet] say they're autistic when they definitely are.*"

This section suggests an interesting interplay between the diagnostic route and identity for these YP. However more crucially it identifies the concern and worries of the staff members working in the SRB who are hesitant to communicate YP's needs in case they misinform the YP's identity formation. Rachel also noted the discrepancy between how males and females are diagnosed with autism mentioning how this influences the development of coping strategies to try to fit in.

> "*I know statistically it takes on average eight years for a girl to be diagnosed with autism. In the meantime, she's being misdiagnosed with many other things. Or she's developing comorbid diagnosis of anxiety which is developed from masking and creating those sort of communication skills.*"

Five participants noted the beneficial impacts of changing the narrative around the diagnosis and supporting YP to explore their unique qualities and strengths. Sofia spoke about activities they do in the SRB where they explore history of famous autistic individuals, and how these activities contribute to a shift in discourse saying:

> "*We spoke to the children about what their strengths are and their autism and how they feel about being autistic and what great things they can do.*"

Tess also spoke about developing role models and said not only does looking at famous autistic people act as *"a real celebration of autism"* but it also helps the YP *"to understand their autism."* Interestingly, Rachel had a slightly different view indicating that she identifies as neurodiverse and mentioned how useful it can be for YP to learn about famous people but also the importance of exploring realistic role models within the community to develop their SOB:

> *"People with neurodiversity can be successful at different levels, so we do history… which is history of famous autistic people, and obviously they are very successful and they're rich. But then they also get to see on a day-to-day basis, a functioning neurodiverse person who isn't full of loads of money. Just doing, a standard job that you know, and it's a good representation of what they can achieve. And they don't have to go for the highest thing."*

In the staff's reflections they also identified that having the label of "autistic girl" was beneficial to support with identity and SOB. Tess highlighted the need to give young autistic girls a safe space to be able to identify with each other:

> *"we've got a Girls Club, that's run by one of our TAs… that gives them an opportunity to talk to each other about stuff. It can be anything from sort of PSHE kind of related things, like periods and things like, you know, talking about friendships, talking about relationships…but it gives the girls the confidence to have that chat together."*

Tess went on to elaborate this idea further, saying that it allowed for the girls to normalise experiences and realise that they are not alone. Tess also noted how this had the power to add a new label to their identity and another group to form a belonging with, saying YP could say *"I'm not only… you know… an autistic person, but I'm an autistic girl."*

The theme of Equal opportunities explored the influences of the narrative around autism and how this impacts the YPs SOB. This theme was

made up by two subthemes, the first captured the impact of YP's experiences of schooling and family and how these can act as protective factors or barriers to the development of SOB. The second theme explored the intricate relationship between identity and diagnosis, with a comment on the systemic inequalities that contribute to delays in identification of need.

2: Meaningful relationships

This section will explore the theme of meaningful relationships which emerged from participants describing the importance of relationships, interaction with peers and staff and how this contributes to the YP's developing SOB. The staff reflected on how they support YP to develop relationships with staff and peers, highlighting the need to ensure that the expectation is not for the YP to conform to "neurotypical" relationships, but to support YP to have meaningful relationships if that is what they want. This theme is separated into three subthemes which captures in further depth the different relationships and interactions, the first is *student-teacher relationships*, the second is *socialising with peers* and the third is *SRB or mainstream*.

2a: Student-teacher relationships

This section will explore the subtheme of student-teacher relationships. Staff spoke about the complexity around ensuring YP form strong relationships with their teachers and key staff members while also maintaining professional boundaries. Rachel indicated that:

> "*Coming up and seeing our young children. Like seeing them face to face, is really important, because they need to understand and build better relationships face to face. Because they have spent, so long doing online learning… and communication nowadays is all through social media. So, I think, it is really important, for all staff, to be involved face to face and to really create those relationships… We do have staff, that do come up, and join us at breaks or lunches, to come and sort of be with the children. And we also get to be with them at breaks and*

lunches as well, which is lovely…there are boundaries in place and professional healthy relationships… Obviously, you want to develop their sense of being and you want to develop a really personal relationship with them because they're fantastic. You spend so much time with them, but then they're obviously all the professional boundaries."

This highlighted the complexities of ensuring YP needs are met while also noting the need for boundaries around those relationships. Scott identified similar complexities, saying:

"I do think most importantly we [SRB staff] give a bit of ourselves, you know, who we are, our senses of humour, our interests, a little bit about us. I have always felt really strongly about this and I'm gonna read you something actually… [Scott read a bit from a book he has written]

'Do not change your identity as a professional working with young people but please do reflect on how emotionally available you make yourself. Do you use your emotions in your work to engage and connect with young people or is your only focus on meeting arbitrary frameworks and standards? Outcomes are not just grades. Equipping young people with the life skills they need to flourish in society is equally as important, but we cannot expect reciprocal emotional literacy if we do not demonstrate it and model it ourselves…'

I do not think anyone can successfully work with young people, let alone young people with neurodiversity and you know neurodiverse needs, if they do not open up a little bit… [and show] who they are. You have to protect who you are, you know, you don't go and say to the kids your children's names, or like, what you did this weekend, that isn't appropriate but it's alright like to tell a kid that you struggled at school."

Interestingly, many of the participants spoke about the difficulties between being one's authentic self, by sharing humour, interests and experiences and compared it with this professional shield that at times

hinders true authenticity. Scott goes on to explore the concept of being emotionally available and maintaining one's professional identity further highlighting the importance of modelling all types of human interactions. Others indicated that they sometimes find staff members are occasionally unsure of how to talk with the YP from the SRB. This at times impedes mainstream teachers from developing relationships with YP. Chloe said:

> "*Sometimes you go to a classroom and the adult [teaching] won't know there's a student from the SRB… [other times] they [the teacher] will overcompensate and not speak to them [the YP from the SRB] at all. Or they will speak to them, and if, they [the teacher] don't get the response the same as they would anybody else, that can be awkward and difficult for the child.*"

Chloe's comments convey the difficulties experienced by mainstream staff who are unsure of how to support YP with social communication needs. All participants had useful ideas of how to support better communication with many recognising the benefits of engaging YP in their interests. Sofia indicated it is often helpful to send out one-page profiles to make adults aware of the YP's interests to help staff feel able to start conversations with YP from the SRB. Sofia said:

> "*our teachers [need] to feel confident, that they can engage with our children. In a way that our children will feel received and welcomed. I mean, so, if they've [the YP] got a special interest… yeah, Henry Hoover? 'Please ask Bob about Henry Hoover' or 'please ask Sara about Pokémon' because actually that's their [the YP's] safety, isn't it?... engaging them in their talents and their interests, is just us, appreciating them for everything they are.*"

Conor reflected on his own experiences of developing his key person relationship with a YP in the SRB and said:

> "*The first thing was to engage the student's interests. They [the YP] had a set of interests that were based around… aircraft and military planes and stuff like that. And my dad worked on*

military aircraft when I was growing up. So, I kind of, had that connection, which I could go back to and we discussed the different things. And we went on Google and we searched them [the aircrafts] up and then it kind of went from there. But also trying to kind of give a bit of yourself to the… relationship. In terms of, if I didn't know something, or, I wasn't confident about something, I'd always try to be very, sort of truthful and honest about that."

Participants also discussed the impacts of positive feedback. Identifying that by noticing the YP's strengths, this enabled the staff to build relationships that effectively supported the YP. For example, Sofia said:

"*I've only ever wanted to teach the children, what amazing brains they have. And, what amazing children they are. And what amazing talents they have, and, how many strengths they have and how wonderful it is to be autistic because of XYZ. And recognising that they've got sensory processing needs and what they are… I vehemently believe that we should be teaching them the skills that they need to be functioning adults out there without, you know, without fear.*"

The subtheme of student-teacher relationships explored the complexity for staff around balancing the forming a professional relationship with students while also modelling how, within the relationship, you may share elements of your own personal identity. They noted the difficulties of how some adults may not know how to communicate with the YP in the SRB and elaborated on what SRB staff do to foster meaningful relationships between the mainstream teachers and the YP within the SRB. As well as indicating the impact of staff within the SRB constantly modelling different types of social interaction while ensuring that they remain emotionally available. This subtheme highlighted the impact of effective teacher and student relationship on the YP's SOB.

2b: Socialising with peers

This subtheme emerged from how staff spoke about supporting YP from the SRB to develop meaningful relationships with their peers.

Participants touched upon multiple strategies and ways to support peer relationships but emphasised that the important aim was for the YP to find meaning in friendships, not for the YP to conform to "neurotypical" relationships. Rachel said:

> "[the YP] can develop really good strategies. So, if there have been difficulties with peers, they know how to overcome that. And [the YP] know what a good friend is. But not just, to know, but actually to embed that and be a good friend. And actually, find meaningfulness in a friendship. Rather than, this is how I should socialise…[it should be] I want to socialise, and I know how to socialise. And I feel, I can socialise. It's just, removing those anxieties around the expected behaviour. It is actually embedding, the meaningfulness behind it."

Rachel expressed the barriers that these YP experience when socialising with peers. She commented on how SRB staff work from moving the YP away from acting when socialising to actually feeling and finding meaning in socialising. Sofia also noted the individual differences in YP's interests in socialising or engaging with peers saying:

> "lots of our children are perfectly fine. I don't wanna put them all in one box, and say, you know… no one has social skills. Because some of our kids are really social, really empathetic… it is about fostering the needs and having a look at the children and their presentation. And saying, well actually… child B, is sitting by themselves at lunchtime for four weeks. But knowing also, that child B might want to sit by himself. And that's OK. He might want to observe for a bit, what things look like up here. And he might not wanna be her friend. I think so much of the time we force this neurotypical idea on children about fostering friendships and actually some of our children, just wanna be on their own. And that's alright too, you know."

This excerpt emphasises the need to move away from a social norm, or "box", and with that leave behind the expectation that these YP need interventions to fit in with these norms. Instead, Sofia suggests adults should support YP by identifying the need and presentation and supporting them to

be themselves. However, the staff highlight the nuances and identify that some YP wish to interact with peers nevertheless they experience barriers to forming friendship. In these situations, Rachel and Sofia both speak about the need to ensure that YP have the chance to explore peer friendships in a non-threatening manner. This was also highlighted by Scott who stressed the impact of changes to the environment to support peer interaction.

> *"I'll tell you what, one of the things we changed which you might find interesting. The class was [originally] set out in individual rows like all the other classrooms. So, like, tables for two students to sit at…I have [now] clustered them all in fours. And set them diagonally, off set to the walls of the room. Every lunch time the year sevens and year eights all sit together around the four seated table. And they'll bring up extra chairs and they'll sit, and they'll have lunch and then they will bring a game out. And you know they are sitting together, and they are talking and chatting, and it is brilliant. And they wouldn't have done that if the tables had been set out how they were before. Because that is set up like a classroom. While it is [still] a classroom, and I still teach in it, I don't want it to be that space during unstructured times. So, when we made that decision to change it, it was genius."*

This subtheme highlighted how staff support YP to develop meaningful friendships with their peers while also acknowledging that each individual may go about forming friendships in a different way. Participants reflected on the different strategies they used to foster peer friendship, for example, changing the environment, talking through what friendships might look like to modelling social interactions. In the conversations, they alluded to how meaningful friendships influence YP's SOB speaking of the need to reject conforming societal norms and instead focus on the unique aspects of each individual in the SRB.

2c: SRB or mainstream

A third subtheme to emerge from the data was where YP form their alliances, whether it is the SRB or within the mainstream. Participants reflected on their perceptions of the YP's SOB and spoke about how each

individual will use the SRB differently. The staff reflected on how some YP gain what they need from the SRB and this in turn impacts how the YP develop their belonging.

Scott spoke about how he thinks of the YP's SOB, he indicated that the majority of the YP in the SRB develop a SOB to the SRB first and this scaffolds them for developing it within the wider community. This was similar to how Racheal viewed SOB.

