

**Using a Participatory Research Model
to Investigate the Friendship
Experiences of Females with Autism or
Social Communication Difficulties**

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requirements of the University of East London for the Professional
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Abstract

There is an historical gender bias towards males in autism diagnosis rates. A recent survey showed that, in England, 1.8% of men and boys have a diagnosis of ASD versus only 0.2% of women and girls. However, the National Autistic Society (NAS) report an increasing number of girls and women being referred for ASD assessment. Theorists are beginning to challenge the notion that autism is a predominately male phenomenon, and are suggesting alternative explanations to the difference in diagnosis rates.

As a result of this bias, few research studies have been conducted in the field of females with autism. Furthermore, studies that do exist largely focus on identifying differences in gender presentation, especially in regards to the diagnostic criteria. There is a lack of participant voice, or studies that consider how support might need to differ across gender.

This project aimed to hear autistic female voices in regards to their experiences. It used a case study methodology to explore the friendship experiences of children and young people (ages 9-17 years) with autism or social communication difficulties attending a specialist education setting. Focus groups using a semi-structured interview approach were employed to collect qualitative data regarding the participants' views. This data was then analysed using the process of thematic analysis.

The participants discussed their experiences of friendship and support within the school setting. The study highlighted themes including an understanding of friendship, feelings of belonging, and support that could be put in place to improve friendship experiences. The school hoped to put in place provision reflecting these lessons.

This research was planned and delivered alongside a co-researcher, according to participatory principles. The co-researcher was recruited from the female population within the target educational setting and was a young person with autism.

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Declaration

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This work has not previously been accepted for any degree and it is not being concurrently submitted for any degree.

This research is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology.

This thesis is the result of my own work and investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references in the text. A full list is appended.

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Amy Elizabeth Jackson

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Table of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Term
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BPS	British Psychological Society
CYP	Children and Young People
DSM 5 Disorders	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental
EP	Educational Psychologist
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
HT	Head Teacher
NAS	National Autistic Society
NASEN Needs	National Association for Special Educational
NHS	National Health Service
NTD	Neuro-Typically Developing
PDD-NOS	Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified
PR	Participatory Research
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
TA	Thematic Analysis
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

This thesis will present research into how females with autism or social communication difficulties within a specialist setting feel about their friendship experiences. This study has been conducted using a participatory research model to investigate the specified topic within a specialist school setting. The research aimed to hear the voices of children and young people relating to their friendships within the school environment, and to empower the school setting to make change.

Friendships are considered vital in developing social and emotional skills, and also serve as a protective mechanism against developing mental health difficulties (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). However, people with autism are thought to regularly experience difficulties in making and maintaining friendships. For example, previous research has shown that children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have a heightened risk of peer rejection and loneliness (Kasari, Locke, Gulsrud & Rotheram-Fuller, 2011).

Yet it is important to note that there has been a bias in past studies in that they have largely focussed on the autistic male's experiences of friendship. This is likely to be as a result of a historical gender bias within autism, where theories suggested that ASD was a majority male phenomenon (Baron-Cohen, 2002). More research is therefore needed to understand the female perspective, particularly from the voice of the child or young person.

This chapter will introduce the central concepts within this research, including defining the key terms and describing important contextual information. This will include explaining the gender bias that has historically been present within autism diagnosis rates, and the potential consequences of this. Additionally, it will describe current debates regarding gender and identity,

and consider how those fit into the present study. Finally, it will explain the participatory research methodology that this study utilised, including the guiding principles and the legislative context for this form of investigation.

1.2 Defining Autism and Social Communication Difficulties

Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them' (National Autistic Society, 2019). According to the diagnostic criteria laid out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5), a person must have a deficit in the areas of communication and language, social and emotional understanding, and flexibility of thought in order to receive a diagnosis of autism (DSM 5, 2013). This means that a person may have difficulties in skills such as working and playing with others, may be resistant to change and may show a restricted range of interests. Children must present with difficulties in all three main areas in order to receive a diagnosis of ASD. However, children can present very differently whilst still meeting the same criteria, hence the labelling of a spectrum'. Furthermore, difficulties in developing, maintaining and understanding friendships are an integral aspect of ASD (DSM 5, 2013).

In a similar way to autism, children with social communication difficulties present with difficulties in understanding social interactions, including body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. They may also struggle to make socially appropriate eye contact or may have difficulties understanding what other people are thinking or feeling (Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust, 2018). People with social communication difficulties may or may not have a diagnosis related to this; the DSM 5 does specify a Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder which is said to be characterised by persistent difficulties in the social use of communication (DSM 5, 2013). This might include a difficulty in making inferences, or the literal interpretation of idioms or turns of phrase (for example, pull your socks

up'). Significantly, the DSM 5 also states that individual presentation must not be better explained' by a diagnosis of autism or other developmental delay. In this way children with social communication difficulties may not present with other features that are central to an ASD diagnosis; for example, the limited range of interests or sensory sensitivities.

Whilst diagnostic manuals such as the DSM 5 consistently refer to autism as ASD', many other names exist and can represent the preferred option for some groups. Other names that National Autistic Society (NAS, 2019) specify includes: autism spectrum condition (ASC); classic autism; Kanner autism; high functioning autism (HFA); Asperger syndrome, or Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). Furthermore, groups can disagree about the ordering of the words in relation to the diagnosis and the person involved; for instance, autistic person' versus aperson with autism'.

Kenny, Hattersley, Molins, Buckley, Povey and Pellicano (2015) have demonstrated through research the divisions that are present within the groups regarding the preferred terminology. For example, in their survey of 3,470 participants, 61% of the autistic adults represented approved using autistic', whereas only 38% of professionals were happy to use this term. When talking about a person with autism', these numbers switch with professionals being far more likely to use this term (49% of professionals, and 28% of autistic adults). Autistic participants linked these preferences with justifications such as autism being an integral part of their personality, and not something that should be viewed as a disability' but rather is a different way of thinking. These views were additionally supported by the family members of autistic people, including parents and other relations.

Overall, the authors state that the most highly favoured terms included autism, on the autism spectrum, and autism spectrum disorder (to a slightly lesser degree). This study will therefore use these terms throughout the paper, in deference to them being the most commonly used and most regularly endorsed terms. Furthermore, it will recognise the preference of the

relevant autistic community members in referring to ‘autistic’ people, for example saying ‘autistic female’.

1.3 Notions of Gender and ASD

Ideas about gender are not fixed; evidence shows that recent times have seen a shift in the way that people perceive gender, in a move away from previous generations. For example, a poll by Fusion (2015) found that over 50% of ‘millennials’ (people between the ages of 18 and 34) in the USA believe that gender is a spectrum, rather than a binary division between male and female. This promotes the idea that gender can be found at different points between the two traditional roles. This does not only include individuals who identify as transgender, but also as gender non-conforming or non-binary (neither male nor female). The significance of this shift is increasingly being recognised by national agencies. Indeed, new information relating to gender identity will be featured on the 2021 national census for the first time, separate from the question on biological sex (Office for National Statistics, 2018). This is an important step in recognising the gender diversity that exists within the general population.

These developments make it problematic to carry out research that categorizes participants by their gender in a more binary sense, meaning to divide by ‘girls’ and ‘boys’. However, previous studies have shown real value in separating by sex within autism; indeed, evidence suggests that they are important differences that may help us in developing understanding of ASD. For example, several theorists suggest that there is a female autistic phenotype that is thought to better camouflage typical symptomology and contribute to the current delay in diagnosis (Lehnhardt *et al.* 2015; Bargiela, Steward & Mandy, 2016).

To that end, this study deliberately chose to separate instead by biological sex rather than gender identity; this justifies the use of the word ‘female’

within the research, although it is recognised that much of the past literature refers to girls with ASD. Moreover, specific decisions within the research reflected this inclusive mentality. For example, one participant approached the researcher prior to data collection and confided that they were unsure of their suitability for this study, since they were currently questioning their gender identity. This person was informed that the study was simply looking at females in the school, and therefore they were still welcome to take part, which they then did so. Even more, their inclusion contributed to the wide range of interesting views that were ultimately shared.

However, it should be noted that tasks such as the literature review were carried out using search terms including gender division (girl) so that large areas of knowledge were not missed. Additionally, the consent forms that were used did include the terminology girls at the school, as staff members felt this would be more accessible.

1.4 A History of Autism

For a long period, many assumed that autism was a mainly male phenomenon; indeed, Baron-Cohen's influential theory suggested that autism arises from the extreme male brain (2002). Due to this and other factors, there has been an historical gender bias towards males in terms of diagnosis rates (Gould, 2017). A survey showed that, in England, 1.8% of men and boys have a diagnosis of ASD versus only 0.2% of women and girls (NHS, 2007). However, the National Autistic Society (NAS) reported following this that an increasing number of girls and women are being referred for ASD assessment (Ashton-Smith, 2011).

Theorists have recently begun to challenge the notion that autism is a predominately male phenomenon and are suggesting possible alternatives to the difference in diagnosis rates, with missed diagnosis or misdiagnosis being the key arguments (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). Missed diagnosis

simply refers to the idea that females with ASD have remained undetected and have therefore never been picked up for diagnosis. In fact, experts suggest that females are better able to mask their difficulties, or that the same underlying difficulties present differently in males vs. females (Dean, Harwood & Kasari, 2016). Additionally, the concept of misdiagnosis is one where females who present with ASD are often given other diagnoses as autism has been dismissed. For instance, evidence suggests that many girls with autism may be given various mental health diagnoses before professionals finally acknowledge the possibility of them having ASD (Bargiela, Steward & Mandy, 2016).

The most recent literature supports the notion that there are significant differences in the presentation of ASD between men and women (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). However, the picture for females and ASD is still unfolding. It can therefore be argued that further research will be essential to continue discovery and development in this relatively newly identified area.

1.5 Why Are Friendships Important?

Friendships can be described as a mutual relationship between two people, whereby they have a reciprocal sense of liking for one and other (Bagwell, Newcomb & Bukowski, 1998). The presence of mutual friendships are thought to be central in helping people to develop self-esteem, a sense of wellbeing, and the ability to cope with difficult life events (Hartup and Stevens, 1999). Studies have shown that children who have good quality friendships are more likely to be socially well adjusted, and to present with higher levels of wellbeing (Waldrip, Malcolm and Jensen-Campbell, 2008). Further, Dunn (2004) gives evidence that friendships can be a buffer against the development of behaviour issues, school adjustment difficulties, and victimization.

Additionally, friendships have been shown to be an important protective factor against the development of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. This has been displayed in multiple studies relating to typically developing children; for example, research by Bagwell, Newcomb and Bukowski (2008) suggested that preadolescents with reciprocal friendships had higher levels of general self-worth during adulthood. This follow-up study also demonstrated a correlation between lack of friendships and subsequent psychopathological symptoms, such as depression and paranoid ideation.

The link between friendship and protective mental health factors has also been displayed in regards to people with autism or other social communication difficulties. For instance, Mazurek (2014) found that higher levels of friendship quantity and quality contributed to fewer feelings of loneliness in adults with ASD. Loneliness itself was associated with greater levels of anxiety and depression, as well as lower levels of life satisfaction and self esteem. Furthermore, Whitehouse, Durkin, Jaquet and Ziatas (2009) suggested that adolescents with Asperger syndrome (AS) displayed higher levels of depressive symptoms where they had poor quality friendships. Finally, Bauminger, Shulman and Agam (2004) demonstrated links between friendship and perceived self-worth in adolescents with autism. In their study, good peer relationships were positively correlated with higher levels of self worth and correlated negatively with feelings of loneliness.

These research findings are especially pertinent when we consider that many studies have also shown that anxiety and other mental health issues may be more prevalent within the autistic population. For instance, one meta-analysis conducted by van Steensel, Bögels and Perrin (2011) suggests that nearly 40% of children and adolescents with autism present with elevated levels of anxiety, and could be classified as having at least one anxiety disorder. Equally, Skokauskas and Gallagher's (2010) investigations imply that both anxiety and depression are more common in people with autism than they are with neuro-typically developing individuals.

1.6 What is Participatory Research?

Cornwall and Jewkes describe participatory research (PR) as an ‘attitude or approach’ to research, rather than a specific methodology (1995, p.1671). The approach is driven by the key principle of empowering the target community to take control of the research process. This means that they are able to decide the research agenda and direct the planning of a study. According to Hart (1992) a project can only be considered truly participatory if the community is involved in designing every stage of a research project, including the design, data collection, analysis and dissemination. Proponents of PR argue that this model treats people as experts in their own lives, by respecting and understanding the knowledge they bring to the research process (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). The emphasis is thus shifted to research *with* children, rather than research *on* children (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015).

PR reflects the ethos of several pieces of legislation. For instance, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) clearly states that children and young people have a right to express their opinions on all matters pertaining to them. Moreover, the importance of the voice of the child is increasingly being recognised in recent UK legislation. For example, the recent SEND Code of Practice (2015) and the Children and Families Act (2014) both emphasise the rights of children and young people to be heard.

There are several models of participatory research that can be utilised in order to guide practice. Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation displays a hierarchy of desired behaviours in relation to the inclusion of children and young people (CYP). In this model, the bottom rung of the ladder represents the ‘manipulation’ of CYP. In contrast, the higher rungs see children being involved in the decision making processes. Further examples of participation models include Aldridge (2017), who similarly suggests that a more positive

model is where participants can move from a passive to an active role or, most ideally, one which enables them to make social change or transformation. This is reflective of research that has emancipatory aims, meaning it hopes to empower those involved. The Aldridge model can be found in the figure below.

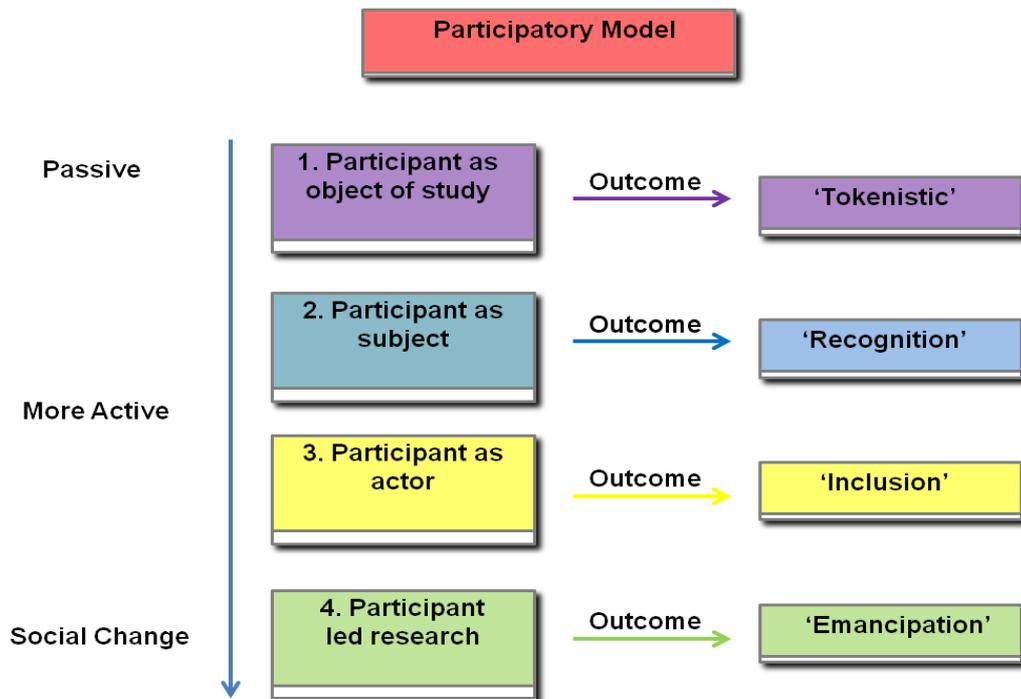


Figure 1.1: Aldridge's Model of Participation

1.7 Researcher Position

Many researchers suggest that it is important to position yourself within the research, in order to assess how an individual perspective may have impacted on the completion of the project. For instance, Willig (2013) suggests that researchers will inevitably include their own assumptions to influence the study direction. To this end, Fox, Martin and Green (2007) suggest that you need to examine your personal values and beliefs so that reflexivity can be employed.

Prior to completing this research project, I worked closely with CYP with autism and other social communication difficulties. For example, I worked as an Applied Behaviour Analyst with autistic children from 4-13 years old. Further to this, I supported children with autism within a school setting as a teaching assistant for a reception classroom. Finally, I supported a variety of CYP as an assistant, and then trainee Educational Psychologist. However, it can be noted that I did not come across any females that were formally diagnosed with autism during the sum of these experiences. In this way, this research was a form of initial exposure to this phenomenon.

Whilst working with children, and particularly during my training to become an Educational Psychologist, I crafted an opinion that listening to pupil voice and acting as an advocate for CYP was a key aspect of my role. The development of these views came about through psychologists such as Irvine Gersch (2016), who promotes the notion that we can empower CYP through providing them with a voice. This training additionally coincided with legislative changes where person-centred methods were heralded as best practice (SEND Code of Practice, 2015). These ideas therefore became quite integral to my self-perception.

During the same period, I learned to reject the idea of the psychologist as the expert and instead support the idea that people are experts in their own lives. This concept has arisen from a solution focused philosophy, as proposed by thinkers such as Ajmal & Rees (2001). My job was therefore to listen to the views and experiences of others, rather than make my own assumptions about the situation.

The concept of participatory research appeared to me to fit within both of these principles. For example, it treats the community member(s) as the expert(s) in allowing them to determine what area merits further investigation, rather than the researcher dictating this topic. This is in contrast to the traditional research model where decisions are held solely by the adult leading the project. Furthermore, it promotes the idea of a young

researcher who is empowered to make change and take control of the research areas such as dissemination of information. Thus when I was initially presented with the idea, I immediately felt a kinship to this form of research.

1.8 Research Rationale

A desire to complete a participatory piece of research was the motivating force behind this project. That is to say, allowing the members of a community to decide where further knowledge should be sought. From this, I required a school setting that would be amenable to this idea. It is likely that this concept held greater appeal to some schools and they would be allowed to choose where my focus would lie.

Having identified a specialised autism setting, senior staff suggested that the females attending their school should be the focus of this research. Their reasoning towards this proposal was a perception that their understanding of this group could be improved. They also wished to identify any potential improvement in the provision they were currently providing. For example, they gave anecdotal evidence that females appeared to be coping well within the school day, but experiencing high levels of distress once at home. This had been corroborated with parental reports to members of school staff.

To justify this research area, initial searches were undertaken to identify the existing literature. As stated, research into females with autism is a relatively novel concept given the recent shift in understanding. Moreover, the research that does exist appears to focus primarily on differences in gender presentation to support changes in diagnostic criteria, rather than provision and support. For example, a large study from Sutherland, Hodge, Bruck, Costley & Klieve (2017) sought to find parent-reported difference in autism presentation across gender. However, despite discovering variation between genders it was not able to suggest how this might relate to a need for differentiation of support.

Furthermore, guidance from autism organisations suggested that it is difficult to provide advice for supporting girls given that ‘...evidence is currently sparse, fragmented and inconclusive’ (NASEN, 2016, p.14). Ashton-Smith (2011) acknowledges that this is a very under-researched field, and further evidence is needed to substantiate anecdotal evidence that exists but has not yet been validated.

Finally, past research had suggested that qualitative research may be most useful in providing a meaningful contribution to this area of study. For example, the Sutherland *et al.* (2017) study, as cited above, only found differences in gender when they examined the qualitative responses. This might suggest that the differences between males and females are difficult to detect through using a quantitative approach. Additionally, in a study by Dean, Harwood & Kasari (2017), quantitative data was not sensitive enough to evidence any social interaction difficulties. However, qualitative description displayed evidence that the participants’ social interactions were very fleeting and the numbers were simply masking their differences.

These factors in combination appear to present a robust argument for further research within this field. Additionally, qualitative research may be a more beneficial route to pursue. This chapter has provided an introduction to this research project and an overview of the key terms and topics. The following chapter will explore any pre-existing literature within this field that may be of relevance to this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the available literature relating to the friendship experiences of girls with autism, to identify current gaps in knowledge and thus set a rationale for this study. To this end, a systematic literature review was conducted; the primary focus of the search being the identification of studies relating to gender differences of friendship or social relationships in children with ASD. The literature will need to relate specifically to female friendships, in line with the goals of this study.

To begin, this chapter will describe the search processes that were employed to identify the academic papers to be reviewed. Following this will be the analysis of the papers identified. To achieve this in a coherent manner, the findings have been divided into four categories: studies that are mainly based on the maternal perspectives of raising females with ASD; those that evaluate the impact of interventions on females with ASD; research that specifically focuses on gender differences in social interaction, and one meta-analysis of gender differences in ASD presentation.

As will be discussed, research in this area is limited; the number of papers is small, and those available generally omit the voice of the child or young person. Additionally, there is currently no published research from the UK that fulfils the search criteria. Thus the studies have mostly been carried out in the US, with one research paper being conducted in Australia. Additionally, a meta-review was conducted in the Netherlands. It will therefore be important to bear in mind how differences in school composition and population may influence social and cultural factors and how these might relate to children in the UK.

2.1.1 Review Strategy

A systematic literature review was conducted to identify papers relevant to the research topic; namely, the experiences of friendship for females with ASD. The literature search was completed in the following manner, and can be seen outlined in Figure 2.1.

Five databases were used, specifically PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, ERIC, Education Research Complete and Education Abstract (H.W. Wilson) via the EBSCO portal. Due to scarcity of papers uncovered during the initial searches, three separate processes were completed. For all searches, the same set of inclusion criteria were utilised in an attempt to ensure relevance to the topic matter. The full inclusion and exclusion criteria are displayed in Table 2.1.

The first search consisted of the terms *Girls OR females* AND *Autism OR ASD OR autism spectrum disorder* AND *friendship*, either in title or the abstract. The search terms employed related to prior searches and suggested additions via the thesaurus function in the database. After filtering using the inclusion criteria, **44** papers were identified. These articles were screened via titles or reading of the abstract, and **three** papers were selected for critical analysis. Reasoning for exclusion can be found in Table 2.1, which details the inclusion and exclusion criteria employed.

Having only identified three studies using these search terms, an additional search was conducted in an attempt to broaden the results. This was completed using the terms *Girls OR females (IN TITLE)* AND *Autism OR ASD OR autism spectrum disorder* AND *friendship OR peer relationship OR friend OR social*. This search generated **50** research papers after filtering using the inclusion criteria. After reviewing the abstracts of these options, **five** papers were considered relevant: **two** of these were duplications from the previous search, with **three** unique papers found.

Finally, a third search was completed using the terms Gender differences AND Autism OR ASD OR autism spectrum disorder AND Friendship OR peer relationship OR friend OR social. This search, using the correct filters, identified a further **43** papers. Of these, an additional **two** papers were deemed to fit the inclusion criteria and added to the review.

In total, the number of research papers in this review is **eight** studies (see full list in Appendix 1.1). The searches were all completed within October 2018, the final search being conducted on the 21st October 2018. An illustration of the search process can be found in Figure 2.1.

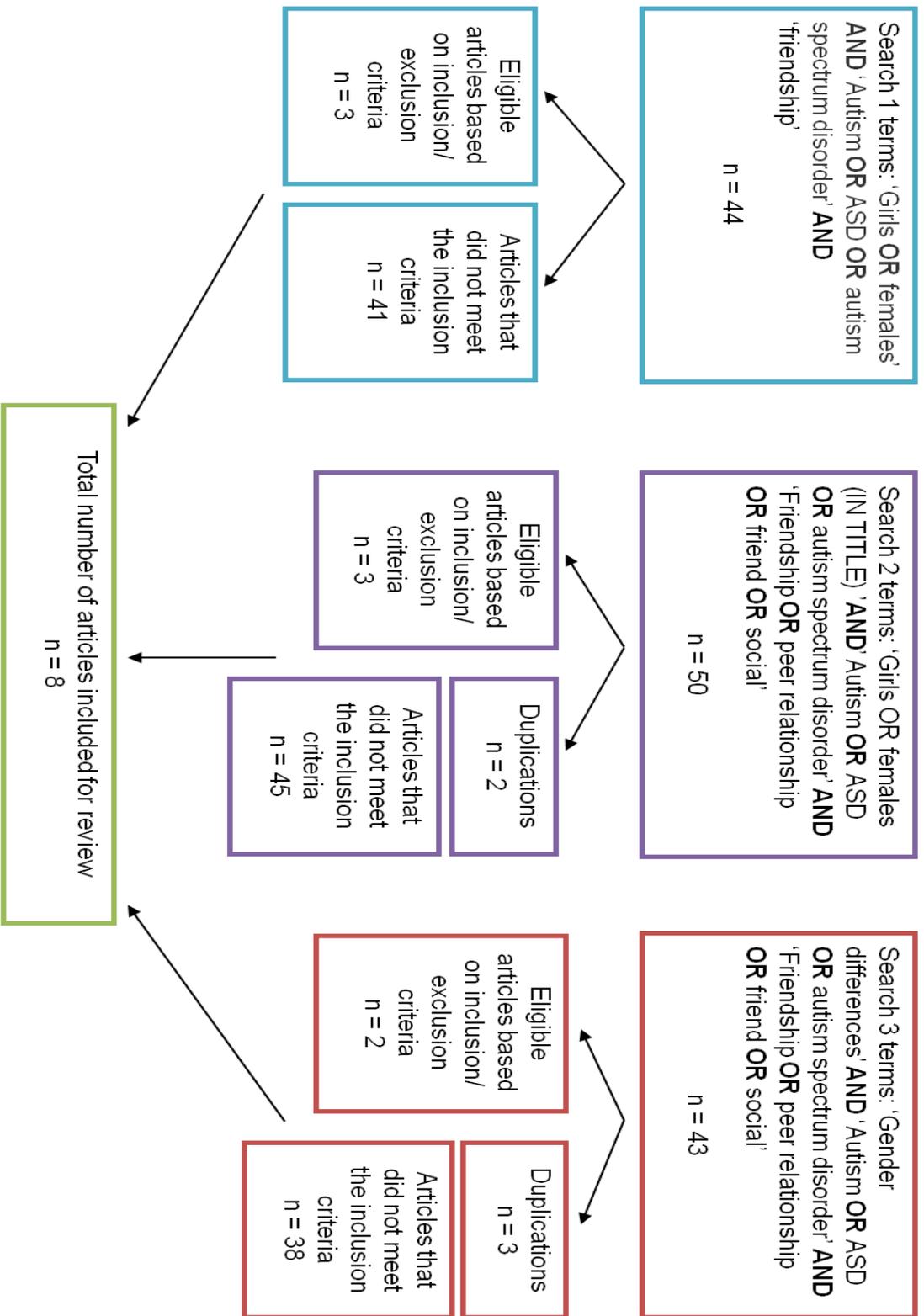


Figure 2.1: Illustration of the literature search process

Table 2.1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Justification	Exclusion Criteria	Justification
Publication date between 2000 and 2018.	Relevance to current theoretical beliefs about females with ASD.	ASD not listed as main area of need.	Not the relevant population to this study.
Full text available.	Accessibility.	No mention of friendships or the social context.	Not relevant to the aims of this study.
English version available.	Accessibility.	No separation of female and male data.	No basis for gender comparison.
Ages School age: 6-12 years Adolescence: 13-17 years	Relates to participants within this research project.		
Autism OR ASD OR social communication difficulties AND Female Or Girls	Ensure relevance to topic matter		

2.2 Literature Review: Critical Analysis

The sections below will undertake a critical analysis of the research identified during the systematic search process. Critique was led by the criteria as laid out by Lincoln and Guba (1985) relating to qualitative research. Whilst 8 papers will be covered overall, these have been divided into four subheadings for clarity. The first of these is maternal perspectives.

2.2.1 Maternal perspectives

Of the research papers found, two investigated maternal perspectives. That is to say, they explored the experiences of mothers in raising a female with autism. Whilst social skills or friendships were not the main focus on these studies, both studies identified ‘difficulties in making/maintaining friendships’ as one of the core themes following analysis of the data. Additionally, both were individually focused on girls with ASD. Thus the studies were deemed suitable for inclusion within this review.

2.2.1.1 Mother-daughter perspectives

Cridland, Jones, Caputi and Magee (2014) used a qualitative research methodology to investigate the experiences of females with ASD during their adolescent years. This was achieved through semi-structured interviews with the mothers of adolescents with autism, either as part of a mother-daughter dyad (three sets of participants), or the mother alone (two participants). The data obtained was then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Cridland *et al.* state that the interviews covered physical, emotional, social and sexual domains.

From these interviews, Cridland *et al.* (2014) identified seven core themes: diagnostic issues, being ‘surrounded by boys’; experiences of high school; the complexity of female adolescent relationships; puberty; sexual relationships and concerns, and; impact of parenting a child with ASD. Many of these themes related to the difficulties facing females with ASD. For instance, the reluctance of medical professionals to diagnose girls as autistic, given the historic male bias; many parents believed that their child had been given a late diagnosis as a result, which caused frustration at the lack of support within their early years. Furthermore, participants spoke about not fitting in with either community; firstly, the neuro-typically developing (NTD) population – due to their developmental disorder – and secondly the autism community – because it is geared towards males. Significantly, the authors noted that all five mothers involved in the study described the difficulty their

daughters faced in making and maintaining friendships. This was particularly the case when trying to converse with their NTD peers, as they felt they didn't understand the 'rules' of their conversations and other social interactions. The authors noted that mothers also worried that their children would be vulnerable, particularly to sexual abuse, given their lack of understanding and willingness to take things at face value.

However, it is important to bear in mind the limitations of this study. For example, there was a small participant pool, made more problematic by the lack of homogeneity within the sample group. Of the five participants, only one young person had a diagnosis of ASD while three were diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. The single remaining participant had received a diagnosis of PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified). Whilst it is not necessarily the case that the females presented significantly differently due to the differing diagnoses, it does make it harder to make direct comparisons of their experiences. For example, it may have impacted on the support they have received and external attitudes to the young people. Additionally, the participants were varied in their school placement; some were in mainstream education, with others in specialist settings or placed in units attached to a mainstream setting. This may be particularly pertinent to their experiences of friendship, as school possibly represents the main area for social interaction. This is also inconsistent with the IPA approach, which usually involves a small but homogeneous sample (Cridland *et al.*, 2014).

It should also be noted that the voice of the young person was not well represented within this research. Although three of the five interviews purportedly involved the adolescent with autism, the voice of the mother certainly resonated more loudly, with a large majority of direct quotes used being from a mother rather than the young people (52 of 56 participant quotes came from mothers, making up 93% of participant voice). Whilst it is important to hear maternal perspectives, it does imply that further research may be required to more fully investigate the experiences of the young people themselves.

2.2.1.2. Maternal views

The second study investigating the maternal viewpoint was conducted by Navot, Jorgenson and Webb (2017). Similar to the prior study in many respects, these researchers sought to obtain information about the experiences of adolescent girls with ASD from a parental perspective. Similarly, they also employed a qualitative methodology by way of semi-structured interviews. Their participants consisted of 11 mothers of girls diagnosed with ASD, with their daughters falling between the ages 10 and 19 years of age (mean age 14.8 years). The researchers used naturalistic inquiry, meaning that they sought to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences of this phenomenon.

As might be expected, several themes overlapped within these two studies. For instance, Navot, Jorgenson and Webb (2017) also categorized their findings into seven different strands, namely: scepticism and delayed diagnosis; disbelief from others; lack of information; higher social demands; puberty challenges; disappointment in physical appearances, and relationship vulnerabilities and future worries. Many of the thematic crossovers can therefore be identified by the titles of the themes alone, for example, the delayed diagnosis issues, difficulties around puberty, and concerns about vulnerability. Pertinent to this study, concerns again arose about the ability of these young people to form relationships with others; mothers suggesting that their daughters did not have the understanding of complex social mechanisms that allowed for bond formation in this age group. Mothers also described the social scenario as potentially more challenging for girls than for boys; not least because female friendships typically rely more of conversational exchanges, rather than a shared hobby or interest (Navot, Jorgenson & Webb, 2017).

It is also interesting to consider the perspectives shared around information available relating to females on the spectrum. The researchers identified a theme within the data whereby mothers felt that there was a lack of information relating to girls with ASD. This was not only the case for

parenting support but also within the medical professions responsible for diagnosing and caring for their children. This resulted in mothers reportedly feeling deskilled in being able to care for their own child, and frustration in the lack of apparent knowledge or understanding of others being involved. These views would certainly support the notion that further research is required on how to both recognise and support girls with ASD, and that information needs to be disseminated to help support both families and those on the frontline of care. This study being published in only 2017 supports the idea that this is still as yet an unmet need.

Limitations of this study include restricted generalisability due to the small participant numbers involved in qualitative research of this nature. Additionally, the study was based in the US and therefore may not be totally applicable to the concerns of parents within the UK, given the differences in educational techniques and access to support between both countries. However, the study certainly achieved its aims of exploring in depth the experiences of mothers who have daughters on the autistic spectrum.

2.2.1.3 Summary and Conclusions from Maternal Perspective Studies

The shared themes within the two studies presented add strength to the evidence base regarding maternal perspectives. Inclusive within these shared themes was the notion of challenges presented in creating and maintaining friendships for girls with ASD. It must be noted, however, that the focus of these discussions was the social interactions between girls with ASD and NTD girls; a gap therefore exists in thinking about how girls with ASD interact with one another, and whether this supports or hinders development of friendship. Moreover, the studies neglected the voice of the young people themselves who may have shared a different perspective. A gap therefore exists in hearing about these experiences through the lens of the child which remains an important area of study.