Scott said:

"I tell you how I could scale this in my mind... I say that about 60% - 70% of the students in the SRB, that have a place, spend all their breaks and lunches here. And [they] are comfortable enough to come and talk to us about issues. So, in my mind, they have a sense of belonging because they use the SRB on a daily basis…In all unstructured times their preference is to be in here... they can play some games, they can eat their lunch. There are toilets in here that they can use that aren't part of the main school. It is little things like that, that would suggest, that those students have a sense of belonging [to the SRB]. But on the flip side we have a year 11… and he doesn't access the SRB at all and he is fully integrated into the mainstream."

Racheal said:

"our children are still trying to develop sense of belonging in themselves, let alone the sense of belonging amongst the community. And they've developed a sense of belonging with their peers in the SRB, who are like them. They have a double empathy for that. Whereas, those neurotypical children, and the mainstream, they haven't yet developed that sense of belonging with them."

These two extracts frame the SRB as a steppingstone for some YP to experiment with identity and belonging. Allowing them to gradually build on their understanding of themselves in relation to those around them in the SRB before having to do it with the wider school system. On the other hand,

Conor and Chloe indicated that the picture wasn't so clear and each YP used the SRB in a slightly different way indicating that this had an impact on how they developed their SOB. Conor said:

> *"I think that it's a bit of a mixed bag. In terms of, some of the students are very much, kind of, outside in the mainstream with their peers. At break and lunch in mainstream classes. And we usually see them pop their head in and have a chat if something had happened. Other students, are more, kind of, very much in the SRB all the time and occasionally, would sort of, go out to very specific kind of lessons."*

Tess also alluded to differences in how YP view and use the SRB, she also spoke about the SRB staff's role in bridging the gap between YP's belonging to the different environments.

> *"Some of our children do feel like there's a difference like they do have their belonging in the mainstream. But they also have their belonging in here [the SRB] and they kind of, go sort of, hand in hand. But some children do struggle with that divide. But that's what we do… we kind of bridge that gap, and whatever they need to sort of help them succeed in the mainstream as well and have that sense of belonging. We are here to help them with that"*

The SRB staff's comments provide further evidence that no two YP are the same, they each use the SRB in different ways and hence also form their belonging in unique ways. All staff acknowledge that the flexibility of the SRB format enables them to provide that individualised support for the YP. The theme of meaningful relationships is made up of three subthemes one that encapsulates the importance and impact of the teacher's relationship with the YP. This was explored through participants reflections of how they work to foster relationships with YP in the SRB. It also stressed the difficulties experienced by some staff who are unsure of how to interact with students from the SRB. The second subtheme explored the importance of meaningful peer relationships, helping YP to develop skills in socialising without imposing an expectation on what peer relationships should look like because of a social construct. Lastly, the third subtheme noted the individual

differences in how the YP use the SRB and how this influences the development of their meaningful relationships and in turn their SOB.

3: Communication and understanding of autism

The participants all made reference to the crucial impact of communication and its influence on SOB for YP within the SRB. The theme of communication and understanding of autism emerged in part from staff reflecting on elements that were currently working well, in conjunction with considering areas in need of development. The theme captures two key components as seen by the subthemes below: communication between mainstream and SRB, and communication with the wider community.

3a: Communication between mainstream and SRB

This subtheme was evident across the data with participants detailing experiences of how they communicate with staff from other departments in the school to support a shared understanding as well as enabling them to provide better support to the YP. Some staff members highlighted the areas that were working well and identified what supported effective communication between SRB and mainstream. Tess indicated that:

> "*we're communicating all the time, and the teachers will ask us about our children if there is something, they're unsure of. They [will] quite happily approach us about that, and we have, like a staff bulletin, that goes out...*"

This was also noted by Rachel who referred to staff qualities such as being open, and nurturing helped to:

> "*create that environment where the staff feel they can approach us and feel they can ask questions.*"

Sofia indicated that this openness encourages teachers to come with questions on how they can appropriately support YP, saying:

"I hope that, I'm quite open to people and people do approach me and say 'look you know, I've got this young person in my class and I'm just a bit worried about them, and their processing is a bit… You know… is a bit slow and could we help them in this way.' Like even mainstream [staff] who are teaching children who aren't in the SRB say 'I've got an autistic child in Year 10. He's really struggling with this concept of characterization in Shakespeare. What can I do? How can I make it more visual?' So, it's just about, I think, opening dialogues with teachers…and I hope, that because we [SRB staff] do a good job, [mainstream] teachers notice that and kind of, take our opinions with a bit of weight, I think."

Tess, Rachel and Sofia all speak of SRB staff qualities such as being open and approachable help to foster that open dialogue between SRB and mainstream. On the other hand, Scott noted that this is not always the case saying:

"So, there are still, and always will be, a number of teachers, including members of the SLT, who just don't understand autistic kids. Yeah, and therefore, you know, that is a massive barrier."

Scott went on to say that this has been something they have been working on and that they have now had more involvement from the Senior Leadership Team. Other participants alluded to not feeling heard by other staff members in the school and how this influenced their ability to support the development of SOB for the YP as well as their own SOB. Chloe said:

"I felt very supported from my core team… [On the other hand] within the main school, just as a TA, there will be very different approaches from teachers, to your sense of belonging. Some will make you feel like you are part of an extension of them. So, that will be like "Mrs is here to support you. She's my eyes and ears. If she's sanctions you, that applies." Other people will treat you like a photocopier. And sometimes you just get ignored really and left to do your own thing. I think that's really nice to be acknowledged, [it helps] me to feel comfortable and like I belong."

This extract shows the importance of staff belonging, highlighting how different mainstream classes have diverse understandings of how best to use support staff. Conor also denoted the difficulties in communicating with mainstream staff which acts as a barrier to effective collaboration. He reflected on previous positions and noted how where the SRB is located and having limited access to the staff room impacts regular contact with other staff members. Conor also mentioned the influence of arriving late or early to class to support YP's sensory needs suggesting that although beneficial for the YP it impacts staff's ability to talk to one another. He said:

> *"[Arriving late to class] that effects, sort of a separation and the engagement with teachers as well…There is a feeling, that every time you step into the classroom, you're not quite sure what's going on. Whereas, in my previous position, it was a case of, you could, kind of, have discussions with the teacher on a regular basis. And you could, kind of, develop an approach between the two of you. [In the SRB position] sometimes… it is rare but sometimes, there is this feeling of… being in opposition to the teacher. Because we are, not just in opposition to the teacher, but the teacher would kind of accede to us and say 'that is one of your students' essentially, so, 'you deal with that and I'm gonna get on with the teaching' of the class"*

Conor isolates an interesting power dynamic between mainstream staff and SRB staff which at times appears to position the staff as in opposition of each other and this complicates effective collaboration. Rachel reflected on previous roles and described how at times she felt her voice was not being heard by higher management within the school.

> *"For me, I think the only thing that's sort of missing, is sort of, how you could be engaging more with like SLT. Just there's no engagement from sort of the head teachers…whereas, in previous roles where the head teacher has met and engaged with support staff, that, was really good. And I think sort of engaging regardless of the position that you are in… So, for me it just basically…the SLT approaching the SRB. Even if they came, what, [like] once a*

month? Like, [just] to take that time to just meet with everyone. If there are any concerns to discuss those concerns, if there's anything going well to say what's going well and just to really sort of boost that morale. Because obviously we know we're doing a fantastic job here… but it's just then hearing it actually from that mainstream management cohort who technically do run us, along with the trust. Just knowing that actually what we're doing is the right thing, and if there are any concerns that they are willing to sort of fix it."

Participants explored the impacts of various experiences of effective and non-effective communication between SRB and mainstream staff. They identified that staff qualities of being open and approachable fostered communication and help not only their own SOB but also the YP's SOB as it enabled them to better support children within both the SRB and in the mainstream. Other participants indicated that at times they felt effective communication was not in place and their "voice was not being heard" they spoke about how this influenced their ability to effectively do their job and therefore impacted YP's SOB.

3b: Wider community

This subtheme encompasses how SRB staff strive to work in a holistic and systemic manner, not only to support a better understanding of autism in the peers and teachers in the mainstream, but also to support the wider community including families. Sofia, Rachel, and Tess spoke about supporting the mainstream peer awareness of autism and how this helps to bridge the gap with the school as well as extending into the wider community. Sofia said:

"Things like the ambassador program… [which is] bringing education to children and students that perhaps teachers haven't had… cause I mean. I know when I trained to be a teacher, I had one day of SEND training, all in all, and that was it. So, our children who are ambassadors are trained in autism more than some of our… teachers. It's actually, it's about, kind of saying, you know,

we want a better world and a better school for our autistic community? How can we do that?"

Tess said:

> "*Basically, it's children in the mainstream, they can sign up to be ambassadors…and they have a course of six training sessions… teaching them all about autism… So, the ambassador program is really good because it spreads the information. It goes home to parents and friends and family outside of the school into the even bigger community. So, not just into the mainstream of the school but into our town*"

These extracts emphasise the significance of educating mainstream peers to have a greater understanding of inclusion and show how this information not only cascades through the school but also ripples out into the community. Scott spoke of the impact of the lack of understanding that some YP have and how he responds by educating these children about the equality act:

> "*So, I coach the Year 7 football team and we've had an issue with some of the kids bullying one of my SRB students… Basically [I] explained the Equality Act to them. Really briefly and then said, 'if you're going to discriminate against someone, you're not playing for my football team' and that's a barrier. Isn't it? …the exposure they [the YP in the mainstream] have had… It's something that I wanna work on within the school… I'm not, I don't feel like the other students fully understand the role of the SRB… within the school. I think they kind of just think…. I'm gonna be really blunt here… to a lot of them 'it is just where the special kids go'- and that is not the case…"*

Scott raises thought-provoking points about how the SRB is perceived not only by the mainstream staff but also the peers in the mainstream. He explored how the role of the SRB has to be clearly communicated to all to support greater inclusion. Tess spoke about the effects of supporting SRB families to create a network and the impact this has on community, families and YP's SOB. Highlighting the need for effective communication between

SRB staff and families and clarifying that these relationships need to have solid foundations of trust and respect to support this communication.

> "*You know, we do a lot of family support as well… We've got parents and children coming in for a quiz and Chips night before we break up for half term. Because it's, well, it's just it's a lovely opportunity for the parents to get together, because you know, we really do sort of foster them, creating their own sort of support networks away from school as well. So, we do you know we do a lot of community engagement with our children and their families.*"

Chloe indicated the difficulties that YP in SRBs experience because they come from diverse areas and only a few live within the school's catchment area. Therefore, they have to travel away from their home community to the school community. Chloe highlighted how this impacts staff's ability to support them within the wider system as they often travel by taxi and would have limited access to extracurricular activities.

> "*Most of our students do not live around here. That's difficult to then support them with that extra curriculum…And so I know that for my student I've looked at what is around in the area. There's very little around in their area that they can go to unsupported…In his local area, he doesn't have any sense of belonging, I don't think*"

This theme captures the impact of understanding of autism and effective communication to the staff as well as the YP. The subtheme of communication between mainstream and SRB highlighted how the SRB staff work to develop a better shared understanding of the YP's needs by fostering communication. Many participants spoke about the obstacles they experience with this. The second subtheme of wider community explores how developing mainstream peers' awareness of autism can have a cascading effect within the wider community. Participants also spoke of the influences of family involvement and extracurricular activities on SOB for YP in the SRB. Identifying a novel barrier for YP's SOB to the wider community

as SRBs are not always located within their home community and the YP often have to travel by taxi.

4: Whole-school policies

All participants noted the impact of whole-school policies, not only having an influence on the way the SRB staff and mainstream staff worked but also impacting the YP directly. Multiple policies were mentioned (for example, safeguarding policies, uniform policies, homework policies and behaviour policies) and a subtheme emerged about the behavioural expectations in cases where policies do not reflect current SEND legislation. This contributed to the second subtheme, as many highlighted the need for a whole-school good autism practice policy to support best practice.

4a: Behavioural expectations and SEND

Six participants spoke about the difficulties of behavioural expectations and how these often do not acknowledge the YP SEN needs within the policies. Sofia said:

> "*I suppose, it is because our children are not one-size-fits-all. They don't fit all boxes in terms of your behaviour policy, your uniform policy, your homework policy, your XYZ. I mean, our school is very ordered, and very black and white. Routines and expectations are reiterated to our children and our children don't have to negotiate in terms of which classroom they're going [to, or] which behaviour policy they're going to be following. Cause everyone does the same thing. All our children walk around the school silently. It's very quiet and calm and I get that. But I also get that sometimes our children aren't that black and white and sometimes they need, you know, additional help with their uniform... So, I think it's… a juxtaposition…because we are creating this lovely welcoming environment for them, but then the uniform policy will say they need to have that shirt tucked in. And that's not true for our children, so I guess flexibility around that would be*

something…because our children shouldn't get detention because their pens run out or they forgot their pen…I think it's around that I mean, we make lots of reasonable adjustments for our children in the school. But I think policy and procedures are quite far behind where they should be. In terms of what we're looking for, in terms of our children, from a SEND perspective."

Interestingly, Sofia specifies that although SRB staff make reasonable adjustments and advocate for the YP within the SRB, the policies and awareness of best practice are not accurately evidenced in the school paperwork. She questions if school policies are outdated alluding to them being an obstacle to a school wide understanding of need. Rachel also noted the mismatch between policy and the reality of SEND support, saying:

"I think the behaviour policy as well as how children are expected to behave…[suggests behaviour to be] in a neurotypical manner. So, behaviour policies are never created with SEND in mind. They try and say that they use the SEND policy to create behaviour policies. But I never see that as the case, because behaviour policies are that these children must wear this particular uniform at all times, otherwise they get sanctions. Behaviour policies indicate: [that if a] child hasn't completed a homework then there must be sanctions. That if your child arrives late to a lesson, they must have sanctions. That they need toilet passes to access toilets. And the behaviour policies dictate so much that go against neurodiverse children. And we're not just talking about autism. We're talking all the various SEND needs that are out there. And there's so many… it's just behaviour policy for me, it's always been sort of, one that's very blasé and doesn't fit the needs of any learner… let alone…let alone any neurodiverse learner."

Rachel also challenges the usefulness of behavioural expectations questioning again if this is an attempt to make the YP conform to societal norms, ignoring their unique qualities. Intriguingly, she queries the policy's usefulness for any learner regardless of need. Chloe acknowledged the

impact that the language and actions used to communicate behavioural expectations have on YP's SOB.

> "*So, you will have 'serial offenders', they call them. And 'sanctions' and 'punishments'…I hate all those words. And so, if you've got somebody that's really struggling [with] their behaviour and… [they are] being [put] in the internal exclusion…That internal isolation, repeatedly, over and over, is reinforcing that they don't belong: 'You're not in the right place'. 'You're not good enough for us'.*"

This excerpt shows the power of language and actions on SOB, identifying that YP that are put through a punitive system based on rewards and sanctions eventually intrinsically learn that they do not fit within the educational system, and this is how they come to understand and conceptualised their identity and belonging. Conor spoke about the mainstream staff's misunderstanding of equality and how teachers strive to apply the policies equally across the classroom thinking this is inclusive, however, he noted how this does not account for the YP's needs. This alludes to the importance of striving for equity, ensuring that YP's needs are accounted for, and individualised support is put in place to enable true equality.

Some indicated that there were elements of the policy that supported SOB for YP. For example, Tess spoke about how the clarity of the behavioural expectations supported SOB and the development of community. Tess also indicated that aspects of the behavioural policy meant that the corridors are always quiet and therefore the YP can easily transition from classes with all the other YP.

> "*having a good structure in school, really helps you know. Our rules and expectations are black and white. Which obviously helps and that's for the whole school, so it's really inclusive…There are reasonable adjustments, of course, there are! But, I think, just having that structure and those boundaries in place that creates a sense of belonging because it is a community.*"

Chloe also noted how whole-school values can help SOB:

"underlying message [in the policies] that is everyone is important as everybody else. Whether you're a teacher, whether you're a teaching assistant, whether you're a student. People should be polite, people should be kind, and everyone should be doing their best. I think that's… it's just nice all round..."

This subtheme explored the influences of the behavioural expectations of YP's SOB. Some participants raised concerns that some policies were not up to date with the SEN legislation and were forcing YP to try to fit into "*neurotypical*" boxes. One participant spoke about the language used in behaviour policies and its impact on developing SOB. However, others spoke about some of the benefits that come from the policies for example how they ensure consistency and structure within the school.

4b: Good autism practice

This subtheme emerged from the participants reflecting on what would be helpful to further support YP to develop a SOB. Having explored above the impact behavioural expectations and policies can have on YP the participants all suggested the need for greater understanding and alignment of the policies. Rachel said:

"So [there] needs to be a policy, around good autism practice, and how that looks like in a school. Putting [it] in a way that can, obviously, still keep the children safe but implement good practice of autism in a mainstream environment as well."

The need for clear identification and communication of best practice was evident across the data, with each participant elaborating on possible next steps to achieving a more inclusive educational system. Scott spoke about the importance of identifying the right people to write policies saying:

"I'll tell you what, right, if your SENDCO writes your accessibility statements your send policy, and send information report, which they should be doing anyway. And potentially a mental health policy. Then it's more likely that they'll be kinda, what is the word… inclusive and accessible… If they have been written centrally,

which unfortunately under academisation the majority will be. Then they're more detached from the children… they become about systems and procedures. And less about the human element that's why that policy exists…Basically they get lost in the grand scheme of academisation. So therefore, yeah, I think, likely in an Academy trust your policy is gonna be very generic and therefore, will create an inadvert barrier. Because they're not designed with the children you know the students in mind."

Scott raises a valid point about ensuring who is best placed to write behaviour policies that will have both the children and awareness of SEND in mind. He reflected on the prevalence of centrally written policies and the systemic structures within large academy trusts that at times impede these policies from being truly inclusive. Sofia and Chloe identified that the changes in policies would need to be supported by a whole-school shift in understanding behaviour and that this would need training.

Sofia said:

"if you know, teachers were skilled up, to the point where, they understand our kids and their needs. And they [the children] are not forgotten about in terms of like we have to hit curriculum. We have to do the whole of, you know, the Christmas Carol by September and [therefore] you know that means Johnny can't go for a sensory break. If we were skilled as teachers, to be able to ensure, that we knew that these children have these needs. I think that the whole provision would change completely."

Chloe explored this further by saying:

"I think a lot of training should be essential for everybody [and] should happen every year. But also…I don't think many people…reflect either…I think the whole restorative thing… I don't think [there is] enough talking. There is not enough time…in mainstream setting [where you are] allowed to [talk about] social emotional [or] just general chat… And I think, to have a whole-school approach, of any kind…people will say 'that's not able to happen', but actually, if the sanction system can happen, and the

rewards system can happen,… then the emotional support system should be able to happen."

This theme identifies the impact of policies on YP's SOB, some noted how certain school policies promoted clarity and routine which contributed to a sense of community as everyone was treated "equally". Others argued that certain policies and behavioural expectations may not be in line with SEND legislation. The second subtheme emerged from participants reflecting on what more could be done to promote SOB. They spoke of good autism practice being more widespread whether this be by whole-school staff training or whole-school policies.

6.0 Discussion

The following section considers the implications of the findings in relation to the research questions and the existing literature. It will provide further critical reflection on the limitations of the current study and implications for future research, as well as discussing the relevance of the findings to the educational psychology field.

6.1 Aims of the research:

This study aimed to explore levels of SOB and what fosters SOB for YP within autism SRBs. The previous literature around SOB lacked the perspectives of teachers working with SEND pupils. This current study aimed to fill this gap by gaining an understanding of levels of SOB through online questionnaires and conducting seven interviews with staff who work in SRBs. These were analysed using reflective thematic analysis. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study in England to explore SOB for YP in autism SRBs. The following section interprets the findings from the analysis in relation to the research questions.

6.2 The research questions were:

1. Do YP in autism SRBs have higher levels of SOB to the SRB in comparison to their levels of SOB to the mainstream?

2. What influences SOB and how can SRB staff foster YP's SOB:
   a. to their mainstream school
   b. to their SRB

6.3 Do YP in autism SRBs have higher levels of SOB to the SRB in comparison to their levels of SOB to the mainstream?

The results from this study suggest that pupils in the SRB's overall reported levels of school belonging are above the threshold of concern according to Goodman (1997). When considering the small size, it is unsurprising that the results indicated variation and individual differences in levels of SOB between the participants when comparing the environment (school verses SRB). As the literature indicates there are multiple contributing factors that can influence SOB. Each individual's SOB will be impacted by their interplay between the system around them as well as the interplay between the systems (Allen & Kern, 2017). This was supported by the qualitative data where SRB staff members spoke about how no two pupils use the SRB in a same way. This is explored further in the subtheme of *SRB or mainstream* which assessed staff perceptions of YP's SOB to the different environments.

6.4 How can SRB staff foster YP's SOB:

This section will evaluate findings in relation to the second research question, looking at how SRB staff foster YP's SOB. This research question had multiple subheadings and therefore this section is divided into three. It will first explore how SRB staff support the development of SOB in the mainstream, it will then assess how staff foster SOB in the SRB. Lastly, it will move to provide an interpretation of how the responses link together through exploring the overarching theme of factors that foster and impede SOB. This section will end with a useful resource that highlights evidence-based ways to support the development of SOB in mainstream and SRBs, using knowledge gained from the literature review together with the findings of this research.

6.5 SOB to their mainstream school

This study suggests that there are various ways SRB staff work to foster YP's SOB to the mainstream school. The participants spoke about the importance of the teachers in the mainstream building meaningful relationships with the YP in the SRB. They noted the need for staff to be approachable and ensure that all adults in the school feel confident in their skills to communicate with children from the SRB. This aligns with the literature that has previously identified teacher relationships as being crucial to the development of SOB (Allen & Kern, 2017; Goodenow & Grandy,1993; Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). As well as qualitative research which has demonstrated that for YP with SEND, relationships with teachers and peers play a particularly important role in fostering affective engagement (Migden et al., 2019).Researchers have also identified that a lack of staff awareness of communication needs increase difficulties in staff ability to establish effective pupil relationship with YP on the autism spectrum in mainstream settings (Sproston et al., 2017). However, the unique finding of this study provides practical examples and strategies on what building meaningful relationships might look like in practice when supporting YP in the SRBs. This is evidenced in Figure 7.

Hamm and Faircloth (2005), identified the importance of peer relations placing the emphasis on the quality of them rather than the quantity. This was also highlighted in the theme of *meaningful relationships* which emerged from the data. The finding suggested there are nuances to how these might be different for YP in SRBs. The participants raised important concerns that the aim was not for the YP within the SRB to adhere to societal conventions which viewed having friendships as being the right thing to have. Instead, they suggested that YP should be equipped with skills to help them understand friendships and develop an understanding of what a meaningful friendship might look like. There is a growing body of research that suggests moving away from viewing SEND through the lens of the medical model, which advocates for the curing of deficits through interventions (Billstedt et al., 2011; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Robertson, 2010), towards using the social model which distinguishes between the social and environmental impairments impacting opportunities to participate within society (Oliver & Sapey, 2018). Milton and Sims (2016) suggest that intervention should only be employed when an informed perspective of the intended sample has been

gained. This was evident within the data for this study, as participants spoke about the need to adapt the environment to support YP.

The findings of this study highlight the need for effective communication between the different departments within the school. Participants not only reflected on how this influenced their own levels of belonging to the school but also influenced their ability to effectively do their job and therefore supporting the YP's levels of belonging. It is well known that staff SOB to a setting influences the day-to-day running of a school (Riley, 2022). The participants identified that staff qualities such as "being open" and "approachable" helped to foster communication between the departments. This is also evidenced in Riley's (2022) work that suggests that school belonging is fostered through the three Cs framework, which includes communication to ensure all the different voices are included. The participants in this study reflected on what was needed for effective communication and suggested increasing both staff and pupils' understanding and awareness of SEND. Research suggests that the combination of a lack of teacher training and a limited understanding of autism acts as a barrier to YP's learning and academic engagement (Falkmer et al., 2012; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). Interestingly, the participants in this current study spoke about the need for the peers in the mainstream school to be educated on SEND and for them to develop a greater understanding of diversity. This was evidenced in the subtheme of *peer learning*.