2.2.2 Impact of Interventions

The second theme that emerged from the papers related to the impact of social skills intervention on females with ASD. This was the topic for two studies found within the search, although differences included the intervention approach and the aims within the studies.

2.2.2.1 The PEERS intervention

McVey *et al.* (2017) sought to investigate how the *PEERS for Young Adults* (Laugeson & Frankel, 2011) intervention might differently impact upon females, in contrast to males with ASD. *PEERS for Young Adults* (Laugeson & Frankel, 2011) is an evidence based intervention that targets the development of social skills, particularly conversation skills and etiquette. The authors report that the intervention is used widely for the ASD community within the US.

In this study the researchers employed a purely quantitative design, using several questionnaires to gather the pre- and post-data sets. These questionnaires included the Test of Adolescent Social Skills Knowledge (TASSK; Laugeson *et al.* 2009) or Test of Young Adult Social Skills Knowledge (TYASSK; Gantman *et al.* 2012). Additionally, the parents of participants also provided data to be analysed within the study. Parents completed the Social Skills Improvement System – Rating Scales (SSIS-RS; Gresham & Elliott 2008) and Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS; Constantino *et al.* 2003). The scales perform the function of assessing a number of subscales related to overall social skill, including social awareness; social cognition; social communication; social motivation; restricted interests and so on.

Whilst McVey *et al.* (2017) initially recruited 250 participants for the study, various factors led to the final analysis numbers landing at 177. Participants were divided into an experimental and control group, based on access to the intervention or waitlist. The young people taking part were reported to be within adolescence, with no further information provided regarding mean age

or other categorizing factors. It is also important to note that authors reportedly utilised both unpublished and published data in order to add statistical power. These numbers were given to be $n = 78$ (unpublished data) and $n = 54$ and $n = 46$ (published data); however, no additional information was given regarding make up of these numbers, including the number of female participants.

Results of this study showed no significant difference between impact of the *PEERS for Young Adults* (Laugeson & Frankel, 2011) intervention according to gender. Authors report that the intervention appeared equally effective regardless of gender of participant. This remained consistent in all measures used, both according to the participant data and the parent findings. These results were based on analysis using independent t-tests relating to gender alone, namely the analysis of variance (ANOVA).

However, this study was subject to major limitations. For instance, the researchers admit that only 27 of the initial 177 participants were female (15.2%), which impacts upon the statistical significance of these results. This is particularly the case where authors were comparing the results of female participants based on race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and parental education level – in which case the sample groups were likely to be small, barring majority homogeneity between these factors. This would render the results fairly insignificant in either case. Indeed, it was difficult to establish the significance of the statistical data given the lack of clarity regarding participants. This was especially the case where the authors included other published and unpublished data within their analysis but provided no additional information about this source.

Furthermore, authors admit that qualitative data would have been useful in helping them to understand the experiences of those taking the intervention, rather than simply relying on the data produced from the various quantitative measures. In addition, comparison groups only accounted for a waitlist rather than alternative available interventions. Given these factors, it might therefore be suggested that limited conclusions can be drawn from this

study, especially when one considers the small percentage of females included in the data set.

2.2.2.2 The Girls Night Out model

The second study relating to a social skills intervention was carried out by Jamison and Schuttler (2017) regarding the Girls Night Out (GNO) model. Researchers reported that their main aim was to describe the intervention, with a secondary purpose to evaluate some initial data regarding effectiveness. The intervention itself endeavours to improve self-confidence and self-perception, hypothesising that this in turn will lead to increased engagement in social activities. Additionally, it explicitly teaches social skills in their natural context (having dinner, doing exercise, getting ready to go out). Researchers also emphasised the importance of participants setting their own goals and monitoring their own improvements over time. Groups were conducted with four to six participants with ASD, and an equal number of NTD peers. Sessions took two hours and progressed over a course of 12-14 weeks.

To provide some preliminary analysis of the intervention, the researchers employed data from previously completed cycles. This took a quantitative form, with data provided from 34 female participants from five prior GNO groups. Measures included the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS), Self Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA) and the Youth Quality of Life-Research Version (YQoL-R). These questionnaires were completed by both the participants and their parents, and results compared for validity. Additionally, both sets filled in 'satisfaction' surveys, which took into consideration their appreciation of the intervention itself. This also took a quantitative format, with aspects being rated out of five.

These initial results showed positive outcomes for the intervention; participant data revealed a significant difference in overall social competence pre- and post-intervention ($p=0.011$) and quality of life ($p=0.016$) according to the SSIS. There was also a near significant difference in global self-

perception ($p=0.065$). However, many aspects of the SSPA were non-significant, implicating mixed success in these measures. Fidelity was reported at 90% and anonymous results were checked by an independent researcher, with good inter-rater reliability demonstrated.

Some difficulties with this study included the small participant numbers, which the researchers state as the main barrier. In addition, the aforementioned mixed results regarding the different intervention measures make it difficult to draw conclusion on the efficacy of the program. Even more, the significant effects that were shown in the participant data were not backed up by the parent scores, whose data gave non-significant differences within the SSIS measure ($p=0.096$). This draws further doubt into the evidence that is provided by this study. Finally, the authors themselves admit that there was a large amount of variability in the scores both between and within groups; this potentially indicates that the effectiveness was based more on a few positive individual responses, rather than a global improvement.

2.2.2.3 Summary and Conclusions from Intervention Studies

Whilst these interventions purportedly relate to the aim of this study, namely the investigation of social skills and friendships of females with ASD, in reality they do little to add to the picture. Both studies faced significant limitations with their data, thus making it difficult to draw suitable conclusions. Moreover, the lack of qualitative data translates to the voice of the young people being neglected. This may have proved the most useful information, to gather a more in depth picture of what the adolescents valued about the intervention experience and its impact on their real-life social situations. Although this was not achieved in these examples, it does serve to again highlight the gap in knowledge relating to the voices of those females with ASD.

2.2.3 Gender differences in social interaction

Three studies from this review concerned identifying differences in the social interaction and communication of males and females on the autistic spectrum. This ranged from investigating differences in social behaviour and the ability of girls to ‘camouflage’ (Dean, Harwood & Kasari, 2017), gender differences in social motivation (Sedgewick *et al.*, 2016), and comparison of peer relationships (Dean *et al.*, 2014). Whilst these studies all contribute unique findings in relation to potential gender differences, they also interrelate in terms of the impact and combined meanings of the findings.

2.2.3.1. Masking behaviours

Dean, Harwood & Kasari (2017) used a mixed methods design within a US mainstream elementary school to assess whether ASD difficulties with social behaviour are more obvious in the male population, and if females are able to ‘mask’ their difficulties. Participants included 96 elementary school students; participants were evenly subdivided into four categories including: females with/without ASD, and; males with/without ASD. There were 24 participants in each category, and authors note that they did not have additional learning needs. Measures employed in the study included The Playground Observation of Peer Engagement (POPE), which uses a timed observation system to assess the social activities of children. This method was used in both the quantitative and qualitative analysis, utilising different aspects of the data (time and activity).

Researchers found that girls were more likely to use compensatory behaviours to appear as though they were accessing social groups. For instance, girls would ‘flit’ between being in groups and being alone (in contrast to typically developing girls, who could maintain an interaction in a social group for a longer period of time), which made it harder to perceive that they were socially isolated. However, the presentation of boys with ASD was more obvious as typical male interactions were more clear cut in whether you were ‘in or out’, such as playing a sport. This implies that it

might be difficult to observe the difficulties that girls are experiencing socially, even for those knowledgeable about autism. Thus females are at risk of 'flying under the radar' and not receiving the appropriate support for their difficulties.

However, it should be noted that the data used in analysis here was taken from a prior study, rather than being gathered to meet the specific aims of this research. Other criticisms of this study include the relatively low participant numbers in connection to statistical analysis, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Indeed, researchers admit that the qualitative data was more beneficial in helping them to understand how females were able to mask their difficulties in social interaction in any case. For instance, the quantitative analysis showed no significant difference in the social isolation of males and females with ASD ($p=0.187$). Nevertheless, further investigation revealed the 'flitting' nature of their interactions that was not picked up by the numbers alone.

2.2.3.2 Social Motivation

These findings are given greater significance when we consider the Sedgewick *et al.* (2016) investigation into the social motivation of males and females on the autistic spectrum. In their study, they used a mixed methods design utilising both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to assess whether being male or female with ASD impacted upon your desire to be socially included. Using 46 adolescent participants from a special school, the researchers used the Social Contact measured using Social Responsiveness Scale (Constantino & Gruber 2012) and the Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS) (Bukowski *et al.* 1994) alongside semi-structured interviews to obtain the relevant data. Questionnaire responses were sought from both participants and their teachers, whilst the interviews were conducted only with the adolescents.

Results implied that girls with autism are potentially more socially motivated than boys also on the spectrum. Indeed, females with autism showed similar

levels of social motivation than typically developing girls, whereas boys on the spectrum displayed significantly lower levels than their NTD counterparts. Teachers also reported perceiving greater social motivation in the female ASD population than the male population, correlating with these scores.

Furthermore, data from the questionnaires detected little differences between the social behaviours of ASD vs. NTD girls, whereas ASD boys scored significantly lower than NTD boys in areas such as friendship intimacy ($p=0.01$) and help ($p<0.01$). This implies a marked disparity in the perceived friendships from girls and boys on the spectrum. Additionally, during the semi-structured interview phase, girls with ASD described their friendships as closer, more helpful and more secure than boys with ASD. This suggests a qualitative difference in friendships for those on the spectrum, as well as differing level of social motivation.

However, it should be noted that this study involved a relatively small sample size, particularly when using statistical analysis. Furthermore, information from the above Dean, Harwood & Kasari (2017) study might suggest that the teachers are less adept at detecting social difficulties in females with ASD, which may cast doubt on their analysis of girls as more socially competent. Further, participants were members of a special school thus surrounded by others with potentially similar difficulties, which may have played a role in the success of friendships given the high social motivation. In any case, it must be noted that these results imply a higher social aptitude from females with ASD than other studies might suggest.

2.2.3.3 Social inclusion

Adding to this picture, Dean *et al.* (2014) further investigated how socially included children with autism were in comparison to their peers, with gender differences forming the basis of their interest. Employing a solely quantitative design, they used The Friendships Survey (Cairns & Cairns, 1994) to examine children's friendships and peer groups, including the salience of a friendship (the frequency with which they are together) and friendship

reciprocity (each child selects the other as one of their 'top three' friends). Participants included 100 elementary school children from a mainstream setting, with even distribution amongst the following groups: NTD males; ASD males; NTD females; ASD females. This represents 25 participants in each category.

The findings of the survey indicated that both males and females with ASD were less likely to have a mutual friendship, and that the salience was likely to be lower in friendships that did exist. Moreover, diagnosis of ASD was a risk factor in children being 'rejected' (listed as a non-desired friend), especially in males. Meanwhile, girls with autism were identified as 'ignored' or 'overlooked' by their peers; they were the least likely to be named as a friend, a non-desired friend, or a member of a peer group. A regression analysis showed a significant difference in the social acceptance of children with ASD in relation to the NTD peers ($p=0.02$), with children with autism being less socially accepted, regardless of gender.

Whilst it is uncomfortable to think of this in terms of 'rejection', this does present significant implications for girls with autism and their ability to be accepted by their peers. In contrast to Sedgewick *et al.* (2016), this study found that ASD females are not more successful than their ASD male counterparts in forming reciprocal friendships. In fact, they were the most likely to be overlooked by all their peers in terms of listed friends. However, this may be a result of the different participant make-up; as opposed to a special setting, this study was conducted in a mainstream setting. Moreover, participants were of an elementary school age (5-10 years old) versus Sedgewick *et al.*'s (2016) adolescent population. It might therefore be hypothesised that girls with ASD continue to develop their social skills and become more successful in adolescence, or when surrounded by like-minded peers. The authors do additionally note that females, whether with ASD or NTD, preferred friends of the same gender.

It should be considered that, again, participant numbers were low which impacts on the statistical power on the analysis. Additionally, data was taken from previous studies conducted by the authors rather than being newly

collected which might provide data that was not fully suited to this study's particular purpose.

2.2.3.4 Summary and Conclusions from Social Interaction Studies

In combination, these studies might imply that females with ASD are more socially motivated than males also on the spectrum. However, some of the research suggests that autistic females are not more successful in their social interactions and are indeed more likely to be 'overlooked' by their peers, despite their attempts to 'camouflage' or fit in with their peers. In addition, their social difficulties might be more difficult to identify due to their masking behaviours. This could have significant consequences in terms of their mental health, should effective interventions not be put in place.

The contradictory results in these studies relating to social success implies that further research may be needed to identify the risk and protective factors in making friends for girls on the autistic spectrum. This includes whether age and educational setting might play a part in the ability to form successful, reciprocal friendships. Indeed, the researchers also admit that further research is required in order to facilitate interventions that enable autistic girls to obtain and maintain friendships. Dean *et al.* (2014) state that '...our understanding of the social deficits associated with ASD is based on predominantly male samples, social skills interventions may be more geared toward boys' (p.129).

These studies might also indicate that qualitative methods are a more effective tool in identifying gender differences. For example, in the Dean, Harwood & Kasari (2017) study, it was the qualitative observation that allowed researchers to assess how girls were able to mask their difficulties, as the quantitative data was not sensitive enough to show the fleeting nature of their interactions. Additionally, Sedgewick *et al.*'s (2016) findings were given much more meaning where participants provided their views, such as the explanations given for why friendship is important.

2.2.4 Meta-Analysis

For the final paper in this review, Wijngaarden-Cremers *et al.* (2014) conducted a systematic literature review and meta-analysis of the information available relating to the gender differences present in the ‘core triad’ of ASD symptomology. The authors characterised these traits as communication deficits, social impairments and repetitive or stereotyped behaviour. Researchers solely sought papers of a quantitative methodology in order to complete further statistical analysis of the amalgamated data (standardised using the standardized mean difference –SMD- to account for the different measures used).

Wijngaarden-Cremers *et al.* (2014) found 22 available texts to support their review and meta-analysis. They subcategorized these papers according to age of participants, using the following names: toddlers (0-3 years); pre-schoolers (0-6 years); children (6-12 years); adolescents (13-17 years); adults (18+). There was a fairly even distribution of papers amongst each category. They reported that overall, their analysis included 4,195 participants with 3,207 male and 988 females (3.25:1 ratio, male to female).

To assess the differences in gender presentation in ASD, the authors first calculated the overall severity for each gender, followed by comparison within the different aged subgroups. The outcome of these calculations showed little difference; suggesting that females with ASD may exhibit less repetitive and stereotyped behaviour, there was no significant difference in the presentation of social behaviour or in communication. These results held true in every category above the age of six, thus excluding the toddler and pre-schoolers subgroups. However, the researchers do suggest that these specific groups were subject to the greatest variety, and therefore may have the lowest potential validity.

Although these results appear fairly decisive, there are several potential issues that the authors suggest. Indeed, they present a number of different hypotheses to suggest how the current studies may be misleading. For instance, they propose that females may present with a different ‘autistic phenotype’ than males; this would imply that the current diagnostic criteria is

biased towards male presentation of autism. The impact of this would be a misrepresentation of females with ASD within all present studies due to missed diagnoses. The researchers also comment on the ratio skew of females diagnosed with ASD who present with co-morbid learning difficulties; they reported this ratio at 9/10:1 female/male. They therefore suggest that the presentation of more ‘classic’ ASD symptoms could be related to their associated difficulties rather than ASD itself. Furthermore, the facts of this ratio might suggest that females have a greater likelihood of obtaining an ASD diagnosis when their symptoms lie in tandem with learning needs. This might imply that ‘high-functioning’ girls are missed, again leading to a bias in the available data. Of course, it may also be the case the quantitative tools are not an appropriate method to determine gender difference in ASD presentation, based on the conclusions of other researchers and the apparent lack of helpful evidence from these methods.

2.2.4.1 Summary and Conclusions from Meta-Analysis Studies

Ultimately, the limitations described might suggest that the evidence gathered thus far is not sufficient to make definitive conclusions regarding presentation of ASD in males vs. females. To this end, there is an increasing demand for better understanding of gender difference within ASD. Better diagnostic procedures are required to ensure an equal representation of females presenting with ASD, but, in a circular fashion, more needs to be known about female ASD presentation in order to create such tools. This is particularly the case for girls who are better able to ‘mask’ their difficulties in areas such as social communication. It could be suggested that qualitative research may be more helpful in thinking about the actual experiences of girls from their perspective in learning where their difficulties lie.

2.3 Summary and Conclusions

It is evident that research concerning females with autism is still within the emerging stages. From the small pool of available papers, to the recent publication dates (2014 onwards), the evidence points to a growing interest in the field, yet still with a need for further investigation. This notion is agreed amongst the researchers represented in these studies; indeed, several explicitly cite the need for further investigation. Furthermore, themes within the studies themselves suggest that the ASD community itself is calling for greater understanding of females with ASD; for example, within the Navot *et al.* (2017) study, mothers discussed how lack of information made them feel deskilled in parenting. Moreover, lack of understanding from medical professional hindered the timely diagnosis of children within the Cridland *et al.* (2014) paper.

It is fair to say that the body of research presented here did not agree on the level of difficulty experienced by females with ASD relating to friendships. For example, Sedgewick *et al.* (2016) reported that girls with ASD have similar levels of social motivation as NTD girls, and in fact experience greater success in friendships than males with the equivalent diagnosis. However, this is contradicted by the results in Dean *et al.* (2014), who found that males and females with ASD are equally likely to be excluded within the social context. Indeed, Dean, Harwood and Kasari (2017) might suggest that the ability of ASD females to mask their social difficulties may have created a false positive in some of these research results. Furthermore, the maternal perspectives laid out in the Cridland *et al.* (2014) and Navot, Jorgenson and Webb (2017) suggest that mothers perceive their autistic daughters to struggle significantly with making and maintaining friendships, particularly with NTD female peers.

The interventional studies might suggest that female social skills may be improved by similar social skills interventions similar to those currently used within the male ASD population. However, the two studies were both subject to significant difficulties which do create a reluctance to generalise these results. For example, the lack of specific participant information in the McVey

et al. (2017) paper creates obstacles in trying to replicate the results. Furthermore, the contradiction between the participant and parent scores of the GNO model (Wijngaarden-Cremers *et al.*, 2014) might imply that further thought is needed.

It is certainly true that the child's voice is absent from much of this research. Whilst some studies did include an aspect of this (e.g. Cridland *et al.*, 2014; Dean, Harwood & Kasari, 2017), this was limited and therefore could be seen as unsuccessful in helping us to understand the experiences of these young people. Indeed, Cridland *et al.* (2014) gave the majority of their platform to the mothers, and Dean, Harwood and Kasari, (2017) utilised their data only to expand on the quantitative data, rather than add a further element of richness to the tale. Yet where voices can be heard they are powerful; for instance, the direct mother quotes in the Navot, Jorgenson and Webb (2017) created a powerful image of the points they were attempting to get across. These images are as yet absent from the young people themselves.

Conclusions might therefore include the need for future research, and those with a qualitative design may be more beneficial in helping to hear the child's voice and to gain an understanding of ASD females' experiences of friendship. This study will address this gap in the literature by obtaining the views of young females with autism in relation to their friendship experiences, helping to provide a unique contribution to this growing body of research. Consequently, the findings of this study may be able to inform future intervention.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe in detail how this research project was conducted and why decisions were made regarding research design. The methodology was chosen in order to fulfil the aims of the project. Largely, these aims were to hear the voices of the participants, who were females with autism between the ages of 9-17 years attending a specialist autism educational setting. In particular, the study wanted to gain the views of the participants pertaining to their friendship experiences within the school setting. This was achieved using a case study design to investigate the female community within the school.

This study employed a participatory philosophy, meaning that a co-researcher was recruited to support the creation of the research project, and to help deliver this. The co-researcher was a young autistic female, who was a pupil at the specialist school setting in which this study was conducted. The co-researcher played an integral part in each stage of the project and supported the creation and implementation of the research design. This included creating the research question, planning the research methodology, co-facilitating the focus groups, and contributing to the data analysis. In addition, a link teacher was identified to support with the project including supporting in co-researcher training, helping to recruit participants, and contributing to the data analysis.

3.2 Participatory Research

As described in Chapter 1, PR aims to hand over control of the project to the target community. One of the main purposes of PR is to empower people to make change, and to treat them as experts in their own lives. Using a PR methodology often means recruiting a co-researcher to act collaboratively in the research, making joint decisions and contributing to each stage of the

project. These ideals have arisen from theorists such as Hart (1992), who created the 'participation ladder', and reflects how children and young people can meaningfully engage in research studies.

This project attempted to align to these ideals in recruiting a co-researcher from the selected community of a specialist autism setting. In line with the principles espoused above, the co-researcher directed the study aims and chose to investigate friendship experiences. The co-researcher also contributed to every stage of the project, as espoused by Hart (1992). The level of inclusion was controlled by the co-researcher, who appeared enthusiastic to contribute at each stage. The ethics of co-researcher involvement are discussed in the sections below.

3.3 Ontology and Epistemology

This research has an underlying ontology of relativism, reflecting a belief there is no singular discoverable 'truth' about the world. Rather, a relativist position would argue that there are multiple realities that are individually constructed. Additionally, it states that our realities will be inevitably impacted by time and context (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). This implies that experiences shared may differ according to the time and place in which they are collected. Taking a relativist position makes a qualitative approach essential, as this method allows individuals to share their own reality and constructs. The relativist ontology adopted within this study fits within the social constructionist epistemology that has been employed.

A social constructionist view would suggest that our understanding of the world is created simply via our interactions with others; more specifically, through our use of language within these interactions (Oldfather, West, White & Wilmarth, 1999). By this notion, a person's perceptions of an event will differ according to their own unique set of experiences. Indeed, Braun and Clarke suggest that more than one reality can exist even within the same person (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For example, a person's understanding of an event may change through exposure to others' versions of the 'truth'; that is,

an exchange of language. Robson (2002) describes how the role of a social constructionist researcher is therefore to seek the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge' (p.27).

The experiences of friendships within this particular specialist setting will be told and understood differently by each of the participants. The methodology employed therefore allowed each participant to describe their own reality by sharing their personal views. Ways in which this was accommodated for includes the qualitative research approach and the use of focus groups, which allowed the participants to describe their personal experiences using their own language.

3.4 Research Design

This research project used a case study design to collect the views of females with autism from the ages 9-17 years, relating to friendship experiences within the context of their specialist educational setting. The case in question was the female group within the larger school establishment. Whilst case studies are typically viewed as an investigation into one individual, Robson (2002) explains that a case study research strategy can be applied to both groups and organisations. Additionally, Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasise that a case has to be studied within its own context.

The case study involved using a focus group with a semi-structured interview approach to collect data from the six participants who took part in the study. It was relevant for this study to use a qualitative methodology, as this accurately represents the social constructionist epistemology. Data was collected from two focus groups, with the same participants (or case) contributing to both.

The study aim states a desire to hear the voices of the young people. To achieve this, a qualitative methodology was important to ensure that rich information regarding the participants' views could be obtained. As outlined in Chapter 2, there appears to be a lack of participant voice available within

the current literature. Additionally, none of the research was completed within the UK, or within the specific social context of a UK specialist autism setting. There was also a limited amount of qualitative research on the topic of females with autism, although those that do exist provide a meaningful contribution.

3.5 Research Question

The research question was devised by the co-researcher in collaboration with the trainee Educational Psychologist (the author of this study) and the link teacher. The specified co-researcher was identified from the pool of available females within the specialist autism setting.

The selected research questions related to the co-researcher's area of interest, based on her experiences in the school and the desire to discover whether this was a shared experience with other females attending the setting. This research area was selected following wider consideration of several areas of interest, and narrowed down to the eventual outcome. The creation of the research question occupied an entire research training session, and also involved looking at several examples.

Theorists such as Kellett (2005) suggest that the process of creating research questions helps provide co-researchers' ownership of the project, which is a significant motivating factor in them continuing to be involved until completion. The wording of the research question was supported by the Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) and the link teacher within the school, to ensure that it was necessarily specific and could directly lead to a research design. The co-researcher agreed with the final wording and confirmed that she understood this process.

The research question was as follows:

How do girls with autism or social communication difficulties at X school feel about friendships?

3.6 Aims and Purpose of Research

3.6.1 Aims

The aims of the study were to:

- Hear the voices of the children and young people participating in this study.
- Collect the views of females with autism relating to their friendship experiences, particularly within their specialist school setting.

Additionally, leadership staff at the school setting hoped that the research would:

- Inform possible changes to school provision, in order to enhance or improve the experiences of girls within the school.

3.6.2 Unique Contribution of the Research

In addition to the overall research aims, the participatory aspect of this project hoped to:

- Engage a young researcher in a participatory project, providing them with:
 - a voice;
 - new research skills; and,
 - the power to create change.

3.6.3 Purpose

One key purpose of this study was emancipatory, in keeping with the study's participatory design. The concept of emancipatory research can be explained using the principles espoused by Stone and Priestly (1996), who identified six core values that should be upheld within an emancipatory research framework. For example, they suggest that research should be of *practical benefit* to the group with which it is working. By investigating friendship

experiences of females within this specialist setting, it is hoped that ideas will emerge that consequently improve the school experience for the participants themselves.

Additionally, the principles suggest that research should be used as a tool to empower those involved. This study aimed to fulfil this criterion by providing new skills and knowledge (of research) to the co-researcher involved in the project. There is a precedent for participatory methods helping to create feelings of empowerment; McCarten, Schubotz and Murphy (2012) noted that young peer researchers increased in confidence in the process of the study, and took on more pro-active roles as a result.

In answer to another of the emancipatory principles, this study also attempted to address the power imbalance that can be symptomatic of traditional research paradigms. Indeed, typical practices involve the researcher in the 'expert role', both in determining the research subject and methodology, and by analysing the data separately from the community it involves. In contrast to this, Stone and Priestly (1996, p.7) suggest that emancipatory research should involve the knowledge and skills held by the researcher being 'at the disposal' of participants so they can utilise these as they wish. This study tried to be inclusive and collaborative with the target group at all stages of the research, in line with the principles of emancipatory research; this was particularly the case with the co-researcher, who was given the training and information to contribute to the project at all stages.

The other key purpose of this study was exploratory, in that it sought to find new insights into females with autism and their experiences with friendships. Robson (2002) claims that exploratory research is appropriate where little is known or understood about a situation; as shown in Chapter 2, very few research projects have considered the perspective of female, autistic children and young people. Additionally, Robson (2002) states that exploratory research has an important role: to generate ideas about possible future research. It is certainly true that investigating the experiences of the children and young people in this setting may lead to further questions.

3.7 Research Procedure

This section will describe the order in which the research was conducted. This includes the selection of the research setting, the process of selecting and training a co-researcher, and the selection of participants.

3.7.1 Selection of Setting

The research setting was chosen as the TEP was previously known to the school in a professional role, having completed some work there. Additionally, the staff indicated a willingness to participate, and it represented an area of interest for the TEP. To begin the process, a meeting was held in the target school between the TEP, the Head teacher (HT), and the SENCo. In this meeting, the researcher explained the guiding principles around PR, and the potential role of the school. School staff responded with enthusiasm for the idea and felt the study could have a role in developing their practice. The HT was quick to suggest that a research project regarding the females currently attending the setting might be beneficial, as they were currently querying whether the school provision was appropriate for this population. The staff expressed a desire to discover whether anything further could be offered to females attending the setting that might improve their experiences.

3.7.2 Selection of the Co-Researcher

Prior to commencing the planning of the study, a co-researcher needed to be selected from the available participant pool. The TEP decided that there was only capacity for a single co-researcher, so that the largest number of possible participants would be available to partake in the study. The reasoning for this can be found in the Participant' section below. In order to select a co-researcher, the girls in the setting were invited to a presentation about the research project, delivered by the TEP in collaboration with the identified link teacher. This covered: the desired research aims relating to the emancipatory purpose of the project, as described above (section 3.6); the

different stages of a research project; and the likely time commitment involved in becoming a co-researcher (see presentation slides, Appendix 3.1).

Girls in Year 11 and above were excluded from the co-researcher selection process following an agreement with the Head Teacher, who wanted to avoid any disruption to their GCSE and other examinations; this excluded three potential pupils. There were five possible remaining co-researchers, all of whom attended the presentation. Of these, four expressed an interest in being involved. All four girls expressed that they would like to be involved at every stage (planning; data collection; data analysis; dissemination). In order to avoid any potential discrimination against the candidates, the choice of the final co-researcher was chosen randomly through selecting a name from a hat. All of the potential co-researchers were invited to witness this process to ensure they were aware that no prior selection had taken place. The TEP left the room whilst the link teacher and the potential co-researchers wrote their names and placed them in the hat. The TEP then returned to choose the name. The young person selected was a female within the school who was 10 years of age.

3.7.3 Co-Researcher Training

After the co-researcher had been selected, it was necessary to train them in research techniques so that they could fully participate in the planning and delivery of the research. The co-researcher was provided with in-depth training in research principles to support their involvement, mainly following the lesson plans laid out in Kellett's instructional text (2005). This included eight training sessions, which occurred on a weekly basis over the period of three months. The sessions covered the following topics:

1. What is research?
2. Learning from other people's research
3. Research ethics
4. Framing a research question

5. Data Collection – Interview Techniques
6. Data Collection – Focus Groups and Open/Closed Questions
7. Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis
8. Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis Continued

The strategies used within these sessions included direct teaching, role play, creating mind maps and using resources directly from Kellett's (2005) book. Questioning was frequently employed to ensure the co-researcher understood the concepts and could apply them to a research setting. Recaps were also utilised at the beginning of each session, sometimes involving flicking back through the folder of resources and at other times simply speaking through what had previously been covered. The link teacher from the school also supported the co-researcher to think about where they may have seen these ideas before, for example in school projects. The full lesson plans can be found in Appendix 3.2.

The co-researcher engaged with the sessions very positively and seemed to respond well to the instruction. When asked for feedback, the co-researcher did not indicate that any changes needed to be made to the training programme. The training sessions were led by the TEP and by the link teacher from the school setting. Both felt that the co-researcher accessed the lessons well and presented as very capable in making research decisions.

3.7.4 Participant Recruitment

Participants were then recruited from within the school, a specialist setting for children with Autism or Social Communication Difficulties. The available participant pool was the number of females who were currently students in this setting. There were **nine** possible participants (**73** pupils in the school, of which **nine** were female).

The inclusion criteria for participants were defined as:

- Female.
- Attending the identified specialist setting.

- 8-17 years of age
- Conversational level of English.

In order to recruit these participants, information sheets and consent forms for the young people were sent out, alongside consent forms for their parents. The information sheet explained the purpose of the study, what being a participant would involve, and how their information would be used. The information sheet and consent forms that were handed out can be seen previously approved by the ethical board and research supervisor (see Appendices 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5).

At the same time, the TEP, co-researcher and link teacher made themselves available on two afternoon sessions to address any questions the young people might have. This was communicated to them through the school app, and also word of mouth from the co-researcher and the link teacher. No pupils chose to use these afternoon sessions to address any questions. After taking these steps, **six** pupils ultimately agreed to take part in the research. Given the study's intention to use thematic analysis, this was considered acceptable. Braun & Clarke (2013) estimate that 6-10 participants are required to produce sufficient data for a small thematic analysis project.

Details of the six participants are shown in the table below (pseudonyms have been used). It can be noted that the participants were all white British, in line with the general population at the setting.

Table 3.1 Participant Details

Participant	Age
1 – Laura	9
2 – Julie	10
3 – Sam	10
4 – Kara	14
5 – Sarah	16
6 – Amber	17

3.7.5 Semi-Structured Focus Groups

This project chose to utilise a semi-structured interview approach within a focus group. This decision was made in collaboration with the co-researcher, having receiving training in the various data collection methods. A qualitative approach was necessary to ensure that the aims of the study were met; namely, that the views of the participants were collected. Kellett (2005) suggests that semi-structured interviews allow greater flexibility in allowing the conversation to take a new direction, where appropriate. This allows the participants to have a more meaningful contribution than simply answering the pre-determined questions as created by the researchers. Additionally, a group interview format allows the researchers to study the group interaction. Since this project related to friendships, the researchers felt this might provide helpful information in seeing how the girls interacted. The co-researcher also reflected that the participants may feel more comfortable in a group setting, rather than the pressure of an individual interview. They therefore felt that a focus group conducted using a semi-structured interview approach would yield the richest information.

A few guiding questions were created for the groups, but these questions were flexible according to the conversations that arose during the groups. These questions were asked in the order given, although additional questions were added during the focus groups themselves in response to particular information. The questions were created in collaboration between the TEP and co-researcher, and were made up of 3 open-ended questions. The specific questions can be found below.

1. How do you feel about friendships in school?
2. How do you play with your friends?
3. What, if anything, could the school do to support you with your friendships?

The first question was designed to evoke more general responses about the participants' experiences of friendships and related feelings. The second

question was related to what this friendship experience might look like, including the quality and depth of their interactions. Finally, the third question represented the interests of the school in thinking about potential changes to provision in order to support the girls more effectively.

Two focus groups were carried out, both in a small meeting room within the school itself. The room was booked in advance to ensure there were no issues or interruptions. The space was quiet and well contained, with a central table and comfortable chairs. The groups were held over two weeks, each on a Thursday afternoon. They lasted no longer than 40 minutes, and took place during the school 'enrichment' period where pupils do not have formal lessons. The interviews were audio-recorded on a mobile device, then transferred to a secure laptop directly following the session.

The researchers were aware that the focus group topic did have the potential to cause upset, with friendship being a sensitive topic to many. To protect the welfare of the participants, informed consent included the option to withdraw at any time and participants were reminded of this prior to the start of each group. Additionally, the group members were handed a debrief form following the end of the session which directed them towards appropriate support. This included internal links to the school (such as the teacher supporting the project) but also available external support such as Child Line. A copy of the debriefing letter can be found in Appendix 3.6.

3.7.6 Pilot Study

An initial focus group that was conducted that acted as a pilot for the study, to assess whether the questions were appropriate and would succeed in obtaining the desired information. Additionally, running a pilot study allowed the researchers to test out any logistical issues such as placement of the voice recorder and room set up.

The TEP noted that the participants were slow to gain confidence in contributing to the group, but this grew over time. Moreover, the questions appeared to act as a stimulus only and pupils soon reacted off of other

people's comments. This really helped to provide meaningful and authentic views, and was viewed as a positive aspect.

As a result of the pilot study, no changes were made to the focus questions.

3.8 Transcription

Transcription is a word to describe the process whereby spoken word is recorded as written text. Theorists suggest that transcription as a tool allows researchers to access participant's knowledge and beliefs (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). This study utilised an orthographic method of transcription, meaning that the focus was on writing the words used rather than the way in which words were spoken (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This method was selected in order to minimise the need for interpretation and therefore reduce researcher bias. Rather, the words spoken were recorded as heard with no attempts to record emphasis or other vocal inflections.

The data in this study was recorded using the 'Voice Memo' app available for smart phones. Transcription involved repeatedly listening to this data and recording this as it was heard. Punctuation was added by the TEP to help the readability of the text, and to indicate the flow of the speech. However, it should be noted that this does make the text inherently susceptible to some level of bias, as much as attempts were made to avoid this. This is because the TEP has become a channel for the participant voice. Indeed, Bird (2005, p.228) suggests that all transcription is an 'interpretive act' and may be influenced by the knowledge of beliefs of the transcriber. It is important that this is recognised as one of the limitations of transcription in this form.

All audible words were recorded; however, there were instances where the exact speech could not be identified. These instances are recorded in the text. The main causes of this were participants speaking over one and other or reactions from one statement masking the next speaker (e.g. laughter). See Appendix 3.7 for the full data transcription from both focus groups.

3.9 Data Analysis

This section will detail the method of data analysis chosen, and the way in which it was performed. It will explain why this method was adopted, including its cohesion with the research epistemology. It will then describe the process that was followed during data analysis, being explicit with the members of the research team who were involved at every step. The method being utilised was thematic analysis.

3.9.1 Thematic Analysis

The analysis method selected was thematic analysis (TA), as has been described by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013). TA can be a helpful tool when involving co-researchers as it can be explained using simple metaphors such as sorting activities (Kellett, 2005). Moreover, it is reported to sit well within the social constructionist epistemology (Joffe, 2012) being utilised within the project. The role that thematic analysis plays in analysing data lies in 'identifying, analysing and reporting pattern (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). Additionally, it helps to make sense of the data in terms of interpreting what has been said, rather than simply describing it (Willig, 2013).

It is possible for thematic analysis to identify themes that are either explicit or implicit, depending on the intentions of the researcher. Braun and Clarke (2013) describe that TA can be conducted on either a 'semantic' or a 'latent' level. Semantic analysis involves simply interpreting what participants have said, whereas a latent analysis attempts to consider the underlying meanings of what has been said. This study used primarily a semantic level of analysis, as this was deemed to be more accessible than the latent style. However, it is likely that interpretation was conducted at both levels in an interweaving fashion, as it is difficult to separate these concepts in practice. Thus the findings will describe the explicit, as well as more implicit themes.

In Kellett's instructional text (2005), a fairly simple method of qualitative analysis is the only data analysis method provided within the teaching sessions; this is not specifically labelled as 'thematic analysis'. It made logical sense to continue using this text and be somewhat led by the process as outlined within this book, as the co-researcher had been responding well to this method. However, the TEP additionally included the aspects of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2013) in order to be more thorough. This was also a decision made in line with the idea that the co-researcher was capable of this level of analysis, or could be supported through this.

Kellett's text (2005) also provides instructions for an inductive style of analysis, rather than deductive. This means that themes will be identified from the data itself, rather than being structured around a theoretical basis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The TEP felt this was appropriate, as they considered it less likely that the co-researcher would bring theoretical biases. This study therefore aimed to use a purely inductive approach to looking at the data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, this style of analysis is also liable to bring out themes that were not specifically sought within the research aims. This is because the researchers are not attempting to code the data into a pre-existing framework, but are open to any theme that might be detected in the raw data.

Nevertheless, it may be important to note that the TEP may have inadvertently brought bias through their past experience and knowledge. For example, the literature review had already been completed during the analysis stage; knowledge of this previous research, and the themes that arose from these studies, may have created a level of deductive analysis on their behalf. This knowledge was not accessed by the co-researcher, and the level to which the link teacher had researched the topic was unknown. However, the co-researcher may have brought expectations or beliefs into the study that the views would match their own experiences, given that they are also a female with autism.

3.9.2 Analytic Process

The analysis was initially undertaken as a joint venture with both the co-researcher and the link teacher. These first steps included immersion into the data, with several re-reads of the transcript and discussions surrounding potential codes. Although all analysers were present during the data collection, and therefore had some familiarity with it, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that it is important to read the data with *intention* and be consciously considering potential themes.

From these first steps 6 initial codes were suggested (Appendix 3.8). Using these codes the next stage involved systematically combing through the data to code all extracts of the text. Attempts were made to allocate each sentence into one of the 6 categories, according to their relevance. This stage was completed by hand, using highlighter to manually delineate each extract (see Appendix 3.9); at the end of this stage, the TEP then digitally organised the extracts into the coding categories, by copying and pasting the relevant extracts into new coding documents (see Appendix 3.10). It is worth noting that this marked the end of the link teacher's involvement in the analysis process; this was due to planned maternity leave.

After this stage, the researchers (the TEP and co-researcher only) once again read through the data, at this point in their coded sections. The guiding codes were revisited and refined; from this, many of the codes were combined and further refined, resulting in four tentative theme suggestions. This refinement process correlates with Braun and Clarke's (2006) comments that themes may well be broader in concept, and thus fewer than the original codes. Furthermore, within these themes some subthemes also began to be proposed. The themes and subtheme suggestions were checked and researchers considered relevant quotes to support these ideas.

Finally, the write-up stage began. This was undertaken by the TEP alone as part of this thesis project, although checks were made with the co-researcher. The process of recording the themes made it more apparent where interpretations were well supported and which required more thought.

The main changes during this process were the creation of more subthemes; none of the main themes were altered.

The analysis process followed can be found in the table below. These stages have been adapted both from the Kellett (2005) text but also the stages described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The actions as completed by the co-researcher are also specified.

Table 3.2: Thematic Analysis Process

Phase	Description of the phase	Co-Researcher Role
1. Data familiarisation	Reading the data with intention following transcription (completed by TEP). Potential codes were kept in mind and discussed as a group (TEP, co-researcher and link teacher) following completion of the reading stage.	The co-researcher actively read through the data transcripts, at some points being read to and at other points reading to themselves.
2. Initial Coding	Creating initial categories in which to divide the data. In this study, 6 initial codes were created as basic ideas for how to divide the data. Possible codes were first suggested then discussed to see if they were suitable.	The co-researcher supported in the generation of the initial codes, and agreed to all final ideas.
3. Abstraction	Systematic coding of the data into the categories chosen. This was achieved using different coloured highlighters to delineate the text.	The co-researcher took an active role in abstracting the data, including highlighting

	<p>The process helped define and adapt the themes according to the ease of defining where quotes should lie. Quotes that could not be easily categorised were left for a group discussion at the end of this stage.</p>	<p>pages individually. If confusion arose the co-researcher asked a brief question regarding the 'correct' coding, or to confirm their choice.</p>
<p>4. Focused Analysis/Reviewing themes</p>	<p>The initial coding was used to generate 6 separate documents with the text that had been selected – this was done by the TEP. Researchers then together reviewed the codes and create larger, more overriding themes. Over the course of a few weeks, the subthemes were suggested and then refined.</p>	<p>The co-researcher was provided with a copy of the divided texts for each code. Having read this, they and the co-researcher discussed possible themes. The co-researcher was asked to justify their choices. The co-researcher provided some notes as guidance for the TEP.</p>
<p>5. Producing the report</p>	<p>Writing this thesis. Selection of relevant extracts of text, relating analysis back to research questions. This also represents the final opportunity to adjust themes.</p>	<p>The co-researcher was not able to take an active role in writing the report. Some adjustments were made by the TEP (to subthemes only) and these were</p>

		passed by the co-researcher at the first opportunity, who agreed with the changes.
6. Memo-ing	Making notes on ideas that occurred to the researchers during the other stages e.g. coding, abstraction. It can be noted that this was not frequently used.	The co-researcher contributed to the note making stage as and when they felt they had something to contribute, as did all the members involved.

*the memo-ing section is highlighted as this does not follow the chronological order of the rest of the table. Rather, this activity took place across several of the previous stages. This stage was taken from the Kellett (2005) text.

It should be noted that the researchers decided to code all the information presented by participants, so that the richness of the full information could be considered. Braun and Clarke call this a ‘rich thematic description of the whole data set’ (2006, p.11) and suggest that it is helpful where studies are investigating an under-researched area, or when participant views on the matter are not yet known. It could be argued that this project meets both of those criteria; Chapter 2 showed that there is limited literature on this topic, and even less relating to the voice of the children and young people in the community. However, it is important to recognise that this may result in some of the complexity being lost as themes are explored in more breadth but less depth. This is one of the criticisms that can be levied against TA in general; further critique of this method can be found in the section below.

3.9.3 Critique of Thematic Analysis

Whilst Braun and Clarke (2006) are largely used as a guide for TA, they also point out some flaws and limitations of this method of interpretation. Firstly, they deny that any form of analysis can enable the researcher to passively report the themes; rather, any researcher will use their own experiences to create links and themes in data as they understand them. Further, the theorists maintain that TA can be largely descriptive and not allow for higher level interpretive analysis.

In addition, Nowell, Norris, White & Moules (2017) claim that TA may not have sufficient literature to ensure that analysis is conducted in a thorough manner. Furthermore, they report that the flexibility of TA may also be a hindrance as this can lead to inconsistency or lack of cohesion unless firmly underpinned by a study's epistemological position. As a result of these factors, less experienced researchers may find it more difficult to conduct TA in a trustworthy and rigorous way. Indeed, this is pertinent to the current study given the TEP and co-researcher's inexperience in conducting this form of analysis.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

In order to proceed with this research, ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), as well as the participating school (see Appendix 3.11 for ethical approval). The study met ethical criteria for research by committing to the relevant guidelines from agencies such as the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2010), and the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014). These guidelines seek to protect participants by ensuring confidentiality and data protection. To this end the researchers ensured the anonymity of the data, including the setting and participant details. Voice recordings were stored on a password protected device and deleted post transcription.

3.10.1 Informed Consent: Co-Researcher

It is important to attend to the ethical issues such as informed consent when conducting PR with a young co-researcher. This is because it is difficult to fully qualify 'informed' consent for their role, as it is at that point unknown how the research will unfold. To combat this, Flewitt (2005) suggests securing 'provisional' then 'ongoing' consent (p.4). These concepts represent a process of gaining initial consent, then continuing to check that the co-researchers are happy to carry on. This includes providing formal and informal opportunities to withdraw from the project i.e. allowing participants to sit out of one day, but not assuming withdrawal from the whole project. This study utilised this model of consent when working with the co-researcher, whose involvement extended across a prolonged period of time and whose role continued to develop based on research decisions made. The co-researcher initially provided a consent form, both from themselves and their carer (see Appendix 3.12 and 3.13). Following this, the co-researcher was offered a further three formal opportunities to withdraw or change their involvement in the project, which were offered at the start of training, midway through the training, and at the start of a new academic year. The co-researcher also gave informal consent on each occasion that they arrived at the research sessions, which they did so independently and without any prompting. Feedback from the co-researcher would suggest that they enjoyed their involvement and often wanted to do additional items; for example, they expressed enthusiasm for writing a paper relating to the project. They also wished for their name to be included in any documentation to the school (e.g. in the app announcements), which might indicate pride at the project.

3.10.2 Informed Consent: Participants

Ethical concerns were also extended to the participants of the study. Ways the researcher tried to ensure that informed consent was received included giving out information sheets about the project (see Appendix 3.3), gaining

consent from both the participants and their carer (see Appendices 3.4 and 3.5), making themselves available for questioning (in person and via email) and having a link teacher in the school whom participants could approach. Additionally, participants were reminded at the beginning of each focus group that they were within their rights to withdraw from the research at any time, either by leaving the group or expressing this to the researcher or another member of staff. Furthermore, the participants were not obliged to contribute to the focus groups if they did not feel comfortable. Since there was a potential for upset following from the groups, a debrief letter was given out (see Appendix 3.6). Whilst the information sheets described how the data given would be used and anonymised, this was also explained at the end of the focus group to relieve any concerns. These steps were taken to try and ensure best practice in protecting participants involved from harm.

The link school teacher offered follow up support to those who were not selected, in case of disappointment. The potential co-researcher's class teachers were also informed of what had occurred so that they could monitor any change in their mood or be available to discuss what had happened. No significant events were reported.

Following transcription the recordings were then deleted, in line with data protection laws.

3.10.3 Focus Groups

The first task of the focus groups was to ensure that appropriate ground rules were made so that participants felt comfortable and safe to contribute, in as far as that were possible. Whilst the participants were first encouraged to create their own ground rules, the researchers did create a list of those that should be brought forward in the case that they were not mentioned. This included a confidentiality clause to ask that no participants discuss what other members might say in the group. Additionally, the co-researcher felt that no names should be used when discussing friendships in an attempt to

avoid causing upset. Furthermore, rules such as respect and turn taking were covered.

3.11 Quality Control

The following sections will discuss the aspects of quality control involved in this study. These particular measures have been deemed appropriate for the qualitative methodology involved in this study.

3.11.1 Validity or Trustworthiness

To ensure validity/trustworthiness in qualitative studies, researchers can utilise guidelines such as those created by Elliot, Fischer and Rennie (1999). One key aspect of these guidelines is consideration for reflexivity, meaning the assessment of how our own values, life views, and experiences can affect a study, and influence the results obtained (Willig, 2013). In this case, it was important for the researcher and link teacher to provide opportunities for reflection to the co-researcher involved, as well as conducting thorough personal reflection. The aspects of reflexivity found in this study are covered in a dedicated section below.

Staley (2009) suggests that PR creates a ‘community validity’ in the sense that public involvement helps guarantee the relevance, appropriateness and positive reception of the research. This means that the research has greater significance for the people it represents and they are more likely to accept it as valid, especially where members of the community are involved in the dissemination of the findings (Staley, 2009, p.25). In using a co-researcher within this study, a community validity model could be applied. For instance, the co-researcher was allowed a measure of control in selecting the area for investigation (friendship) which hopefully represented the concern of other pupils also in the setting. Furthermore, the co-researcher was involved in recruiting participants including answering questions about the study and informing people about the consent forms; this may have helped participants

feel at ease. As propagated by Staley (2009), the co-researcher was finally also involved in disseminating the findings from the study back to the school. This included feeding back to both staff and the classes in the school, with a PowerPoint that was co-created by the researcher and co-researcher in collaboration.

The ability for PR to create effective change also represents a potential measure of validity: catalytic validity. This term refers to 'the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses, and energizes participants' to make changes, especially where participants are able to gain 'self-determination through research participation' (Lather, 1986, p.67). The extent to which the co-researcher was inspired to create change can therefore be used as a measure of success within this study. Following the completion of the study, the co-researcher displayed enthusiasm in wanting to disseminate the research findings to a number of different parties. For example, taking part in feedback to senior members of school staff, as well as volunteering to present the findings to a group of Educational Psychology professionals.

Additionally, the co-researcher indicated on several occasions that she would like to be involved in writing a research paper for publication to spread the information more widely. The enthusiasm displayed by the co-researcher was very prominent throughout the study, and they showed a willingness to expand their involvement in as many ways as possible. This included responding with vigour to any suggestion such as presenting to the local Educational Psychology Service, or writing an article for the school newsletter. This attitude might imply that the co-researcher felt empowered by her involvement in this research project; moreover, she had the willingness and enthusiasm to share what she had gained.

3.11.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a key practice in research, designed to monitor and acknowledge how personal biases may play a role in a study (Willig, 2013). The main aims of reflexivity are to assess the extent to which the researcher

may have influenced different aspects of the project, for example through their personal expectations (confirmation bias) or influencing participant reactions through specific questions. For example, having previously worked closely with ASD children I tried to think consciously about how my expectations may have been shaped by these experiences and not simply ask questions that would fulfil these expectations. This may also have been influenced by research and study I have undertaken on autism as a condition, which predicts that friendship will be a difficult area. It was also important for this study in particular to think about the act of reflecting with the co-researcher, how I may have been influencing them with my own views, or indeed the link teacher.

In order to actively engage in reflexivity, a reflective diary was kept that allowed me to consider how the project was unfolding. This diary initially had a particular focus on the development of the co-researcher and their contributions to the planning stages of the project. For instance, I attempted to not overly influence the co-researcher's choices whilst training them in research skills. Although some aspects of the study were pre-determined (the qualitative approach, the pool of participants, and the focus on girls), the wish was for the co-researcher to retain much of the control over the remaining choices. For instance, selecting the research focus (friendships) and related research question, the data collection method (semi-structured focus groups), and the questions asked during the focus groups. However, at times there was additional stress due to time pressures and necessary outcomes of the research (i.e. this thesis) that were not translated to the co-researcher. At times, I was conscious that I may be encouraging certain practices in order to fulfil these duties in time. For example, suggesting focus groups rather than individual interviews. Following this, it was helpful to reflect that as co-researchers we should still have equal contributions, which may allow for some decisions to still be made by the TEP.

Other times where reflexivity was significant included the focus groups; as these took a semi-structured approach, there were opportunities for me to ask follow up questions that were not originally planned. It is important to recognise that the questions asked, and the information that was followed

up, will have been influenced by my own experiences, expectations and interests. This is to say, another individual may have chosen to ask different questions or pursue another line of enquiry. This also applies to the link teacher. In fact, in my reflective diary during the data collection stage I noted that there were instances where I was surprised by the follow up questions chosen by the link teacher. I felt that these might reflect the interests of the teacher in being a member of school staff, and therefore potentially being driven by a desire to have more specific details about steps that could be taken to support the participants (and school pupils). For example, asking detailed questions relating to the timing, regularity and group make-up of potential friendship sessions within the school. Whilst this did not detract from the sessions, equally it would not have occurred to me to make these enquiries.

Given the co-researcher's involvement in the project, it was also important to allow them to reflect upon their role. This was provided in an informal manner during the research training sessions. However, they responded to this positively and it was felt that they were able to reflect well. For example, on one occasion the co-researcher spontaneously announced that she should not be involved in any potential interview with her closest friend within the setting, as that individual may not feel able to speak openly about her experiences. This took place prior to any formal teaching about conflict of interest, although it did follow an ethical considerations discussion. At other times the co-researcher was able to think about why and how she had forgotten to bring in the folder where she kept her training materials; following reflection, she moved the materials to a smaller folder which fit into her bag (rather than having to carry this in her hands) and which she could pre-load the night before a research session.

3.12 Summary

This chapter has described the methodology used in this research project, including the use of a co-researcher and supporting link teacher. It explained and justified the research design, and the way in which data was collected.

Furthermore, it took care to detail the steps of data analysis, according to the process of Thematic Analysis as taught by Kellett (2005) but in consideration of the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006 and 2013). Finally, it described the ethical considerations central to conducting this research, and the ways in which quality control were considered in the process of carrying out this project.

As a result of the data collection stage, 73 minutes of information were recorded within two focus groups. Whilst the data analysis method has already been described, the following section will share the themes that the researchers interpreted from the available data.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe the interpretations made from the data analysis process as described in Chapter 3. As previously explained, this study aimed to hear the voices of children and young people with autism relating to their friendship experiences. Previous research has generally lacked the voice of the child, and as such, this study attempted to redress that balance. Participant views were collected in focus groups using a semi-structured interview approach, as detailed in the previous chapter.

The findings will be presented within four themes, as discussed and constructed during the data analysis stage. These themes are: Understanding Friendships; Friendship Support and Provision; Identity and Belonging; and Experiencing Puberty. Within these larger themes, many subthemes have also been interpreted, as demonstrated in Figure 4.1. Themes will be supported by direct quotes from participants to clearly demonstrate where meaning has been made. Quotes are cited using the fictitious names assigned to participants during anonymisation. These are not the genuine names of the pupils who took part in the study.

In addition, Figure 4.1 visually demonstrates the themes and subthemes that will be discussed.

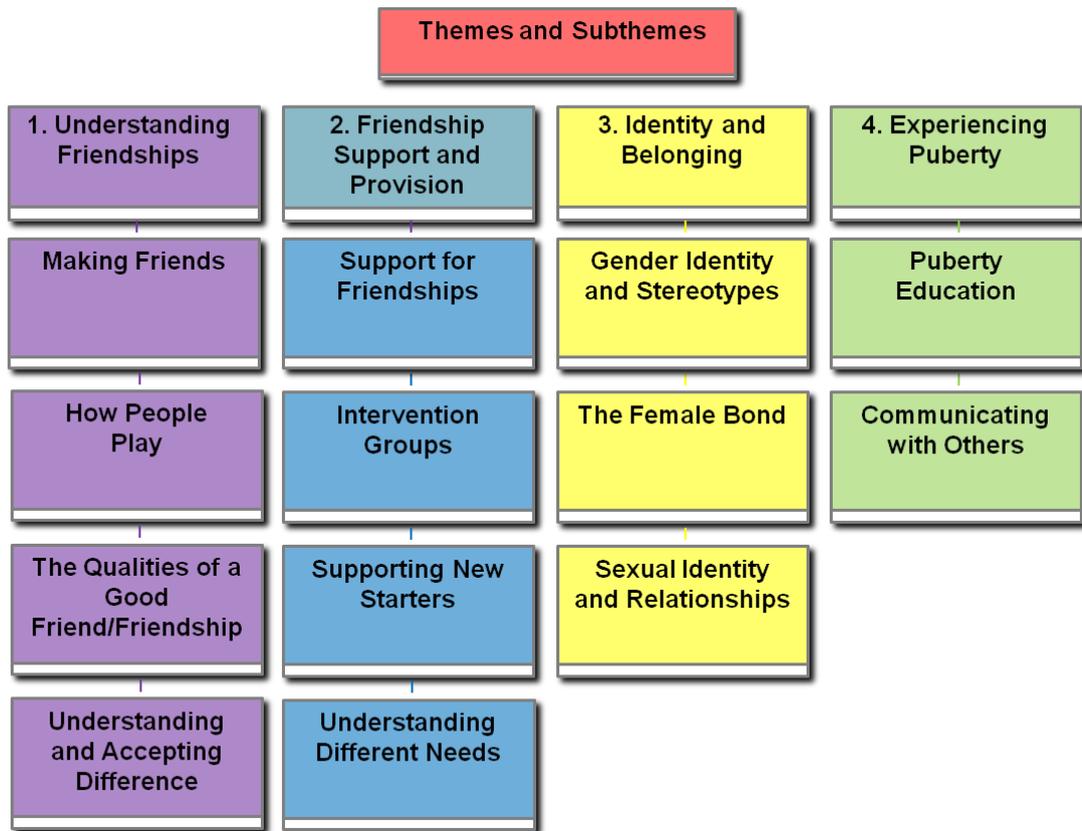


Figure 4.1: Thematic Map

4.2 Theme 1: Understanding Friendships

*‘a friendship is a bond made from trust, love, hope, understanding and truth...friends do not need to last, will stay loyal, never give up at the expense of each other, and defies the oddness of individuals.’
(Amber, lines 543-6)*

During the focus groups, various aspects of friendships were discussed. Whilst participants were asked direct questions relating to their friendship experiences, other information also arose in a more spontaneous manner. This theme encompasses the unique difficulties that may be experienced in trying to make friends in this setting, as well as maintaining those friendships throughout potential challenges. It also includes those qualities that the participants felt enable you to be a good friend, including the ability to accept

and understand our individual differences. The concept of understanding friendships is divided into four subthemes: making friends; how people play; the qualities of a good friend/friendship; and understanding and accepting difference.

4.2.1 Subtheme 1: Making Friends

Some of the participants spoke explicitly about difficulties in making friends, particularly when they first began at the setting. Three of the six participants revealed at least some initial challenges: *'I er found it sometimes quite tricky.'* (Julie, line 75) There appeared to be a correlation between those who struggled and the quantity of male friends they had or were comfortable having. For instance, Sam explained the difficulties she experienced when she joined the school and Laura (the only other girl in her class) was away:

'Also, the school, when I was like really really new I didn't really have anyone to talk to um because Laura was on holiday in America. I had no clue who she was and everyone was talking about her and I was like, when if she going to be back? She got back and [I] immediately assumed that we were friends and um then Laura was like, what? So basically, I used to sit on my own at lunch and read the school rules. That's what I used to do.' (Sam, lines 311-16)

Although the initial issues may have arisen from the potential friend being away, these continued following the return. The barrier to creating a friendship seemed to be an assumption that a relationship would be formed, possibly due to the shared gender.

Equally, Laura shared similar experiences.

'Yeah, I used to do that as well. I would sit there being like, hmm I don't know who to make friends with because there was an older girl who like spoke to me, but obviously they're older so they don't have an interest in like playing with me so they'll wanna do other things. So I just sort of sat by myself.' (Laura, lines 317-20).

This might imply that at least some of the participants are seeking other girls as potential friends, with issues arising due to the small number of girls within the setting itself. Of the 73 school pupils, only nine are female and these are spread across the ages of 8-18 years. Additionally, one participant felt that it was difficult to approach other girls who were not in the same class: *'I know that I find it really hard to communicate with other girls sometimes that aren't in my class (Sam, lines 236-8)'*.

In contrast, participants who had the majority male friends described a lot less difficulties in making those initial connections. For example, Kara told the group:

'So, it's not really as different because most of my friends were not female in primary school anyway, so it didn't really change all that much.' (Kara, lines 28-9)

And Sarah agreed Yeah me and Kara consistently throughout our lives have been mostly friends with boys.' (Sarah, lines 22-3).

The friend gender bias was more explicitly addressed within the group by Laura, who stated the difficulty in not befriending males in the school:

'I think it can be difficult at times because some friends don't want to be friends with a boy but then they don't have any friends who are girls so you're just sort of by yourself' (Laura, lines 69-71)

4.2.2 Subtheme 2: How People Play

In discussion the participants shared how they play with their friends; this is to say, the variety of games and different activities that they undertake. Within the group there was certainly a range of different favoured activities, which also appeared to depend on the types of friends that they described. For example, whether they stated that they had mainly male or female friends. Participants also described a range of activities that they might enjoy doing at different times.

Two participants described playing specific games such as Dungeons and Dragons, which they had done for many years and across several groups of friends; *my old friend group in like where we used to live we used to play dungeons and dragons a lot so I introduced it to my new friend group.*' (Sarah, lines 95-6). Other games that were specified included *f*' (a chasing game) and doing rough and tumble or *play* fighting: *'I feel like tumbling around on the mud is quite usual'* (Laura, line 107).

Some participants did feel that rules in school impacted upon the types of play that they engaged in. For example, they explained that there is a *no physical contact*' rule which changed the rough and tumble type play that might usually do. However, they also said that they found ways around this in specific games, for example playing *f*' but *you'll play it in a way that you're not really allowed to touch each other so you'll just run around*' (Kara, lines 101-2). Other activities were also not possible or practical within the school setting, *'obviously we can't build tree dens inside school'* (Sarah, line 99).

However, the most popular activities did not appear to be the organised games but more casual or flexible activities. For instance: *'me and my friends, we just talk about random things'* (Sam, line 105); *you'll just stay inside and talk about random stuff* (Kara, line 104); *'I like making my friends laugh'* (Sam, line 116); *daring each other to do random things*' (Sarah, line 120); and *she likes to ask me awkward questions. I like them though cause they're funny*' (Sam, lines 122-3). Equally, one participant spoke about doing necessary tasks like homework *'I like studying with my friends'* (Amber, line 130), and in a similar vein another talked about helping their friends with work: *I like to um, help them out*' (Julie, 126).

4.2.3 Subtheme 3: The Qualities of a Good Friend/Friendship

The third subtheme arose from discussions relating to a person's qualities, and types of friendships that were valued. Many of these comments occurred at the start of the second focus group, where participants were asked to record some of their thoughts around friends (creating a *mind map*' for

friendship). Much of the focus was on personality aspects that were desirable, as well as the aspects of friendships that participants enjoyed. However, participants also spoke about more negative experiences and how to tell if someone is a bad friend.

From the mind mapping task, some participants listed potential desirable qualities of a friend, such as *'similar hobbies is a good thing to have, them being funny'* (Kara, line 455), and being able to relate to each other. Sam also discussed this, saying:

'knowing how to create a good friendship...tell each other how you feel. So like, if there's a problem with the other person you can explain to them why and how you can resolve it...' (Sam, lines 448-51)

The same participant expanded on this to describe the mutual benefits you can receive: *'you can laugh together, you're helpful with each other, kind to each other, and lovely to each other'* (Sam, lines 452-3).

Another topic that arose was the qualities that the participants themselves brought to friendship. For example, Julie described that she enjoyed helping her friends in the classroom: *'I like to um, help them out. Like if they're stuck on a question and a teacher asks me to help I just do it.'* (Julie, lines 126-7). An additional two participants also described their enjoyment at providing emotional support for another person/their friends. *'I think helping people through problems can be quite rewarding as well'* (Sarah, line 137) and *'I like talking to my friends about their worries'* (Sam, line 138).

Although some participants expressed enjoyment at being able to emotionally support their friends, others expressed doubt at offering too much to others to the detriment of themselves. Kara explained *'I've been in situations where I've tried to help people too much and it's taken a toll on my own health'* (Kara, lines 145-6). This type of support was sometimes also viewed as interference where the role of helping those pupils belonged to the teacher, *'sometimes it's the teacher's job and not mine'* (Sam, line 148).

Equally, some participants expressed the importance of knowing when a friendship is bad and the idea of protecting oneself from that, *'like*

sometimes realising when it's a bad friendship' (Laura, lines 471-2). Aspects of friendships that were considered bad included being unable to have successful communication, for example being able to express yourself:

'...it's less about I don't want to talk to a guy because they're a guy, it's more because if you can't do it then they're not a good friend, everyone should be able to talk openly I feel and if they're not then they're not a good friend.' (Kara, lines 688-90)

Communication was also cited as essential to being able to sort through issues, or avoid these in the first place:

'being able to tell each other problems because I feel like, with my friends, they just get in a mood with me for doing something wrong and it really annoys me, so if I can tell them why I said that and then they wouldn't get in a mood with me.'(Laura, lines 466-8)

In a similar way, control was flagged as an aspect of friendship that is both unpleasant and might cause the end of a friendship. Two members of the focus group described this type of situation, and both implied that it would be horrible and not a good friendship', as below:

'If someone controls one person to be like them, it would be so boring because it would just be like, well I don't want to be friends with you anymore because all you do is control me, and it's horrible.' (Sam, lines 564-6).

'If you don't want to like do something and then your friend thinks that you should always do what they say then that's not really a good friendship' (Laura, lines 469-70).

There does appear to be a common thread in these quotes that this control would be fairly consistent, in the idea that it would be all they do, and that you must always do what they say. This might imply that some control may be tolerated, although not desired.

In another point, one participant spoke at length about the benefit they receive from their positive friendships, namely reassurance and comfort. For example, they stated:

'I think also my friends really help me cause I struggle when I see like people or hear people shouting, I really struggle with that and my friends are really comforting.' (Sam, 164-166)

Participants therefore described both the positive and negative aspects of friendships.

4.2.4 Subtheme 4: Understanding and Accepting Difference

The last subtheme within this section covers the idea that differences should be both understood and accepted. Participants suggested that recognising and accepting our difference are key to friendships in several different ways.

Many participants believed that people did not need to be the same in order to be friends: *'being different and that like, knowing that you don't need to be the same just so you can be friends'* (Laura, lines 464-5); *'it was really important to understand that people are different'* (Sam, lines 562-3). Indeed, some participants argued that differences are needed, otherwise it would be boring' (Sam, line 564) and that *'it's important that we also have contrast, so that we always hear the other side of the argument'* (Amber, lines 887-8). One participant felt that it was essential to try and be friends with other people despite their differences:

'Well like, lots of people are all different and they're very odd in their own little ways, and I think it's important that no matter what they do or who they are, it's important to be friends with them or to try to be friends.' (Amber, lines 549-51).

However, one participant felt that their friends needed to have a greater understanding of their differences, *'I think it is really important that my friends understand that it might not always be about them'* (Sam, lines 477-8). The same participant also framed this in the specific context of religion. Based on

an experience earlier in the day, they utilised religion to explain how friends need to be accepting of beliefs, even if those beliefs may be different from your own.