Unsurprisingly, participants noted that increasing staff awareness of needs would also be conducive to supporting staff to develop better relationships with the SRB pupils and well as SRB staff. Previous research exploring YP on the autism spectrum highlighted that they present with a "diminished sense of engagement" and "more challenging behaviours" due to schools not understanding or being able to meet their needs (Brede et al., 2017). The findings of this study indicate that participants queried how much whole-school policy aligns with current SEND legislation. Many participants reflected on the impact of the behaviour expectations and how this influences YP's SOB. With the 'zero tolerance' approach still widely common in schools, even with little evidence that it is useful for behavioural change (Allen et al., 2020). Previous literature has evidence that belonging can be fostered both at an individual level and at a systemic level (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). In

fact, many participants in the current study called for a whole-school policy that would outline best autism practice. They noted the need to ensure that this be written by members of leadership who are aware of SEND legislation and who are familiar with the day-to-day running of an SRB. This aligns again with the three Cs framework and the effort to bring leadership, policy, and practice together (Riley, 2022).

6.6 SOB to their SRB

When exploring the research question of what SRB staff do to support YP's SOB to the SRB, participants reflected on the role of the SRB. Viewing it as a gateway and a flexible provision that can provide diverse support depending on the needs of the YP.

Many participants spoke about the need to support YP in the SRB, to view their strengths, and to build on their self-esteem. This is evidenced in the theme of *equal opportunities.* Participants spoke about the diverse experiences the YP have prior to coming to the SRB and how this impacts how they perceive themselves as belonging to the wider community as well as within the educational system. This aligns with research that looked at the experiences of adults on the autism spectrum and which identified a number of barriers to belonging and the effects this has on wellbeing (Milton & Sims, 2016). The researchers identified a number of common narratives such as the impact of living with an "othered identity" and how this influences belonging and wellbeing. Participants in the current study spoke about the work they do advocating and empowering the YP to challenge this othered identity (practical examples given in Table 2). This was also seen in the subtheme of *identity and diagnosis*, where participants spoke about the difficulties YP experience in the world of labelling.

As mentioned above, relationships were again found to be a crucial part of the role of SRB staff. This is unsurprising considering the research indicating that the biggest impact on SOB is teacher relationship (Allen et al., 2018). Allen et al. (2018) indicated it had a moderate effect size with teacher support being the strongest correlate of school belonging. However, a novel finding of the current study was how the participants reflected on the need to show their own identity in their role, balancing the professional identity with personal aspects of their lives. Participants indicated that this was

fundamental to their role in the SRB as they were modelling social interactions and therefore needed to show their own interests, humour, and speak of their experiences.

The participants also noted the important role they have in supporting better communication between home and school. The impact of parental involvement has been shown to support pupil achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003) and to have an influence on SOB (Allen & Kern, 2017). However, it is unclear what the relationship between SOB and parental involvement is (Allen & Kern, 2017). In this current study, staff in the SRB recounted how sometimes families had experienced difficulties, fighting for their child to get the support they needed. They alluded to how this impacted their initial relationships with some parents as they needed to spend time showing they can be trusted. Participants also spoke about how they organise events to support with networking between parents as well as parental involvement in the school. They noted that as the YP in the SRB typically live far away from the school, it is important that these events happen to ensure they develop that community and network around the family. Some staff members indicated how this development of a support network also encourages the YP to engage in extra curriculum activities; another factor that the literature indicates has an impact on SOB (Allen & Kern, 2017).

6.7 Practical tools on what works to foster SOB:

The sections above have highlighted how the research findings align with the literature and noted the novel findings of this project. The project has evidenced multiple themes previously identified within the literature and added to the field by demonstrating how these themes are nuanced for this unique sample. The findings have also contributed to the development of a useful tool that provides practical strategies and ideas for SRBs to use to foster SOB in the mainstream and in the setting (Table 2). This is a unique finding of the study, as many researchers emphasise the discrepancy between the evidence base and practice when it comes to strategies to promote SOB in school (Allen & Bowles, 2012).

Fostering sense of belonging:	Things to consider:	Possible activities to support:
To the mainstream	What is the staff's relationship with the SRB pupils?	• Mainstream staff coming into the SRB for breaks and lunches. • All adults being aware of pupil interests. • Staff training on how to communicate with YP with social communication needs. • SLT spending time in the SRB. • Professional healthy relationships with YP where the staff show their own identity. • Staff being approachable (spending time to develop relationship, checking in, knowing interests).
	What is the relationship between YP in the SRB and YP in the mainstream?	• Pupil programmes to raise SEND awareness amongst peers (learning about the Equality Act (2010), Send Code of Practice (2015) and different needs). • Mainstream pupils understanding what the SRB is. • Pupils supporting SRB peers in class. • Mainstream pupils accessing SRB during breaks and lunches. • SRB pupils being recognised within mainstream (awards, assembles, prefects).
	Do the SRB and mainstream communicate effectively?	• All staff understanding how the SRB works. • Daily bulletin highlighting SEND and SRB information. • Open door policy, where staff can ask/email questions. • One-page profiles with pupil information. • SRB assemblies looking at SEN, autism etc. • Mainstream and SRB staff being treated as equal and working collaboratively in classrooms.
	Do adults understand the YP's needs?	• CPD Training on supporting YP on the autism spectrum. • Whole-school training on viewing behaviour as a form of communication. • Sharing links to Ted talks. • Awareness of how the school environment may impact sensory needs (lights, bell, lots of pupils etc.) • Staff reflecting on their practice.
	Are the whole-school policies effective for fostering a sense of belonging?	• Restorative approaches for behaviour management. • Making reasonable adjustments for SEND. • Inclusive whole-school rewards for effort. • Ensuring SEND needs and legislation effectively used to develop policies.
	Is the curriculum inclusive?	• Adapting the PSHE curriculum to support YP on the autism spectrum. • Scaffolding the work to include the diverse needs. • Presenting information visually. • Placing an emphasis on emotional wellbeing before attainment.

Fostering sense of belonging:	Things to consider:	Possible activities to support:
To the SRB	Is the SRB a safe environment?	• Staff are friendly, open, approachable, have trusting relationships. • Having flexibility to work in a person-centred way. • Staff have a SOB and therefore can model it to the group. • Valuing everyone's wellbeing. • Having a compassionate workspace. • Location of the SRB, part of the school.
	How do the YP identify with their own needs?	• Exploring role models for example famous people or individuals in the school or community who have similar needs. • Exploring YP's strengths and interests. • Empowering YP to ask for what they need (fidget toy, movement break etc.) • Exploring role models through characters in books, reading the news etc.
	What are the relationships between staff in the SRB and the YP like?	• Staff being honest when they have made mistakes. • Staff showing a sense of humour. • Staff having unconditional positive regard for YP. • Staff being consistently emotionally available for students. • Staff being themselves and showing their personality. • YP get the support of their key person when needed. • Staff are advocates for the YP.
	What are the relationships between peers like?	• Changing the environment to support pupil interaction (chairs facing each other, several pupils to a table etc.) • Exploring what a good friend looks like. • Supporting YP to find meaningfulness in friendships. • Lunchtime clubs and extra-curricular activities. • Having games (puzzles, board games etc.). • Parents organising outings.
	How do we communicate with parents?	• Regular communication through calls, written comments or emails. • Parent and children evenings, facilitating networking as well as understanding of SRB (quiz night, chips night, nature park etc.) • Parents being able to contact key person directly. • Parents having a WhatsApp group to share information.

Table 2: Practical tools on what works to foster SOB

7.0 Implications

A variety of implications for professionals supporting children and YP in autism SRBs have emerged from the current study. These include implications for EPs who are trained to support children, YP, families, and schools with a wide range of needs. This research contributes to the field of educational psychology by identifying the nuances of SOB for YP in autism SRBs. This section will use the bio-psycho-socio-ecological model of

belonging (BPSEM) (Allen & Kern, 2017) to explore the implications of the research findings at the various levels.

7.1 Within the individual level

At an individual level, we know from previous research (as detailed in Chapter 1) that SOB is associated with a wealth of beneficial outcomes (Riley, 2022). Including being a protective factor against mental health problems (McMahon et. 2008; Allen et al., 2018) and greater academic motivation (O'Keeffe, 2013), higher levels of school engagement (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). With this in mind, it is also important that YP voices are heard in terms of how to support greater SOB. Although this was not directly addressed within this thesis, it would appear from the responses of those interviewed that SOB within the SRB has a huge influence especially during the period of transition to the SRB. The results from phase one of the current study suggest that for YP in autism SRBs there are varying levels of school and SRB belonging which may be indicative of the unique ways individuals develop a SOB. It will be important for professionals working with YP in autism SRBs to have an awareness of how YP feel they fit into the wider school system.

7.2 Within the Microsystem level

Speaking with SRB staff also identified that they should be considered at an individual level. Evidencing the importance of how staff's SOB impacts their ability to do their job effectively and therefore influences the YP's SOB. This has previously been identified by Riley (2022) who suggests a systemic approach for increasing belonging school wide. With this in mind, it would be helpful for professionals to consider staff levels of belonging when working within a school system and potentially looking at whole-school systemic changes that need to be implemented to support SOB. EPs are well placed to do this. Lambert and Frederickson (2015) claim one of the fundamental roles of EPs is to promote and support inclusion for children and YP at an individual and school level.

The findings also suggest implications for how to support parental involvement within the SRB. Parental involvement is known to support wellbeing and academic outcomes for YP (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Therefore, it is beneficial for professionals to be aware of how staff work to support family networking events and the strategies they use to build trusting relationships with parents of YP in the SRB.

Lastly, the Microsystem also includes peers, both those in the SRB and those in the wider school system. The findings of this project highlight a need to help YP foster meaningful relationships and it is important that professionals consider this within the context of supporting YP to understand what a friendship for them might look like. This will avoid imposing a neurotypical perspective on them. An interesting implication from the findings is the need for peers in the mainstream to be educated about SEND. It would be beneficial to explore how external agencies such as children's services, EPs, and Speech and Language Therapists could support with this. Also, school staff could be empowered to help develop training of SEND for pupils.

7.3 Within the Mesosystem level

A crucial implication that came from this research is the need for school policies to be reviewed to align them with SEND legislation. Participants identified that the flexibility of the rules within the SRB allowed the YP to thrive. However, they worried about how effectively and consistently reasonable adjustments to rules were made to support the YP within the wider school context. Many participants indicated a need for policies and behaviour expectations to be reviewed, calling for them to be written by SENCOs or professionals who have an understanding of SEND, rather than being written at the trust level. This should be given due consideration especially given the goal set out in the Schools White Paper (Roberts, 2022), that every school to be in, or in the process of joining, a trust by 2030 (DfE: Implementing School System Reform, 2022).

At this level, it is also important to consider staff's professional development and its implications. Participants identified that mainstream staff at times lack the skills or the confidence to work with children with social communication needs. It is crucial that staff be given training to support their

development and empower them to feel confident to work in an inclusive manner. Participants also noted the need for staff to develop a greater awareness of what is behind YP's behaviour. They called for a shift in whole-school approaches around behavioural expectations. Many identified that, for this to be successful, there would have to be staff training and more awareness of sensory needs, impacts of trauma, social emotional needs, and mental health needs. Interestingly, one participant noted that for such training to be effective, staff would need to be allocated time to reflect on their practice. At this level, EPs could offer support not only for training but also for staff supervision and problem-solving strategies, such as Circle of Adults (Newton, 1995) to help work as reflective practitioners.