'I think also it's really important with religious people that their friends understand. So like ok, you go somewhere on Sundays, I don't but I'm gonna respect that.' (Sam, lines 736-8).

The idea that we must understand each other's differences was also discussed in terms of accepting the differences in how people like to be supported and the way in which they live their lives. This is further explored in the 'Support and Provision' theme below, but these concepts are closely interlinked so it was important to highlight it within this section.

4.2.5 Theme 1 Summary

A number of different subthemes have been discussed within the overall concept of understanding friendships. The quotes used display how participants spoke about the different aspects of friendship, both those that they viewed positively and more negatively. It is interesting to note the variety in the experiences of the participants, both in terms of making friends and the preferences of who their friends are. Pupils seemed to have formed strong ideas of the qualities that enable someone to be a good friend, as well as those that should be avoided. Particularly, the ability to accept and understand that each person is different was a highly lauded concept amongst most participants. It is interesting to consider how these constructs may have arisen within the unique setting, or influenced by staff valuing difference or individualised support.

4.3 Theme 2: Friendship Support and Provision

This theme emerged from the suggestions that participants made regarding the provision and support that is offered by the school. Often this was in response to specific questions, but it also occurred naturally during the flow

of conversation. As was the case in the last section, a further four subthemes were interpreted from the data available. These subthemes reflect the desired support related to friendships, including specific intervention ideas. In addition, they constructed ideas around how new starters could be supported, and how people with different needs should be considered.

4.3.1 Subtheme 1: Support for Friendships

Within the focus groups, participants were asked directly what the school could do in order to support them in their friendships. Many participants shared ideas in terms of this support, what it might involve, and what it could look like. These suggestions are presented below.

One of the key issues that participants described as requiring support was arguments with friends. Many described having fallouts in their friendships and sometimes requiring that third person to support in the recovery of that relationship. Sarah explained that Sometimes even if a few people want to do something and they kind of need a third person to get them to communicate (Sarah, lines 200-1). The something in this case was repair a friendship following an argument. Other participants agreed with this, including Amber (Yeah, Amber, line 203).

Participants also described the nature of support that might be helpful in these cases, meaning to repair a friendship after a rift. For instance, Sam suggested that the adult could provide specific strategies such as getting pupils to write things down, and supporting both individuals to think about what they could have done better. This participant's ideas can be found below:

'like we write down how we feel or we um and then both of us do it then like the teacher can say, so what could you have done better, what could they have done better, like just like kind of like putting it having like both sides because I know that sometimes someone wants to talk about it then the other person wants to as well but they can't.

So like, just saying right ok you're both going to write it down so that no one feels upset, and then like having a chat about it later' (Sam, lines 193-9)

This quote again references that additional person is needed to support the communication. It also speaks of having both sides heard, so that neither voice is dominant within the narrative: this is the assumed purpose of writing the issues, rather than speaking them aloud.

Finally, participants spoke of knowing when a person might need support with this issue. Whilst this may be more individual, a few participants described some key things that you might see. For example, Laura explained that if something doesn't look right' or *'if you're sort of like not speaking to that one person or just like not looking at them like, trying to act like they're not there'* (Laura, lines 209-11) then they might need a chat that a teacher could support with. Another participant agreed with this, describing similar tell-tale signs that might indicate that there is an issue:

'sometimes with my friends I don't talk to them and I don't like make eye contact with them, and I don't like making eye contact with strangers, but that's like y'know, but I can always make eye contact with my friends unless I'm mad at them.'(Sam, lines 226-9)

Of course, staff can also ask a person where they suspect they might need help. As Julie agrees, teachers can support her *'by asking for help if I need it'* (Julie, 206).

4.3.2 Subtheme 2: Intervention Groups

Throughout the discussion, ideas emerged related to potential intervention groups that could be run within the school. The first of these ideas was a friendship group', initially suggested by one participant but built upon by several members of the group. This was almost universally viewed as a positive idea, and the participants gave several suggestions regarding the

group make up, possible activities, and the role of adults within this intervention.

4.3.2.1 Friendship groups

The notion of friendship groups was first suggested by one participant, in response to a question relating to staff support. Laura suggested running friendship groups so that we can like be friends with other people instead of just like people just 'cause we see them' (Laura, lines 212-3). The groups would therefore be a method of expanding potential friendship groups, by establishing relationships with people that you may not naturally come across. Throughout the focus groups, further probing created a clearer idea of what these might look like.

Firstly, participants discussed the potential make up of any friendship groups. This included issues such as: the number of people in the intervention; the potential age ranges; the compatibility of group members; and the gender/sex. Several participants had recommendations to this end. One person suggested that the group should be made of up three members, but ensuring those people are random people from different classes' (Laura, lines 249). Sam additionally felt that the groups should not only contain two people, as things may escalate' but should equally not be too large: 'more than two people but not like so big that it gets too much' (Sam, lines 325-6).

Whilst some participants felt that the groups might benefit from being female only, 'I think girls would work better, cause there's like a bajillion boys here' (Sam, lines 232-3), this seemed to be quickly outvoted: 'Could it not be anybody who wants to take part though? Because saying that it can be only girls is a bit...' (Kara, lines 247-8). Another participant said that it doesn't matter' what the gender was (Laura, line 250).

However, participants suggested that any people chosen would need to be compatible. So although the group members might be unknown to each other, they might have similar interests or not. Sam explains 'because different people like different things. So you don't want like a girl to be with a

guy and like find it really really awkward and dread it because then they won't enjoy it' (Sam, lines 263-5). Indeed, Kara suggested that a key element would be to make caeful' choices, so that you can avoid *'people who just won't talk or people who would be quite mean or destructive'* (Kara, lines 259-60). Age additionally came up as factor in the decision of group formation.

Many of the girls agreed that age would be a significant factor in the success of the friendship groups. For instance, three of the participants recommended that the groups should not contain pupils who are too far apart in age: *you wouldn't put class 6 person in with a class 1 person'* (Sarah, lines 271-2); *I also think they shouldn't be [class] 5,6 and 7 in one group because if you're in class 5 you get close with a class 7 person and then they leave, you're going to be upset because they're not there'* (Laura, lines 321-3); *because they would get too close and then, they're gonna leave'* (Sam, line 273).

One participant also highlighted an important point in saying that consent would have to be gained from anyone participating in the friendship group. That is to say, not simply consent for joining the group but also an agreement on who else would be joining. Sarah stated:

'you need to get everyone's opinion. If you're gonna do the thing that we've been talking about you should probably ask people first like, are you happy to be with this person' (Sarah, lines 266-8)

In line with this, the link teacher agreed that pupils wouldn't ever be forced' into taking part, as this would be a voluntary activity.

Additionally, the participants also discussed the responsibilities that an adult might have in the group. One theme that came out was the adult having a protective role, if someone says something or is unkind' (Sam, line 242). This also links with Kara's observations that people may be mean' or destructive' as mentioned above. Participants suggested that adult presence might mitigate this, or could call out unkind behaviour. Additionally, participants felt that adult presence would be necessary to ensure the groups

run smoothly and can prompt discussion if needed: *if there's a minutes silence ask like one question to get things started'* (Sam, lines 241-2).

Finally, the practical aspects of the group were discussed. This included the possible timings of the sessions, and what they might contain. Options for timings included *maybe like at lunch or at break'* (Sam, line 217) or *'just a regular lesson, so PSHE'* (Laura, line 218).

Whilst discussing the friendship groups, many agreed that this appeared to be a positive idea. For example, one girl suggested that they may have come in useful at a previous time when they had suddenly lost all their friends, stating that it *'would be really beneficial for them'* (Sarah, line 297), meaning those in similar situations. Equally, participants suggested that they would be useful when first starting the school, in order to establish that initial friendship group.

4.3.2.2 Girls Group

Further to the friendship group idea, the concept of having a *girls group'* was also raised. The TEP made this initial suggestion, based on the response to the focus group: whilst only one session was originally planned, the participants voted almost unanimously (five of six votes in favour) to have another session. Based on this, the TEP considered that the girls may appreciate a space to meet regularly and discuss any particular issues that may have come up. In general, the girls responded positively to this idea.

I know that I would really like it to happen regularly, because I know that we don't really get much chance, like I get to play with Laura and that's pretty much it because they're in different classes and they're playing with different people, and it's really hard to socialise with girls who you don't really know. (Sam, lines 855-8).

Pupils noted the potential positive benefits of having time to connect with the other girls in the school that they may not come across. Another member described this as having people to *elate'* to, in terms of the shared

experiences of being female. Amber stated that *Well I think it's very important that we have people that we can relate to of course, because we need to be able to express ourselves'* (Amber, lines 886-7). A girls group might therefore provide the opportunity for female pupils to find others who they can relate to on this level.

However, there was some discussion as to the potential regularity of the sessions and whether the girls would be obliged to attend. Laura explained that it may make the boys feel they were missing out: *the boys are gonna be like, why can't we have that'* (Laura, line 862). The same participant additionally felt that meetings may become repetitive if they happened too often, saying *like this session we've brung up quite a couple of topics we already brung up in the last one so if we keep on doing it regularly then we're not gonna have anything new to bring up'* (Laura, lines 866-8).

One participant additionally felt that the group should not be obligatory, as she explained: *As long as it's not enforced, because I mean like, whilst you're all cool, I don't fit this group'* (Sarah, lines 872-3). However, the participant did also state that she may come along to the group in order to be the *opposing force'* (Sarah, line 894), provided that it did not occur too regularly.

In relation to timing, the most popular opinion appeared to be a frequency of once-per-term, with some electing for once-per-month. On taking a vote, the girls responded with the following: *I would like it to be once a term cause I don't want it do it that weekly, or that like monthly'* (Laura, lines 895-6); *I feel like once a term, yeah'* (Kara, line 891); *If it's not incredibly regular, like not every week'* (Sarah, line 892); *I think maybe like once a month or something'* (Sam, line 869).

Other factors that were discussed included the sessions being scheduled ahead of time so the girls knew when it was happening and what to expect. This was compared to other activities in the school, presumably suggesting that any girls group could copy this model:

Like they do the school council meetings on like a Wednesday enrichment every half term, I feel like if you did that it would be more like their choice because you know it's going to be on a Wednesday, um one time of that is like once you've been to it you don't have to worry about it' (Laura, lines 899-902).

Finally, one participant also requested that an adult be present during the session.

It is perhaps unsurprising to note that the girls most in favour were those who had been very vocal during the sessions. However, it is also important to note that other girls from this school could be invited to these sessions as they would no longer be related to this research project and would be run by a known member of school staff. This might therefore entice more pupils to participate.

4.3.3 Subtheme 3: Supporting New Starters

Another topic that arose relating to support and provision was new starters and any additional provision that should be made available to them. Some participants shared their own stories around being new and made suggestions as to what may have been helpful. These suggestions included having a buddy system, using PSHE lessons, and being introduced to a range of new people to encourage that initial interaction.

To start, a buddy system was raised as a potential support for new females to the school, with participants describing how this might work. When directly questioned about what the school might do to provide the development of friendship for those joining the setting, Sam immediately responded *'Maybe having like a buddy or something'* (Sam, line 340). However, she qualified this by saying that it shouldn't be someone that they should get too close to (Sam, lines 341). Another participant agreed, saying that the buddy would fulfil a more practical role: Just someone to help them around. They do that in some of like sometimes in lower years in secondary schools' (Sarah, lines 342-3). Indeed, it was suggested that people could have more than one

buddy like on different days so that they don't feel like they're getting ditched but it'll help' (Sam, lines 347-8). This might imply that having multiple buddies would lessen the pressure on any two individuals to get along, or feel obligated to spend time together.

Participants also specified more general strategies that could be used to support new females. For example, having a targeted PSHE lesson where you can get to know the various members of the class and their interests, as experienced by participant Kara:

'What we had which was good for like a PSHE lesson about that thing where you say one thing about yourself, you can immediately tell what people are like, who you're going to end up friends with.' (Kara, lines 358-60)

The link teacher also suggested that similar PSHE lessons may be able to occur where classes are mixed, so you come across a larger assortment of people. Additionally, Laura described a helpful scenario whereby you are introduced to a variety of people that you may have something in common with. Future interactions could then be encouraged (by staff) with those people who have a shared interest with you. Laura said the following:

'I feel like when we first start if um we like could get introduced to lots of people and then maybe we could say what we like and what we don't like and then maybe if we both like the same thing maybe we could say, oh you could play that together at lunch' (Laura, lines 352-5)

On top of these ideas, participants agreed that the aforementioned friendship groups might be a positive experience for those just joining the setting, as a method for creating friendships. However, some participants certainly felt that these groups should be offered to current students as well:

'I think the friendship group thing that we've talked about, when you first start?' (Link Teacher, line 356)

'Yeah, and also do it after' (Laura, line 357)

4.3.4 Subtheme 4: Understanding Different Needs

The notion of accepting individual differences has already been discussed within the framework of understanding friendships (Theme 1, Subtheme 4). However, participants also spoke about how different needs will require different kinds of support from staff or other people. The main area discussed was a need for schedules and the issues that can arise within friendships when needs differ in relation to this. Whilst this is primarily a friendship issue, participants felt that this needed to be supported by staff members due to the potential impact on the individuals involved.

Members of the focus group brought up a need for a schedule as a difficult factor in friendships. Initially, participants discussed the struggle where one friend felt that they needed a schedule, where the other felt oppressed by the idea of constantly having to fulfil this need:

Need [not want] a schedule, because I think a lot of people here do really need a schedule and when my friend says to me, 'I don't know' or 'maybe' it's really hard for me (Sam, lines 784-6)

'...at that point I would just be like, I wanna play by myself and then they get angry cause I don't, cause I do like a plan but I don't like it when it's every single day I'm getting told' (Laura, lines 768-70)

Participants appeared to have a construction that these differences were of great significance due to the potential impact on the individuals, perhaps that they had witnessed or experienced previously. For instance, Kara empathised with the need for a schedule, saying that:

'Cause it is quite hard though, cause it's not just wanting a schedule here it's people who actually need a schedule or they're gonna have a panic attack every day until they get it' (Kara, lines 838-40)

Additionally, participants appeared to suggest that teacher or staff intervention may be required in order to ensure that everybody's needs were met. Sarah told the group that *'I think teacher support needs to come into*

that one'(Sarah, lines 806-7) because *'it's not fair to say that the person who doesn't like scheduling should be forced to have one, but at the same time it's not fair that the person who likes schedules should be breaking down every night'* (Sarah, lines 804-6). This might particularly be the case where individuals are distracted during lessons due to their preoccupation/anxiety with this matter. One participant, Sam, explained that worries over her schedule can impact upon how much she is able to concentrate on the lesson, saying that *'I think it is really important for me to be able to know, ok so this is what's gonna happen otherwise I worry about it in like, let's say science and that's completely irrelevant to science'* (Sam, lines 791-3).

The ways in which the focus group felt that teachers could support in this matter included helping to create schedules or agreements between individuals. For instance, participants described making a plan one week in advance and having to adhere to this: *'maybe a week in advance so that maybe there's not too much of a schedule but then, the person who needs a schedule has a schedule'* (Sam, lines 808-10). However, not all participants appeared satisfied with this response, suggesting that a week was still too far in advance and did not allow flexibility in the plans. *'If I don't want to play with that person and we've already made that schedule then they're going to get angry with me just cause I don't feel like that on the day'* (Laura, lines 813-15). No agreement was made in terms of this debate.

Additionally, a discussion was held around making a schedule but having the option to cancel this: *'I think you can like somewhat schedule but always have the option to cancel'* (Kara, line 821). The participant who had been mainly preoccupied with this issue appeared to agree, stating that *'Yeah, cause then you're like expecting a cancel'* (Sam, line 823). In which case this may be a more promising route to pursue.

It should be noted that this discussion took place towards the end of the sessions and the conversation was therefore cut off by time constraints. It may be worthwhile to further pursue these points in conversation with the research participants. This job could be completed by members of school staff at the provision to obtain the full views relating to this topic.

4.3.5 Theme 2 Summary

This section has discussed the support and provision that participants specified in relation to friendships. It was recognised that different support may be required for different individuals or at different times, for example when they're new or experiencing a difficult period. The idea that staff can support friends to understand each other's different needs and mitigate difficulties was also introduced. The most specific notions to arise were perhaps the intervention suggestions, both with the friendship group and the girls group. Some conclusions appear to have been made regarding the structure and aims of these interventions which may help support their implementation.

4.4 Theme 3: Identity and Belonging

This theme relates to the feelings of self-identity and belonging within a group or setting. Whilst this has a close connection to friendships, it has been identified as a separate theme as it was heavily discussed in regards to gender in particular. This theme has additionally been divided into three subthemes which each discuss different aspects of belonging as raised by the participants.

4.4.1 Subtheme 1: Gender Identity and Stereotypes

The ideas of gender and typical presentations of gender made frequent appearances throughout the focus group discussions. Several of the participants appeared to make comments pulling themselves away from their perceived ideas of femininity (i.e. female stereotypes). In some cases, participants aligned themselves more with a neutral or male-leaning identity (two participants) whilst others simply distanced themselves from ultra-femininity.

One way in which the participants distanced themselves from typical female presentation was in relation to their autism diagnosis. For instance, one participant commented that *'I feel like we would have been diagnosed almost like as easily as guys because we've just had guys as friends our whole lives. If you get what I mean'*(Sarah, lines 25-7). The we in this scenario was Sarah and another participant, Kara. This quote implies that the participant had some knowledge of the current debates regarding females with autism; namely, that females are more difficult to diagnose as they may present differently to males. In saying that they would have been almost as easily diagnosed they may be implying that their presentation is closer to male than female.

This particular participant also identified themselves specifically as unfeminine in several different ways. To start, they repeated multiple times that *'I'm like incredibly unfeminine'* (Sarah, line 516) and suggested that they were not appropriate to attend the (girls only) focus group for this reason: *'I just feel like I'm the wrong person to be here because I'm not feminine'* (Sarah, line 639). This also held true for the proposed follow up sessions, because *'I don't really feel like I'll end up like relating to any of you much'* (Sarah, line 879). This might suggest that she felt others in the group were more feminine and therefore different to herself. Further, they made comments relating to their appearance saying *'I'd rather appear male'*(Sarah, line 529). Of course, this does only describe the experiences and views of one participant and not the whole group.

However, other participants also rejected the notion of being feminine, although perhaps in a lesser form. For example, Sam explained that she does not enjoy having too many female friends: *'Yeah I like having like a few people like, friends who are girls, but I don't like having too many because it starts to get too much'*(Sam, lines 507-9). An example of the too much described here included things such as overly feminine topics of conversation, for instance bras. The following exchange happened within the focus group, which highlights these feeling across three participants:

'...at my old school one of our favourite things to do was when we were getting changed for PE was to talk about bras and crop tops'
(Sam, lines 509-10)

'The drama' (Kara, line 511)

'Oh my god' (Sarah, line 512)

'I know, I hated it' (Sam, line 513)

This suggests that, although female friendship might well be desired, the ultra-feminine discussions may not be.

4.4.2 Subtheme 2: The Female Bond

Whilst participants did display some distancing from the female stereotype, they also spoke of a female bond that helps them relate to one another. In particular, a comment related to the shared experiences of females within puberty (further details of this are described in the Experiencing Puberty theme). The extent to which participants identified with this bond varied, with one participant seemingly confused about the whole concept.

'It's more like kind of a secret bond that females have together' (Amber, lines 662-3) was the initial comment that used the phrasing of bond. This specifically referred to the experiences of period pain, which the participant felt was inaccessible to the opposite sex. However, participants further contributed to this idea by suggesting that it was easier in general to share with other females: *'I feel like I can be more open with girls. Because it's like, oh you know how I feel'*(Sam, lines 519-20).

It did appear that the extent to which participants felt this bond varied hugely. Whilst some immediately recognised this concept, one participant expressed confusion and lack of knowing about any kind of special bond: *Girls have a bond I didn't know about'* (Sarah, line 674). Equally, others expressed an awareness of any potential bond but did not state that they felt it in any way. For instance, Kara explained her ideas to another participant in

the following way: Some people find it easier to do it with people who have like a direct knowing of what that [period pain] is' (Kara, lines 669-70). However, she did not clearly explain the level to which she felt this particular bond.

In general, at least one participant denied awareness of this bond whilst two spoke strongly of it. Further, those who seemingly felt this bond described it as an ease in being able to communicate with other girls due to their shared understanding of female experiences. In this way, it may be difficult for girls within this setting to utilise any bond due to limited exposure to other girls. This appeared to be how participant Sam experienced this:

'I think there's like 10 or 11 girls now here [in the setting] and it's quite hard to be able to talk about how you feel, like girl-wise. Like, you can talk about how you're feeling emotionally but sometimes it's quite nice to be able to um like it's quite nice to be able to talk about how the girls all feel' (Sam, lines 621-5).

4.4.3 Subtheme 3: Sexual Identity and Relationships

Whilst this was not a main focus of the focus groups, some aspects of personal sexual identity did occur during these discussions. This often arose from one participant who views themselves as pansexual (–of, relating to, or characterized by sexual desire or attraction that is not limited to people of a particular gender identity or sexual orientation"; Merriam-Webster, 2019). The participant who shared this also challenged some assumptions made by the group, for example about the typical relationship and variations of this.

For instance, during the friendship group discussion one participant suggested that the group should not only be made up of one female and one male as that's gonna escalate' (Sam, lines 326-7). However, objections were made relating to the assumption that male-female interaction would automatically lead to a sexual relationship (assuming that it the implication of this comment). Sarah interjected that either male or female could be asexual' (Sarah, line 328), or pansexual like themselves. The expectations

around these two participants regarding hetero-normative relationships therefore appeared different. This might imply that participants are at different points in terms of awareness and knowledge of sexual preferences.

In addition, participants also shared experiences where assumptions were made about their sexuality. For instance, some shared that having male friendships were difficult due to accusations that they were a couple. Participants described varied reactions to these events, however they were described using entirely problematic narratives. For instance, one participant described how this attitude can drive away friends: *'...the problem, are you dating all your friends and it makes you not have friends, which is great. Yeah, which isn't actually true anyway'* (Sarah, lines 497-9). Others explained how this can also be a point of ridicule, particularly from other females. One quote highlights this:

'I always feel like, erm, if you are ever friends with a guy people always like, the girls, sometimes make fun of you because they're like, woah, and we used to actually call them friendboys because we were like, we're not, we're not going out' (Sam, lines 35-7).

Although, the same participant also noted that there is good support when these assumptions occur, so they feel it is manageable. They stated that *'when that happens it's a joke now'*(Sam, line 41).

4.4.4 Theme 3 Summary

The theme of Identity and Belonging has been used to explore and describe the discussions in the focus groups relating to gender associations, the female bond and sexual identity. Participants shared their views on these topics and showed their own interpretations of their gender identity, for example by rejecting the ultra-feminine stereotypes. This is despite the fact that female friendships were sought by some, and indeed a female bond was explored in terms of shared female experiences creating a deeper connection, or an ease in communicating. Finally, some aspects of sexual identity were discussed where one participant challenged the hetero-

normative narrative that some focus group members seemed to hold. Participants also described common experiences where having male friends led to difficult assumptions around their relationship status; this was wholly viewed as negative and unhelpful, although some have since overcome this.

4.5 Theme 4: Experiencing Puberty

Whilst not directly related to friendship experiences, at several points the discussion in the focus groups diverted into thoughts around puberty. Specifically, the education around puberty and the difficulties some experienced with this. Further, some participants expressed concerns around being able to communicate their experiences, particularly relating to periods (being a solely feminine occurrence). This theme has therefore been divided into two sections, or subthemes. These are: puberty education, and communicating with others.

4.5.1 Subtheme 1: Puberty Education

The desired method of puberty education, specifically meaning teaching related to women's experiences of puberty, varied hugely across participants. Indeed, this topic created the largest divide and levels of disagreement amongst the focus group members. Whilst several participants felt that girls should be offered separate tuition, others insisted that this was wrong and counterproductive. The two arguments developed as follows.

4.5.1.1 In Favour of Separate Puberty Lessons

Three particular participants emerged with arguments in favour of separating the sexes, at least initially, whilst learning about puberty. The main arguments appeared to be centred on embarrassment and vulnerability. Sam suggested that learning was difficult during joint lessons and that boys give you funky looks' (Sam, line 378). She additionally said:

'Definitely um it's quite hard in a PSHE to not start laughing your head off cause you're feeling embarrassed' (Sam, lines 365-6)

Laura additionally argued that gender separation may be beneficial in order to avoid the awkwardness that may arise during these situations. However, they did express that it continued to be important to learn about both sexes:

'And I also think though, they should at least separate them whilst they teach, they can still teach that subject but not with them together. Cause then when you look over it's like...' (Laura, lines 375-77)

Of course, it may not be coincidental that these views represent the youngest members of the group. During the sessions, the link teacher (LT) explicitly addressed this in saying that feeling more comfortable with joint puberty lessons comes with age' (LT, line 695). However, it is also pertinent to note that with a male majority population often there will be only a single female in any given class. This may increase the feelings of vulnerability and embarrassment at being the only example of female development. Indeed, one of the oldest participants also made the following contribution:

'I must say that at a very young age when we do learn about our own bodies and who we are let's say, call it sex, well it's quite awkward for y'know having another person there with different parts who might make us feel quite vulnerable if we're already exploring ourselves.' (Amber, lines 396-9)

Those participants in favour of separate puberty lessons also provided a possible alternative, in the girls being given the option of leaving: *'...there could be like an option, so the girls get asked do you wanna go out?'* (Laura, line 417). However, another participant noted that pupils are permitted to leave class at any point when they are feeling uncomfortable:

'Those classes anyway you are always told that if you feel awkward you're allowed to leave at literally any moment, so I feel like it would be unnecessary to split them up because you have a choice there anyway.' (Kara, lines 420-3)

Thus some participants continued to argue for entirely separate lessons, for instance with the following set up:

'I think if they separate people to start off with, girls learn about the girls and boys learn about the boys and then like mix it up. So like, boys learn about girls and vice versa. And then I think, then they could like mix them into a class so there's different stages.' (Sam, lines 388-91)

4.5.1.2. Against Separate Puberty Lessons

On the opposing side, several participants argued strongly against the notion of 'gender segregation'. Their argument suggested that learning together was necessary to ensure that girls can become comfortable and confident in having to discuss feminine matters with the other sex. For example, Kara argued the following:

'...when everyone's together it's ok but when you split them up it makes you feel like they need to be split up because it's inappropriate to discuss with the opposite gender, which then causes all kinds of problems like not being able to talk to people.' (Kara, lines 400-3)

Another participant agreed, suggesting that a time delay would not help people become more prepared, but may in fact slow down any progress in feeling more comfortable:

'It creates issues further on, because if you can't talk about it in a group of guys then you're not going to be able to do it in 3 years.' (Sarah, lines 595-6)

Additionally, one participant argued that it was unnecessary and sets a dangerous precedent in terms of gender segregation:

'It's not necessarily important to split them up and have them not know cause that's what causes, oh you're a girl, oh you're a boy. You know? Gender segregation, not good.' (Sarah, lines 424-6)

The same person also argued that separation of the genders would cause them to feel deeply uncomfortable as this would mean separation from their closest friends:

I don't like the separating idea. I'm totally, really friends with guys and having a, you're separated, absolutely horrible. (Sarah, lines 384-5)

It is perhaps important to note that those against the notion of gender separation were the same participants who explained that many of their friends were male. As in the quote above, having an established friendship with those you are learning with most likely supports in feeling more secure during any puberty based discussions.

4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Communicating with Others

In addition to the topic of puberty in education, the participants also discussed the ability to communicate with other people about the menstrual cycle. This included members of staff, for example when supplies were needed, but also members of the opposite sex. Most participants expressed some form of discomfort in having to tell males about women-only complaints, such as period pains; one voice provided the exception to this.

The topic of menstruation was introduced in the focus groups by one participant, who mentioned that signs had been placed in the female bathrooms describing how sanitary supplies were available. The girls had mixed views on this; *I think that's lovely actually'* (Sarah, line 45); *I hate it'* (Laura, line 52). However, several participants agreed that the signs had some usefulness, as the participants did not have to directly request supplies from staff.

I think it's good to have it there, because I can see if we don't have things we don't want to just sit in the toilet until you can go home scared. And they do have pads and tampons. Everyone at some point will have their day when like...' (Kara, lines 57-9)

This quote implies that the participant would st on the toilet' until she was able to g home scared' rather than communicate to a member of staff that they were in need. The participants did not indicate whether it would be more or less comfortable to talk to a staff member whether they were male or female. Sam also shared the view that the sign was helpful, as you could help yourself, explaining that *'obviously you don't want to go into the office and say.'* (Sam, line 62).

Many members of the focus group also agreed that they would experience some level of discomfort in talking about their period to the opposite sex. For instance, one participant expressed a belief that males would not be able to empathise with the particular pains associated with the menstrual cycle. They claimed that this created further awkwardness in trying to broach this subject, as their complaints would not be understood.

'if I was to go up to a guy and say like, oh my chest hurts because of this and that, it would feel a lot more difficult cause they don't have the same things, they wouldn't have known too much about it' (Amber, lines 660-2)

In addition to this, a different participant feared the reaction of her male friends and anticipated that they might feel uncomfortable, which would have a ripple effect on their own emotions. Sam included herself in the category of people who don't like talking to males about puberty atall' in the following statement:

'I think some people don't like talking about puberty to guy friends at all...because girl puberty is extremely different to boy puberty...Like if I went up to a boy and said, I'm on my period they'd be like....and I'd just like. Well, that's what my friends are like.' (Sam, lines 675-81)

However, one member of the focus group did suggest that communicating is heavily dependent on personality, rather than sex or gender. They rather suggested choosing carefully who you shared information with, in order to avoid being taken the mick' out of but also to gain the empathy and support that you might be seeking. They made the following claim:

'Well, it depends on the guy. If you go up to some random guy, obviously they're going to take the mick out of you for the rest of your life, but um if you go up to like your friend who's a guy and say, yeah I'm not feeling too great today because I've got monthly cycle or period or whatever you want to say, generally if they're a good person they'll be like oh alright and they'll try to support you.' (Sarah, lines 682-6)

Furthermore, the same participant suggested that males are able to empathise with the pain specific to period, despite not experiencing this. They recommended comparing this pain to a similar type of pain experienced by men.

'And another thing about not understanding it, particularly with menstrual pain, instead of saying menstrual pain which they probably won't understand, if you say cramping they understand that.' (Sarah, lines 691-3)

However it can be noted that the reluctance to share with males came from three participants, whereas only one spoke in their defence.

4.5.3 Theme 4 Summary

This theme and two subthemes have discussed participant views on the subjects of puberty, both in terms of the education received and the ability to communicate with others. It is certainly true that this topic generated the most debate and differences of opinion within the group, as previously stated. The factors that could be contributing to this include age, friendship group (female versus male majority) and individual personality differences. However, due to this it is hard to make overall conclusions based on the opinions shared. It is also important to note that topics relating to puberty, sex and education arose on several occasions despite not being a main focus of the group (or indeed the aims of the research project). This might suggest that girls have not yet discovered an appropriate outlet for these discussions.

4.6 Findings Summary

This chapter has explored the themes and subthemes that have been interpreted from the data collected. This research project aimed to hear the voices of the participants, and to collect their views in relation to their friendship experiences. It is certainly true that several aspects of friendship were explored, including ideas around understanding our friendships and what support and provision the school could provide in order to support the females within the setting to have positive friendship experiences. Additionally, sections described narratives around the sense of belonging that may or may not exist through their sense of gender: whilst some participants did not feel 'feminine' there was a notion of a shared female bond. Finally, whilst not the main aim of the project, the focus group unerringly found its way to discussing female puberty and the various issues surrounding this. The willingness to explore this topic amongst a group of women might imply that this topic is both more easily explored amongst same-sex groups, but also that the females involved in the sessions had not yet found an outlet for these thoughts. The importance of females meeting together and having a shared identity might therefore be an important thing to consider moving forward in the setting and from this research project.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will further explore the findings of this study, including the implications of this data for school and Educational Psychology practice. It will consider how the data collected has answered the research question and what, if any, link it has to the existing body of literature. Opportunities will be taken to critically evaluate the study design, the tools used and their effectiveness in fulfilling the stated aims of the project. This will include reporting on the dissemination of information into the research setting, how this was received by staff and what changes were brought about as a result of the research conducted. Finally, it will explore potential further research that may be beneficial in adding to this narrative.

5.2 Research Question

The aims of this study were to collect the views of females attending a specialist autism setting, relating to their experiences of friendship. By hearing the voices of the children and young people, it hoped to inform potential changes to school support and provision in order to improve females' experiences of friendship within the school. There was a single research question created in relation to this aim:

How do girls with autism or social communication difficulties at [name] school feel about friendships?

To answer this question, two semi structured focus groups were carried out around the topic of friendships. The findings related to this have been presented in Chapter 4: the following sections will think about the implications of these findings.

5.3 How do girls with autism or social communication difficulties in a specialist setting feel about friendships?

Throughout the focus groups the participants shared many thoughts and feelings around the construct of friendship. Data pertaining to answering this research question can be found across many of the themes, as defined in the previous chapter. This includes: Understanding Friendships, Support and Provision, and Identity and Belonging. Some of the thematic interpretations do correlate with the previous literature on the subject, whilst others can be viewed as potentially novel information. Those themes that do relate may be especially pertinent given the inductive style of analysis used, meaning that the researchers were not looking to hook the data onto any pre-existing theories. Rather, shared ideas have arisen from the views provided by the participants alone (barring an inevitable level of researcher bias). The way in which the findings both answer the research question and link with previous studies is explored below.

5.3.1 Experiencing Difficulties in Making Friends

Many of the participants expressed similar ideas that they had found it difficult to make friends, particularly when they were seeking female friendships. Whilst this has been connected to the relative lack of female presence within the school, it is also described as a social difficulty. For example, making an assumption that someone will want to be a friend and subsequently driving them away. This led to descriptions of being alone, or having to fill time with menial tasks as a result of not having this social partner. The notion that ASD females experience difficulties in forming friendships is not novel within past literature. Indeed, in the Cridland, Jones, Caputi and Magee (2014) study, mothers described significant issues that their autistic daughters faced in making and maintaining friendships. Specifically, the mothers felt that their children did not understand the social cues that lead interactions. Additionally, Navot, Jorgenson & Webb (2017) investigating maternal perspectives found a similar theme: difficulties in

making friends. It therefore appears that this study has echoed the previous findings and adds weight to these notions.

However, it should be noted that the difficulties experienced by the girls in this study were not all-pervasive; for one, not all participants shared concerns relating to finding friends. This was particularly the case where participants had male friends, and thus a surplus of choice within this setting. Furthermore, all members of the focus group made reference to having friends, both in describing how they play and what qualities they valued. This might imply that the difficulties experienced were in the past or that they were not significant in creating a barrier to forming friendship. The ability of girls to make friends within a specialist setting had not previously been researched. These findings of the current study may therefore make more optimistic reading than previous literature. However, the participants of this study still noted that difficulties were experienced, and that support was still needed.

5.3.2 Friendships are Valued

From the information offered, participants appeared to highly value the concept of a 'friend' and spoke at length about the many benefits that are conferred. For example, having someone to relate to or being able to play a preferred game. Participants also spoke positively about the experiences of being a friend and the qualities that they could personally offer to those with that relationship to them. One such example is the emotional comfort that they could both give and receive. Additionally, participants shared some difficulties that they had experienced in making friends, for instance having to occupy themselves or sit alone. This was particularly the case where participants were describing being new at the setting, and finding it hard to make those initial links. These narratives were universally presented as negative experiences, implying that the preference would be to have friendships.

The idea that females with ASD are motivated to have friends was explored in the study by Sedgewick *et al.* (2016), who used a quantitative design to

compare the social motivation of females with ASD versus males with ASD. In their study, they found that autistic girls showed similar levels of social motivation as their neuro-typically developing peers, whereas boys showed a significantly lower level of motivation. These findings appear to link with the current study, with all participants appearing to want and value friendships. This is perhaps not surprising when we learn that Sedgewick *et al.* (2016) similarly completed their research within a specialist setting. The additional qualitative information that has come out of this study can therefore add further weight to this hypothesis.

5.3.3 Wanting Differences to be Understood

Participants also expressed a need to both be understood and to understand others. This was emphasised in the Understanding Difference subthemes in both Understanding Friendship but also Support and Provision. Perhaps as a result of the setting and staff attitudes, pupils expressed an idea that individual differences are to be appreciated. Additionally, they appeared to have empathy with others' needs and frequently expressed the importance of understanding the impact of their actions on others. For example, the need for a schedule was regarded as essential because of the potential negative effects on the individual were this not the case. Furthermore, participants appeared to express the wish to have their uniqueness understood, for instance in the case of religion or sexuality. It was not necessarily the case that friends had to be the same, but simply to understand and value individual differences.

The extent to which the feeling of being understood had been obtained varied within the group. For example, some pupils felt that the suggested girls group may provide that outlet to talk about things that only girls' understand. Meanwhile, others appeared satisfied with the amount that they were able to communicate and be understood by their existing friends, whether these be male or female.

The idea that people wish to be understood or fit in' is additionally addressed by the Cridland *et al.* (2014) study, where participants expressed not being able to fit in with any community. This study presents potentially more optimistic findings, where some people are able to describe being understood by friends, who are also their peers. However, it is important to be cautious as the concepts of being understood' and fitting in' are not entirely the same, and thus may not be a good basis for comparison.

5.3.4 Support is Wanted and Needed

Regardless of whether participants expressed being happy with their current friendships, it was unanimously agreed that support is sometimes required. Specific times where support could be helpful were named: for example, when girls are new at the school, when arguments are taking place, with male-female friendships, and in times of difficulty where friends may have been lost. The ability to accept support where needed did not appear to be a barrier for the members of the focus group, but rather something to be valued. Participants often suggested that staff input would be useful and there were no implications that this would be difficult, or frowned upon by others. This may be different to narrative in mainstream settings where pupils are sometimes reluctant to accept support as this denotes them as different'. For example, the study by Humphrey and Lewis (2008) suggests that children with ASD can reject help from adults stemming from a desire to fit in'. The difference in these participants' views may be as a result of attending a specialist setting, where it is accepted that we all require different levels and types of support at times.

The suggested support for friendship took different forms depending on the need; some was informal, for example following friendship disagreements, where a third person may be all that is required. Equally, more formal arrangements were suggested in the form of friendship intervention groups and girls groups. Participants were not exclusive about who may benefit from these intervention groups, and in fact suggested that everyone could find

these useful at certain times. This again supports the notion that support is viewed positively and in a non-discriminatory way.

5.3.5 Differences of a Specialist Setting

Participants described a belief that the experiences of friendship are different within a specialist setting, as opposed to a mainstream setting. This was demonstrated through an acknowledgement of several impacting factors. For example, the exposure to many more males than females skewed the potential friendship group make up. This factor significantly affected how many friends the different participants referred to, in line with how comfortable they felt having male friends. Indeed, some participants stated that their friendships had not changed because they had always historically been friends with males. However, this still implies a change as the amount of choice had been removed. Additionally, the way in which participants played or interacted with their friends was affected by the setting and the school rules. Although it is important to note that this may not be notably different to similar policies in other settings.

There does not appear to be any relevant literature that these findings can be matched with. Whilst other studies have considered the differences between friendship experiences in special versus mainstream settings, they have several limitations that limit how much direct comparison can be made to this study. For example, Cook, Ogden and Winstone (2016) compared the experiences of friendship and bullying in mainstream and specialist settings. However, this study only contained male participants, removing the issues of sex/gender and the availability of similar friends.

5.3.6 Limited Opportunities for Friendships with Other Girls

Discussion within the focus groups appeared to present an idea that the opportunities for developing friendships with other females may be limited. As previously explained, the number of girls within the school is much fewer

than the number of boys: there are currently 9 female students out of a total of 73. This makes up only 12% of the school population. Additionally, these numbers are not spread evenly across age groups. This statistically shows that female friendship opportunities are lower. However, participants also expressed the feelings that opportunities for female friendships were fewer, and this contributed to social isolation in some cases.

In Cridland *et al.* (2014), one of the themes identified was being ‘surrounded by boys’. This certainly seems to echo what participants in this study experienced, with one participant expressing there are a ‘billion’ boys in the setting. However, in a similar way both studies had differing participant views in relation to this, with some describing it as a positive, and some as a negative. Cridland *et al.* (2014) described how some participants recognised that they got along better with boys and therefore their overwhelming numbers were a good thing. This certainly echoes some voices in this study who claimed that they had always been friends with males, and thus there was no change. On the opposing side, mothers in the Cridland *et al.* (2014) paper expressed concerns that there was no one for their ASD child to relate to, as the autistic world was geared towards men. Again, participants in this study claimed similar ideas in saying that opportunities to communicate with another female about their shared experiences were limited. Both papers thus appear to suggest that, whilst males are the overwhelming majority of those in autism settings, ASD female responses to this are individual and varied. As a result, any potential support will need to be equally individualised.

5.3.7 Older and Younger Pupils Cannot Be Friends

Participants appeared to display a belief that pupils with a large age gap could not or should not be friends. For example, participants in the lower years shared views that older girls would not have an interest in being friends with younger girls. Additionally, they presented a notion that younger pupils should not befriend those in older year groups as they will leave sooner and this will result in upset for the younger person. Additionally, participants in the

higher years differentiated themselves from their younger peers by suggesting that they require different support or may grow out of certain traits, for example being embarrassed by puberty. There did not appear to be a distinct line where friendship was no longer possible; participants did speak of being friends with those in other years, but this did not appear to breach the entire age range of the school population. In other words, there was an arbitrary cut off point that was not explicitly discussed. There does not appear to be any relevant literature that relates to this concept.

5.4 Other Links to Literature

Whilst this research specifically aimed to learn about the feelings and experiences of friendship in females with ASD, other discussions also brought up additional information. These extra ideas are mainly represented in the themes of Identity and Belonging, and Puberty. The previous chapter had suggested that these themes may have arisen through the participants' need or desire to discuss these issues within a female only group. It is certainly true that these topics have seen some recognition in previous research studies. These findings can therefore additionally be linked back to these studies.

5.4.1 Gender Identity

As discussed in Chapter 4, a number of participants expressed opinions in relation to their gender identity. This varied in the extent to which they did or did not associate with being feminine, with one participant expressing not feeling feminine at all and preferring to present as male. Two other participants additionally rejected being ultra-feminine, and one stated that having too many female friends would be overwhelming. This theme may have arisen from this study's choice to include based on biological sex, rather than gender identity; this potentially allowed for greater diversity in the views and experiences of the participants.

Past literature has identified a correlation between gender dysphoria and ASD diagnosis. Gender dysphoria is the label for a person experiencing distress that their gender identity does not match their sex at birth (Fisk, 1974); for example, when you identify as male in gender but have female sex organs. Additionally, gender dysphoria can refer to people who feel non-binary, meaning that they do not associate with being male or female in gender (Richards, Bouman, Seal, Barker, Nieder & T'Sjoen, 2015). In a study by Heylens *et al.* (2018), researchers found that the prevalence of ASD was higher in their sample of participants experiencing gender dysphoria. In this case, 6% of the participants met the diagnostic criteria of ASD; this is six times greater than the general population, of whom 1% typically has autism. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the number of people experiencing gender dysphoria generally is in a rapid upward trend. For instance, Wiepjes (2018) found that referrals to a gender clinic in Amsterdam increased 20-fold from 1980 to 2015. Additionally, the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) in England report statistics that show a 14 times increase in the amount of referrals between 2009 and 2016 (GIDS, 2017). Of course, this may also reflect an increasing level of awareness and acceptance of these individuals, rather than simply greater prevalence.

Whilst participants in this study are not known to have gender dysphoria, it is interesting to link the Heylens *et al.* (2018) findings with possible gender fluidity in this study. The National Autistic Society (NAS) have already recognised the findings from the cited study, in addition to others, and have information relating to gender fluidity on their website. This includes ways in which children and young people with ASD can be supported in relation to gender identity and dysphoria (Powis, 2017).

5.5 Planned School Feedback and Predicted Response

As with the rest of this research project, feedback to the setting will be completed in collaboration with the co-researcher. Following the end of the analysis and write up of findings, the TEP and co-researcher have met to create a PowerPoint to support in disseminating the information. This

presentation includes the main themes and subthemes that were interpreted from the data, with some supporting quotes for these. In line with ethical considerations, and what participants were told in the consent forms, no specific information was included regarding who made which statements.

The TEP and co-researcher approached the HT once this feedback was ready. In conversation, they decided which members of staff would be present at the presentation of the research results. It was decided that the key members should be there, and that a delay would be worthwhile to ensure that all necessary parties could attend. The head teacher expressed a desire to involve everyone with the potential to make decisions on changes to provision; to that end, the list of attendees included: the HT; the SENCo; the head Governor; and the link teacher for the project.

It is hoped that the feedback from the study will incite change in the school, particularly based on the suggestions regarding provision and support. Indications would suggest that change is likely; for example, this project began through a desire from the school to improve their offer to the females in the setting. Furthermore, those responsible for change will be present at the feedback at the volition of the head teacher. It is also hoped that the 'community validity' effect will allow those receiving the information to have confidence in it. This is because members of the school community have been heavily involved throughout the research project and will be disseminating the information. From these changes, it is hoped that the overall experiences for females within that setting will therefore improve.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

It is certainly true that this study has provided insight into the constructions of girls with autism relating to their friendship experiences within a specialist school setting; in this way, it has fulfilled its aims and successfully responded to the research question. However, it must also be acknowledged that this research is subject to limitations and difficulties relating to research design. This section will acknowledge and discuss the possible critiques that can be

levelled against it. Following this, it will discuss potential research that could further contribute to this area of study. It should be noted that future research opportunities are multiple, given the relative youthfulness of this area of enquiry.

5.6.1 Generalisability of the results

The first difficulty within the study is related to the lack of generalisability due to a limited sample size, focus group method and special school setting. As previously stated only six participants took part in the project, making this a relatively small case study. Additionally, assigning focus groups as the data collection method provided necessary restrictions to the amount of data that could be obtained (73 minutes of audio recording). This meant that some themes were not fully developed due to time restrictions: this is noted in theme 2, subtheme 4 where the need for schedules was discussed. Furthermore, the setting of a specialist school implies that it may be difficult to extend these findings to those in either mainstream or alternative education settings. Utilising this setting did however provide unique insight into this topic, not having previously been investigated. Moreover, focusing on this area allows new information that can be followed up in other settings. For example, the intervention ideas may be applied to ASD females in other schools to see if they may be appropriate.

5.6.2 Use of Focus Groups

Secondly, the use of focus group as a data collection method had some added difficulties. The initial plan for the study was to run two focus groups, dividing the participants into the older and younger age ranges. However, due to the number of pupils that consented to take part in the study, these groups were combined into one. This resulted in a large age difference between the youngest and oldest participants; specifically, there was an 8 year difference between Laura (9 years old) and Amber (17 years old). This may have made it difficult for the participants to relate to each other, or

limited the amount of shared experiences. Indeed, the variety of opinions are reflected in theme 4, subtheme 1 where members strongly disagreed about the way in which they should be educated about female development and puberty. It was speculated that these differences could be associated with age. Furthermore, the age difference may have contributed to feelings of comfort or discomfort about contributing to the conversation. It was noted during the focus groups that one of the youngest participants, Julie, was struggling to access the discussions. Whilst steps were taken to try and ensure her voice was heard, particularly between the first and second sessions, she has a noticeably smaller contribution; this can be seen throughout the findings. However it is perhaps a positive sign that she continued to remain in the group, even attending the additional session. She may therefore have been receiving benefits simply from being in attendance. Additionally, the focus group did manage a large amount of open discussions that covered many areas and themes. This would suggest that the majority participants felt comfortable in sharing their experiences despite the age differences.

5.6.3 Group Dynamics

Finally, there were inevitable group dynamics that may have influenced the direction of conversation. For example, two of the participants were siblings and this was sometimes evident in the way they interacted with one another. For example, bringing up family issues or telling anecdotes from their earlier childhood. Furthermore, two of the group members had recently been in a romantic relationship which had then ended. The researcher reflected that they may have found it difficult to share openly in the group; they noted in the reflective diary that they struggled to make eye contact with one another and one participant would often drop their head whilst their ex-partner was speaking. Moreover, it is likely that some members of the focus group were friends which may have impacted the topics they chose to raise; for example, they may have wanted to target a certain concern that bothers them about that particular friendship. However, there is no evidence to support that this

was the case. Furthermore, this may have helped provide a more balanced view than individual interviews as pupils had the opportunity to rebuff statements or provide an alternative view directly.

5.7 Unique Contribution of the Research

5.7.1 Findings

This research has contributed to the growing body of knowledge relating to the experiences of females with ASD. Indeed, it has played a novel role in hearing the voices of the children and young people within the autism community, an area that had been mainly neglected up to this point. This was achieved using a qualitative design that has proven to be more successful in obtaining richer information in regards to this topic (Chapter Two). This population has shown the ability to be reflective about their experiences, and the potential provision and support that may be helpful in improving these.

Furthermore, the views supplied by the participants of this research have gone some way in elucidating further areas of this topic. For example, the data appears to add compelling evidence to previous theories that females with ASD may be more socially motivated (Chapter Four). In addition, it described the impact of being female within a setting (and autistic world) that is dominated by males, although this varied between participants. This again backed up previous findings from research such as Cridland *et al.* (2014). Moreover, some of the themes that arose provided new insights that did not reflect any previous findings. For instance, the willingness of the participants to accept help contradicts previous studies (although these were conducted within a mainstream environment; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Although not reflecting the main aim of the study, several other interesting topics arose from the focus groups as a result of the semi-structured approach employed. This included the self-perception of the participants and a level of rejection towards typical feminine presentation. This adds an

interest aspect to the trend whereby individuals with autism are seemingly more likely to experience gender dysphoria (Heylens *et al.*, 2018).

5.7.2 Participatory Implications

It is also important to recognise that this research project had additional aims, on top of collecting the data regarding the experiences of friendship. This was related to the participatory element of the design, and specifically the use of a co-researcher. As explained in Chapter 3 (Methodology), this research hoped to:

- Engage a young researcher in a participatory project, providing them with:
 - a voice;
 - new research skills; and,
 - the power to create change.

The degree to which these aims were met therefore also needs to be considered.

The inclusion of a co-researcher within this project has overall been a success. To start, on several occasions the co-researcher offered positive feedback relating to the project. For example, when asked how the training could have been improved the co-researcher only offered “I think you should do it every day next time”. The co-researcher consistently showed an understanding of research skills and was able to contribute to the project in a meaningful way. They created the research question, made decisions regarding the research design and were able to code data and suggest relevant themes. They were also given a voice in being able to direct the focus of the project, which they elected to be friendships.

Additionally, there has been evidence to suggest that the co-researcher has felt empowered by her inclusion in the project. This was evident in their confidence in feeding back to the school; from the start she was keen to share about her research skills with others, and this continued throughout the

project. Furthermore, the co-researcher expressed that she would like to support the TEP in delivering a presentation about this study to their Educational Psychology Service (EPS) in the future. This shows a huge level of confidence and the ability to take charge of the project and its results.

Despite this, there were some areas of participatory research that could have been improved. For example, the involvement of the co-researcher in the analysis stage of the project could have been extended. Whilst they played an active role in the initial stages, the themes and subthemes were adjusted without their involvement towards the end of the process. This was due to time constraints in needing to write this project and being unable to organise dates to visit. Indeed, Jones (2007) suggests that insufficient time is one of the key barriers in carrying out effective participatory research. There was perhaps an inevitable quality to this, in that the co-researcher was not involved in writing the thesis. Braun and Clarke (2006) recognise that writing up the findings is a key stage in the analysis, and this was the case here. Nevertheless, the level of participation arguably achieved one of the higher ‘ungs’ of the ladder of participation as defined by Hart (1992); this means that at points the young person led and initiated the actions, and at other times the young person and the co-researcher made joint decisions. In terms of Aldridge’s (2017) model of participation, the research occupied the ‘ocial change/transformation’ space, in being participant led (Figure 1.1).

5.8 Future Research

Following from this research, many future research opportunities have been raised. For example, it may be beneficial to hear the participant voices of females with autism in a mainstream school or other setting. Their experiences, particularly relating to friendships, are likely to differ given the differences in school make up (for example, the number of pupils is typically much larger). Additionally, it would be interesting for further research to investigate this topic with a much larger sample size so that a variety of different views could be obtained. This might particularly include participants from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds in order to diversify the findings.

Moreover, other perspectives could also be explored, such as teacher or parent views, to triangulate these findings.

As has previously been explained, autism has historically been undiagnosed in females, thus many females are requesting the diagnostic process much later in life (Chapter One). It might therefore be helpful to collect the views of this late-diagnosis population, to further understand how friendship experiences may be different without the access to additional resources or understanding of difficulties that a diagnosis may bring. It is important to note that the females involved in this study already had a diagnosis of autism (or social communication difficulties) which might mean that they show more typical autistic traits, as found in males. It therefore represents a bias sample; further research could seek to rectify this skewed sample.

Given the topics that arose unprompted in this research, it may be helpful for future studies to explore autistic female CYP constructs related to puberty or self-identity, including gender and sexual identity. For example, researchers could investigate potential reasons for the reported higher incidence of gender fluidity in young people with autism. Additionally, researchers may wish to further enquire about the sense of belonging felt by ASD females in special schools. This sense of belonging could be in relation to the female gender overall, or could examine how much females feel a member of the typically male-dominant setting. Finally, future research could consider how support and provision may need to differ in other areas (for example, learning or anxiety) for the female sex.

5.9 Implications for Practice

This research is highly relevant for practices both in schools and EP services. As theorists begin to challenge historical notions of autism as a male-only phenomenon, it is likely that female diagnosis rates will continue to grow. Due to this, settings and professional services will need to adapt in order to provide effective services for these children and young people.

5.9.1 Implications for School Practice

Section 5.5 explains how the research setting has adapted their practice in accordance with the outcomes of this project. From this, possible suggestions for school approaches to females with ASD are presented below. It is safest to suggest that these recommendations will be more applicable to special school settings with a similar make-up to that in this study. That is to say, an ASD specialist school that has a majority of male pupils.

Participants appeared to have clear ideas about how they would like to be supported with friendships. This included the school providing specific friendship support when females with ASD are new to the setting. For example, using a 'buddy' system to help a new pupil get around the school but also provide that initial link for social interaction. A buddy system is already utilised by several mainstream settings and should be relatively easy to set up. Furthermore, friendship interventions will need to be individualised according to the friendship preferences of the person. For example, whether they feel comfortable or have experience in being friends with males.

Additionally, settings might consider providing girls with ASD the opportunity to meet as a group and share their views. This would enable them to obtain the unique views of the females in their own setting and make adjustments according to this. In this way, the research design here may provide a template with which schools can consider their own support and provision.

Based on the mixed views shared in this piece of research, careful consideration should be made in regards to the school policy on puberty education, keeping in mind the sensitivity of the topic. Schools could obtain pupils opinions on their personal preferences for receiving single-sex lessons, for example. Alternatively, extra sessions could be added for those who want female-only lessons for a short time. These sessions might include practical activities such as practising how to ask for supplies or help when needed during a period.

Finally, schools may wish to keep themselves up to date on new research that is emerging in relation to autistic females. This includes the relatively novel concept that children and young people with ASD may have a greater disposition towards gender fluidity/dysphoria (Heylens *et al.*, 2018).

5.9.2 Implications for EP practice

EPs play an important role in advising schools how to effectively support CYP with different needs. As it stands, EPs are already frequently requested to support autistic people in a range of settings. It is therefore vital that EPs have a working knowledge and understanding of how ASD presentation may differ in females, and what support might look like as a result of this. EPs may be able offer support in the following ways.

On a systemic level, EPs will need to consider that females with ASD are occupying a male-dominated world, whilst also considering that the impact of this will differ according to individuals. This may include thoughts around the accessibility to feminine products (for example menstruation supplies), and greater thought into how female-only topics such as puberty are taught within the school. Providing opportunities for females to meet and have a shared identity may be helpful in some settings.

On an individual level, EPs may be expected to work with females with ASD within schools. Additionally, they could run the interventions suggested within the research (for example, the friendship or girls groups) and gather data pertaining to their effectiveness with this population. Further research is certainly needed to assess whether interventions are equally successful with females and males with autism: as it stands, limited comparison exists (Chapter Two).

EPs could be involved in supporting parents to be aware of current research and ongoing understanding; as highlighted in the Cridland *et al.* (2014) study, many mothers felt disempowered by lack of knowledge regarding ASD in females. Some EP services already offer ASD courses that are open to parents, to support understanding and evidence based practices; specific

information around female presentation could be included in these, and parents of females with ASD could be targeted in advertisements.

In general, EPs will need to keep abreast of the latest research in this rapidly developing field. For example, being familiar with research related to ASD and gender dysphoria, including resources to help support schools and pupils. Further, it will be helpful for EPs to have a critical awareness of any new information that emerges relating to ASD diagnostic criteria, based on our understanding of female differences.

5.10 Reflexivity

I was aware during the research process that I wanted to achieve a ‘pure’ model of participatory research by dutifully following the ideals described by Aldridge (2017) or Hart (1992), rather than engage in a ‘pretence’ of collaboration or tokenism (as described by Alderson, 2000). This potentially arose from my beliefs around empowering the children and communities I work with, and allowing people to be experts in their own lives. However, during the research I became aware that some of the ideals were harder to meet due to time constraints or the aims of the study. Whilst I still made efforts to abide by the PR philosophy, at many points this felt more difficult than engaging with a more traditional research design. For example, the time taken to train the co-researcher meant that each stage was extended, and at many points I had to actively remind myself to consult them in decisions that would have been quicker and simpler to make myself. Things that were helpful in resolving these feelings were reminding myself of the motivation behind these decisions, and the guiding principles of my work overall, as well as this research project.

In many ways I felt frustrated by some of the limitations of this study. For example, the struggle in gaining participants and difficulties I experienced in setting up the focus groups in the way that was desired. I felt that some decisions had to be made relating to time, for example the use of focus groups and the number of sessions held. I felt it would be a ‘better’ project if I

had managed to gain more views, and I also questioned the responses I had made during the focus groups. For example, wondering how much I should allow or encourage participants to talk off the topic of friendships. Given the semi-structured interview method used, these were at many points unscripted and therefore probably reflected my own bias. However, I reflected that these learning experiences could inform not only the next session but also any future research. I was also guided in my responses by my experiences working with children and learning on the Educational Psychology doctorate, which I did feel allowed me to be successful in many respects.

An invaluable aspect for me during this project was the use of supervision, both formal and informal with peers and colleagues. At several points I was aware of feeling unsure or deskilled, this being the first research project of this magnitude that I had undertaken. Discussing the different aspects that I was struggling with supported me in moving forward with the project and engaging in effective problem solving. This was particularly helpful during stages where particular issues came up, such as participant recruitment and the writing of this research project.

5.11 Conclusion

This case study aimed to investigate the friendship experiences of females with ASD who attend a specialist school, in order to increase understanding and improve provision within the target setting. The findings contribute towards a growing body of knowledge relating to autism within the female population, a much understudied phenomenon. It has provided a new understanding within this topic, through hearing the voice of the child and young person and respecting them as an expert in their own lives. This fulfils an unmet need within the existing literature, which generally omitted the views of the CYP.

Some themes that arose from this project included the motivation for friendships experienced by these young people, yet limited opportunities to

make friends with other females within the setting. Furthermore, participants showed a real willingness to accept help, and a desire for this to be given at appropriate times. Participants also showed an ability to reflect on specific intervention techniques that may be helpful, including buddies and friendship groups. These findings not only shed light on the experiences of these young people, but can also be helpfully applied to the school setting to promote positive change. Moreover, whilst some findings reinforce previous research findings, it also offers unique insight that cannot otherwise be linked to other literature.

In addition, this project has provided a young researcher with new research skills and knowledge. The confidence that arose in this young person implies that this study met its aims in giving this individual a voice. For example, their enthusiasm at contributing to every stage of the project, including the dissemination stage, was very positive. It is hoped that in the future the young person who acted as the co-researcher will be empowered to help carry through any potential change, and will feel enthused to continue developing their research skills.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.1 – Literature Review Papers

Authors	Paper	Publication	Date
Cridland E. K. Jones S.C., Caputi P. & Magee C.A.	Being a Girl in a Boys' World: Investigating the Experiences of Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorders During Adolescence	Journal of Autism Developmental Disorder	2014
Dean, M. Harwood, R. & Kasari, C	The art of camouflage: Gender differences in the social behaviors of girls and boys with autism spectrum disorder	Autism	2017
Dean, M. Kasari, C. Shih, W. Frankel, F. Whitney, R. Landa, R. Lord, C. Orlich, F. King, B. & Harwood, R.	The peer relationships of girls with ASD at school: comparison to boys and girls with and without ASD	Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry	2014
Jamison T.R. & Schuttler J.O.	Overview and Preliminary Evidence for a Social Skills and Self-Care Curriculum for Adolescent Females with Autism: The Girls Night Out Model	Journal of Autism Developmental Disorder	2017
McVey A.J. Schiltz H. Haendel A. Dolan B.K.	Brief Report: Does Gender Matter in Intervention for ASD? Examining the Impact of	Journal of Autism Developmental Disorder	2017

Willar K.S Pleiss S. Karst J. Carson A.M.Caiozzo C. Vogt E., & Vaughan Van Hecke A.	the PEERS Social Skills Intervention on Social Behavior Among Females with ASD.		
Navot, N. Jorgenson A.G. & Webb S.J.	Maternal experience raising girls with autism spectrum disorder: a qualitative study	Child: care, health and development	2017
Sedgewick, F. Hill, V. Yates, R. Pickering, L. & Pellicano, E.	Gender Differences in the Social Motivation and Friendship: Experiences of Autistic and Non- autistic Adolescents	Journal of Autism Developmental Disorders	2016
Wijngaarden- Cremers P.J.M., van Eeten E. Groen W.B. Van Deurzen P.A., Oosterling I.J.,& Jan Van der Gaag R.	Gender and Age Differences in the Core Triad of Impairments in Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Systematic Review and Meta- analysis	Journal of Autism Developmental Disorder	2014

Appendix 3.1 – Co-Researcher Presentation Slides



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

- LOTS OF NEW INFORMATION AND RESEARCH HAS BEEN PUBLISHED ABOUT GIRLS WITH ASD AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES.
- GIRLS ARE A MINORITY IN OUR SCHOOL AND WE WANT TO MAKE SURE THEIR EXPERIENCE IS POSITIVE.

HOW WILL WE DO THIS?

- WE WANT TO DO A **PARTICIPATORY** PROJECT.
- WE HOPE TO INVOLVE THE GIRLS FROM X SCHOOL IN LEADING THE PROJECT ALONGSIDE US.
- THAT MEANS THAT YOU CAN BE INVOLVED IN EVERY STAGE OF THE PROJECT.
- WE WILL EXPLAIN THESE STAGES IN MORE DETAIL LATER.

WHAT WILL YOUR ROLE BE?

- IF YOU VOLUNTEER TO BE PART OF THE PROJECT YOU WILL HAVE A ROLE CALLED 'CO-RESEARCHER'.
- THIS ROLE INVOLVES YOU RECEIVING TRAINING ABOUT HOW TO DO RESEARCH.
- YOU CAN CHOOSE TO PARTICIPATE IN AS MUCH OR AS LITTLE AS YOU WOULD LIKE. WE WILL REQUIRE ONE CO-RESEARCHER AND WILL CHOOSE THE PERSON WHO IS LIKELY TO BE MOST INVOLVED.

WHAT ARE THE 'STAGES' OF THE PROJECT?

- 1. PLANNING AND DESIGNING THE RESEARCH: *THIS IS WHERE YOU DECIDE HOW TO FIND OUT THE INFORMATION YOU NEED.*
- 2. DATA COLLECTION: *THIS IS WHEN YOU COLLECT THE INFORMATION.*
- 3. DATA ANALYSIS: *THIS IS WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE FOUND AND SEE WHAT IT MEANS.*
- 4. SHARING RESULTS: *THIS IS WHERE YOU TELL PEOPLE WHAT YOU HAVE FOUND OUT.*

YOU WILL HAVE TRAINING WITH US TO COMPLETE EACH OF THESE STAGES.

WHAT WILL THE COMMITMENT BE?

- WE WILL DECIDE WITH YOU AT THE BEGINNING HOW MUCH INVOLVEMENT YOU WOULD LIKE TO HAVE.
- IF YOU CHOOSE TO BE INVOLVED AT EVERY STAGE IT IS LIKELY TO INVOLVE A WEEKLY COMMITMENT DURING TERM TIME.
- THIS SHOULD BE NO MORE THAN 1 HOUR.
- THIS WILL NOT INTERFERE WITH YOUR EXAMS OR ANY CURRICULUM LESSONS.

HOW MUCH TIME WILL THIS TAKE?

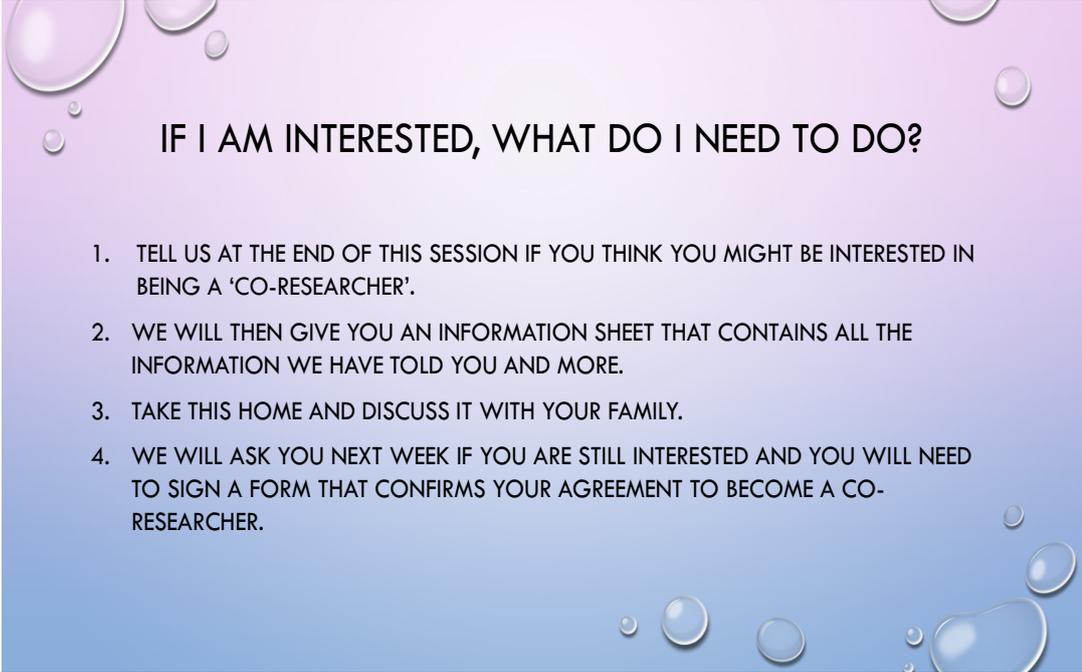
- THE PROJECT IS PLANNED TO RUN FROM NOW UNTIL THE END OF THE AUTUMN TERM (CHRISTMAS).
- THE RESULTS SHARING MAY TAKE PLACE IN THE SPRING TERM (2019).
- YOU WILL NOT LOSE ANY HOLIDAY TIME.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR YOU?