7.4 Within the Exosystem level

This level considers the shared whole-school vision. Other sections have already alluded to how the findings could have implications at a systemic level. However, within the context of this study, this level also includes the SRB networks between the different schools and the LA structures that support SRBs. An implication from the findings is the need for best practice to be shared between SRBs provisions. This might entail support staff visiting other SRBs or potentially following a similar model to that offered with ELSAs where staff are offered supervision by an EP every half term to troubleshoot and consider next steps. The participants also called for a good autism practice policy that could be shared within the mainstream school. This would tie in with the suggestions implemented at the Mesosystems level.

7.5 Within the Macrosystem level

The macrosystem is the outermost layer. It includes history, social climate, culture, and legislation. This will unquestionably be more difficult to change; however, the author believes that, over time, the implications suggested in the levels described above would have an impact also on the macrosystem.

This impact would include societal shifts in our perception of needs and differences, so contributing to more inclusive societies. Participants

indicated that this would need to be more that a one-day celebration of autism or a dimming of the lights in supermarkets for an hour. Instead, we would have to move to consider how each part of our society can be more inclusive. To implement this, it would be beneficial to consider educational reforms and ensure that adaptations to the national curriculum are made to be inclusive of SEND needs. This would mean a move away from prioritising academic success, which has often overshadowed SOB (Allen & Bowles, 2013). However, considering that currently the government is considering a reform to ensure all school pupils in England study maths in some form until the age of 18, it appears academic success is still the primary focus.

To support the changes in the Mesosystem mentioned above around behavioural expectations, there would need to be a shift in government policies away from the Zero Tolerance Approaches (Skiba, 2014) to more relational techniques, for example Restorative Approaches (McCluskey, 2018). This, along with schools having less pressure to meet solely academic outcomes, would enable teachers to prioritise the wellbeing of YP in the school.

8.0 Limitations

The following section outlines some of the limitations of the current research, including the sample size for the quantitative data, the choice of questionnaire, the generalisability of findings and, lastly, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the limitations of this study regards the number of YP who completed the online questionnaires. Although multiple attempts were made to recruit more YP, a total of only 8 participants completed the questionnaires. Due to the small sample size, it was not possible to analyse the difference in the levels of SOB within the mainstream and the SRB. This hindered the contribution that the quantitative data could provide. It is also important to note that with such a small sample size, there is a higher potential for the influence of bias in the sampling methods. For example, as the recruitment was set up as an opt-in approach, the study may have seemed more appealing to YP and parents that already feel part of a community and have higher levels of SOB. Therefore, the results that levels

of SOB are above the threshold of concern should be viewed with caution as it is possible there are YP in the SRBs with lower levels of SOB.

Another limitation of the study is the choice of questionnaire. Although this was critically evaluated in the literature review and found to be the most generally used one when accessing SOB. It was not devised to be used with YP with social communication needs. Questionnaires often feature self-assessment measures, and this brings into question the extent to which these standardised measures of wellbeing capture the experiences of individuals with SEND needs (Hebron, 2018; Robertson, 2010). The rational in this study was that previous researchers have used it with participants on the autism spectrum and with SEN and found it to be effective (McMahon et al., 2008), as have Milton and Sims (2016), indicating that potentially the core domains in wellbeing measures are not dependent on particular needs, and that perhaps the standardised measures can be used without much adaptation. However, if this is the case, particular attention must still be paid to the intervention that follows. That said, the choice of questionnaire should still be viewed as a potential limitation of the study and it highlights the need for further research to be done to identify appropriate measures for YP with SEND to ensure that their voices are included in research.

A valid critique of the study is that it did not capture the voices of the YP which the literature highlights is often missing, contributing to adults' perspectives being prioritised (Migden et al., 2019). The researcher made multiple unsuccessful attempts to capture the YP's perspectives. Alongside the noted difficulties with gaining responses from autistic people (Milton, 2019) the researcher was also aware that the research was being conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic with a requirement to conduct interviews online, it was not possible to gain the YP's voices.

When considering the qualitative data in the study, it is important to note that the participating staff came from three different SRBs, out of the five secondary autism SRBs in the LA. Although autism SRBs follow a similar model across the county, there are still differences between them. Therefore, the participants did not necessarily come from a homogeneous group. Nevertheless, the use of reflective thematic analysis provided an outline for considering the various impacts of this on the data. In fact, to mitigate the impact of this limitation and strive for generalisability of the findings, the

researcher decided to reach out to the SRBs again to ensure the voices from as many SRBs as possible were heard.

Another major limitation was the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for interviews to be done remotely. This may have acted as a barrier to participants building a rapport with the researcher and so influencing the results of the study.

9.0 Future Research

To the author's knowledge, this is currently the only research that has focused on SOB for the unique sample of YP in autism SRBs. With more funding being allocated, and an increasing number of SRB places across the county in which the author works, it is important that more research is done to look into the experiences of YP in SRBs. Although it was not possible to include the YP's voices directly in this research, due to the timeframe and COVID-19 requirements, it is necessary that future research look at gathering their views on SOB within the educational system. As mentioned above, it would also be important to add to the research on SOB scales and potentially to look into developing one that appropriately measures levels of SOB for YP with social communication needs. In terms of future steps for this specific research project, it would be interesting to test the validity of the practical tool outlined above. This could be done by using action research in a specific SRB and measuring levels of SOB longitudinally to see if, over time, the practical strategies outlined directly increase levels of belonging. With the other points outlined above in mind, it would be important that this study also include semi-structured interviews with staff and pupils to gain an understanding of how the strategies work.

10.0 Conclusion

This study was the first to explore SOB for YP in autism SRBs and to identify factors that foster SOB for this unique sample. The findings of the study align with the literature, which has previously acknowledged the importance of prioritising high-quality teacher-student and peer relationships (Allen & Kern, 2017; Goodenow & Grandy,1993; Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). It has contributed to the field by offering a unique insight into the

complexities of forming these relationships without subjecting a neurotypical framework or expectation for these YP with social communication needs. Placing the emphasis on achieving inclusion through the celebration of individual strengths, interests and the identification of need.

The literature review highlighted the need for a greater understanding on what fosters SOB for YP with SEND. To develop this the findings of the current study have been explored through the bio-psycho-socio-ecological model of belonging (BPSEM) (Allen & Kern, 2017) highlighting the role of the EP at the various levels. As seen in the literature, due to their training and work methods, EPs are well placed to advocate for the importance of SOB by working at a whole-school level and influencing school staff, parents and students (Shuttleworth, 2018). Researchers have often emphasised the discrepancy between the evidence base and practice when it comes to strategies to promote SOB in school (Allen & Bowles, 2012). With the aim of closing this gap, the findings of the current study have contributed to the development of a useful tool with practical strategies which can foster SOB in mainstream schools and in an SRB setting. The aim is for this tool to be used as a conversation starter during consultations with SRB staff to identify next steps and contribute to the development of a bespoke plan for SRBs to foster SOB. This will be rolled out to the SRBs within the LA following EP training on how to use the tool.

Lastly, this study has highlighted the outstanding work done by many of the practitioners. In doing so, it has identified the inconsistency between the flexibility allowed within the SRBs and the behavioural expectations within the mainstream. YP's educational experience can have such a profound impact on shaping their identity, minds and attitudes which, in turn, go on to influence their future societal behaviour. The participants called for more inclusive practices to be in place at a whole-school level in order to strive for a more inclusive world.

Chapter 3: Reflective Chapter

1.0 In search of a research subject

When I began exploring potential research topics, I ended up with an extensive list of varying interests, most of which would have probably been unachievable or unrealistic. In my studying up until this point I have always enjoyed engaging in research, however, for this project I struggled to narrow down the area I wanted to research. Perhaps this is indicative of the field of Educational Psychology, its diversity and how it offers many possible avenues to explore.

In my second year on placement, most of the traded work I was engaged in involved working in primary autism Specialist Resource Bases (SRBs). I was intrigued by the SRB provision and the concept behind how they worked. I was also curious about the transition process students went through to get into the SRBs. Knowing that some of the pupils would travel sometimes for up to an hour in a taxi every morning to get to their SRBs made me consider what the impact of these provisions might be, and what experiences these YP have in the SRBs.

Around this time, I started engaging in the literature to gain an understanding of the role of the EP in these situations. The book, *Educational Psychology Perspectives on Supporting Young Autistic People* (Steward et al., 2022), highlighted the need for the voices of individuals on the autism spectrum to be heard. The authors stress the significance of contributing to a real shift in the research to ensure true usefulness to the YP and the adults around them. The book concludes with themes and trends they identified to help focus and achieve a more inclusive world. These are: inclusivity, equality, advocacy, adaptability, and creativity. It was no surprise that these aligned with my values and the way I see the role of an EP, however, what did surprise me was that I found myself questioning the SRBs' positioning in this. Were the SRBs truly inclusive? Was this equality in supporting YPs actually helping them to access the mainstream? Was it truly adapting the mainstream model with creativity? The critical side in me questioned if they were just a place where society was trying to fix a YP who did not fit in. This narrative was heavily influenced by another book I was reading at the time;

We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation by Eric Garcia (2021). It recounts the experiences of Eric Garcia, who identifies as an autistic journalist, and the social and policy gaps that exist in supporting people on the spectrum.

By this stage I probably had more questions than answers, however the one thing I was sure about was that I wanted to explore this field further. The first thing I should probably clarify here is that not all YP in autism SRBs have a diagnosis of autism, however, they do present with social communication needs. Nevertheless, I questioned whether I was the right person to do this type of research. Would I be just another researcher without any identified neurodiversity adding to the bias in the field?

1.1 My connection to the subject

When putting together the research proposal, I reflected on the fact that I do not identify as autistic nor as having any social communication needs, and yet I wish to research this field. This pushed me to acknowledge the risk of subconsciously falling into my "ableist bias" (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). In an attempt to work with the research bias, it was crucial to explore the literature and conceptualise the correct terminology. Acknowledging that in the field there is research that aligns more with a medical model framework, which advocates for the "curing of deficits" through interventions. In contrast, I identified that I wished to use the social model which distinguishes between the social and environmental impairments impacting opportunities to participate within society.

This is when I started exploring the literature on Sense of Belonging and found my connection to the topic. To give some context to what I mean it is important that I tell you a little bit about myself. I grew up in Italy with an Irish mother and an English father, I attended an international school where my mother worked. Identity, culture, and belonging are themes that have been part of my upbringing and life. I battled with these in terms of class within the school system. For example, the divide between the children that belonged to the "wealthy group," as opposed to the teachers' children. To add to this, I lived most of my life in a small rural village on the outskirts of Rome. Growing up in Italy with an Irish name I was often identified as "straniera" (directly translated as stranger and meaning foreigner). Then

when going to study in Scotland for my Undergraduate studies I had peers referring to me as "the Italian." I found it interesting that wherever I went I was told I belonged to where I had come from. It was not something I was necessarily offended by because, in truth, I agreed. I did not have the same lived experiences as the others. I would miss out on cultural jokes or references to past TV shows. It was around this time that when people asked me where I was from, I started to reply either "confused" or feel the need to give them my whole life story so they could decide for themselves where they thought I was from.