- YOU WILL LEARN NEW SKILLS IN CARRYING OUT RESEARCH.
- YOU WILL TAKE ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF WORKING WITH US.
- WE HOPE YOU WILL FIND IT INTERESTING.
- IT MIGHT BE USEFUL FOR YOU IN THE FUTURE (FOR EXAMPLE ON YOUR CV OR COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY APPLICATIONS).

WHAT OTHER INFORMATION DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

- IF YOU CHOOSE TO BE INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT YOU CAN DECIDE TO LEAVE AT ANY POINT.
- YOU CAN ASK US ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROJECT BEFORE YOU MAKE A DECISION WITHOUT ANY COMMITMENT.



IF I AM INTERESTED, WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?

1. TELL US AT THE END OF THIS SESSION IF YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN BEING A 'CO-RESEARCHER'.
2. WE WILL THEN GIVE YOU AN INFORMATION SHEET THAT CONTAINS ALL THE INFORMATION WE HAVE TOLD YOU AND MORE.
3. TAKE THIS HOME AND DISCUSS IT WITH YOUR FAMILY.
4. WE WILL ASK YOU NEXT WEEK IF YOU ARE STILL INTERESTED AND YOU WILL NEED TO SIGN A FORM THAT CONFIRMS YOUR AGREEMENT TO BECOME A CO-RESEARCHER.



DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

Appendix 3.2 – Co-Researcher Lesson Plans

Session 1: What is Research?

Learning Aims	Knowledge Content	Skills	Interactive Elements	Follow Up Work
Begin to develop an understanding of the nature of research	The nature of research/enquiry The importance of research	Critical thinking Separating fact and opinion	Discussion Expert researcher card games	Read and reflect on a short research paper
Begin to have an appreciation of ethical issues in research	Different types of research and their main characteristics	Interpreting research findings		

Discussion:

- Experience of co-researcher – school projects, finding-out activities etc.

What is different about research?

- Formulation of a research question
- A methodological design
- The collection of raw data
- In depth analysis
- Scrutiny of validity
- The generation of *new* knowledge

What do all of these mean?

Why is research important?

- Increase knowledge and understanding
- Can bring about beneficial change
- Promotes problems solving
- Can call out poor or unethical practice

Research and Ethics

Will cover more in depth later

Research **must** be ethical – in the best interests and needs of the participants. It must not cause harm or distress.

Researchers must be frank, open and critical

Core Activity

Co-researcher reads the following report (fictional) and considers whether this is valid research'. Prompts given as needed:

UK fast-food diet producing 'fat' babies

New statistics out this month suggests that our obsession with fast food is now producing fat babies. This year a record number of babies – 103 – have weighed in at more than 12lb 12 oz. According to figures from the Office for National Statistics, 1.68% of babies weighed more than 10lb this year compared with 1.45% ten years ago. Boy babies weigh an average of 7lb 8oz, a rise of 2oz from 1973. Experts state that babies who are padded with fat all over their bodies – including, in some cases, their skulls – have a greater tendency towards obesity. In Japan where fast food is not as popular and the average diet includes an abundance of raw fish the average birth weight is 6lb 10oz and in India the average birth weight is less than 6lb.

- Is this report research'?
- Would you describe it as systematic, sceptical and ethical?
- What other information would researchers need before they could draw the same conclusions as this journalist?
- How differently do you think a research report might be constructed?

Guided comments:

This would not be considered valid research because:

- Only select pieces of data are used so it is not systematic
- It is not sceptical as it doesn't look for any data that might disconfirm its claims
- The article is unethical as it makes links between fast food and heavier babies without any evidence to back this up e.g. we don't know what the mothers of the larger babies actually ate

- We need a lot more data to claim these as fact e.g. height and weight of parents and their diets, any medical conditions that may affect birth weight (diabetes etc).
- Comparing babies in Japan and India needs to be done alongside other relevant factors, e.g. average size and weight of adults in those countries.

Expert Researcher Card Games

Write four key research terms (data, ethical, sceptical, systematic) onto cards that can be used to play games e.g. card match. These terms will be added to throughout the sessions.

Follow Up Work

Co-researcher to read a short research paper (Leonard M. Working on your doorstep: child newspaper deliverers in Belfast. 2002) and reflect on the questions below.

1. The author discusses the skills needed to be a newspaper deliverer. Do you think these skills are undervalued by the general public?
2. What are your views on the law relating to child employment as described by the author of the paper?
3. What do you think about the health and safety issues related to being a newspaper deliverer?
4. Do you think newspaper deliverers are exploited?

Session 2: Learning from Other People's Research

Learning Aims	Knowledge Content	Skills	Interactive Elements	Pupil Follow Up Work
Begin to have an appreciation of good and poor research	The nature of research Access to and orientation of research studies	Skim reading Content sifting	Discussion Expert researcher card games	Read and reflect on a short research paper
Understand the way a research paper is structured		Critical reading		

Discussion:

Learning from Other People's Research

How do we know the difference between good and bad research?

If research has all the aims we described last session, we also need a way to evaluate if it has met these aims and practiced in an ethical way.

Much research is written up into research papers. Being able to find our way around a research paper is a key aspect of judging quality.

Finding your Way around a Research Paper

The title

- A good title should reflect the content of the research paper and give enough information so that people are able to work out whether it is relevant to their area of interest.
- Titles often come in 2 parts e.g. 'Just teach us the skills please, we'll do the rest': empowering ten-year-olds as active researchers.

The Abstract

- Most research papers have an abstract, which appears after the title but before the main body of the article
- This usually gives some background and rationale for the study, and may summarise the findings.
- A good abstract will have a few sentences covering each section of the overall research paper – the introduction, methodology, findings and discussion.

References

- All research papers have a list of references at the end. This needs to include all the other research projects that the authors have referred to throughout their paper.
- This may be quite extensive as authors will need to justify their study area by reviewing previous research to see how well it addresses their research question. This is usually called a *literature review*.
- References must be done in a specific way that varies in different guidelines. However it will always include the author(s) names, publication date, title of the paper, and where it was published (a book or a journal etc).

The Introduction

- An introduction sets out the reasons a researcher is interested in their particular topic and a rationale for the study.
- This may include the literature review.
- It also sets out the particular question(s) that the study is going to explore.

The methodology

- This is a crucial part of the paper. It must give enough information about how the research has been conducted that somebody else would be able to *replicate* it.
- It also needs to give enough info so people can judge the quality of the study e.g. whether the methods were appropriate to address the research question(s).
- For example, if making a comparison between girls and boys there needs to be close to equal representation of each gender. It would not be fair to use 100 boys but only 10 girls.

The Findings

- This section tells us the data that has been found. This may be numerical, descriptive, or both.
- This section addresses the research question(s) that have been asked.
- It needs to be presented clearly and succinctly.

The Discussion

- In this part of the paper the author(s) analyse and discuss their findings.
- They will suggest implications of the study, including how this knowledge can further our understanding of the topic area, and how it fits into the context of other people's research.

Conclusion

- This draws together the main findings that have been explored in the discussion.
- It is intended to summarise the main points rather than make new ones.

Reading other research papers is one the best ways to learn about research. You can use these strategies to decide how relevant a research paper is to you before you read it.

- Look at the title. Does it contain key words that link to your topic?
- If the literature source is an article, read the abstract as this gives you a short summary of what the research is about.
- What year was it written? If it was a long time ago it may be out-of-date.
- Look at the subheadings. Do they deal with subjects that are relevant to your topic?
- Read the first and last sentences in paragraphs and subsections because sometimes they are mini introductions and summaries of the content.

It is also very important to read papers in a *critical* way. Ask yourself the following questions when reading a paper:

- What is the author trying to get me to accept?
- What evidence is the author providing me to persuade me to accept this?
- How plausible is the reasoning and explanation that is provided?
- How reliable is the evidence on which this reasoning is based?

Core Activity

Read the following research paper.

Elsy, S. (2004). Children's experience of public space. *Children & Society*, pp.155-164.

Discuss the following questions:

- Is the title a good summary of the paper? If not, can you suggest a better one?
- Does the abstract tell you a little about the introduction, methodology, findings and conclusions?
- Does the introduction tell you what the study is about and why it is being undertaken? Does it review other people's research in the field?
- Is there sufficient explanation in the methodology for replication? Is the method appropriate for the research question? Can you find anything unsound, unethical or absent from the description of the method?

- Are the results clear and presented in a way that is easy to follow and understand?
- Does the discussion section relate the findings of the study to the literature reported in the introduction? Are there ways in which it could be improved?

Expert Researcher Card Game (as before).

Session 3: Research Ethics

Learning Aims	Knowledge Content	Skills	Interactive Elements	Pupil Follow Up Work
Understand the primary importance of ethics in research	Informed consent	Thinking skills	Discussion	N/A
	Human rights	Appreciating perspectives other than one's own	Expert researcher card games	
	Confidentiality			
Appreciate a given situation from another person's perspective	Anonymity	Making balanced judgements		
		Exploring moral and social values		
Develop greater ethical awareness				

Ethical considerations are an integral part of every stage of a research project. Sometimes, the topic of the research itself can be ethically sensitive e.g. bullying. The very act of exploring this with individuals could cause distress, anxiety, or increase a person's vulnerability to a bullying situation. However it is also important that issues like bullying are explored so that we can increase our knowledge and understanding, to improve prevention.

Researchers must always be conscious about the balance of benefits versus costs of a study. These costs can include:

- Emotional e.g. anxiety, embarrassment, depression, loss of self-esteem.
- Financial e.g. cost of the individual's time, loss of earnings, travel costs.
- Physical e.g. pain or other physical effects (e.g. in medical research).

Can you think of another example where researcher(s) would have to be sensitive about individual reactions/safety?

Some guiding principle to focus on (from Alderson & Morrow, 2004):

- Respect and justice – e.g. respecting participants' sensitivities and dignities.
- Rights – e.g. participants' rights to be protected from harm, to be fully informed and listened to.
- Best outcomes – to actively promote best outcomes for participants.

Research usually needs to be approved by at least one ethical body before going ahead.

Informed Consent

- *All* research must have the *consent* of all participants. However, before individuals can give their consent they must understand exactly what they are agreeing to. This is what we call *informed consent*.
- It is ethically questionable to not provide any information regarding a research project to a participant, or to not provide enough information to enable them to make a decision about taking part.
- Participants need to be told:
 - The aims and objectives of the research.
 - How the data collected from them will be used (especially in regards to confidentiality and anonymity).
 - How the findings will be disseminated.
- This information needs to be transparent, with no hidden agendas.
- With children, consent needs to be sought from parents too. This is because there are debates about what age is sufficient to be able to make an informed decision. Sometimes parents and children disagree and this can even go to court in important cases (e.g. *Gillick v. Norfolk and Wisbech*).
- Even if a child is not able to sign a consent form, every efforts needs to be made to explain the research to them in an accessible format and be approached about consent.
- Informed consent also relates to *ongoing* consent; participants should be aware that they can withdraw their consent at any time and for any reason.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

- Participants should be protected within the research process. This includes keeping data confidential and anonymous wherever possible.
- Names should be changed when the study is reported.
- Video, audio or photographic data may be destroyed at the end of a research project.

Core Activity

Role play.

An Ethical Dilemma

An 11-year-old boy, Josef, is dying from a very rare form of cancer. There is no known cure and he only has a few months left to live. Researchers are in the process of developing a new drug which they think may be able to cure this cancer in the future if it could be caught at an early enough stage. The drug is not perfected yet and even if it were, Josef's cancer is already far too advanced for it to be able to cure him. However, doctors could learn a lot more about the drug and its potential if they could test it out on Josef. Although this would not help Josef it could benefit many more children in the future. There is a possibility that there might be some side effects from the drug but the doctors cannot be sure as it has not been tested on humans before. Josef's parents are against this and are refusing to give their consent. They want Josef to have the best possible quality of life and to be left in peace for the few months he has left. But Josef would like to help the doctors and says he wants to do some good with his life before he dies. Who should have the final say on his consent? Should Josef, aged 11, be allowed to overrule his parents or should his parent's wishes prevail? Who else might influence the decision making process?

Adults and co-researcher to take the following parts in the role play.

Josef – Wants to have the drug and insists it's his body and his life.

Mother – wants Josef to be left in peace so that the family can make the most of the little time they have left together.

Father – Angry the doctors should have approached them with this proposal, says this is emotional blackmail and that Josef is being exploited.

Doctor – Arguing for the possible benefits for other children.

Session 4: Framing a Research Question

Learning Aims	Knowledge Content	Skills	Interactive Elements	Follow Up Work
<p>Begin to understand what a research question is and how it differs from a hypothesis</p> <p>Begin to understand how a research question informs the design and data collection methods of a research study</p>	<p>The pivotal place of a research question in the research process</p>	<p>Question framing</p> <p>Sorting the essential from the peripheral and/or irrelevant</p>	<p>Discussion</p> <p>Expert researcher card games</p>	<p>Children's research featured on websites</p>

Introduction

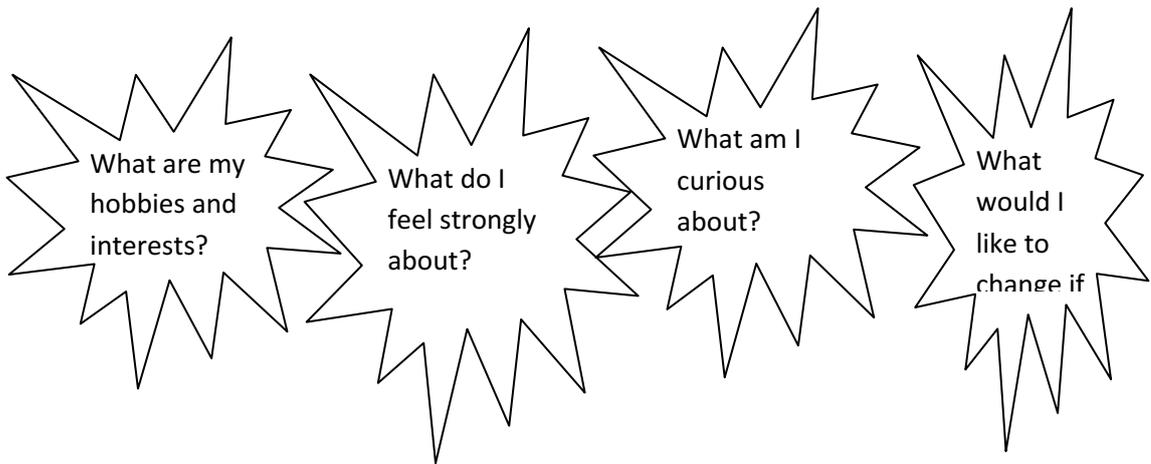
Before you can think about how they will go about collecting data, they need to frame a research question. The research question will help guide the rest of the methodological planning so it is important that we get this right. It will need to be tightly worded so that it leads neatly into the research design. It sets the framework for the whole project, giving it direction and coherence.

(NB creating a research question is an important step in allowing a co-researcher to feel ownership over a research project)

Ask yourself: what am I trying to find out?

Use of a 'think sheet' can be utilised to support in the creation of the research question. This can be found below:

Think Sheet



Topic Area:

What aspect of this topic especially interests me?

What exactly am I trying to find out?

Where and how could I find this out?

Draft Question

Are there any age or gender issues?

What are the timeframes I need to work to?

Research Question:

Sessions 5 + 6: Data Collection – Interview Techniques, Focus Groups and Open/Closed Questions

Learning Aims	Knowledge Content	Skills	Interactive Elements	Follow Up Work
To develop an appreciation of different interview structures and different question types	Framing Questions	Open questioning	Discussion	Creating interview questions
	Question bias	Closed questioning	Expert researcher card games	
	Structured interviews and surveys	Non-verbal body language		
	Semi-structured interviews	Avoiding question bias		
	Unstructured interviews			
	Group (focus) interviews			

Introduction

The interview is a primary tool that is used a great deal in qualitative research, like this study. You can base your findings purely on data collected in interviews or you can use additional methods as well. The interview can be used in many different ways and different question styles can be adopted to suit the purpose of the particular investigation. If used properly, they can help us to understand other people's feelings about important issues.

We will be covering 4 different types of interviewing techniques, including:

- Structured interviews
- Semi-structured interviews
- Unstructured interviews
- Group interviews

The style of interview must be appropriate to the research question being asked.

Structured interviews

These are used when a researcher is interested in standardised answers. They share some characteristics of a survey, although they are asked verbally rather than as a written questionnaire.

Let's suppose that a research project is looking to find out how pupils feel about their school lunches. The study wants to know whether children think the portions are large enough, hot enough, healthy enough, whether there is sufficient choice etc.

Ideally, questions will be asked in a way that allows some qualification of response without being too free, otherwise you end up with lots of different answers that are hard to standardise. You also want to avoid bias e.g. influencing the answers the pupils give.

So:

Do you think the portions are big enough?

This question may give a biased response because you are implying that they are big.

What do you think about the size of the portions you get?

This question is very open and it would be hard to control the way in which people answer. For example, they might suggest that they are still hungry, or it is the same as they get at home etc. This will make it hard to compare answers.

A good compromise is to provide a few options for the answer. So, perhaps saying:

Would you say that the portion size is about right, too small or too large?

This question allows you to categorise pupils into the different response types. See table below:

Response	Too large	About right	Too small
Number of pupils (of 100)	4	28	68

A researcher using a structured interview could do the same for each question asked and collect data for comparison.

Unstructured Interviews

This type of interview is almost opposite. It is very open ended and designed to elicit individual and richly descriptive responses. It is used when a researcher wants to try and understand opinions and/or behaviour at a more complex level without pre-imposing any categories of response. Typically these will be in depth interviews that produce lots and lots of data. There are no set questions and the role of the researcher is only to gently probe when appropriate to invite the interviewee to elaborate, or clarify where necessary.

An unstructured interview might open with a very general question about the topic matter. So for example, with the school lunches, the researcher might say What are the school lunches like here? The rest of the interview will be led by the interviewee's responses.

Semi-structured interviews

This type of interview is mid-way between the other two that have been explored. It is becoming increasingly popular, and it involves the researcher having a small core of predetermined questions or topic areas but the interview being unstructured beyond that. The core questions are not necessarily asked in any particular order and may not even need to be asked directly if the answers come up in general conversation. This interview type is therefore very *flexible*.

Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to pick up on individual responses and take the questioning in different directions where appropriate. For example, with our school lunch research, the interview might begin as follows:

Researcher: What are the school lunches like here?

Interviewee: They're awful. I wanted to stop having them and bring a packed lunch but my mum won't let me.

The researcher can then pick a few different lines of enquiry to pursue. For example, depending on the research questions and focus, they could either ask:

Why do you say they're awful?

OR

Why do you think your mum won't let you have packed lunches?

Of course, this does open up the interview to bias from the researcher. It also takes a level of skill to steer the conversation so it stays relevant to the research question. If it strays too far from the focus area, it can be hard to analyse the data in a thematic way later on.

Group Interviews/Focus Groups

This is where the researcher works with several people at the same time, rather than interviewing individually. Sometimes called focus groups, these interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. The role of the researcher is different in focus groups; it is less like an interviewer and more like a facilitator for ‘sterred discussion’. The researcher will also be interested in the group interaction as well as the statements being made.

The researcher will guide the topic of the discussion and, depending on the interview style being used, may ask questions. One advantage of asking a question in a group is because it can sometimes access information which not be as forthcoming in individual interviews. This is because people may respond and reflect on what other people in the group have said.

The researcher’s role is to steer and moderate the discussion so it does not go too far off at a tangent but has enough flexibility to explore interesting trails. There can also be issues with group interviews: for example, the dynamics may be off where one person is dominating conversation, or it may become heated with differences of opinion. It is down to the skill of the researcher to negotiate these situations.

Practical Issues about Interviewing

- You always need informed consent.
- Think about the location of an interview. Is being in school, with all the rules and constraints of this, likely to affect responses? Ditto for home interviews.
- How will you put the interviewees at ease and gain their trust?
- How will you record the data: audio, video, hand written notes?
- Estimate how long you think an interview will take and allow plenty of time.
- How many children will you interview and on what basis will you choose them (e.g. age, gender)?
- Do you need to practice first or to pilot your questions?
- Be aware that a lot of communication is non-verbal e.g. body language.

- Show you are actively listening.
- Avoid interrupting your interviewee(s).
- Always remember to thank the interviewee and indicate that you enjoyed talking to them and value their views.

Core Activity – Open/Closed Questions

Learning Objective: Understand the difference between open and closed questions.

Closed questions are ones that can only be answered with a yes/no response. For example, ‘Do you like your school lunches?’ usually invites either a yes or a no.

Open questions are ones that can be expanded upon as the answerer likes. For example, ‘What can you tell me about your school lunches?’

For our type of research it is important that we ask open questions so that participants can tell us their views in depth.

Give me an example of one closed question relating to friendships (e.g. do you have lots of friends?)

Give me an example of one closed question relating to friendships (e.g. how do you feel about friendships?)

GENERATION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Session 7 + 8: Data Analysis

Learning Aims	Knowledge Content	Skills	Interactive Elements	Follow Up Work
Begin to understand how to code and analyse qualitative data	Transcription	Organising, grouping and sifting large amounts of data	Discussion	N/A
	Levels of coding		Expert researcher card games	
	Analysis of interview data	Coding and categorising		
		Memoing		
		Theme abstracting		

Introduction

During this research project we have collected qualitative data through semi-structured group interviews. The data we have has been recorded via audio and will be transcribed. This means to make an exact written copy of the conversations. There are lots of different types of qualitative data analysis but we are going to be using one called Thematic Analysis.

Thematic analysis is done in the following way:

Phase	Description of the phase
Data familiarisation	Reading the data following transcription. Sharing initial thoughts.
Initial Coding	Creating initial categories in which to divide the data. In this study, 6 initial codes were created as basic ideas for how to divide the data.
Abstraction	Systematic coding of the data into the categories chosen. The process helped define and adapt the themes according to the ease of defining where quotes should lie.
Focused Analysis/Reviewing themes	Reviewing the analysis and identifying subthemes or any stronger themes. Defining and naming the themes.
Producing the report	Writing this thesis. Selection of relevant extracts of text, relating analysis back to research questions. This also represents the final

	opportunity to adjust themes.
Memoing	Making notes on ideas that occurred to the researcher during the other stages e.g. coding, abstraction.

Data familiarisation

This involves getting familiar with the data before analysis. This would usually include reading and re-reading the transcripts, even when the researcher has been present at the data collection stage. This is a part of the 'immersion process' when you become very involved with the data.

Initial Coding

After the data familiarisation stage you will start thinking about some initial codes for the data. This will be broad themes that seem to come up in the data, *but* these are not yet formal themes. These codes will be used to divide the data into thematic sections. Points to bear in mind whilst coding include:

- Try not to introduce too many 'codes' or categories. This process is meant to make the data easier to handle, and having lots of different codes will make this harder.
- Further subcategories can be introduced at a later time if needed.
- Avoid overlapping codes or having similar categories where lines will be blurred. This will make it difficult to divide up the data.
- Decide on a system for differentiating between the codes e.g. a colour coding system.

Abstraction

This is the process of dividing up the data into the previously chosen codes. This will involve going through the transcription line by line and assigning the relevant code to it. Researchers will try to code every line (aside from researcher questions or steering). It is likely that there will be a few lines which are more difficult to assign a code to. Leave this blank during the initial task; researchers can then come back to these at the end and see if there is any greater clarity. If there is more than one researcher, they can also discuss these sections and see if an agreement can be made.

Focused Analysis/Reviewing Themes

After the abstraction has been completed the researchers can consider the codes and the amounts of data in each section. Have there been any surprises? Does the volume of quotes indicate any stronger or weaker themes? Do we need to combine any codes or create subthemes?

In this section the overall themes and subthemes will emerge, the first official recognition of them as such.

Producing the report

You won't be part of this process on this occasion. What will happen is I will report the themes and subthemes that we have found and use the most pertinent quotes to display them. This will also be a final chance to review the themes and subthemes and see whether they make sense when trying to explain them. I will keep you updated if I think anything needs to change.

Memoing

This happens alongside the analysis process. If you have a particular thought during any stage you can note this down on a post-it for us to address now or later. They are meant to form written reminders.

DATA ANALYSIS BEGINS

Appendix 3.3 – Participant Information Sheet



PARTICIPANT INVITATION LETTER

Using a Participatory Research Model to Investigate Educational Provision
For Females on the Autistic Spectrum

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you agree, it is important that you understand what this would involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Who am I?

My name is Amy Jackson and I'm a Psychology student at the University of East London. I'm studying for a Doctorate in Educational Psychology. As part of my studies I am doing some research, and I am asking you to take part.

What am I doing?

I am looking into what X School provides for girls, and what more they could do. We want to know what is helpful about being at this school, and what could make it better.

This project has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. This means that my research follows the standard of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been invited to take part in my research as you are a girl who goes to X school. I will ask all the girls that currently attend this school.

I want you to know that I am not looking for experts on the topic I am studying. You will not be judged in any way and you will be treated with respect.

You are free to decide whether or not to take part, and you should not feel forced.

What will you have to do?

If you agree to take part you will be asked to come to a focus group. This means that a group of people will get together to share their views and talk together about what it's like to be at the school. We will come up with some rules for this group so that everyone is happy to share. It will be an important rule that nobody shares what someone else has said.

The focus group will take 40 minutes. You will only need to come once and you won't miss any lessons. The group will take place during one of your normal enrichment sessions; I will let you know in advance when this is going to be and someone will remind you on the day that it is happening.

I will record our group on a tape player to make sure that I remember exactly what you told me about being at the school. This recording will be deleted as soon as I can write down what we talked about.

I will not be able to pay you for taking part but I will really value your input for helping to develop knowledge and understanding of how girls at X school feel about their school.

Your taking part will be safe and private

Your privacy and safety will be respected at all times. I will not write your name anywhere on the information and I will not tell the school who said what. You do not need to answer any of the questions if you don't want to. You will be free to leave at any time, even once we start.

What will happen with the things you tell me?

When you provide information I will write it all up and see if lots of people have said the same things about what would make the school better. I will give feedback to the school about the ideas that people had and they will make changes based on what was said, if possible.

I will also use the information to write a long paper that I need to complete to get my qualification. This paper won't say anything about you or the school that you go to.

I'm going to save all the things you say on my laptop but it won't have your name or any of your details. The laptop is password protected and nobody else will be able to get into it but me. Sometimes I will show other people, like my supervisor, but I won't tell them your name or any details about you.

What if you want to stop being in the research?

You are free to stop being in the research study at any time without explanation. No one will tell you off for leaving. However you should know that if you stop being in the research I will still use these things you told me before that (not using your name).

Contact Details

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please get in touch with me. My email is:

U1150913@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted please contact the research supervisor Janet Rowley. School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,

Email: j.e.rowley@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr Mark Finn, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.

(Email: m.finn@uel.ac.uk)

Appendix 3.4 – Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

Consent to participate in a research study

Using a Participatory Research Model to Investigate Educational Provision
For Females on the Autistic Spectrum

I have read the information sheet about this research project and I have a copy to keep. The research has been explained to me, and I have had the chance to ask questions if I want to. I understand what is involved and what I will be asked to do.

I understand that my involvement will remain strictly confidential. Only the researchers will know what I personally have said. It has been explained to me what will happen once the research study has been completed.

I freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason.

I also understand that should I stop, the researcher reserves the right to use what I have said up to that point.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Participant's Signature

.....

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Researcher's Signature

.....

Date:

Appendix 3.5 – Participant Parent/Carer Consent Form

Parental Consent Form

Girls Research Project: Participant

X School is currently taking part in a research project in collaboration with Amy Tee, Trainee Educational Psychologist. This study is investigating the provision available for girls attending X school. It hopes to identify possible improvements to this provision by asking the students for their views about the school and what is available here. The information gathered will also be used by Amy Tee to write a research thesis for a Doctorate in Child and Educational Psychology at the University of East London.

We would like your child to take part in this research project. This will involve your child talking about their experiences at X school in one focus group with the researchers. This focus group will take no longer than 40 minutes and will not involve missing any taught education. The focus group will take place during the enrichment period. Your child's permission will also be sought, and they will be free to withdraw from this research project at any time should they choose to do so. All the data will be anonymous and protected on encrypted files.

If you have any further questions about the research please do get in touch with us.

You can do this by coming in to the school office to talk, or contacting one of the researchers via email. The contact details are:

Amy Tee

u1150913@uel.ac.uk

OR

Mrs X

Anonymousemailaddress@school.org

Please return the slip below to X school to confirm that you are/are not happy for your child to take part in this project.

I am happy for my child to take part in this research project. I understand what this involves and I am aware that I am free to withdraw my child at any time if I wish to do so.

I am not happy for my child to be involved in the research project at X school.

Parent/Carer Signature

—

Appendix 3.6 – Participant Debrief Letter

Participant Debrief Letter

Using A Participatory Research Model to Investigate Educational Provision for Females on the Autistic Spectrum

Thank you for being involved in this project. With the information you provided, we hope to review the provision available at the school to see whether the experience of girls attending can be improved. We will analyse the information that you and the other participants have given to do this. This study has the support of the school and has committed to making changes, where possible, to reflect your views.

Please be assured that your details and the information you've given will remain anonymous. I have recorded what you said but this will be deleted as soon as I have written this down. The information will be kept secure on my computer. I will not tell the school what you personally have said about the provision here.

You have the right to withdraw from this study. I will keep this option available to you for the next 3 weeks, at which point I reserve the right to use the information you have provided.

If you have been upset by anything that has come up in the course of this project please be aware that support is available from school staff. Teacher Mrs X is involved in this project and could provide particular feedback if needed. If you would like external support, this is available from Childline.

For Childline call 0800 1111 or get in touch online at www.childline.org.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted please contact the research supervisor Janet Rowley. School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,

Email: j.e.rowley@uel.ac.uk

Or

Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr Mark Finn, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.

(Email: m.finn@uel.ac.uk)

Appendix 3.7 – Research Data Transcripts

Data transcription - Focus Group Session 1

Researcher = R
Link Teacher = LT
Participants x6

R: Thank you so much everyone for coming along today. So hopefully you're all aware and you've signed up for being part of this project which is investigating how girls in this school feel about friendships and how school supports you with that. OK? We've got until the end of enrichment to have a little discussion among ourselves, but before we start I just want to make sure that everyone feels really safe and happy to contribute. To help with that, we're going to come up with a few what I call "ground rules" just to make sure that we're all being respectful and happy. OK? Does anyone have any suggestions of rules we could make?

----- CREATION OF GROUND RULES -----

R: So those are our rules to keep thinking about, just to make sure that it goes really nicely and smoothly. So I've got a few questions, just to help us start get the conversation going. So, the number 1 is: how do you feel about friendships in school? I'll say that one more time: how do you feel about friendships in school?

Kara: Er ok, I feel like me and Sarah will both be anomalies in this because even when we didn't go to a school that was mostly men like all our friends were male anyway

Sarah: Yeah me and Sarah consistently throughout our lives have been mostly friends with boys

Kara: Like, at any given time we'll have like 1 or 2 friends that were female

Sarah: yeah. I mean, I didn't know but, it's kind of like I feel like we would have been diagnosed almost like as easily as guys because we've just had guys as friends our whole lives. If you get what I mean by like *inaudible*

Kara: So, it's not really as different because most of my friends were not female in primary school anyway, so it didn't really change all that much

R: So for you in this school it's not very different, because you've always had a lot of guy friends and you still have a lot of guy friends.

LT: What about you Julie? Anything about friendships?

Julie: Yeah, ermm, I feel quite happy about friendships.

LT: Good, good.

Sam: I always feel like, erm, if you are ever friends with a guy people always like, the girls, sometimes make fun of you because they're like, woaah, and we used to actually call them friendboys because we were like, we're not, we're not going out

Sarah: Like yeah, I have like 5 guy friends and it's like, I'm dating all of them at once! Yeah, like no

Sam: But yeah, I feel like we are well supported and if we need more support we can talk to someone. Like when that happens it's a joke now

Laura: And I think it's very awkward during the puberty sessions *giggles*.

Sam: Also, the signs have been put up on the toilets about —Please could I have a spare pad?"

Sarah: I think that's lovely actually.

Kara: Yeah that's fine, yeah I like that

Sam: I don't like it, because I feel like the guys are going to see it and then they're going to like —What?"

Kara: Well that's their problem.

Sam: It's their problem, yeah. Like it's bodily function, you can't help it, they can't help it

Laura: I hate it

Kara: They have their own bodily functions

Sarah: I think we all hate it really but..

R: So there are some different opinions about that, fine

Sarah: I don't know, I thought it was sweet.

Kara: I think it's good to have it there, because I can see if we don't have things we don't want to just sit in the toilet until you can go home scared. And they do have pads and tampons. Everyone at some point will have their day when like...

Sam: And we've been told that like you're allowed to just go in there and get them. Like, yeah, for everything else you're meant to ask but erm you're

allowed to go in there. Cause obviously you don't want to go into the office and say.

Kara: It is a bit awkward I must admit.

Sam: That's why it's good to have your own as well. I think we all know what we're talking about here.

R: Ok, thank you for that. I'm just going to steer us back to the original questions, because it's really helpful everything but I just wonder if anyone else had more to say about the friendship aspect and how you feel.

Laura: I think it can be difficult at times because some friends don't want to be friends with a boy but then they don't have any friends who are girls so you're just sort of by yourself

Sam: yeah

LT: how have you found it since you started Julie, because you only started quite recently

Julie: er, I er found it sometimes quite tricky.

LT: ok. Anything you want to share?

Julie: erm, I haven't got anything else to say

LT: ok

Sam: Um, I think um I've found it quite difficult when um, because obviously my age it's quite difficult to not be too moody, not to be like too mad, not to get too mad at friends and take it out on them when it's not really their fault

R: I don't want to call on people and put you on the spot

Sarah: We keep being put into awkward silences and it's like -hmm, who's going to talk next, who volunteers"

R: I don't want to call on particular people but if you haven't said anything and you'd like to.

Sam: We could even talk about the whole question for the whole thing. One question. So many things.

R: There are a few more. So that was about how you're feeling about friendships, and the next one is just about how you play with your friends, so what sorts of things you do with them

Sarah: Dungeons and dragons

R: Dungeons and dragons, was that?

Sarah: It was like, groups of friends we've had. Me and Kara, we've moved near here recently. So, um, my old friend group in like where we used to live we used to play dungeons and dragons a lot so I introduced it to my new friend group.

LT: do you find you do different things with your friends in school than you do outside school?

Sarah: Not particularly. Except like obviously we can't build tree dens inside school

Kara: I think it very much depends, like it's sometimes you'll go outside and you'll play f because you'll play it in a way that you're not really allowed to touch each other so you'll just run around. Like, no one can see you if you're behind a tree

Sam: Oh yeah, the no physical contact rule

Kara: Or you'll just stay inside and talk about random stuff

Sam: Yeah, that's me and my friends, we just talk about random things

Kara: I do as well but the subjects get very different

Laura: I feel like tumbling around on the mud is quite usual and hurting our friends by accident

Sarah: Me and Kara were in Ireland right, and we were like play fighting and Kara accidentally knocked me off the bed and gave me this massive bruise on my back

Kara: Did I actually?

Sarah: Yeah you did

R: Some things might be more sibling things

Sam: Me and Laura literally act like we're siblings.

LT: anyone else want to share what they like doing with their friends?

Sam: Well, I like making my friends laugh

Laura: *Inaudible over laughter*

R: It would be helpful for me if we could stay calm, because it's going to be hard to hear what people are saying

Sarah: daring each other to do random things can be fairly entertaining

Kara: Yeah because you never back down

Sam: Yeah she likes to ask me awkward questions. I like them though cause they're funny

R: I'm loving all the things that are coming, I'm wondering if Julie would like to tell me what you like to do with your friends

Julie: I like to um, help them out. Like if they're stuck on a question and a teacher asks me to help I just do it.

R: that's kind, so you help out your friends

Julie: that is kind

Amber: I like studying with my friends

R: So similar to Julie

Sam: I like helping and supporting my friends because um the other day at swimming we were doing lengths and she was really struggling and I could tell that she was. I was really worried about her, more worried about her than my swimming. So if I'd drowned, it would have been her fault

R: Sometimes you might help people to your own detriment

Sarah: I think helping people through problems can be quite rewarding as well

Sam: I like talking to my friends about their worries

Sarah: But you've got to be careful with that at the same time

Laura: I like reading my friend's notebooks

inaudible, people speaking over each other

R: Ok. Thank you everyone for your contributions. I couldn't quite hear what you were saying before

Sarah: Helping people out with like emotional problems can be rewarding but you need to be careful at the same time. I've been in situations where I've tried to help people too much and it's taken a toll on my own health

Sam: Yeah, I really like helping people but then again I don't want to interfere. Because sometimes it's the teacher's job and not mine. But then if I can see that they're struggling it's really hard not to go —Are you ok?" I really like helping people emotionally, and um like I'm...if I do say so myself I'm really athletic so um if one of my friends is struggling in athletics I'm fine to just float there and wait for them to compose themselves and then go again

Laura: Or wait, I was gonna say cause you can't float when you're running

R: Yeah ok, thank you. So there's different ways you can support your friends, either something really specific like athletics or emotionally. And you were talking about with their work as well. But you were talking a bit about how sometimes you feel it's the teacher's job although you find it difficult not to step in. So what could you do; are there teachers you feel comfortable telling about it?

Sam: Yeah well, I think that I feel very strongly about it's their job – it's the person who's struggling and upset to um y'know say —can't do this, I'm upset, I don't feel well" or you know blah blah blah

Sarah: I think particularly here people will have a tendency to shut down instead of doing that though

Sam: Yeah. I think also my friends really help me cause I struggle when I see like people or hear people shouting, I really struggle with that and my friends are really comforting

R: So there are some things that your friends can comfort you with, but you think, actually sometimes you shut down and maybe you don't do the things

Sarah: Like sometimes I just get *inaudible*I forget to ask and I just stare into space thinking about for ages

Sam: Yeah, like in Maths I literally freak myself out about a questions and I'm like —can't do it, I really can't do it." The next day we go back to it and I'm like —What on earth. I thought I couldn't do that?"

Sarah: Yeah, it's like when you read back over test answers and you're like what?

LT: I've seen you do that before actually Kara.

Sarah: Cause there'll always be that one question and I'll read over and I'll be like, nah there's nothing wrong here, like even if you do check you never seem to find that one thing

Sam: *inaudible talking over each other* ...and basically, we had to go back over our old ones the other day and I was like, how did I get that answer? But then again we had to do 11 squared and I got that wrong and I knew that I got it wrong but I wasn't allowed to change it. It really annoys me, even though I know that I got one wrong

Sarah: What I find funny is when you get the right answer but you did the method wrong. So the teacher tries to explain to you that you're wrong even though you weren't wrong.

Sam: Like, long multiplication doesn't go in my brain. I mean, I'm getting better at it but it just doesn't

LT: OK, shall we direct ourselves back to...

R: Shall we move on to the next question. So, this is about what the school can do. So some people, like Julie you've already said that you're quite happy sometimes, but what more could the school do maybe to support you with your friendships?

Sam: I think if um, like maybe if it's just like we write down how we feel or we um and then both of us do it then like the teacher can say, so what could you have done better, what could they have done better, like just like kind of like putting it having like both sides because I know that sometimes someone wants to talk about it then the other person wants to as well but they can't. So like, just saying right ok you're both going to write it down so that no one feels upset, and then like having a chat about it later

Sarah: Sometimes even if a few people want to do something and they kind of need a 3rd person to get them to communicate

R: Amber you're nodding. Is that you agreeing?

Amber: Yeah

LT: Julie have you got any thoughts? About how the school could help you with friendships?

Julie: Um, by asking for help if I need it.

LT: So, by offering you help if we think you're struggling?

Julie: Yeah

Laura: I've got 2. One could be um to like, if they can see that something doesn't look quite right, or if you're sort of like not speaking to that one person or just like not looking at them like, trying to act like they're not there, then ask you do you need a chat and also friendship groups so that we can like be friends with other people instead of just like people just cause we see them.

R: Ok, so there were 2 things there, one about being perceptive and noticing when something's a bit different, and the second is friendship groups. So what would that look like?

Sam: So maybe like at lunch or at break, or in the morning even.

Laura: Or just a regular lesson, so PSHE we could all go into a different room or just separate the class up and we could just do something fun in a friendship group. Or we could just um like Mrs W could take out like 3 students from different classes and we could like do something, so like not – it's sort of like Lego Therapy, but like something fun so that we can just be friends together.

R: Are you saying that Lego Therapy isn't fun?

Group: Oh it isn't!

Inaudible chatter

Sam: I think like yeah, I agree with Laura cause sometimes with my friends I don't talk to them and I don't like make eye contact with them, and I don't like making eye contact with strangers, but that's like y'know, but I can always make eye contact with my friends unless I'm mad at them.

LT: So these friendship groups, can we just focus on those for a bit longer in terms of how it would work and what you'd expect to see?

Sam: I would like it at lunch or break, or like just getting a few different – I think girls would work better, cause there's like a bajillion boys here so if we all have them in one room. But I think also having an adult, but just like the adult could just sit there.

Kara: Well we could always, you could divide the boys by class

Sam: Cause I think if all the girls were together, because I know that I find it really hard to communicate with other girls sometimes that aren't in my class and that I don't know um, but I think just having an adult who's just acting like they're not there and if

LT: provides a little bit of guidance if you need it

Sam: Yeah, and if there's a minutes silence ask like one question to get things started and then sit there, and then if someone says something or is unkind they can like

LT: So have like a sort of guided discussion with a few girls from across the school with an adult

Sam: Yeah

Kara: Could it not be anybody who wants to take part though? Because saying that it can be only girls is a bit...

Laura: I think it should be 3 random people from different classes, it doesn't matter what the gender is but maybe if you realise they don't look like they ever speak? So I wouldn't pick um 3 and K because I know that they're good friends and they speak, so I would pick like 2 different people and then I would see it like they would go into a room and just do play dough or something and just sort of chat with other for like 10-15 minutes in a lesson which it doesn't matter missing out, so like obviously not English or something just like a lesson that isn't as important as the rest just to like become friends

Sam: Yeah, and maybe like

Kara: I would say that you do have to be like careful about what you choose, cause like you said about people who talk too easily but also people who just won't talk or people who would be quite mean or destructive

Sam: I think maybe the adult should choose, I mean I get what people are saying about discrimination people but then if like, it depends who you're talking about because different people like different things. So you don't want like a girl to be with a guy and like find it really really awkward and dread it because then they won't enjoy it

Sarah: Well no, you need to get everyone's opinion. If you're gonna do the thing that we've been talking about you should probably ask people first like, are you happy to be with this person. And if they so no, then you

LT: I mean yeah, we wouldn't ever force you to do anything. It's not like we're going to say right, you you and you in a room, off you go.

Sarah: I think another thing that um age group, you wouldn't put class 6 person in with a class 1 person.

Sam: No because they would get too close and then, they're gonna leave

Sarah: You'd have to do it generally by say like class 1 and 2, class 3 and 4, class 5 and 6

Sam: And I think also because erm maybe just like going on like um –what are they called?- a mission, so like giving them both a mission that so like, I'm going to shut the door and erm but I'll be here and the lights will be on and

Sarah: I like how you have to specify the light thing

Sam: And um like, there are some clues and you have to try and find them

LT: Or you've got tinfoil and you need to make a giraffe or something, but you've got to do it together

Sam: Like practice like different roles

R: Thank you for all the suggestions so far, I'm just aware that we're hearing lots of ideas and if there is anyone who hasn't said anything has an opinion about the group, about whether they'd like to be in them or what they would like to do?

Sarah: You could do the thing like, have you ever seen the thing where you have like an obstacle course and one person is blindfolded and you have to tell the other person where to go. It's quite hilarious.

LT: Julie do you have any thoughts about this friendship group idea?

Julie: Um, I haven't got any ideas

LT: You're not sure? Ok

R: Do you think you would like to be in a friendship group?

Julie: Yeah.

R: Yeah, you'd be happy to go along?

Sarah: I think it would be beneficial, especially with people like um...I pretty much lost all my friends, so it would be really beneficial for them um cause I just kind of sat around for months

LT: So to develop new relationships

R: So giving opportunities at certain times, so if you're going through a difficult time with friends you can approach someone and say, can I be part of that group?

Sarah: Oh yeah it wasn't a difficult time they just kind of all, went

R: Yeah, ok, so times when you're feeling a bit alone

Amber: Friendship is very important, but I think it's key to focus on um, but before we love others we should love ourselves first, therefore maybe you should um self-motivational activities.

LT: That sounds really good

Amber: I think um also...

Sarah: But also some of us find it incredibly difficult to even care about ourselves even slightly

Sam: Also, the school, when I was like really really new I didn't really have anyone to talk to um because Laura was on holiday in America. I had no clue

who she was and everyone was talking about her and I was like, when if she going to be back? She got back and immediately assumed that we were friends and um then Laura was like, what. So basically, I used to sit on my own at lunch and read the school rules. That's what I used to do.

Laura: Yeah, I used to do that as well. I would sit there being like, hmm I don't know who to make friends with because there was an older girl who like spoke to me, but obviously they're older so they don't have an interest in like playing with me so they'll wanna do other things. So I just sort of sat by myself, so also the friendship groups would be good to like make friends but I also think they shouldn't be 5,6 and 7 in one group because if you're in class 5 you get close with a class 7 person and then they leave, you're going to be upset because they're not there

Sam: Yeah. And I think also it's really important that you don't have like a class 1, basically not like 2 people, more than 2 people but not like so big that it gets too much, because if we have 2 people and they're a boy and a girl that's gonna escalate

Sarah: Well, not necessarily. Someone could be asexual or

Kara: Yeah I stay with mostly guys and I'm fine. I just don't like any of them

Sarah: Same. I'm pansexual, so it doesn't matter who I hang out with. Technically I could end up with all of them, but that would just be polyamorous – I think that's the word but um, that's technically how it is, you can't really say, oh it will escalate just because it's a guy and a girl

Sam: No but like sometimes it might

R: So you're saying have more than 2 people

LT: Just a quick question: some of you have mentioned that when you first started you found it quite tricky, I think Julie you said that didn't you? And Sam I think you said that. So if there something that we could do in school when pupils first start to support them in terms of building friendships.

Sam: Maybe having like a buddy or something? Not one that they get like really really close with

Sarah: Just someone to help them around. They do that in some of like sometimes in lower years in secondary schools

Sam: They get like a higher up person

Sam: I think, I think um when like people um start, especially if it's a girl here I know that I get really upset and I'm like, oh my god she doesn't like me ahh.

So I think not like, having more than one buddy like on different days so that they don't feel like they're getting ditched but it'll help

Sarah: I hate being like, it depends, every single time but yeah, it depends

Laura: I also think that like if you have, I think I get really annoyed when people just expect me to play with them that day whereas if I can just be like, oh yeah I'll play with you today, and also I feel like when we first start if um we like could get introduced to lots of people and then maybe we could say what we like and what we don't like and then maybe if we both like the same thing maybe we could say, oh you could play that together at lunch and then just sort of like...

LT: I think the friendship group thing that we've talked about, when you first start

Laura: Yeah, and also do it after

Kara: What we had which was good for like a PSHE lesson about that thing where you say one thing about yourself, you can immediately tell what people are like, who you're going to end up friends with, and I predicted perfectly let's be honest.

LT: Do you think it would be beneficial perhaps to have PSHE with different groups of people that weren't just your class?

Sarah: Yeah like class 5, I barely see them and I've got quite a few friends in that class

Sam: Definitely um it's quite hard in a PSHE to not start laughing your head off cause you're feeling embarrassed because if you do start to feel, y'know, upset in a PSHE lesson if you go off in a different group with boys and girls and there's like an adult, it may be like a male adult because then it's awkward knowing that girls know about boys things and girls yeah..

Sarah: Well you have to learn child

Sam: And I think wait until you're a bit older to mix up the genders because then they'll know

Kara: It's important to know though because it's about protection

Sarah: Yeah, it's really important to know

Laura: And I also think though, they should at least separate them whilst they teach, they can still teach that subject but not with them together. Cause then when you look over it's like...

Sam: The boys do give you some funky looks

Kara: It's important to know. When you have that coat and they're like, why do the girls have to do this, because it's important for them to do too because it's to do with protection so it kind of does matter and you do need to do it

R: So what we said last time about it is that it might be nice to separate the girls to start with, learn about both, then integrate them a bit later

Sarah: I don't like the separating idea. I'm totally, really friends with guys and having a, you're separated, absolutely horrible

Sam: Um I think that like, just as you start to learn, every single PSHE lesson is they start talking about babies and weird things, then um well basically life so it's not really weird, but I think if they separate people to start off with, girls learn about the girls and boys learn about the boys and then like mix it up. So like, boys learn about girls and vice versa. And then I think, then they could like mix them into a class so there's different stages.

R: It sounds like there's different opinions about that though

Sarah: I get what you're saying but at the same time we'll have to learn it about a week later anyway, you won't be any more comfortable then

Kara: The thing is I'm strange because I make friends in awkward situations

Amber: I must say that at a very young age when we do learn about our own bodies and who we are let's say, call it sex, well it's quite awkward for y'know having another person there with different parts who might make us feel quite vulnerable if we're already exploring ourselves

Kara: And also, when everyone's together it's ok but when you split them up it makes you feel like they need to be split up because it's inappropriate to discuss with the opposite gender, which then causes all kinds of problems like not being able to talk to people

Sam: I fully agree with Amber

R: There are very different opinions and what people are saying is that one thing would make them uncomfortable for example. Could we just ask the opinion of the class of what they want?

Inaudible, people talking over each other

Sam: Do you think that...is there one person from each class?

Kara: Well there isn't a girl in like every class

LT: I've got no one from 3 and no one from Laura because there weren't any girls in them

Sam: If like maybe they go and ask the teacher, can I ask them this question, like if there's 2 people in the class though and they both explain it. But I think maybe like say ummm yeah like say would you feel nice if that happened and just check with the teacher that that's ok and then like, ask the boys, ask the girls.

Laura: Or there could be like an option, so the girls get asked do you wanna go out?

R: Ok, people have their hands up and I'm really sorry but I'm just conscious of the time, we have come to the end. Would anyone just like to say one final comment?

Kara: Those classes anyway you are always told that if you feel awkward you're allowed to leave at literally any moment, so I feel like it would be unnecessary to split them up because you have a choice there anyway.

Sarah: What I was gonna say was, learning from a young age is important as well. It's not necessarily important to split them up and have them not know cause that's what causes, oh you're a girl, oh you're a boy. You know? Gender segregation, not good.

R: Ok. Thank you so much for everyone contributing today and coming along.

Sarah: Are we going to do one next week?

R: We hadn't planned one for next week, unless everyone feels they have much more that they would like to say?

-----GIRLS VOTED 5/6 TO HAVE ANOTHER SESSION-----

Researcher handed out debrief sheets

Focus Group Session 2

Researcher = R

Link Teacher = LT

Participants x6

Introduction: researcher welcoming people back, reminder of the ground rules, thanking people for coming. Asking participants to take part in an activity to encourage everyone to take part – making a mind map around “friendships” and how they feel about friendship.

-----A FEW MINUTES TO COMPLETE ACTIVITY-----

R: Right, so thank you. So if everyone puts theirs in front them, or doesn't want to that's fine. Some of you might have written some of the same things, or some of you might have different things because we all have different ideas about friendships, don't we? Does anyone want to volunteer to be first to just explain a bit about what you've said?

Sam: Basically with my one I've written, building friendships so like knowing how to create a good friendship. Um, tell each other how you feel. So like, if there's a problem with the other person you can explain to them why and how you can resolve it. You're supportive, you um so it's good to know how to keep a good friendship. Um, you can laugh together, you're helpful with each other, kind to each other, and lovely to each other.

R: Thank you so much Sam. Did anyone have any similar things to that or the same?

Kara: I also had like similar hobbies is a good thing to have, them being funny.

Amber: I had something similar.

R: Yeah? Would you be able to tell us what that was?

Amber: Um, we could support people, we could help out, be helpful, we can love them, be thankful and have happiness.

R: Those are lovely ideas, thank you. So there is some things that you both wrote on there didn't you? Like about being supportive and being happy together, yeah? Does anyone else want to share what they did? Laura?

Laura: I writ friend, cause that was the only word I could think of and then I writ um understanding friendships but like one of those could be being different and that like, knowing that you don't need to be the same just so you can be friends. Um and being able to tell each other problems because I feel like, with my friends, they just get in a mood with me for doing something wrong and it really annoys me, so if I can tell them why I said that and then they wouldn't get in a mood with me. Um knowing a good friendship, umm so like just knowing what's good to do like if you don't want to like do something and then your friend thinks that you should always do what they say then that's not really a good friendship so learning what that is. But like sometimes realising when it's a bad friendship, and being able to talk to the teacher and then the teacher possibly let you like chat together but then with them just sitting there making sure that they like don't go.

Sam: I think it's really important to understand that if someone let's say, because I know that one of my friends said to me to write it down, and it's quite, it's not difficult but I think it is really important that my friends

understand that it might not always be about them, I just might want to keep some things confidential.

R: Ok, so there's a bit about understanding people and also Laura mentioned that, it's ok that you don't have to be the same in every way, you can be different people but respecting that and understanding it.

LT: Has anyone ever heard of the phrase opposites attract? Yeah so sometimes that your best friends, you might not have anything in common with

Kara: I think that depends though

LT: Oh definitely, I'm not saying – yeah I said sometimes

R: OK thank you. So I'm aware that there's 3 more people that have some ideas recorded that might want to share them.

Sarah: I don't mind. I think I took it in a different way to other people because you've all put like um similarities and stuff whereas I just put like generally like, who I make friends with

R: Ok

Sarah: I don't know if I should read them out or not, you can read them if you want

LT: You can read them if you want

R: No, any ideas are right, you know it's what you think about friendships

LT: how you've interpreted it is fine

Sarah: I've been mostly friends with guys. I just get on with them better honestly. But um, where mutual activities rest, and humour rests, just generally that and also the problem, are you dating all your friends and it makes you not have friends, which is great. Yeah, which isn't actually true anyway

Sam: Uncomfortable, yeah

Kara: But I think it's gradually getting becoming now when you're friends are anyone

Sarah: Yeah it's terrible

Kara: It's gradually getting more

Sarah: But um, yeah that's a bit of a problem, but um it's generally similarities and the fact that like usually I'm friends with guys

R: Thank you

Sam: I quite like being friends with guys. Yeah I like having like a few people like, friends who are girls, but I don't like having too many because it starts to get too much. Like, at my old school one of our favourite things to do was when we were getting changed for PE was to talk about bras and crop tops

Kara: The drama

Sarah: Oh my god

Sam: I know, I hated it

Kara: It's gets very like, also drama. Like have you ever gone to a girls changing room...

Sarah: I'm like incredibly unfeminine so any conversation like that I would be like, right out

Kara: You're just like, I don't like it

Sam: It was just like really awkward, so I like being friends with guys but then I feel like I can be more open with girls. Because it's like, oh you know how I feel

Laura: I think sometimes people like just in general, if you was to have a haircut which was a bit shorter or like, which you could technically call a boys haircut, then people would like, people would say oh you look like a boy and it's like if boys decide to have longer hair they're like a girl

Kara: We said that a lot because I used to have a short haircut as well, and it was boys either thinking straight up

Sarah: That was a reason I got my hair cut though at the same time, I mentioned it before to you [the researcher, outside of the sessions]. I don't like being feminine at all so yeah, I'd rather appear male but still

R: Well different people have different preferences don't they

Sam: Yeah, like I really want long hair but then it gets in my way too much and then it really annoys me

Sarah: I'd recommend short hair

Kara: Or plait it. If you just plait it it feels normal

Sam: Yeah it doesn't work for me

Kara: If you just get like 3 strands

Sarah: Oh yeah you've got curlier hair haven't you

R: It's a bit thicker, it's a bit more difficult.

LT: We've got a bit off topic a little bit

R: Ok thanks everyone for sharing, I know that's created a bit of debate. I'm just wondering if we can come back to written things because some of you have already done lots of... *inaudible quiet talking to Amber*... if you could share them

Amber: Well I basically kind of wrote what friendship is made of. So I said that a friendship is a bond made from trust, love, hope, understanding and truth, and that friends do not need to last, will stay loyal, never give up at the expense of each other, and defies the oddness of individuals.

R: Thank you, that's really thoughtful. I'm wondering if you could explain a bit more about defying the oddness of individuals, I wonder what you mean by that

Amber: well like, lots of people are all different and they're very odd in their own little ways, and I think it's important that no matter what they do or who they are, it's important to be friends with them or to try to be friends

R: Yeah, ok so taking in the variety of people, and everyone is odd in their own way. Interesting, thank you. Did we have everyone? I know that you chipped in at some points, Kara but did you go through everything on your sheet?

Kara: Um I went through most of it because I didn't really have time to put down much because I couldn't really think of much

R: That's ok, I just wanted to make sure you'd an opportunity. So that was really interesting, one the different interpretations that some people had, and the different ideas we had about friendship. Did anyone spot any kind of common themes or things that were coming up a lot?

Sarah: Being a good person

Sam: I think it was really important to understand that people are different and I think that came up quite a lot. Like, different in our own little ways; if someone controls one person to be like them, it would be so boring because it would just be like, well I don't want to be friends with you anymore because all you do is control me, and it's horrible.

R: Mmm, so respecting the differences of people

Sam: Yeah, and also different things that work for different people like um some people like to go to the calming room, some people really don't like them. So it's just like respecting their different strategies.

R: Was there anything that came up that people would like to know more about, or feel like they have some weaknesses in?

Sarah: From last time?

R: Anything that we just talked about, or from last time

Sarah: I'm a bit concerned since you will be able to affect the school that gender segregation might be put in place.

R: Ok, based on our discussion about the, and that was just about the puberty education wasn't it?

Sarah: I feel like in any case I'm highly concerned about that, because it's a thing that was fought for for a long time. And also, um I'm mostly friends with guys. And also, everybody needs to learn about it at some point so the one week or two weeks later, they'll still learn about it and gender segregation is quite horrible in a way

LT: I think in terms of the school and what makes you uncomfortable, any lesson where something is making you feel uncomfortable, you know that you're allowed to leave. You're allowed to go to the calming room, you're allowed to the cosy room so I would personally say as a teacher, I'm not going to say it's not going to happen cause I'm not in a position to promise that, but it's unlikely that we would gender segregate for lessons. And I don't think it was talked about.

Kara: Even then they did have, I think it was like last year or 2 years ago they did have a lesson where they took out like 5 girls and they had like talks about periods and with some who was in to talk about it, like so they have those things

Sarah: That's alright but like

LT: I see what you mean Sarah, you mean deliberately segregating a one class just for one lesson

Sarah: It creates issues further on, because if you can't talk about it in a group of guys then you're not going to be able to do it in 3 years

LT: I agree

R: It has to happen at some point, yes

LT: And everyone in the whole world has to learn about it. I remember my lessons where they didn't split us up and it was all giggling and awkward and there was, that's normal isn't it that's just what happens

Kara: It's funny at the same time

Sarah: But um, yeah I'm just concerned that gender segregation will be put in place based on the conversation yesterday [last week]

R: Yeah well, it was important for you to say that just now

Sarah: Yeah, I wouldn't be going into those lessons

R: Yeah there was a lot of difference of opinion last time wasn't there, but I don't think there was anything, I certainly didn't go away thinking, oh well that's something I can tell the school to do

Sarah: Oh that's good

R: And as I said, I won't be mentioning who said what it will just be these are the general ideas that came out. But there were things that came out a bit more strongly than that as well, there were some split things about that but other things, like the friendship groups, people seemed more on board with

Sarah: Yeah, happy

R: Something that I spoke to my tutor about, which is supporting with this at university, was about this group and the benefit you were getting from this group and what you had decided to have another session with. And we wondered if it was something about having a chance to get the girls together, not in a segregation way, but so that you can have your voices heard and you have that identity as a group

Sam: Yeah I really do like that, because I think it's really important because only I think there's like 10 or 11 girls now here and it's quite hard to be able to talk about how you feel, like girl-wise. Like, you can talk about how you're feeling emotionally but sometimes it's quite nice to be able to um like it's quite nice to be able to talk about how the girls all feel, and have like little controlled debates about how you feel and what do you want to happen for the girls to make it easier

R: Sarah you've got your hand up

Sarah: Not all feel, first off, sorry. But um, I dunno, this group makes me about as anxious as I thought it would. But um, yeah that's about all I wanted to say

Kara: I do think, there are like some things that people, like with you [Sarah] it doesn't happen, with me it happens slightly but a lot less than it does with a lot of people actually

Sarah: I feel like I'm not supposed to be here

LT: Sarah you're doing fine, don't worry

Kara: people find some things, like with guys if they're on their period will gladly tell a guy, just an example that usually happens, they'll gladly tell like a girl but they won't tell like their male friends because they find it embarrassing to talk about cramps and all that but like some people don't care

Sarah: I just feel like I'm the wrong person to be here because I'm not feminine, I don't care about telling guys about like anything feminine, I don't really care about...I just feel like I'm the wrong person

LT: No but it's important that you're here because we need to hear a range of views

Kara: The thing is as well there are quite a few people, another thing Sarah, is that when someone are friends with guys they do feel like they can't say their emotions because of that whole thing that happens in primary school where guys act like they don't feel emotions

Sarah: But my group of friends is openly emotions

Kara: Exactly, so are mine but it's kind of like, why people think that's why it's set up like that

R: From my perspective, I think it's really important that we do have people with different views, it's a bit like what Sam was saying earlier that the world would be boring if everyone was the same.

Sarah: Yeah, I just feel like I'm contradicting everything

R: Yeah but that's important because we need your opinion in there because if we had the group without you and made lots of decisions that you were unhappy with, that wouldn't have been a good result

LT: That's the whole point of you being here

Sarah: I guess. That's kind of why I came

Amber: I was just going to add a point that, like I can completely understand where you're coming from Sam. Like, in like a way if I was to go up to a guy and say like, oh my chest hurts because of this and that, it would feel a lot more difficult cause they don't have the same things, they wouldn't have

known too much about it, and it's more like kind of a secret bond that females have together

Sarah: I don't understand the awkwardness. I seriously don't, I'm really lost

Kara: I don't really

Sarah: Cause wouldn't they just compare it to a weird pain that they have that we don't have

Sam: I think it's like um, some things they just feel cringey

Kara: Some people find it easier to do it with people who have like a direct knowing of what that is Sarah

Sarah: I'm lost

Kara: I feel like I'm the one who's translating for you, I'm translating because I understand both sides

Sarah: Girls have a bond I didn't know about

Sam: I think it's really important to be able to talk to guy friends, but not about like, I think some people don't like talking about puberty to guy friends at all –

Sarah: That makes sense

- because girl puberty is extremely different to boy puberty and you don't really want to, I mean I get that we're both educated together but they'll be like nng. Like if I went up to a boy and said, I'm on my period they'd be like and I'd just like. Well, that's what my friends are like

Sarah: Well, it depends on the guy. If you go up to some random guy, obviously they're going to take the mick out of you for the rest of your life, but um if you go up to like your friend who's a guy and say, yeah I'm not feeling too great today because I've got monthly cycle or period or whatever you want to say, generally if they're a good person they'll be like oh alright and they'll try to support you.

Sam: If they're not then why are they your friends? Going to the points beforehand

Kara: Really, it's more, it's less about I don't want to talk to a guy because they're a guy, it's more because if you can't do it then they're not a good friend, everyone should be able to talk openly I feel and if they're not then they're not a good friend

Sarah: And another thing about not understanding it, particularly with menstrual pain, instead of saying menstrual pain which they probably won't understand, if you say cramping they understand that

Sam: People get cramps, it's just a normal thing

LT: I think it's something that comes with age though Sarah

Sarah: Yeah maybe

LT: Over time they might feel more comfortable but at the moment some people might find it a bit more embarrassing

Sarah: Yeah no I understand that

Kara: I mean I think that since I understood what things were, but I found out what things were quite late. I only found out during the lessons, a lot of people seemed to already know

Sam: Yeah I know about a little bit but not too much

Kara: People would come into lessons and be like, oh no and I wouldn't know what we were doing

Sarah: I figured it out Kara, it's cause my friends ruined me

Laura: I just sort of like, that's also why I feel weird cause I only know about the girl part and when I'm learning about the boy part I'm like, eww.

Sarah: But it's ew for us isn't it? I think it's a lot more disgusting for us.

Kara: Yeah

Sam: Yeah it is

Kara: Like, we bleed, that's worse

Sarah: It is a lot worse

Kara: Exactly, so learning about that

Sam: Especially when you're squeamish

Kara: Especially when you realise it's not actually blood, it's flesh

LT: Right guys, we're not just here to talk about puberty

R: We have had a good discussion about that, and thank you for everyone for sharing the ideas around that.

Sarah: You didn't need to add that last part

R: It's fine, it's fine. I'm wondering if we can come back, because some of the other ideas, what Julie was talking about, was supporting your friends as well. Yeah? And what are some of the ways you support your friends?

Julie: Um, I, what I do is if a teacher asks me to help someone then I just do it. But I don't always get asked to help cause I don't really need to help out.

R: Ok, but if they ask you to, you will?

Julie: Yeah, I don't need to help out unless a teacher asks me to.

R: That's true. What about in the playtimes, like during playtime or free time.

Sam: I think it's really important to be kind to your friends, and yeah you can joke but just be kind to them and just let them know that when you are being like funny, it's not because they don't like you it's just because they're joking. And it's not like, offensive. Like, yeah.