What stuck with me about that reflection on my own life was the influence SOB had on my educational experience and upbringing. I therefore considered the impact of how YP in the SRB experienced SOB, especially in secondary schools during adolescence when most YP are trying to figure out where they belong in the world. This was when my research supervisor suggested I read *Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging* by Kathryn Riley (2022). The book highlights the need for systemic changes, noting that when YP feel they belong in a school it influences how they think of themselves and their future as a global citizen. While reading the book I made visual maps (Figure 7) noting the impacts of belonging and not belonging (exclusion).
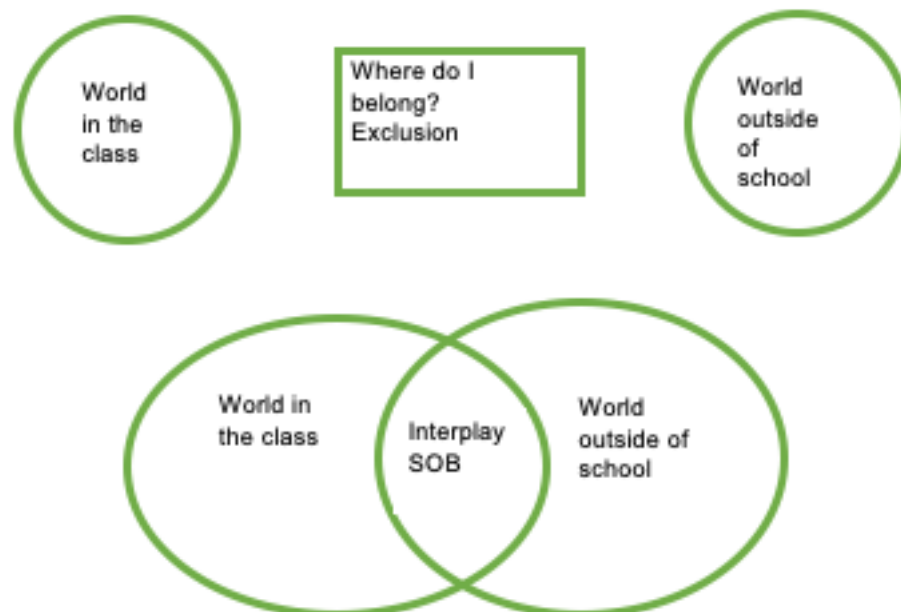
Figure 7: Influence of school and home interplay on SOB

This reinforced the notion that schools play such a crucial role in being able to merge the gap between YP and the wider world. Helping YP to make sense of it all and to figure out where they belong.

1.2 Clarifying project

By Spring term of second year I knew the three areas I wanted to investigate: firstly, the apparent gap I had found in the field around SOB for YP identified with SEND (Carson, 2014); the relative lack of research into SRBs (of interest especially since the LA was due to invest more money in expanding the provisions); and, lastly, the underrepresentation in the literature of the voices of YP on the autism spectrum.

Therefore, my project set out to fill these gaps in the field. Unfortunately, due to multiple influencing factors, explored below, I was unable to get the voices of the YP and my project underwent multiple adaptations. However, the original concept was to conduct a mixed method Explanatory Sequential Design where in the first part of the study the participants (YP in autism SRBs) would be asked to complete a short survey that would include two measures of SOB. The second part of the study aimed to recruit a subgroup of the original participants (6-10) to explore YP's SOB through semi-structured interviews. This method had been used and found effective with a similarly sized sample (Cridland et al., 2014; Miles et al., 2019; Tierney et al., 2016). However, due to ethical considerations and participant recruitment problems, I was unable to achieve this as I was unable to engage with YP in SRBs (the sections below will explore this in more detail). The project therefore changed its focus to understanding what staff in the autism SRBs do to foster SOB.

2.0 Ethical considerations

Over the course of the two years of the project I submitted two separate ethics forms, one for the University and one for the LA, as well as having to make between five to seven submissions of amendments to each of the ethics applications. There were multiple reasons for this, including clarification of the ethical consideration and needing to implement changes

in the project due to my struggling with recruitment. This section will include a reflection on some of the amendments.

I knew I was making my life harder by wanting to ensure I got the voices of the YP in the research. However, I was not completely prepared for the journey I would have to go on. Not only was my ethics application longer, it also meant that multiple forms had to be completed to gain YP consent and parent consent. However, what struck me most about the process was that at times it felt as if the increase in ethical considerations and procedures put in place to protect children was actually putting them at a disadvantage by making it harder for their voices to be heard and researched. In fact, I remember reflecting on one of the questions in the ethics application asking me to confirm that I had no previous involvement with the prospective participants, and that they would not feel coerced into completing my project. Yes, I can agree with this in principle. However, when we are discussing YP with social communication needs, who at times might struggle with meeting strangers, I feel recruitment would have benefited from YP meeting me and understanding who the person behind the research was. To add even more complexity to the picture, the impact of the research had to be conducted online due to COVID-19. Looking back at it now, it is no surprise that not one YP agreed to volunteer for an interview with me despite numerous recruitment attempts. Now to be clear, I am not saying that this was all due to the ethics application requirements and I do acknowledge that I could have tried to reconsider the recruitment methods (perhaps Participatory Action Research), or even convince the ethics panel that, for this sample, it would have been beneficial for the YP to know the researcher. However, this was not possible within the timeframe we have available on the course.

Instead, I submitted yet another ethics application and changed my research question to explore what adults do in autism SRBs to foster SOB. Not only was this application a lot shorter, it was also accepted without any need for amendments. I acknowledge that many of my fellow colleagues and previous cohorts have been able to successfully recruit YP to participate in their research. However, I do think it is important to consider and reflect on the ethical application process and ensure that we are not placing YP and people with SEND at a disadvantage by making it harder for research to explore their schooling experiences.

3.0 The struggle of participant recruitment

As I have alluded to in the above section, participant recruitment was one of the hardest parts of this thesis. It made me question my project, made me reconsider what I was doing and ultimately made me change the project. This roller-coaster of events was inevitably accompanied with a flurry of various emotions, at times making me wonder if I would ever qualify as an EP.

When working on our Ethics applications, we were told not to propose in-person projects as the University's stance due to COVID-19 was that research should be conducted remotely. I originally started recruiting participants, YP within SRBs, in June 2022. Within the first week, I had three participants complete the online questionnaire and I was thrilled. However, by September 2022, I had sent out five reminder emails to SRB LTs and had a total of eight YP who had completed the questionnaire and not one had indicated any interest in participating in an online interview. This made me reflect on the external factors such as the impact of COVID, and the remote nature of research interviews and the complexities of ethics around research involving young people in "vulnerable" populations. One of the articles I came across considered the key ethical questions when conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic (Townsend et al., 2020). The authors encouraged researchers to be mindful of unnecessarily increasing the burden on participants and to be aware that the results would require cautious interpretation. It was also noted that some of the services for signposting may not be actively running. These points stayed in my mind and made me realise it was time to change my project as, due to the time limits of the course, I would not be able to conduct the research I wanted in an appropriate and ethical manner.

Had time constraints not been an issue, it would have been interesting to gain the YP's voice through Participatory Action Research, which is an approach that emphasises the involvement of the participants throughout the research process (Baum et al., 2006), and which promotes conducting research "with" people not "on" or "for" people. Unfortunately, I decided this would have been unachievable in the timeframe I had available I therefore decided to work with the adults around the child. This took the form of semi-

structured interviews with staff working in SRBs to explore factors that foster SOB. Luckily, after completing the amendments for this ethics application, recruitment went fairly quickly. I sent out my first recruitment email in October 2022 and by November I had five participants. Around this time, I considered the nature of the study and what would be an appropriate sample size. Braun and Clarke (2022) identify that what defines 'enough' data cannot be justified by a number or even the duration of interviews because the aim is to explore the meaning and meaningfulness in the data. They suggest that there is no concrete answer to dataset size, exploring the complexity of the influencing factors they note how the notion of statistical models, and the concept of data saturation are problematic (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Instead, they invite the researcher to reflect on the requirements of their study and the "information richness" in the transcripts. This includes reflecting on if there is sufficient depth, density, diversity, and complexity in the data to justify the themes. Therefore, I started familiarising myself with the five transcripts and realised the need for more participants. I sent out my last recruitment reminder email in November 2022 and had two more respondents. After familiarising myself with the new transcripts, I felt I had reached an optimum level of information richness to continue with the analysis of the data.

4.0 Process of analysis

Having collected the data and then being confronted with the realisation that it was time to move on to the next stage of the process, I felt a mixture of excitement and worry. As part of my proposal, I had outlined that I wanted to use Thematic Analysis (TA). Part of my feedback questioned my reasoning for choosing TA as I had been originally interested in experience which aligned perhaps more with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). I reflected on my reasoning and concluded that, due to its phenomenological stance, IPA does not offer the same flexibility as TA. For this same reason, I also excluded discourse analysis due to its emphasis on participants' use of language (Willig, 2008). This acknowledged that I, as a researcher, align more with a pragmatist paradigm that aims to solve practical problems in the real world (Feilzer, 2010), as opposed to a more social constructionist positioning. Another

consideration was about content analysis: although at times similar to TA, it was deemed unsuitable for this study, as it tends to be used for quantitative analysis of qualitative data. Therefore, with due consideration, I decided that TA was the most appropriate.

Although above I claim to have enjoyed research in the past, I should clarify that my previous experiences of research have been mostly quantitative and almost predominately with a subconscious positivist bias, which I had never been asked, nor encouraged, to question. I will admit that in my first year on the doctorate course, I attempted to complete TA for a small-scale research project which, although hugely beneficial to support my understanding of TA, with hindsight it was not a reflection of my best work. It was not until I started reading Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's latest book, *Thematic Analysis: A practical Guide* (2022), that I started to understand what I had signed up for.

It was quite early in the book, when I completed one of the suggested activities (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.16) entitled "getting into personal reflexivity," that I started to understand more about TA. The activity was meant to be a reflection task to help you as a researcher identify social positionings, for example, gender, sexuality, social class, race and ethnicity, ability, age, belief, and immigration status. The aim was to consider the knowledge we produce with research and how we go about producing it. Many of the reflections I have mentioned were influenced by this section of the activity.

The next piece of the activity looked at functional and disciplinary reflexivity. Sue Wilkinson (1988) defines functional reflexivity as how the methods and design of research projects shape how the knowledge is produced. Disciplinary reflexivity is how the academic discipline you align with shapes how the knowledge is produced. It was this part that truly allowed me to acknowledge and consider some of my biases and how these will impact my analysis. Although ideally, I should have engaged with this material sooner and my reflections should have informed my choice of method and study, this was not the case in real life. Instead, before engaging

in the analysis, I reflected on my training experiences up until this point and how the EP discipline informs my practice.

I will aim to summarise some of these reflections. As noted above my research experience had mostly been quantitative, for my master's thesis, I recruited 296 workers assessing their personality and their self-reports of the conscientiousness and honesty-humility of their managers. All analyses were carried out in R (R Core Team, 2018) where I completed a factor analysis to explore the structure of the questionnaires and analysed the data using linear regression modelling. Therefore, it is not hard to note the vast differences in approaches. What I at the time identified as "good quality" research was quantitative, relying on large samples, and testing the psychometric properties of validated questionnaires. My view of the role of the researcher was to find the truth. It is no surprise I felt like a fish out of water for the first year of the Educational Psychology course. Over the three years on the course I have come to place myself in the pragmatist paradigm and, at times, perhaps a critical realist. When reading, *Mixed Methods Research: A research Paradigm Whose Time Has Come* by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), their description resonated with me, especially how they described the paradigm wars with one professing "the superiority of deep rich data" and the other arguing for, "hard generalisable data" (Sieber, 1973, p. 1335). Their concluding comments promoted researchers using the strengths of both methodologies keeping in mind the underlying research questions rather than preconceived biases about research paradigms arguing the time had come for mixed methods research.

It is fair to say that, as always, when attempting anything new, I felt anxious and worried about the lack of structure and rules within the reflective thematic analysis "framework." I hesitantly use even the word framework as Braun and Clarke (2022) note that reflective TA offers guidelines rather than rules for the process of analysis. They go as far as using the word 'phases' as opposed to steps, which may allude to a unidirectional model. I will now explore my reflection on the various phases.

4.1 Familiarisation

The process of familiarisation is to help develop intimate knowledge of the data: it is also referred to as an "immersion." This includes starting to critically engage in the data and drawing on the literature. When reading *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* by Braun and Clarke, I came across doodles as a method for supporting familiarisation. Initially, I was not sure if it would work for me, but I found it a highly effective way to listen to a recording and pause and draw or write what I heard (Figure 8). It was also highly effective for me as I had conducted my interviews remotely and used Microsoft Teams to transcribe them. Although I did go back and check they were transcribed verbatim, I believe having a transcription software means the researcher needs to ensure adequate time is spent familiarising themselves with the data.