R: But if you found it, if you were upset by something.

Sam: Yeah, being able to tell them. You know like, I'm upset by that.

Kara: And like either they'll accept that or they won't accept that

Sam: And I think also it's really important with religious people that their friends understand. So like ok, you go somewhere on a Sundays, I don't but I'm gonna respect that and I think also on the coach this morning to swimming, me and my friend heard someone, like 2 boys having a bit of a...it was like a, it was like a...what was it? It was just very heated and I was listening in because they were like a row behind us

Laura: What was it about again?

Sam: Religious.

Laura: Oh yeah yeah yeah

Sarah: There was kind of like this, oh

Kara: Oh the class 2s are arguing about religion, this can't be good

Sam: And I think um, because I overheard it and I'm personally religious and Laura personally isn't, it was quite um good to have 2 sides. Because then it was like, ok so I get what you're saying, because they were talking about how Christians believe that God made the world and they were getting very um, one of the boys was like, Science made the world! Science made humans!

Kara: No, no.

Sarah: Realistically neither is proven

Kara: You can't say science made the world, science is a subject. Like, that's not how you word those things y'know?

R: Ok, that's the debate but coming back to the..

Sam: Yeah, so basically it's a debate and then me and my friend was like, well you can believe what you want to believe but no one else has to believe it.

Kara: In the end it doesn't change it and nor does it *inaudible*

Sarah: I don't like religions that try to force their religion on someone

Sam: No yeah, and you're not actually meant to argue about religions because it can get quite upset, and I was, it's not that I was worried but I just didn't wanna hear someone getting really upset in the back of a minibus. And I feel really strongly about keeping everyone happy, or trying to at least, and if someone isn't happy, ask them why and like and ok, so like what could I do better next time?

Laura: I think sometimes my friend likes to get a bit like, like my friend likes a schedule and sometimes I don't wanna do that so they would ask me something like, what are we doing today? And I would be like, at that point I would just be like, I wanna play by myself and then they get angry cause I don't, cause I do like a plan but I don't like it when it's every single day I'm getting told, oh what are we doing today cause it feels like it can also going to get boring if you play with the same person constantly.

Kara: It's like setting something up to happen everyday

Sarah: The thing I find since I'm mostly friends with guys, um they can be quite...I don't want to say emotionally blocked off I guess, is the right word to use?

Kara: Emotionally detached

Sarah: Um, but not so much within our group generally, it's alright but sometimes since they don't feel up to not acting all emotionally they can just, lose it sometimes and it's pretty horrible

Sam: I think um, it is really important that you understand if someone does need a schedule and it's not that they want to annoy you. I think it is sometimes that they do genuinely need it

Sarah: I think a lot of people, particularly here can like schedules

Sam: Need a schedule, because I think a lot of people here do really need a schedule and when my friend says to me, I don't know or maybe it's really hard for me, cause I don't like knowing too far in advance but then I need time to get things ready like, I like taking my notebooks to break so if I don't know where we're going I'm like, ahh what do I do?

Sarah: That's so true of me cause I've got so much stuff on me at all times I'm like right, let me gather everything.

Sam: Yeah and I think it is really important for me to be able to know, ok so this is what's gonna happen otherwise I worry about it in like, let's say science and that's completely irrelevant to science

Kara: I mean you don't know what you're doing in science

R: Mmm, and it distracts you. So if we have one person who feels like they really need to know in advance and it makes them maybe a bit anxious if they don't know, and another person who doesn't like to have too much scheduling but they want to be friends, what are some ways you could overcome that?

Kara: Compromise, do it for like a week and then not a week

Sam: Well I think we need to meet both of their needs, because if one of them has their needs met and they're all happy, and the other one is like having meltdowns every night that's not fair on the other one's family, or them. Because obviously, no one wants to have a meltdown, if they have one they can't help it

Sarah: I think, it's not fair to say that the person who doesn't like scheduling should be forced to have one, but at the same time it's not fair that the person who likes schedules should be breaking down every night, so I think teacher support needs to come into that one

Sam: Yeah like ok, so I think that would work or maybe like, maybe a week in advance so that maybe there's not too much of a schedule but then, the person who needs a schedule has a schedule

Kara: I think you can like somewhat schedule but always have the option to cancel

Sam: Yeah

Laura: Yeah but I think that planning it in advance the week before, on most days if I don't want to play with that person and we've already made that schedule then they're going to get angry with me just cause I don't feel like that on the day. Cause also I think other people make you feel different things, cause like it might not have been them, someone might have upset

you then during break time you was like, yeah I can't be bothered to speak to that person at the moment I just want to sit by myself but then because you've made that schedule they're going to get upset with you

Kara: I think if you have a schedule but you both know that you always have the option to cancel

Sam: Yeah, cause then you're like expecting a cancel. I think it is really important that um, what was I gonna say...but um, they understand that you do need a schedule, and they get that but then they also want their side of the view, so then they're like ok so this is what I want to do. And obviously in lessons me and my friends can't really talk that much so..

R: So I'm interested in what people said in terms of that might be where teacher support comes in. Who thinks that that might be helpful to have teachers help with that?

Sarah: I think, cause this is particularly about the lower years who tend to act out a bit more about um, I don't want to say not getting their way because that sounds bratty but, is kind of is but it's more in a needs sense than a they-want sense, but um in the case of the lower years I feel like it would help them a lot

Sam: And I think also when you're in the other classes or the lower years um I think it is really important to have agreements, because I think some people find it really hard not to have an agreement but then others find it hard to have an agreement

Kara: Cause it is quite hard though, cause it's not just wanting a schedule here it's people who actually need a schedule or they're gonna have a panic attack every day until they get it

Sam: Yeah, and I think it is really important that people don't get too stressed, so if there's a plan too far in advance then I'm like ehhhh. And I think some friends find it really hard to keep to promises. Like, they're like, I'll do that oh no I don't want to do that

Sarah: I thought you said a fire alarm, cause I was gonna say that really sets people off

R: Thank you everyone, I know that there's still lots to say but I'm just looking at the time and we only have a few minutes left. So, because this is our last scheduled session, there isn't really much time to have another one, I wanted to have a quick chat about something that I mentioned earlier in terms of this group and how we feel about this group. Because one of the things that was mentioned was that maybe it could happen, I could try and arrange it with the school that it happens on a more a regular basis, maybe

just once a term. That's something that could happen, an opportunity for the girls.

Sam: I know that I would really like it to happen regularly, because I know that we don't really get much chance, like I get to play with Laura and that's pretty much it because they're in different classes and they're playing with different people, and it's really hard to socialise with girls who you don't really know. Like um I would socialise with um Julie but I would find it really difficult to not get too irritated, because I get really irritated with people that I don't know very well

Laura: Um, I think like having it regularly could be hard because then it just like, and also the boys are gonna be like, why can't we have that, or it's gonna be um oh we've got to do this again um, whereas if we have it maybe once a term and we set an exact date so that we can like, get to know but obviously we know that we can walk out if we want so um, cause otherwise if we have it regularly I just feel like it'll just be, cause sometimes it, like this session we've brung up quite a couple of topics we already brung up in the last one so if we keep on doing it regularly then we're not gonna have anything new to bring up

Sam: I think maybe like once a month or something, because then it's not too regular but then people...I think also having an adult

Kara: *inaudible*

Sarah: As long as it's not enforced, because I mean like, whilst you're all cool, I don't fit this group.

R: Yeah. So it would be a drop in and not a you-have-to-come

Sam: A drop in for maybe like 10 minutes or something

R: yeah, or there could be a different type of opportunity where the girls could get together

Sarah: I just think that...I mean, you're cool guys and girls – I'm so used to saying guys – but um, I don't really feel like I'll end up like relating to any of you much, except you [points to Kara]. Unless it's like art, because art is like the only borderline feminine thing I do but um yeah. But you get what I mean, I'm not really gonna fit in with these people too well so as long as it's not enforced, that's fine

R: Ok, Julie do you have an idea?

Julie: Um no, I haven't got any thoughts

R: Ok, thank you. What about you?

Amber: Well I think it's very important that we have people that we can relate to of course, because we need to be able to express ourselves, but also it's important that we also have contrast, so that we always hear the other side of the argument.

R: So just maybe with a quick hands up, who would like to have a more regular, say if it's once a month or once a term

Kara: I feel like once a term, yeah

Sarah: If it's not incredibly regular, like not every week because I like my enrichments and is also depends on what it's on, if it's going to be more like discussions like this then I mean, sure I'll come to be the opposing force

Laura: I would like it to be once a term cause I don't want it do it that weekly, or that like monthly

R: I don't think it would be realistic weekly, or even monthly, that's quite frequent isn't it, so it would probably be more like a termly thing

Laura: Like they do the school council meetings on like a Wednesday enrichment every half term, I feel like if you did that it would be more like their choice because you know it's going to be on a Wednesday, um one time of that is like once you've been to it you don't have to worry about it for the rest of it

inaudible chatter

R: Ok, we are now at the end of the session so sorry for cutting people off. I was just wondering if we could quickly go round and if everyone says just one word about how they feel about this group today. It doesn't have to be a very amazing, creative word just a word that kind of sums up. Ok, does anyone want to volunteer their word first?

Sam: Interesting

Kara: Mediocre

Laura: Ok

Amber: Fun

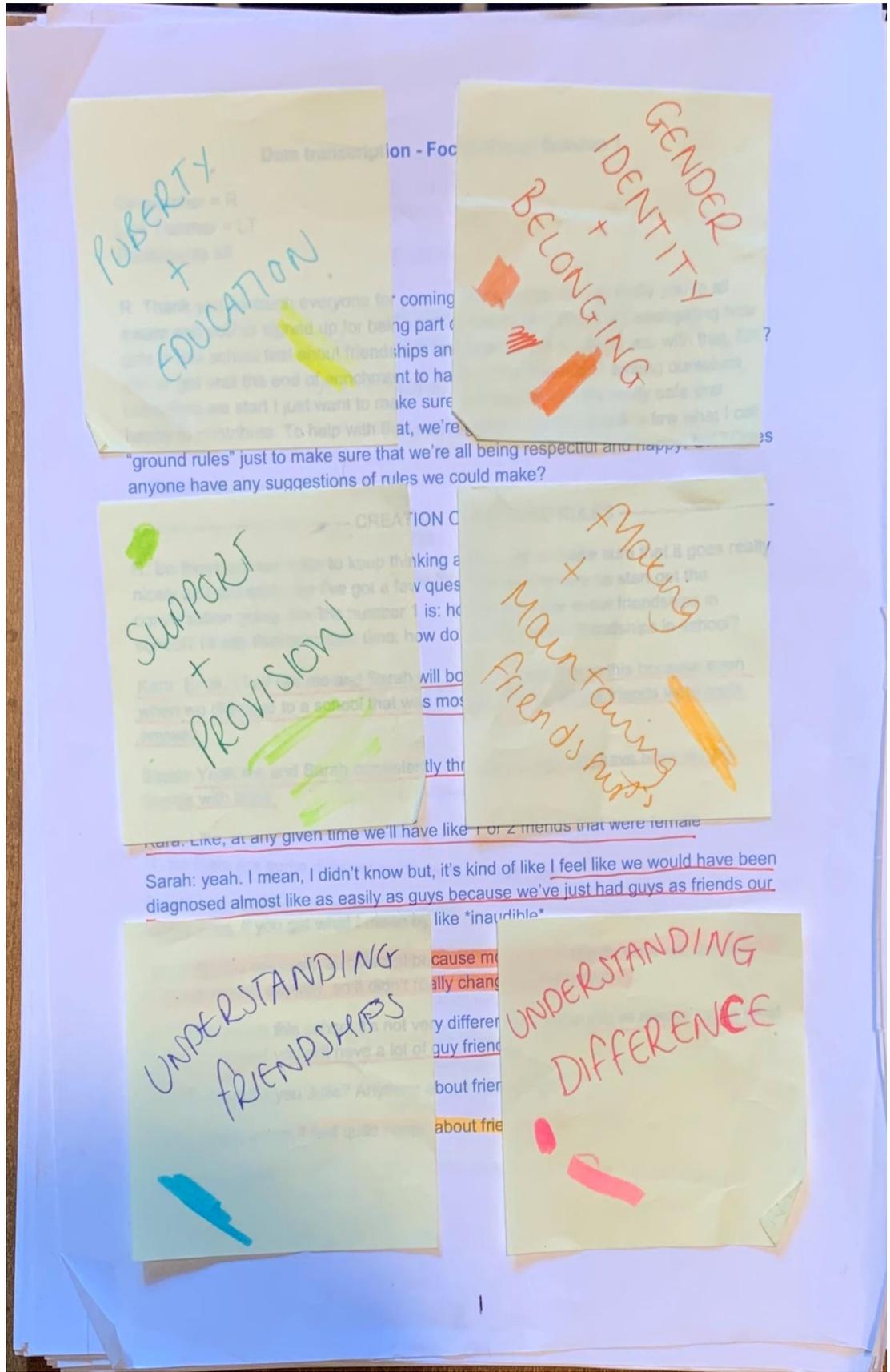
Julie: Um, I would say that it was helpful

Sarah: I'm misplaced here

R: Ok, thank you very much everyone

Sarah: I'm sorry I should have said something more positive!

Appendix 3.8 – Initial Data Coding



Appendix 3.9 – Initial Coding Samples

Co-Researcher Coding Sample

Sarah: I think it would be beneficial, especially with people like um... I pretty much lost all my friends, so it would be really beneficial for them um cause I just kind of sat around for months

LT: So to develop new relationships

R: So giving opportunities at certain times, so if you're going through a difficult time with friends you can approach someone and say, can I be part of that group?

Sarah: Oh yeah it wasn't a difficult time they just kind of all, went

R: Yeah, ok, so times when you're feeling a bit alone

Amber: Friendship is very important, but I think it's key to focus on um, but before we love others we should love ourselves first, therefore maybe you should um self-motivational activities.

LT: That sounds really good

Amber: I think um also...

Sarah: But also some of us find it incredibly difficult to even care about ourselves even slightly

Sam: Also, the school, when I was like really really new I didn't really have anyone to talk to um because Laura was on holiday in America. I had no clue who she was and everyone was talking about her and I was like, when is she going to be back? She got back and immediately assumed that we were friends and um then Laura was like, what. So basically, I used to sit on my own at lunch and read the school rules. That's what I used to do.

Laura: Yeah, I used to do that as well. I would sit there being like, hmm I don't know who to make friends with because there was an older girl who like spoke to me, but obviously they're older so they don't have an interest in like playing with me so they'll wanna do other things. So I just sort of sat by myself, so also the friendship groups would be good to like make friends but I also think they shouldn't be 5,6 and 7 in one group because if you're in class 5 you get close with a class 7 person and then they leave, you're going to be upset because they're not there

Sam: Yeah. And I think also it's really important that you don't have like a class 1, basically not like 2 people, more than 2 people but not like so big that it gets too much, because if we have 2 people and they're a boy and a girl that's gonna escalate

Sarah: Well, not necessarily. Someone could be asexual or

Kara: Yeah I stay with mostly guys and I'm fine. I just don't like any of them

TEP Coding Sample

Kara: Some people find it easier to do it with people who have like a direct knowing of what that is Sarah

Sarah: I'm lost

Kara: I feel like I'm the one who's translating for you, I'm translating because I understand both sides

Sarah: Girls have a bond I didn't know about

Sam: I think it's really important to be able to talk to guy friends, but not about like, I think some people don't like talking about puberty to guy friends at all -

Sarah: That makes sense

- because girl puberty is extremely different to boy puberty and you don't really want to, I mean I get that we're both educated together but they'll be like nng. Like if I went up to a boy and said, I'm on my period they'd be like and I'd just like. Well, that's what my friends are like

Sarah: Well, it depends on the guy. If you go up to some random guy, obviously they're going to take the mick out of you for the rest of your life, but um if you go up to like your friend who's a guy and say, yeah I'm not feeling too great today because I've got monthly cycle or period or whatever you want to say, generally if they're a good person they'll be like oh alright and they'll try to support you.

Sam: If they're not then why are they your friends? Going to the points beforehand

Kara: Really, it's more, it's less about I don't want to talk to a guy because they're a guy, it's more because if you can't do it then they're not a good friend, everyone should be able to talk openly I feel and if they're not then they're not a good friend

Sarah: And another thing about not understanding it, particularly with menstrual pain, instead of saying menstrual pain which they probably won't understand, if you say cramping they understand that

Sam: People get cramps, it's just a normal thing

Sarah: And another thing about not understanding it, particularly with menstrual pain, instead of saying menstrual pain which they probably won't understand, if you say cramping they understand that

Sam: People get cramps, it's just a normal thing

LT: I think it's something that comes with age though Sarah

Sarah: Yeah maybe

LT: Over time they might feel more comfortable but at the moment some people might find it a bit more embarrassing

Sarah: Yeah no I understand that

Kara: I mean I think that since I understood what things were, but I found out what things were quite late. I only found out during the lessons, a lot of people seemed to already know

Appendix 3.10 – Extract Coding Documents

Theme: Understanding Friendships

Subthemes suggestions:

1. Making friends
2. Qualities of good friends
3. Understanding and accepting differences

Julie: Yeah, ermm, I feel quite happy about friendships.

Laura: I think it can be difficult at times because some friends don't want to be friends with a boy but then they don't have any friends who are girls so you're just sort of by yourself

Sam: yeah

LT: how have you found it since you started Julie, because you only started quite recently

Julie: er, I er found it sometimes quite tricky.

Sam: Um, I think um I've found it quite difficult when um, because obviously my age it's quite difficult to not be too moody, not to be like too mad, not to get too mad at friends and take it out on them when it's not really their fault

R: There are a few more. So that was about how you're feeling about friendships, and the next one is just about how you play with your friends, so what sorts of things you do with them

Sarah: Dungeons and dragons

R: Dungeons and dragons, was that?

Sarah: It was like, groups of friends we've had. Me and Kara, we've moved near here recently. So, um, my old friend group in like where we used to live we used to play dungeons and dragons a lot so I introduced it to my new friend group.

LT: do you find you do different things with your friends in school than you do outside school?

Sarah: Not particularly. Except like obviously we can't build tree dens inside school

Kara: I think it very much depends, like it's sometimes you'll go outside and you'll play it because you'll play it in a way that you're not really allowed to

touch each other so you'll just run around. Like, no one can see you if you're behind a tree

Sam: Oh yeah, the no physical contact rule

Kara: Or you'll just stay inside and talk about random stuff

Sam: Yeah, that's me and my friends, we just talk about random things

Kara: I do as well but the subjects get very different

Laura: I feel like tumbling around on the mud is quite usual and hurting our friends by accident

LT: anyone else want to share what they like doing with their friends?

Sam: Well, I like making my friends laugh

Sarah: daring each other to do random things can be fairly entertaining

Kara: Yeah because you never back down

Sam: Yeah she likes to ask me awkward questions. I like them though cause they're funny

R: I'm loving all the things that are coming, I'm wondering if Julie would like to tell me what you like to do with your friends

Julie: I like to um, help them out. Like if they're stuck on a question and a teacher asks me to help I just do it.

R: that's kind, so you help out your friends

Julie: that is kind

Amber: I like studying with my friends

R: So similar to Amber

Sam: I like helping and supporting my friends because um the other day at swimming we were doing lengths and she was really struggling and I could tell that she was. I was really worried about her, more worried about her than my swimming. So if I'd drowned, it would have been her fault

R: Sometimes you might help people to your own detriment

Sarah: I think helping people through problems can be quite rewarding as well

Sam: I like talking to my friends about their worries

Sarah: But you've got to be careful with that at the same time

Laura: I like reading my friend's notebooks

inaudible, people speaking over each other

R: Ok. Thank you everyone for your contributions. I couldn't quite hear what you were saying before

Sarah: Helping people out with like emotional problems can be rewarding but you need to be careful at the same time. I've been in situations where I've tried to help people too much and it's taken a toll on my own health

Sam: Yeah, I really like helping people but then again I don't want to interfere. Because sometimes it's the teacher's job and not mine. But then if I can see that they're struggling it's really hard not to go —"Are you ok?" I really like helping people emotionally, and um like I'm...if I do say so myself I'm really athletic so um if one of my friends is struggling in athletics I'm fine to just float there and wait for them to compose themselves and then go again

Laura: Or wait, I was gonna say cause you can't float when you're running

R: Yeah ok, thank you. So there's different ways you can support your friends, either something really specific like athletics or emotionally. And you were talking about with their work as well. But you were talking a bit about how sometimes you feel it's the teacher's job although you find it difficult not to step in. So what could you do; are there teachers you feel comfortable telling about it?

Sam: Yeah well, I think that I feel very strongly about it's their job – it's the person who's struggling and upset to um y'know say —"I can't do this, I'm upset, I don't feel well" or you know blah blah blah

Sam: Yeah. I think also my friends really help me cause I struggle when I see like people or hear people shouting, I really struggle with that and my friends are really comforting

R: So there are some things that your friends can comfort you with, but you think, actually sometimes you shut down and maybe you don't do the things

Sam: Cause I think if all the girls were together, because I know that I find it really hard to communicate with other girls sometimes that aren't in my class

Sarah: I think it would be beneficial, especially with people like um...I pretty much lost all my friends, so it would be really beneficial for them um cause I just kind of sat around for months

Sam: Also, the school, when I was like really really new I didn't really have anyone to talk to um because Laura was on holiday in America. I had no clue who she was and everyone was talking about her and I was like, when is she going to be back? She got back and immediately assumed that we were friends and um then Laura was like, what. So basically, I used to sit on my own at lunch and read the school rules. That's what I used to do.

Laura: I also think that like if you have, I think I get really annoyed when people just expect me to play with them that day whereas if I can just be like, oh yeah I'll play with you today, and also I feel like when we first start if um we like could get introduced to lots of people and then maybe we could say what we like and what we don't like and then maybe if we both like the same thing maybe we could say, oh you could play that together at lunch and then just sort of like...

Kara: The thing is I'm strange because I make friends in awkward situations

Sam: Basically with my one I've written, building friendships so like knowing how to create a good friendship. Um, tell each other how you feel. So like, if there's a problem with the other person you can explain to them why and how you can resolve it. You're supportive, you um so it's good to know how to keep a good friendship. Um, you can laugh together, you're helpful with each other, kind to each other, and lovely to each other.

R: Thank you so much Sam. Did anyone have any similar things to that or the same?

Kara: I also had like similar hobbies is a good thing to have, them being funny.

Amber: I had something similar.

R: Yeah? Would you be able to tell us what that was?

Amber: Um, we could support people, we could help out, be helpful, we can love them, be thankful and have happiness.

R: Those are lovely ideas, thank you. So there is some things that you both wrote on there didn't you? Like about being supportive and being happy together, yeah? Does anyone else want to share what they did? Laura?

Laura: I writ friend, cause that was the only word I could think of and then I writ um understanding friendships but like one of those could be being different and that like, knowing that you don't need to be the same just so you can be friends. Um and being able to tell each other problems because I feel like, with my friends, they just get in a mood with me for doing something wrong and it really annoys me, so if I can tell them why I said that and then

they wouldn't get in a mood with me. Um knowing a good friendship, umm so like just knowing what's good to do like if you don't want to like do something and then your friend thinks that you should always do what they say then that's not really a good friendship so learning what that is. But like sometimes realising when it's a bad friendship, and being able to talk to the teacher and then the teacher possibly let you like chat together but then with them just sitting there making sure that they like don't go.

Sarah: I don't mind. I think I took it in a different way to other people because you've all put like um similarities and stuff whereas I just put like generally like, who I make friends with

Amber: Well I basically kind of wrote what friendship is made of. So I said that a friendship is a bond made from trust, love, hope, understanding and truth, and that friends do not need to last, will stay loyal, never give up at the expense of each other, and defies the oddness of individuals.

R: Did anyone spot any kind of common themes or things that were coming up a lot?

Sarah: Being a good person

Sarah: Well, it depends on the guy. If you go up to some random guy, obviously they're going to take the mick out of you for the rest of your life, but um if you go up to like your friend who's a guy and say, yeah I'm not feeling too great today because I've got monthly cycle or period or whatever you want to say, generally if they're a good person they'll be like oh alright and they'll try to support you.

Sam: If they're not then why are they your friends? Going to the points beforehand

Kara: Really, it's more, it's less about I don't want to talk to a guy because they're a guy, it's more because if you can't do it then they're not a good friend, everyone should be able to talk openly I feel and if they're not then they're not a good friend

R: It's fine, it's fine. I'm wondering if we can come back, because some of the other ideas, what Julie was talking about, was supporting your friends as well. Yeah? And what are some of the ways you support your friends?

Julie: Um, I, what I do is if a teacher asks me to help someone then I just do it. But I don't always get asked to help cause I don't really need to help out.

R: Ok, but if they ask you to, you will?

Julie: Yeah, I don't need to help out unless a teacher asks me to.

R: That's true. What about in the playtimes, like during playtime or free time.

Sam: I think it's really important to be kind to your friends, and yeah you can joke but just be kind to them and just let them know that when you are being like funny, it's not because they don't like you it's just because they're joking. And it's not like, offensive. Like, yeah.

R: But if you found it, if you were upset by something.

Sam: Yeah, being able to tell them. You know like, I'm upset by that.

Kara: And like either they'll accept that or they won't accept that

Sam: Like um I would socialise with um Julie but I would find it really difficult to not get too irritated, because I get really irritated with people that I don't know very well

Sam: I think like yeah, I agree with Laura cause sometimes with my friends I don't talk to them and I don't like make eye contact with them, and I don't like making eye contact with strangers, but that's like y'know, but I can always make eye contact with my friends unless I'm mad at them.

Laura: Yeah, I used to do that as well. I would sit there being like, hmm I don't know who to make friends with because there was an older girl who like spoke to me, but obviously they're older so they don't have an interest in like playing with me so they'll wanna do other things. So I just sort of sat by myself

Appendix 3.11 – Ethical Approval

School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION

For research involving human participants

BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

REVIEWER: Kenneth Gannon

SUPERVISOR: Janet Rowley

STUDENT: Amy Jackson

Course: Professional Doctorate in Child and Educational Psychology

Title of proposed study: TBC

DECISION OPTIONS:

1. **APPROVED:** Ethics approval for the above named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice) to the date it is submitted for assessment/examination.

2. **APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES** (see Minor Amendments box below): In this circumstance, re-submission of an ethics application is not required but the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made before the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box below when all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to her/his supervisor for their records. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.

3. **NOT APPROVED, MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED**(see Major Amendments box below): In this circumstance, a revised ethics application must be submitted and approved before any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.

DECISION ON THE ABOVE-NAMED PROPOSED RESEARCH STUDY

(Please indicate the decision according to one of the 3 options above)

APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES

Minor amendments required*(for reviewer)*:

* Given the potential age range of participants the information sheets and consent forms will need to be age-appropriate. The precise nature of the form for any given age/age-range should be discussed and agreed with the DoS.

* Some terms (e.g. focus groups) may need to be explained regardless of the age of participants.

* If the decision is to use focus groups then ground rules (e.g. relating to confidentiality) for conducting these will need to be agreed.

* The research training is very intensive and lengthy. It would be helpful to the co-researcher and her parents to have some sense of the likely duration of each session.

* It was not clear how recent leavers will be indentified and approached. A mechanism for doing this (e.g. the School sending information and invitation in the post) that protects their anonymity will need to be agreed with the School and DoS.

Major amendments required*(for reviewer):*

Confirmation of making the above minor amendments*(for students):*

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data.

Student's name *(Typed name to act as signature)*: Amy Jackson

Student number: u1150913

Date: 19.06.18

(Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed, if minor amendments to your ethics application are required)

ASSESSMENT OF RISK TO RESEACHER*(for reviewer)*

Has an adequate risk assessment been offered in the application form?

YES

Please request resubmission with an adequate risk assessment

If the proposed research could expose the researcher to any of kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard? Please rate the degree of risk:

HIGH

Please do not approve a high risk application and refer to the Chair of Ethics. Travel to countries/provinces/areas deemed to be high risk should not be permitted and an application not approved on this basis. If unsure please refer to the Chair of Ethics.

MEDIUM (Please approve but with appropriate recommendations)

LOW

Reviewer comments in relation to researcher risk (if any).

N/A

Reviewer (Typed name to act as signature):

Dr Kenneth Gannon

Date: 25/04/2016

This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

RESEARCHER PLEASE NOTE:

For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's Insurance, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

For a copy of UEL's Personal Accident & Travel Insurance Policy, please see the Ethics Folder in the Psychology Noticeboard

Appendix 3.12 – Co-Researcher Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

Consent to be co-researcher

Using A Participatory Research Model to Investigate Educational Provision
for Females on the Autistic Spectrum

I have the read the information sheet about this research study and I have a copy to keep. The research project has been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions if I want. I understand what I am being asked to do and that I can choose how much I want to be involved.

I freely and fully consent to take part in the study which has been fully explained to me. I understand that I have the right to stop taking part in this study at any time without giving a reason. I know that I can change my mind about my level of involvement as well. I understand that should I stop taking part, the researcher can continue to use my contribution towards the planning and delivery of the study.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Participant's Signature

.....

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Researcher's Signature

.....

Date:

Appendix 3.13 – Co-Researcher Parent/Carer Consent Form

Parental Consent Form – Co-Researcher

X School is currently taking part in a research project in collaboration with Amy Jackson, Trainee Educational Psychologist. This study is investigating the provision available for girls attending X school. It hopes to identify possible improvements to this provision by asking the students for their views about the school and what is available here. The information gathered will also be used by Amy Jackson to write a thesis for a Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of East London. The study is being supported by one of the class teachers at School, Mrs X.

Your child has expressed an interest in being involved in this project as a co-researcher. This means that they will be trained in research skills and help plan and deliver the study. This might involve collecting data and helping the researchers to analyse what has been found. Full details of what this commitment entails can be found in the information sheet your child brought home. Although this represents a significant involvement, this will not result in your child missing any taught education. The planning and delivery will take place during the enrichment period of the day. Your child will be thoroughly briefed about what their involvement will look like and they will need to provide their consent for this. They will be free to withdraw from this research project at any time should they choose to do so. They will not be responsible for holding any confidential information or data but they will understand the need for confidentiality regarding the information that has been given by participants.

We would like to invite you to talk to us about what this project will involve for your child before signing this form. You can do this by contacting the researchers via email, or we are happy to set up a meeting with you to discuss the project. Our contact details are:

Amy Jackson

U1150913@uel.ac.uk

OR

Mrs X

anonymousemail@school.co.uk

I am happy for my child to take part in this research project. I understand what this involves and I am aware that I am free to withdraw my child at any time if I wish to do so.

I am not happy for my child to be involved in the research project at X school.

Parent/Carer Signature -----

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Appendix 3.14 – Co-Researcher Information Sheet



CO-RESEARCHER INFORMATION

You are being invited to be a co-researcher in a study. Before you agree, it is important that you understand what this would involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Who am I?

My name is Amy Jackson and I'm a Psychology student at the University of East London. I'm studying for a Doctorate in Educational Psychology. As part of my studies I am doing some research, and I am asking you to take part.

What am I doing?

I am looking into what X School provides for girls, and what more they could do. We want to know what is helpful about being at this school, and what could make it better.

This project has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. This means that my research follows the standard of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Why are you being asked to take part?

You have shown interest in being involved as a co-researcher after you saw a presentation Amy and Mrs X gave about this.

I want you to know that I'm not looking for 'experts' on the topic I am studying. You will be provided with training in all the different parts of the study and you will be supported with all the stages you wish to be involved with. This

could include planning the study, collecting information from other pupils, analysing the information we find, and telling other people about the results we find.

You are quite free to decide whether or not to participate and should not feel that you have been forced to take part.

What will being a co-researcher involve?

If you agree to be a co-researcher in this study your involvement could last from now until Autumn, 2019. The first step will involve you being given training on how to plan a research study. This will involve up to 8 teaching sessions with myself and Mrs X, depending on what you would like to be involved with. The teaching will take place during your usual 'enrichment' sessions at school, and will not involve you missing any of your formal studies e.g. maths and English. We will give you all the dates in advance. The teaching sessions will last 50 minutes each.

Once you have the information you need we will plan the study together. It is difficult to say what this will look like as we will make all the decisions as a team. Once we have a plan we will start to collect the information we need from the other girls in the school (data collection). We will then think together about what all this information means and share what we have found with other people.

I will not be able to pay you for participating in my research but your help will be really valuable in helping to plan and deliver the project. I also hope that you would gain lots of new learning and skills to help you in the future. I would advise that you will need to be very interested in the topic we're studying (good school provision for girls at X school) to see the project through to the end.

What if you want to withdraw?

You are free to stop taking part in the research study at any time. Throughout the project I will check in with you at certain times to make sure that you still want to be involved. If you would like to stop being a co-researcher, you can tell me or a member of school staff. We will not make you give a reason for no longer being involved. You will not be punished for no longer taking part. You can also change your mind about what stages you'd like to be involved in; for example, you can choose later if you don't want to take part in the data collection or analysis.

However, if you do stop taking part I would continue to use what you have contributed so far to continue with the study.

Contact Details

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do contact me. My email address is:

U1150913@uel.ac.uk

Or you can reach me through the school.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted please contact the research supervisor Janet Rowley. School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,

Email: j.e.rowley@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr Mark Finn, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.

(Email: m.finn@uel.ac.uk)