Figure 8: Familiarisation of data through doodles

I started noticing that I was placing and categorising comments in certain sections of the doodle and believe this helped me map out what I heard. I might have been jumping ahead here, but I maintained a reflective approach and noted when the participants were drawing on similar ideas. Reflecting on this however, it potentially made me try to see themes too early and influenced a "cherry-picking" approach in the data. I therefore had to take a

step back and reposition myself with the data and my research questions to ensure I was staying true to the reflective TA approach. In the book, they also suggest that, at this phase, you should jot down overall dataset familiarisation notes. They suggest writing down potential patterns in the data as well as questions that come to mind to encourage engaging with a critical mindset.

4.2 General reflections included:

As someone who has worked as a TEP in various SRBs I was originally surprised by how little I knew of the ones I had not been in. I naively thought they were more homogeneous and run in a similar way. However, having engaged in the interviews, I saw they are different in terms of the staff, location, influences from a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) level as well as understanding of belonging. Nevertheless, when starting to engage analytically, I did notice similar tendencies, I noticed that:

- there was a lot of positive best practice going on to support sense of belonging;
- on the surface level a lot of praise for SRBs and the potential they have to support more young people;
- influences from whole-school policies were impacting sense of belonging.

Interestingly, I found myself confused by the data. I wondered that, if the participants were already doing all this excellent work, what was the point of my project. This thought was potentially fuelled by my subconscious realist bias which, in turn, had been influenced by my heavy quantitative training, making me believe I should be finding an absolute truth in the raw data and providing answers to questions for other professionals to implement. Then my EP training impacted my perspectives and I considered that the project was also to highlight the good practice that was going on. As I became more familiar with the data set, I also started to notice barriers, mentions of societal norms and assumptions that impact SOB. They had picked up on the themes I had noted as important in the literature and appeared to be doing so much to support SOB. I then started to become aware of the subtle nuances for developing a SOB for the YP in SRBs. For example, they described how the YP in the SRB experience SOB, which encompassed many of the themes I had already come across in the literature review but with a unique

perspective of this samples' experiences. Potentially, due to my training as well as the literature review this reflection was heavily influenced by Allen and Kern's, (2017) theoretical framework that proposes school belonging as a multidimensional construct that exists with multiple layers. As the Bio-psycho-socio-ecological model of belonging (BPSEM) (Allen & Kern, 2017) highlights, there are numerous factors that influence SOB at the diverse levels. I noted how participants were also alluding to the multiple systemic elements. This made me excited by the richness of the data set as well as worried that I had already analysed the data too much and stepped into coding.

4.3 Coding

When looking back at my research diary, my first entry around coding was "SCARED!" I was worried I would choose the wrong codes, not capture the right elements or be too descriptive with my codes. I struggled with not having the "right way to do things" and felt a bit lost in my attempts. Again, I turned to Braun and Clarke and started to keep notes of how I was approaching meaning-making (coding) and how my approach shaped the things I noticed in the data reflective on the spectrum from inductive (data driven) to deductive (theory driven). It is interesting that, although my literature review was on SOB for YP, it revealed that little is known about fostering SOB for YP with SEND in SRBs. So, I did find myself (deductively) identifying the themes that are evident in the literature, but also (inductively) noticing the nuances of how those themes differ for the YP that the staff spoke about. Here I was reassured by my reading on how we can never be purely inductive (Fine, 1992).

4.4 Generating initial themes:

Having done my initial coding using the comment function on Word, I struggled to get my head around the whole data set. I therefore decided I needed a more visual approach and printed the data set out. This helped me refine my codes and start to form a cluster of ideas or patterns in the data. I decided I needed to have a physical map and printed out all the transcripts and codes and mapped them out on the floor (Figure 9).
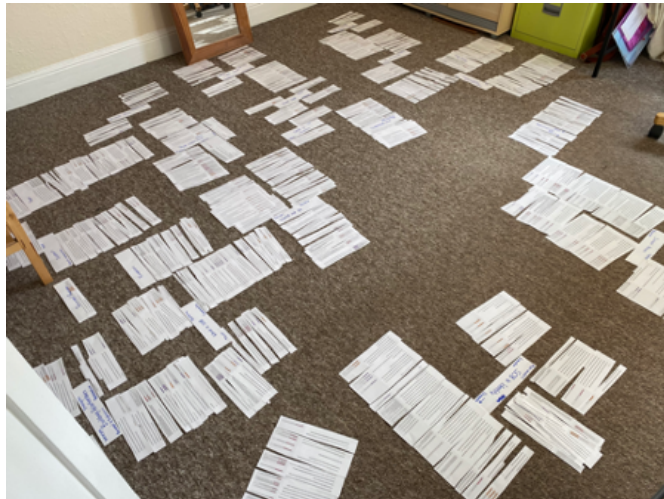
Figure 9: Initial understanding of themes

At this stage, I felt overwhelmed, there was so much going on in the data I felt it could be used to explore a variety of research questions. I reflected on ensuring I was not massaging the data and inductively coming to understand it, but this made it hard to not make new codes and patterns.

4.5 Developing and reviewing themes & Refining, defining, and naming themes

Out of the entire process, these were the phases I struggled with the most. Especially, trying to ensure the themes were accurately evidenced and appropriately worded. I found this a troublesome process because when you are so intertwined with the data, you tend to think it makes complete sense, so you struggle to word things appropriately with other peoples' perceptions in mind. I found two things extremely beneficial during these phases. One was making mind maps of the various potential themes and ideas or concepts that connected them. The other was spending time away from the data and research. Ironically, this was the most helpful, as it gave me time to reflect and come back to it with a different perspective and be able to question myself. The time allowed me to question the connections that had seemed clearer cut originally and acknowledge if the links were tenuous.
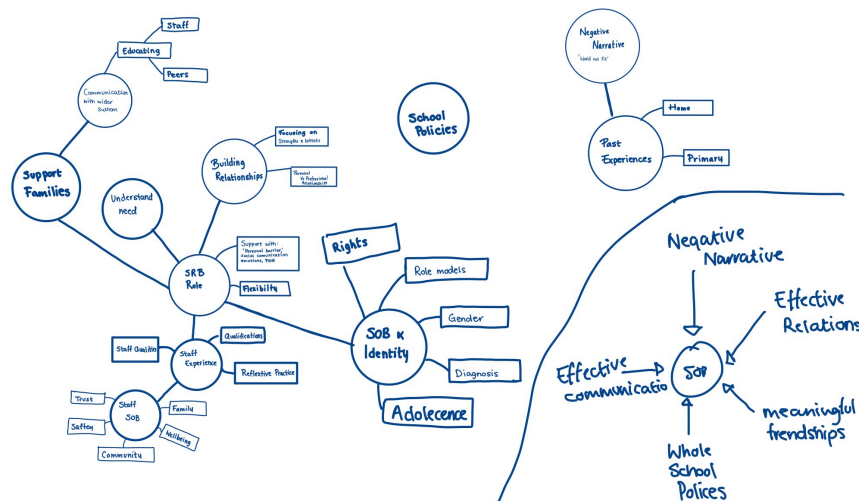
Figure 10: Developing a thematic map

I was eventually able to simplify the above mind map and narrow down the themes. The next stage was redefining, defining, and naming themes. Which is evident in the figure below where I kept track of how the names changed throughout this process. Those written in blue were the ones I started with, some had adaptations which I made in green and orange was a subtheme that only became evident when I was writing up the analysis.
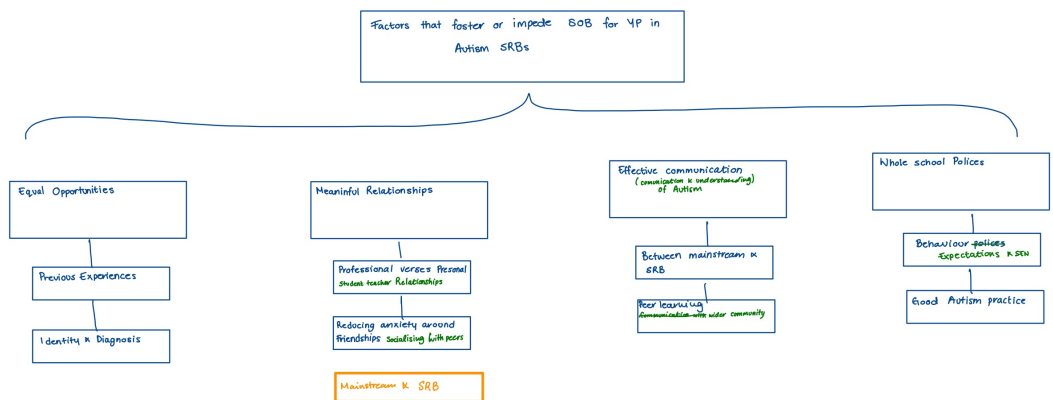
Figure 11: Wording of themes and subthemes

5.0 The impact of the research journey

I would say this chapter in itself highlights the journey that I have been on as a researcher and how it has intertwined with who I am as a person. However, I think the aspects that I will keep with me from this research experience are, in truth, some of the conversations I had with the participants. Two stand out particularly for me. The first was Sofia who said, "We're not moulding you into the mainstream." With that one line she validated that this

was a topic worth exploring. I felt like all my original scepticism was put aside and I was able to listen to what my participants were saying.

The second experience that will remain with me was the realisation of the influence the interviews had on the participants. Scott reflected back to me during an interview that, as a result of our conversation, he would make a change in his practice. When talking he noted that, although mainstream staff come into the SRB, they do not necessarily spend time with the YP in the SRB. He said:

> *"The head teacher comes down a couple of times a week. The deputy head comes down a couple of times a week and the assistant head, just comes down and just checks in and sees what's happening with the kids. And you're right, and that's actually a good reflected point for me, it would be nice if occasionally one of them would come down and spend lunch in the SRB. So what I'm gonna do is I'm just gonna put it on my list, and I am just going to send an email round and say in the new year be really nice if occasionally staff could just come down and spend lunch time in the SRB and see what it is all about."*

This made me realise the impact research interviews has on the participants. I was aware of the power of interactions within the EP practice and the world of consultation, I somehow was not prepared for it to be part of my research. It has, however, sparked an interest in me to pursue both Participatory Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry within my practice or as another project.

6.0 Proposed dissemination

I am hoping to disseminate my research locally within my EPS as part of continuous professional development for the service as well as with the LA and SRBs. The findings will be disseminated to the LA as part of an agreement with their ethics application processes. The SRBs LT and the participants that were in the project will also receive a summary of the findings, along with the practical strategies for fostering SOB. Finally, I am hoping to publish my study with relevant journals including Educational Psychology in Practice.

Appendix
A.1 Ethical Approval

University of East Anglia

Study title: How is Sense of Belonging constructed in young people who are in Specialist Resource Bases for autism*: A Mixed Methods Explanatory Approach

Application ID: ETH2122-1228

Dear Aisling,

Your application was considered on 13th May 2022 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 October 2023**.

B.1 Participant Information Sheet and Consent forms Phase one

Aisling Gallagher Deeks
Trainee Educational Psychologist

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Young people in Specialist Resource Bases Experiences of Sense of Belonging: What are the barriers and what helps Young people to develop a Sense of Belonging to their setting?
Study Information Sheet:
Hello. My name is Aisling.

I am doing a research project to find out more about *your experience of school and the SRB. I want to find out what makes you feel like you belong in school.*
I am asking you to be in my study because I want to understand how best the adults around you can support you to feel included in school.
You can decide if you want to take part in the study or not. You don't have to - it's up to you.
This sheet tells you what I will ask you to do if you decide to take part in the study. Please read it carefully so that you can make up your mind about whether you want to take part.
If you decide you want to be in the study and then you change your mind later, that's ok. All you need to do is tell me that you don't want to be in the study anymore. You or your family or someone who looks after you can email me *(A.Gallagher-Deeks@uea.ac.uk*.
If you have any questions you can speak to me or your family or someone else who looks after you. If you want to, you can contact me on *[A.Gallagher-Deeks@uea.ac.uk]*.
What will happen if I say that I want to be in the study?
If you decide that you want to be in my study, I will ask you to do these things: Have an online interview with me and we will talk about your school experiences. This will happen online, and you can do it from your home with someone to help you. It will last between 45-60 minutes.
- When I ask you questions, you can choose which ones you want to answer. If you don't want to talk about something, that's ok. You can stop talking to me at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore.
- If you say it's ok, I will make a video of you with a video recorder.

Will anyone else know what I say in the study?

I won't tell anyone else what you say to me, except if you talk about someone hurting you or about you hurting yourself or someone else, or doing something you

should not be doing. Then I might need to tell someone to keep you and other people safe.

All of the information that I have about you from the study will be stored in a safe place and I will look after it very carefully. I will write a report about the study and show it to other people, but I won't put your name in the report, and no one will know that you're in the study.

Are there any good things about being in the study?

By sharing your experiences, I will be able to add your views to other young people views. The results from the study could help the adults in your school know about the things that make you feel like you are part of the school, as well as things adults can do to help you. I will not use your name or identify what you told me to any adults. By being part of this study you will also be helping with my research.

Are there any bad things about being in the study? Some people find it hard to talk about their experiences in school. If at any point you want to stop the interview you can do this, and you do not have to continue if you do not want to. This study will take up some of your time, but I don't think it will be bad for you or cost you anything.

Will you tell me what you learned in the study at the end?
Yes, I will if you want me to. When I have finished the study, I will give your teachers a summary of what I have learnt they will share this with you.
What if I am not happy with the study or the people doing the study?
If you are not happy with how I are doing the study or how I treat you, then you **or the person who looks after you** can:
- Write an **email** to me on A.Gallagher-Deeks@uea.ac.uk

Contact my supervisor *[*Dr Susan Wilkinson – S.Wilkinson6@uea.ac.uk*]*
- Write an **email** to the Head of School Professor Yann Lebeau - Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

B.2 Participant Information Sheet and Consent forms Phase two

What are the barriers and strengths to young people in Specialist Resource
Bases developing a Sense of Belonging to their setting?
Participant Information Sheet

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about sense of belonging to school and SRB. Previous research has generally focused on the mainstream experiences. This research project aims to develop a greater awareness of how sense of belonging is constructed for the young people within autism SRBs. The research findings will inform what helps young people develop a sense of belonging as well as the barriers to developing a sense of belonging in SRBs and the mainstream. You have been invited to participate in this study because you have a unique role in supporting these children in school. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

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

✓ Understand what you have read.
✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
✓ Agree to the use of your 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: **Aisling Gallagher Deeks**, second year Trainee Educational Psychologist, on the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD) in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at University of East Anglia.

The study and researcher are supervised by: **Dr Susan Wilkinson**, Research Supervisor, on the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD) in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at University of East Anglia.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

If you are randomly selected you will be invited for an online interview with the researcher (Aisling Gallagher Deeks, Trainee Educational Psychologist). The interview will focus on the themes of "how is belonging constructed and understood" and "do staff and students feel a sense of belonging". The interviews will take place online at a time that is convenient for you.

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

If selected for phase two of the study, this will involve an online interview lasting between 45-60 minutes.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to consent will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the Child and Educational Psychology Practice or at the University of East Anglia. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your minds, you are free to withdraw at any point prior to analysis. You can do this by emailing the researcher.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?
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 and this would include the submission of the thesis for assessment purposes.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?
Talking about sense of belonging could be a sensitive topic. However, there are unlikely to be risks from it. Aside from you giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any other cost or risks associated with taking part in this study.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?
Your responses are likely to provide details about the experience of young people in SRBs. It may also help to identify what facilitates and what are the barriers to developing a sense of belonging. This could inform how the SRBs could support pupils to feel more included in their educational settings.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?
Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?
When you have read this information, Aisling will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. You can contact her on A.Gallagher-Deeks@uea.ac.uk. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?
You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can access feedback by reading the summary of the results which will be sent to and disseminated by the Lead Teachers of your child's SRB. Alternatively, if you are happy

to, you can email me, and I can send you a summary of the research findings once the project is complete. You will receive feedback following the end of the project (August 2023).

(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 at the following address:
Aisling Gallagher Deeks
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
A.Gallagher-Deeks@uea.ac.uk
If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:
Dr Susan Wilkinson
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
S.Wilkinson6@uea.ac.uk

If you 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 the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Yann Lebeau at Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

(13) How do I 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 I need 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.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?
You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and email it to me at A.Gallagher-Deeks@uea.ac.uk. *Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.*

(16) Further information
This information was last updated on 20*.09.2022*.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by the SRB lead teacher.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researcher if I wished to do so.
- The researcher has 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 I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or anyone else at the Child and Educational Psychology Service now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I 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 I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that personal information about me 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 me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used for a thesis assessment and may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in the thesis or any publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

Audio-recording   YES ☐   NO ☐

Video-recording   YES ☐   NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

                                                        YES ☐   NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Phone number: _____

☐ Email: _____

....

Signature

....

PRINT name

....

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C.1 Semi-structured interview Schedule

Interview script:

Thank you so much-
Confirm- Recording and transcription

As you know today, we are looking a sense of belonging for in the SRB and in the mainstream. I am going to ask a range of questions that if there is any question that you would prefer not to answer please feel free to say so and we can stop any point. It is expected to last between 45-60 minutes.

Before we get started could you beefily describe your role.

Card sorting: prompt for understanding teachers' perspectives on school belonging- beliefs and actions of participants. The nine statements:
Participants will be given 9 statements about belonging, that have previously been used (Riley, Coates & Allen 2020).

Your first task is to sort the statements. You will also see a blank statement so you can add anything else that you feel is important. Think about these statements and think which is most important to you. This is not a test- there are no right or wrong answers. Sort the statements from most important (1) to least (9). You can give some the same number if you feel they have equal importance.

Discussion around where the statements were placed why they made those choices. Reflections on what you have said
1) how do you apply your thinking about belonging to what you do in school
2) what more could you do?

A. When you feel you belong you can be more creative, innovative and confident. (3)
B. Belonging is about being respected and feeling accepted. (4)
C. It helps you feel part of the community- party of society.(5)
D. When children feel safe and they belong, their attendance improves and so does their academic performance. (6)
E. Belonging is about feeling that you are valued and are part of a place. (2)
F. It contributes significantly to developing good mental health and a feeling of wellbeing. (1)
G. When staff feel that they belong, it helps with retention- they'll stay in the school. (7)

H. When you feel you belong, you can be yourself, you can develop your own sense of personal identity. (1)
I. When you can grow and develop your sense of belonging in school, you learn how to be yourself and fit in elsewhere. (2)

1. Do YP in autism SRBs have higher levels of SOB to the SRB in comparison to their levels of SOB to mainstream?
2. How can SRB staff foster YP's SOB:
    a. SOB to their mainstream school
    b. SOB to their SRB
    c. Strengths and barriers that influence SOB

We are here today because we are interested in your thinking about sense of belonging to the school and to the SRB:
- What you think about how is belonging constructed and understood in the different environments
- do staff and students feel a sense of belonging to school and SRB

- How are issues about belonging thought about, articulated and experienced and acted on?

- How do staff think about behaviour issues?

- Is there an underpinning philosophy (a sense of belonging a place to succeed)?

- What have we learned about the language of belonging?

D.1 Example Transcription: Audio recordings were transcribed:

Researcher
I suppose which ones did you feel were most relevant for you?
0:2:58.980 --> 0:2:59.290
Researcher
Mm-hmm.
0:3:2.40 --> 0:3:2.420
Researcher
OK.
0:2:53.590 --> 0:3:13.180
Rachel
Umm, so I've put my top three as when children feel safe and they belong there, attendance improves and so does their academic performance. It helps a part of the community and part of society and it contributes significantly to developing good mental health and a feeling of wellbeing. So put those as sort of my top three.
0:3:13.970 --> 0:3:20.520
Rachel
And it's sort of then follows on with that with when you can grow and develop your sense of belonging in school, you learn how to be yourself and fit in elsewhere.
0:3:21.310 --> 0:3:32.400
Rachel
And yeah, I feel like they're their sense of identity and their ability to be creative and initiative definitely came over me needing to sort of, have a feeling belonged. The bottom one I put was when staff feel that they belong, it helps with retention. They'll stay in the school for me, like I don't think about myself myself in the role. I think about the children. Are definitely put them sort of as my top statements and my priority with sort of belonging.
0:3:49.50 --> 0:3:53.460
Researcher
And that's sort of an interesting reflection in itself because it almost.
Supposedly you feel like you belong, so it's not something that you need to worry about maybe.

Rachel
Yeah, yeah, the. But the retention here was incredible and no one sort of has left without a sort of obviously they're being sort of better opportunities or being able to then engage in creating something great elsewhere. like we are all here. We're all really fantastic people and it's community that would feel and almost kind of like a sense of family. And the children do feel.

E.1 Familiarisation:

The researcher used text and images or Braun & Clarke, (2022) "familiarisation doodles" to help grasp the data. The research then completed sematic notes of the whole data set.

F.1 Coding:

Coding was initially done using the Microsoft word comment function.

work with our families just to

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> Working with SKB families

really basically build them up and

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> Supporting families

make sure that they're able to communicate and access sort of outside provisions.

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> Enabling access to community support

if they are finding it more challenging and then just sort of your standard sort of teaching and running tutor times and sort of social communication skills,

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> Families as a barrier

and that's sort of again that is sort of my Forte. And going out to leisons, supporting children and. Everything in anything really, it's you. Ask it, we do it.

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> Pride in role

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> Flexibility of SKB role

Rachel

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> SOB is safety

Umm, so I've put my top three as when children feel safe and they belong there, attendance improves and so does their academic performance.

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> SOB first then comes attendance and academic

It helps the a part of the community and part of society and it contributes significantly to developing good mental health and a feeling of wellbeing. So put those as sort of my top three.

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> SOB part of community

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> SOB part of society

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> SOB impact on mental health and well being

And it's sort of then follows on with that with when you can grow and develop your sense of belonging in school, you learn how to be yourself and fit in elsewhere.

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> School impacts how you view yourself in life

And yeah, I feel like they're their sense of identity and their ability to be creative and initiative definitely came over me needing to sort of. Have a feeling belonged. The bottom

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> SOB and identity

> **Aisling Gallagher-Deeks**
> YP's SOB comes before Staff SOB

G.1 Searching for themes:

The codes were clustered to identify patterns:

H.1 Initial visual mapping of themes:
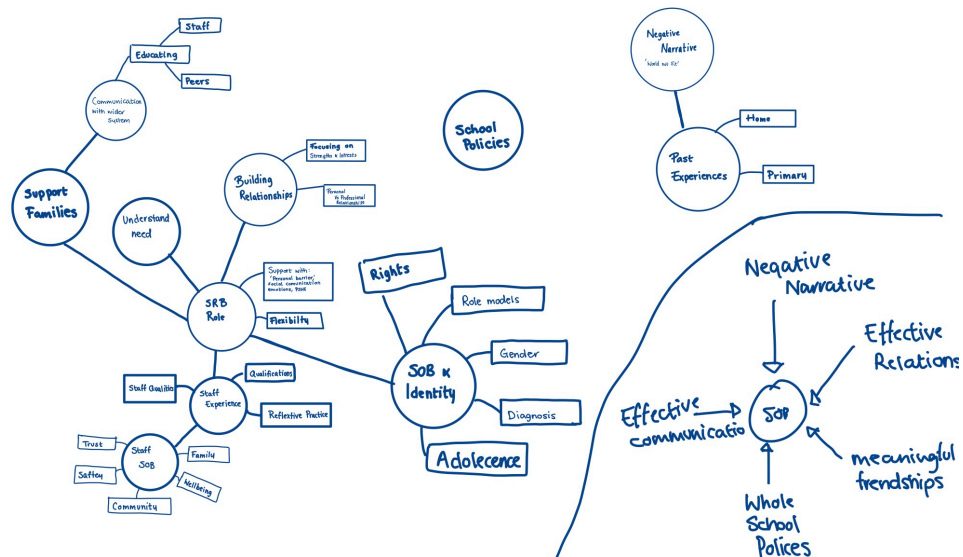
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